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Thai Electoral Campaigning: Vote-Canvassing Networks and Hybrid Voting

Anyarat Chattharakul

Abstract: Based on evidence gathered through participant observation, this article illuminates the nature of vote-canvassing, previously a black box in Thai electoral studies. Offering a close-up study of the internal mechanisms of an individual Thai election campaign, this article reveals that vote-canvasser networks are underpinned by long-term dyadic relationships, both hierarchical and horizontal, between the candidate, vote-canvassers and voters. These networks continue to be the most important factor in winning elections. This article documents how candidates draw up an election campaign map and identify voters along residential lines to maximise their vote-canvassing strategy. The findings of this article challenge Anek's 1996 concept of "two democracies", which argues that rural voters are influenced by money, local leaders, political factions and corrupt politicians while more well-educated, urban, middle-class voters are more oriented toward the alternative policies offered by competing parties. The case study of Kom's election campaign showed that the role of the much-vaunted middle-class voters is not decisive, even in suburban areas of Bangkok. While political marketing has grown in importance in Thai elections, it has not displaced traditional electoral practices. Thai society is, in fact, deeply fragmented and diverse – too complex to be divided in such a simplistic manner. This article suggests that rather than undergoing a linear transformation, political hybridisation is a key trend in Thai election campaigns.

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Keywords: Thailand, vote-canvasser networks, elections, political marketing, "two democracies"

Dr. Anyarat Chattharakul is currently a Thai diplomat (Second Secretary) with the Department of East Asian Affairs for Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Awarded the Royal Thai Government Scholarship in 2002, she holds an M.Sc. in Asian Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and a Ph.D. in Political Science from the School of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Leeds, UK.

E-mail: <anyarat_ping@hotmail.com>

Introduction

Thai democracy has long faced institutional deficits. The country's parliamentary and political party systems have been disrupted by frequent military coups and elitist bureaucratic intervention. Most Thai political parties are short-lived, non-ideological and personalised, run by small groups of party-founders and financiers. Local-level political party branches have rarely been established. Thai political parties have no organisational mechanism that helps politicians establish formal communication linkages with constituency voters. Thai electoral candidates thus need to rely on their personal influence, *itthiphon*, and non-partisan connections with prominent local people to arrange communication channels to act as middlemen between them and local voters (Ockey 2000: 83). Those electoral middlemen are called *buakhanaen* in Thai; the term literally means "head vote" and is contextually translated as "vote-canvassers", "vote-gatherers", "vote-brokers", or "vote-banks" (Callahan 2000: 24).

The term *buakhanaen* – vote-canvassers – has negative connotations and is avoided by many Thai politicians (Phichai, Somjet, and Worawit 1988: 97). This is probably because core practices of vote-canvassers involve what McCargo and Ukrist (2005: 99) call "traditional methods of electioneering": vote-buying, electoral manipulation connived by government officials, mobilisation of traditional patronage networks and straightforward violence and intimidation.

Previous studies of Thai electoral politics have viewed vote-canvassers through the narrow lens of "vote-buying", but have consistently failed to elucidate the complexity and diversity of vote-canvasser networks. Offering a close-up study of the internal mechanisms of an individual Thai election campaign, this article reveals that vote-canvasser networks are underpinned by long-term dyadic relationships, both hierarchical and horizontal, between the candidate, multi-level vote-canvassers, and voters. These networks continue to be the most important factor in winning elections in both rural and urban constituencies.

This article¹ will also discuss the influence of modern-style/ nationwide political marketing. It will elaborate the election-campaigning formula, relying on the image of the political party leader and modern media, used

1 This article is based on my Ph.D. thesis, submitted to the University of Leeds in 2007. The thesis is an in-depth study of Thai electoral campaigning in the period following the 1997 constitutional reforms. Based on extensive participant-observation field research, it provides a critical investigation into the informal vote-canvasser networks of a major political party's parliamentary candidate in a suburban constituency during the 2005 general elections.

distinctively in the Thai Rak Thai party before the coup on 19 September 2006. It will, however, show that while the techniques of modern political marketing introduced by Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai party have attracted considerable attention, their impact is less decisive than many practitioners and academics have supposed. Instead of a shift toward a consistently “modern” model of election campaigning, Thailand has developed a complex and hybridised form of electioneering that effectively blends old-style vote-canvasser networks with certain elements of political marketing.

This study is based on my participant observation of a parliamentary electoral candidate in the 2005 general elections. Academic studies of Thai electoral politics using the participant observation methodology, such as Callahan and McCargo (1996), Arghiros (2001) and Nelson (2002 and 2004), are rare and have become outdated with subsequent developments. Work conducted prior to 1997 does not reflect the changes and continuities in Thai politics in the aftermath of the new constitution. Arghiros (2001) focused on local politics, mainly the elections of village headmen and heads of sub-districts. Nelson (2002) provided excellent detail on the 2001 general elections, though he did so as an outside observer. He did not participate fully in the parliamentary candidate’s campaign team as Curtis (1971) did in a Japanese election campaign. The research for this article followed Curtis’ model closely. It is thus a critical investigation into the election campaign and informal vote-canvasser networks of a major political party’s parliamentary candidate in a suburban constituency during the 2005 general elections.

My basic concern in this inquiry is to understand better how politicians seek votes to win elections in the Thai context. While novel forms of political marketing have become more important in electoral campaigns – and can even provide a narrow margin of victory in highly competitive constituencies – they have not replaced, but rather supplemented, vote-canvassing. Thai electoral politics is increasingly hybridic, both in terms of the manner in which vote-canvassing is conducted and the way in which political marketing has been injected into it. The next section of this paper discusses this point briefly before the case study of a vote-canvassing network in suburban Bangkok is presented.

Hybrid Election Campaigns in Thailand

In the latter half of the 1990s, the famous Thai political scientist-cum-politician, Anek Laothamatas, wrote an article widely distributed through the mass media and discussed in academic forums. He argued there were “two democracies” in Thailand representing the conflicting perceptions of elections and democracy between urban, middle-class voters and rural voters.

Members of the Thai urban middle class were active, rational, policy-based voters, whilst rural agricultural citizens were passive and mobilised through money-oriented, clientelistic vote-canvassing networks (Anek 1996: 201-223).

The essence of Thailand's 1997 constitutional reform more or less stemmed from this perception. The categorisation of parliamentary members into three sets of representatives – senators, party-list MPs that would be chosen to be ministers, and constituency MPs – was an institutional attempt to exclude “lower quality” politicians, elected by their rural bases, from executive power (McCargo 2002: 248-249). Those “lower quality” rural politicians were often labelled “*jao pho*”: mafia-style figures who were often blamed for the most corrupt elements of Thai electoral politics.

However, the practices and results of the 2001 and 2005 Thai general elections and the senate elections that followed the 1997 constitution showed that it had failed to undermine the influence of vote-canvassing networks. Political parties' policy platforms did become a more important factor in the party-list voting system, particularly through new techniques of political marketing. Thaksin Shinawatra introduced elements of political marketing and a populist political platform in his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party's 2001 and 2005 election campaigns. Yet older campaign elements remained fundamental to the party's electoral success as Thaksin projected the image of a great patron. Personal linkages, factional ties and political dependence between senators, party-list MPs and constituency MPs also continued to be key in Thai political activities (McCargo 2002: 249). The election campaigns of TRT that brought about landslide electoral victories in those two campaigns in both the party-list and constituency-based systems were a hybrid form: a mixture of Thailand's old-style vote-canvasser networks and Western-style political marketing.

The example of TRT shows that the Western approach of political marketing did not and could not replace Thailand's old-style vote-canvasser networks in election campaigns. Thaksin and his party did not detach themselves from vote-canvassing networks. He recruited large numbers of network politicians and their offspring. Although significant numbers of TRT's MP candidates in 2001 were newcomers in competing for parliamentary seats, most of them were either children of veteran politicians or local-level politicians who were in control of vote-canvasser networks that came with a solid local support base. TRT might have been able to show the public that these first-time MP candidates were the “god”, new generation of politicians that the reformists longed for, but most of them – in particular former local politicians – were “hardly idealistic advocates of a new way of thinking and innovative policy initiatives. Most were seasoned log-rollers and pork

barrelers, who had typically made their money in the contracting business.” (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 80) Thai political parties, including TRT, continued to rely on personalised vote-canvasser networks to win over the majority of voters.

Hybridisation was also increasingly evident within vote-canvassing networks themselves. Anek’s thesis suggested an easy rural–urban division with vote-canvassers prominent in the former but rare in the latter. As will be shown below through a case study of a suburban Bangkok constituency, vote-canvassing networks are widespread even in the country’s major metropolis. Based largely on the kind of houses and neighbourhoods in which they live (from slum dwellers to wealthy apartment or villa dwellers), Bangkokians are integrated into, or inaccessible to, vote-canvassing networks to varying degrees. While political marketing is the primary means of soliciting the votes of the rich, vote-canvassing networks are still crucial for gaining the votes of the more numerous urban poor and some in the middle class. But with the rise of new forms of media and spreading coverage, poor voters are not immune to political marketing, particularly for the non-constituent, party-list seats created by the 1997 constitution (but abolished in the new constitution after the 2006 coup). In addition, as Thailand “modernises”, such hybridity spreads beyond urban and suburban locations to encompass the rural areas themselves. Anek’s “two democracies” are not so much geographically distinct as coexistent in urban and rural electoral contexts.

Schafferer (2006) asks whether there is a regional standard of election campaigning emerging in Asia but finds “no evidence for a future standardisation of election campaign practices in East and Southeast Asia” (Schafferer 2006: 135). Close scrutiny of the Thai case study presented in this article below shows that we should be wary of making sweeping generalisations about the rise of new forms of electioneering in emerging Asian democracies – features such as political marketing may be salient, but their impact is often less than expected. No change from “pre-modern” to “modern” election-campaigning has taken place in Thailand or in other new democracies in Asia, with old-style, “traditional” electioneering mechanisms far from being replaced by modern, “Western”, “Americanised” political marketing. McCargo (2006: 661–662) has suggested that many Asian countries are, in fact, in the process of

bypassing the entire apparatus of modern political parties, moving instead directly from elections based largely on personalism, patronage and corruption, to elections in which these traditional campaign elements are compounded and modified by hybridised par-

ties with ‘electoral professional’ elements, using all the latest media and marketing techniques.

Vote-Canvassing Networks

In Thailand, vote-canvassers play an intermediary role in linkages of political communication between candidates and local voters. They are local notables with influential economic, political or social positions, and are well connected with local voters through kin and friendship ties (Phichai, Somjet and Worawit 1988: 98). Vote-canvassers in Thailand vary “by type and by level, ranging from a village teacher with limited influence to a wealthy tycoon with business interests and employees spread throughout an entire region” (Ockey 2004: 28). Vote-canvasser networks are the most important electioneering mechanism in every Thai candidate’s election campaign at all electoral levels. Votes in Thai elections have long been mobilised from the bottom up through the extensive webs of vote-canvasser networks.

Mainly, vote-canvassers are responsible for distributing gifts and vote-buying cash to voters, managing speaking opportunities for candidates, obstructing other candidates’ campaigns and even rigging election results (Phichai 1998: 167-168). Also, it is common for vote-canvassers to transport voters in far away areas to polling booths and instruct them to vote for a particular candidate. In some cases, a group of networking vote-canvassers can control the election outcome in a particular district by switching their canvassing services from one candidate to another (Nelson 2002, cited in Ockey 2004: 28). Moreover, vote-canvassers are the candidate’s indispensable informants about local affairs. For example, they inform the candidate about what local voters want. The candidate then devotes his or her financial and human resources to respond to voter demands, which range from, for example, the provision of pesticide to community infrastructure-building. The candidate’s ability to satisfy voters in particular villages is an important factor in the diffusion of his or her popularity throughout the constituency.

The density of each politician’s vote-canvassing networks is different depending on the level of one’s influence in local communities. Some networks are able to mobilise more votes and/or influence larger campaign areas than others. Yet, it is not necessary to have an extensive vote-canvassing network covering a large campaign area to get elected. Small but dense vote-canvassing networks often work more effectively than the large but loose ones, particularly in constituencies with low voter-turnout.

Vote-canvassing networks in Thailand were originally created by bureaucratic-dominated authoritarian governments in order to mobilise votes for government-sponsored candidates. Government officials, especially

those who worked closely with people at the local level, were forced to become vote-canvassers. As the capitalist economy expanded throughout the country and parliamentary elections became more institutionalised, vote-canvassing networks became commercialised. Local figures with economic power such as moneylenders, factory owners, owners of gambling houses, and middlemen emerged as effective vote-canvassers, as did government officials. Monks and other religious leaders were also often tapped to join vote-canvassing networks. Most recently, after decentralisation efforts in the 1990s, local elected officials have come to play a crucial role in such networks.

Many vote-canvassers are not loyal to any electoral candidate in particular and can be bought on an election-by-election basis. In most cases, vote-canvasser networks are set up temporarily a couple of months prior to election and discontinued after the announcement of election results. Some vote-canvassers put their networks up for “auction”; some even use personal networks to canvass votes for more than one candidate at a time!

Money and material payments are common motivations for all groups of vote-canvassers. Most vote-canvassers expect straightforward cash and material payment from the candidate if he or she is elected. However, a significant number of vote-canvassers expect to trade their vote-canvassing services for non-monetary benefits – in particular, long-term socio-political patronage and favours. For instance, some vote-canvassers request electoral support from the parliamentary candidate and political clique or political party for local-level elections in which they compete. Some ask elected candidates to use their status as MPs to protect their illegal businesses from government investigations. Others ask for special privileges and favours such as better positions in bureaucratic offices for themselves or others.

Kom’s Dyadic and Non-Dyadic Vote-Canvassing Network

According to Lande (1977: xiii), a dyadic relationship is, in its social scientific sense, “a direct relationship involving some form of interaction between two individuals”. The directness and personal attachment between actors are central to a dyadic relationship. This differentiates it from a non-dyadic relationship in which

two actors are connected with each other indirectly as a consequence of the fact that they occupy offices or positions which are interconnected, or because they are members of the same group (Lande 1977: xiii).

Relationships between a candidate and vote-canvassers are bound to be complicated – as Lande (1977: xi-xiv) mentions, two persons may be engaged simultaneously in more than one type of relationship. Nonetheless, it is plausible to divide vote-canvassers into two major groups according to dyadic or non-dyadic relations between a candidate and each group of vote-canvassers. Vote-canvassers that have dyadic relationships with a candidate they are canvassing for are “core vote-canvassers” (“*buakhanaen lak*”). Those that have non-dyadic relationships with a candidate they are canvassing for are “outer-layer vote-canvassers” (“*buakhanaen chan nok, buakhanaen rong*”). Dyadic relationships between core vote-canvassers and a candidate usually start quite some time before the election, and mostly continue after the voting is over. They can get to know one another through many channels: through a candidate’s wife, husband, parents, in-laws, close relatives, intimate friends, loyal clients who have worked for the candidate previously, etc. Persons who can become core vote-canvassers must be well known to local constituencies, must have good connections with local prominent figures, and are in most cases insiders in local politics. Core vote-canvassers connect a candidate with outer-layer vote-canvassers. They usually recruit, communicate with and monitor outer-layer vote-canvassers for a candidate (Sombat 1993: 121). Core vote-canvassers are often informal local leaders and top local officials in the provinces, districts and sub-districts. For example, they are prominent businessmen, members of provincial and local councils, headmasters of local schools, heads of sub-districts, and powerful headmen that are well known across villages. Almost no core vote-canvasser expects immediate monetary payment for his canvassing services. Some of them even provide financial support for a candidate. These core vote-canvassers hope for long-term transactional deals, such as state concessions, official promotions, a candidate’s support in local politics, and collective infrastructure for the communities and villages.

Unlike core vote-canvassers, outer-layer vote-canvassers do not have dyadic relationships with a candidate. They are unlikely to get in touch with a candidate before and after the particular election. They are recruited into and operate within the particular networks of core canvassers with whom they have dyadic relationships. They are usually motivated to become vote-canvassers through immediate monetary and material payments contracted through core vote-canvassers. Outer-layer vote-canvassers are often medium-level government officials, small- to medium-sized shop owners, moneylenders, traders, and monks or religious leaders that are well known to the communities. Certainly, they have ample opportunities to meet large numbers of voters everyday (Sombat 1993: 123-124).

Dyadic relationships between Kom² and his core vote-canvassers had grown out of mutual understanding and the exchange of favours. Each party had valuable resources that the other desired. In the 2005 general elections, Kom's powerful resources attracted many people to work as his vote-canvassers. They were his connection to state authorities and powerful agents in both the government and the Thai Rak Thai party, and his large financial resources.³ Meanwhile, his core vote-canvassers brought him invaluable relationships with the constituency's local leaders and voters, which would bring in the votes Kom desired.

As mentioned above, dyadic relationships can exist between two individuals of either equal or unequal status: horizontal or vertical dyadic relationships (Lande 1977). Kom had both horizontal and vertical dyadic relationships with different core vote-canvassers. However, in only one vertical relationship did Kom play the inferior role: that between Kom and a chief military officer, General Sak, who had become one of Kom's core vote-canvassers through the channel of Kom's faction leaders.⁴ Dyadic relationships between Kom and the rest of his core vote-canvassers were horizontal relations: Neither Kom nor those core vote-canvassers thought of their relationship in terms of "superior–inferior" or "patron–client". They saw themselves as "electoral partners" of equal status exchanging dissimilar personal resources for mutual benefits. Kom never called any of those core vote-canvassers "*luknong*", meaning "subordinates". And, his core vote-canvassers never called Kom "*naī*", meaning "boss".⁵ Both parties told me that they were not in patron–client ties but they were "*phak phuak*" – equal members of the same political clique.⁶

In this context, a clique, *phuak*, is an exclusively informal grouping of those of equal status who seek benefits from each other. It is a collective

2 Kom is a major political party's MP candidate in the suburban constituency whose campaign I observed during the 2005 general elections.

3 Kom was regarded as reliable by local vote-canvassers. He never paid a smaller amount of cash than agreed and always paid on time.

4 A vertical dyadic relationship between Kom and this chief military officer will be discussed below.

5 The words "*naī*" ("boss") and "*luknong*" ("subordinate") are commonly used in relationships in which two individual members have superior–inferior status relations or patron–client ties.

6 In an interview (12 January 2005), an incumbent local councillor in Kom's constituency, Aek, noted that the relationship between Kom and himself was an "equal electoral partnership". He canvassed votes for Kom because they were colleagues in the same political faction, and he wanted to show the faction leader his ability to mobilise votes from the electoral area under his influence.

entity, in the sense that their members share a group identity and regard those who do not belong to the group as outsiders. This collective identity

allows members to evaluate actions as being beneficial to or detrimental to the group's interests, and to shape their own actions if its members of the group are involved (Nelson: 2004: 13).

The concept of cliques in Thailand is commonly applied to non-political groupings as well. In fact, cliques are a general feature of the Thai social fabric (Nelson 2002: 317).

Originally, Kom had no kinship ties in the constituency. Before entering electoral politics, he had rarely visited this part of the city. None of his family had lived in the area. Although Kom himself lacked kinship ties in the constituency at the time, he received some trustworthy and reliable local vote-canvassers from his clique's existing networks. Most of them had canvassed for the clique for a long time. These persons became Kom's core vote-canvassers. They helped Kom establish solid vote bases in their communities and villages and connected him with other community leaders. Some core vote-canvassers that were "equal" members of Kom's clique, in particular local councillors and business leaders, had personal influence that covered almost the entire district and were able to mobilise many thousands of voters. Some had limited influence over several villages and could only deliver smaller blocks of votes. Core vote-canvassers normally recruited other locally influential individuals – those with whom they had dyadic relationships – to work as outer-layer vote-canvassers in order to get access to larger sets of voters. Kom did not have dyadic relationships with those outer-layer vote-canvassers.⁷ After the elections ended, Kom continued to meet with core vote-canvassers and their families, with whom he had dyadic relationships, on various personal occasions. However, he did not continue to see most of his outer-layer vote-canvassers personally.

It did not matter that Kom had non-dyadic relationships with most of his outer-layer vote-canvassers because they tended to communicate through core vote-canvassers anyway. In addition, outer-layer vote-canvass-

7 In an interview (11 January 2005), Kom said he had never met a single outer-layer vote-canvasser recruited by his core vote-canvassers when he first ran a parliamentary election campaign in 2001. Although he had since developed various personal relationships with most of his outer-layer vote-canvassers, he considered these relationships "shallow" and still non-dyadic: "I do not care who they [outer-layer vote-canvassers] are. I do not need to get to know them personally. There are so many of them, I have no time and energy to establish dyadic relations with everyone anyway. I just say hello and talk to them randomly, try to be nice and friendly. But there is no need to create close, meaningful personal relationships with them. They are the core vote-canvassers' men, not my men."

ers would not come directly to Kom when they needed to ask for his aid after the election. Instead, they first approached Kom's core vote-canvassers with the expectation that core vote-canvassers would seek Kom's assistance on their behalf. It must be noted that, indeed, outer-layer vote-canvassers and most local voters saw no need to meet up with Kom face-to-face. They were satisfied to have their problems solved through Kom's vote-canvasser networks. In short, the key difference between dyadic relationships between a candidate and core vote-canvassers and non-dyadic relationships between a candidate and outer-layer vote-canvassers was that the former involved a long-term commitment lasting beyond the elections while the latter was temporarily cultivated for ad hoc purposes.

The Structure of Kom's Vote-Canvassing Network

Thai-style vote-canvassing networks can be understood to operate in a ranked system composed of three levels of vote-canvassers: core, intermediate and cell. Core-level vote-canvassers have dyadic relations with the candidate. Intermediate- and cell-level vote-canvassers are outer-layer vote-canvassers that mostly have non-dyadic relationships with the candidate. Core(-level) vote-canvassers are normally powerful figures in the communities, such as provincial councillors, mayors, high-ranking government officials, and big business leaders. They work as the candidate's representatives in dealing with lower-ranking vote-canvassers and voters. For example, they supervise the distribution of pork-barrel money to communities through lower-level canvassers in sub-districts, attending to the problems of communities, and visiting voters on behalf of the candidate.

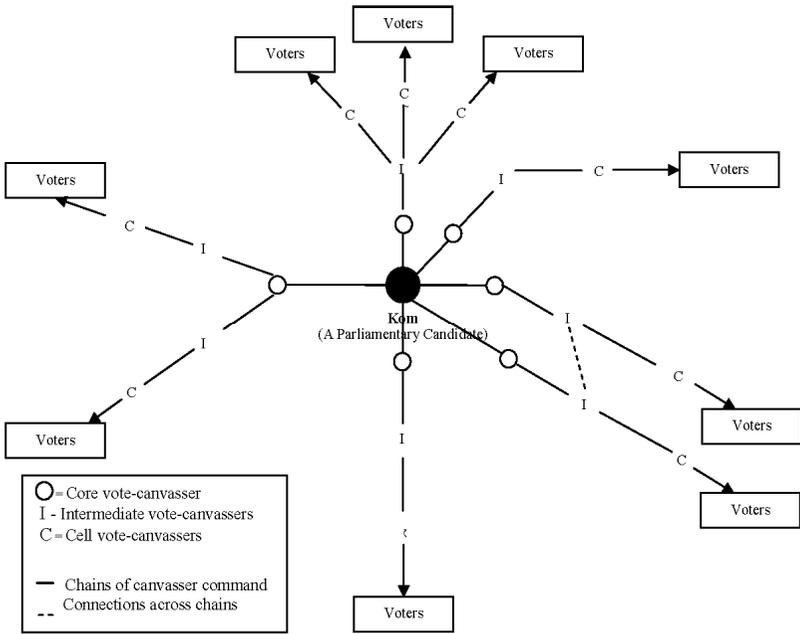
Intermediate-level vote-canvassers link core- and cell-level vote-canvassers together. They are more familiar with the local electorate than core vote-canvassers are, but less so than cell vote-canvassers. In the process of vote-buying, intermediate vote-canvassers prepare the list of eligible voters, receive money from either the candidate or core vote-canvassers and then distribute it to cell vote-canvassers to hand out to voters. Some intermediate vote-canvassers have no direct connections with the candidate. They are recruited into the candidate's vote-canvasser networks by core vote-canvassers and are directly responsible to their recruiters. Others, however, have dyadic relations with the candidate. They are recruited into the candidate's networks and are directly controlled by the candidate. Usually, intermediate canvassers are local government officials, such as *kamnan* (sub-district leaders), *phuyaiiban* (village leaders), health officers and school teachers, and local businessmen, including factory owners, moneylenders, traders, and gangsters running illegal lotteries and gambling.

Cell-level vote-canvassers are at the bottom of the chain of command of vote-canvasser networks. They have the closest personal relationships with voters. Cell vote-canvassers are members of villages and communities. They distribute cash to voters face-to-face and make sure they get to the polling booths on election day. Cell vote-canvassers have the smallest geographic area of responsibility, and are normally assigned to control no more than 25–30 voters living next door to their houses in the villages. The most sought-after cell vote-canvassers are members of village committees, representatives of different social groups in local communities, leaders of occupational groups and heads of the neighbourhood communities (Phichai 1998: 171-172).

Vote-canvassers at all levels are electoral middlemen who exploit their personal, local social networks to canvass votes for the candidate. Core vote-canvassers function as intermediaries between the electoral candidate and lower-level vote-canvassers. Intermediate vote-canvassers work as the middlemen between the candidate and core vote-canvassers on one hand, and cell vote-canvassers on other hand. Cell vote-canvassers are intermediaries between intermediate vote-canvassers and voters. Core vote-canvassers are the strategic planners, masterminds, and sometimes financiers of the candidate's election campaigning. Cell vote-canvassers are grassroots actors who interact face-to-face with local voters. Among all vote-canvassers, core vote-canvassers are closest to the candidate and cell vote-canvassers are closest to the electorate.

There is no prototype of a chain of command of vote-canvassers. The numbers of cell vote-canvassers controlled by one intermediate vote-canvasser and working with one core vote-canvasser differed markedly. A core vote-canvasser divides the area under his chain of command into smaller geographical blocks. He then assigns responsibility to canvass votes from voters living in each block to intermediate vote-canvassers. Some intermediate vote-canvassers are responsible for more than one geographical block. Intermediate vote-canvassers divide up the blocks among various cell vote-canvassers.

Figure 1: Kom's Vote-Canvassing Networks in the 2005 Election Campaign



Source: Author's own compilation.

Diagram 1 above shows Kom at the centre of his vote-canvasser network, which is composed of multiple chains of command to the three levels of vote-canvassers. At the top of each chain of command was the core vote-canvasser, an influential figure who had dyadic relationship with Kom. Kom had six core vote-canvassers in the inner circle of his network. Each of them cultivated and controlled their personal chains of command, consisting of intermediate and cell-level vote-canvassers. These chains of command linked inward to Kom, the candidate, and outward to intermediate vote-canvassers, which in turn linked to cell vote-canvassers, which linked to targeted groups of voters. Like many Thai parliamentary candidates, Kom was not involved in the process of recruiting intermediate and cell vote-canvassers. They were recruited and directly controlled by core vote-canvassers at the head of their chains. Normally, the relationships between three levels of vote-canvassers in one vote-canvassing chain of command were hierarchical, top-down from core to cell vote-canvassers. A core vote-canvasser usually had a closer personal relationship with Kom and possessed higher socio-economic and political status than intermediate and cell vote-canvassers in his vote-canvassing chain of command.

The structure of Kom's vote-canvassing network was uneven. There was no fixed pattern of how Kom and his core vote-canvassers interacted. The relative statuses of Kom's core vote-canvassers were not equal. Some core vote-canvassers were better off than the others in terms of individual socio-economic, political status or in terms of the boundaries of their canvassing influence. The numbers of chains of command that a core vote-canvasser controlled varied directly with his existing networks of important local connections, financial resources and experience in electoral politics (Ockey 2004: 33). Some core vote-canvassers had limited boundaries of canvassing influence and controlled only one or two chains of command operating within a couple of villages or a single district. Others controlled multiple chains of command and could influence larger groups of voters from different districts. There were also some core vote-canvassers whose canvassing influence extended beyond Kom's constituency and provided their canvassing services for candidates in other constituencies at the same time they worked for Kom. Moreover, these chains of command of vote-canvassers were not exclusive. Some intermediate and cell vote-canvassers had personal connections, mostly of marriage, kinship, school networks and political clique membership, across chains and even across networks. Sometimes they even engaged in political "moonlighting" – providing their vote-canvassing service for both Kom's networks and others.⁸

The majority of vote-canvassers in Kom's networks, especially intermediate and cell vote-canvassers, were brokerage vote-canvassers who provided their canvassing services to Kom for personal gain. All 22 vote-canvassers of Kom's I interviewed said they offered Kom vote-canvassing services as personal favours, not business arrangements. They emphasised that they "helped" Kom mobilise votes because he was a good friend, brother, cousin, patron, client, political party colleague, and member of the same clique. They denied that they were "hired" to be Kom's vote-canvassers, or that they traded votes for profit.

However, their actions contradicted their words. There is a social code of conduct in the Thai society, called *kreng jai*, in which a person should never take any gift given from another person immediately. A receiver should politely say "Thank you, but no" to the giver first, and may later take the gift when the giver insists. But Kom's core vote-canvassers did not seem to follow the social norm of *kreng jai*. During their holiday tours in England in December 2004, all the expenses for which were fully paid by Kom, all of those vote-canvassers immediately took different kinds of gifts Kom handed to them without performing any *kreng jai* courtesy. Given that each of

8 An interview with Aek, 17 December 2004.

Kom's core vote-canvassers were high-ranking officers, local councillors, and well-connected businessmen, it was odd for them not to practise the basic social code of conduct unless the gifts were actually parts of the transactional arrangement between these vote-canvassers and Kom. It was thus possible that dyadic relationships between Kom and his core vote-canvassers were partly commercial trade relationships.

It is tempting to identify Thai vote-canvassers as patrons in their relations with local voters owing to vote-canvassers' characteristics as local power leaders. However, the majority of Thai vote-canvassers are not patrons but electoral brokers. First of all, not all vote-canvassers are of higher socio-economic status than most voters. Second, most vote-canvassers do not actually use their own resources, if they have any, to provide protection or benefits to the voters. Instead, they rely on their personal contacts with a candidate or higher-level vote-canvassers who directly control resources given to voters.

My case study of Kom's vote-canvasser network shows that vote-canvassers in Thailand revolve around horizontal dyadic relations between actors of equal status rather than hierarchical patron–client ties. In addition, they are more likely to provide their canvassing services for transactional arrangements – trading their personally cultivated relations with local voters for personal benefits. As Kom stated,

All vote-canvassers want and expect exchange benefits from providing their canvassing services, some want straightforward cash while others want more complicated returns, such as political patronage and long-term business deals.⁹

The existing cultural explanation, which assumes that Thailand's vote-canvasser networks are deeply rooted in traditional culture based on hierarchic social relationships and moral indebtedness or obligation, has either over-generalised or underestimated the complexity of local power and money relations in Thai society. Most experienced vote-canvassers are persons who have strong local power and influence and use such power to, directly or indirectly, force voters to vote for particular candidates.

Classifying Voters

Almost all Thai electoral candidates and campaigners categorise voters into groups based on types of houses and neighbourhoods in which the voters live. In the context of election campaigns, voters are classified into three

9 An informal interview with Kom, 22 December 2004.

housing groups: *ban pit*, *ban poet*, and *ban pit-pit poet-poet*. Literally, *ban* means “house”, *poet* means “open”, *pit* means “closed” and *pit-pit poet-poet* means “sometimes closed, sometimes open”. *Ban poet* literally means an “open house”. This term actually refers to the housing group in which voters are open to accepting or do accept the role of vote-canvassers in elections, and are likely to be mobilised by electioneering methods that concentrate on collective political patronage and vote-buying via vote-canvasser networks. *Ban pit* literally means a “closed house”. This term refers to the housing group in which voters are not open to playing or outrightly refuse the roles of vote-canvassers in elections. Voters in the closed house group see vote-canvasser networks and money-oriented electioneering methods more or less as causes of corruption and money politics. They prefer to vote on the basis of programmatic election campaigning and modern political marketing, based on the image of party leaders and national policy platforms. *Ban pit-pit poet-poet* can be loosely translated as a “semi-closed, semi-open house”. This term refers to the housing group in which voters are split between those who grant access to vote-canvassers and those who deny them such access. Normally, rural villages and slums are classified in the open housing group. Gated houses, upper-class condominiums, and expensive townhouses with frontyards and gates are considered to be in the closed housing group. Finally, non-gated houses, lower-class condominiums, apartments, flats, row houses, shop houses, and commercial buildings are considered part of the semi-closed, semi-open housing group.

This classification of voters along residential lines is an election campaign formula commonly used by Thai politicians. Yet, it is a pattern with which many outside observers, including most academics, are not acquainted. Only those involved in the electioneering process itself are familiar with the terms *ban pit*, *ban poet*, *ban pit-pit poet-poet*. To the best of my knowledge, the identification of voters in terms of the housing groups of closed, open, and semi-closed, semi-open categories and its importance to Thai-style election campaigning have never before been given scholarly attention.

Kom’s case study shows that there are some groups of voters in suburban areas who are under as much of an influence from patronage-based and money-oriented vote-canvasser networks as those in rural areas. Kom’s constituency comprised four housing neighbourhoods: old rural communities, urban slums, gated houses, and non-gated houses. His constituency is located at the edge of a big city. It is a suburban area that seems destined to soon become fully urbanised. There are no rural villages in this constituency, but there were the neighbourhoods that Kom and his campaigners called “old rural communities”. Old rural communities have collective characteristics and exhibited political behaviour quite similar to rural villages. They

have been situated in the area for many decades. Most families have lived in those old communities for generations and are linked through kinship ties – by blood, marriage or both.

Voters who live in old rural communities and slums are community-oriented. Their day-to-day living activities are largely limited to the local area. Most of them were born in the neighbourhoods, went to local, state-funded schools, married local people, and settled down not far from their original homes. Members of old rural communities are closely linked through kinship relations, while those of slums were tied through patronage- and monetary-based relations. Kom and his campaigners classified both old rural communities and slums as belonging to the “open house” (*ban poet*) group, and relied heavily on networks of local vote-canvassers to mobilise blocs of votes from voters living in these open house neighbourhoods.

Gated house neighbourhoods, consisting of upscale individual houses with gates, townhouses with gates, and condominiums, were classified as part of the “closed house” (*ban pit*) group. Voters living in gated house neighbourhoods belonged generally to the urban middle class. They did not open up to networks of local vote-canvassers. Most of them seemed to separate national-level politics from what was going on in their local neighbourhoods. In other words, they expected MPs to concentrate on legislative duties and national affairs rather than the delivery of pork-barrel benefits to local neighbourhoods. The modern, policy-oriented election campaigns of political parties via mass media and television were the most influential methods to win votes in the “closed house” category.

Non-gated housing neighbourhoods, consisting of row houses, shop houses, commercial buildings, small-scale developer-built houses, and state housing estates (akin to council housing) were classified in the “semi-closed, semi-open house” (*ban pit-pit poet-poet*) group. It was the most complex housing group in the context of election campaigns. Characteristics of voters living in non-gated house neighbourhoods were highly diverse. While voters in closed house neighbourhoods were mostly sophisticated members of the middle and upper classes who could not be influenced by vote-canvassers, voters in semi-closed, semi-open neighbourhoods were a mix between Sino-Thai entrepreneurial families, bureaucrats, lower-paid salary men and small-sized business owners. Some of them were receptive to vote-canvassers and money-oriented electioneering methods.

Normally, the segment of non-gated house voters that accepted the role of vote-canvassers had lived in the area for decades and had developed close personal relations with each other and the local leaders. For them, national-level elections are one part of local affairs and vice versa – in other words, they seemed to vote for the candidate whom local leaders or local

political cliques supported, and expected to receive commensurate pork-barrel benefits, particular political patronage and the development of local infrastructure in return. The mixture of local vote-canvasser networks and door-to-door campaigning was the most effective electioneering strategy to win over votes from this group.

Meanwhile, some numbers of voters living in non-gated houses were newcomers to the area. They had relocated from the overcrowded city or the provinces. This segment of voters was much less interested in local community affairs. Their relations with neighbours were nothing deeper than routine interactions. Most of them were well-off and did not need to rely on local leaders for help. They seemed to vote on the basis of national-level policy and party image. The most effective electioneering strategies towards this group of voters are party-level political marketing and policy-based, image-oriented election campaigns.¹⁰

The Election Campaign Map

Classifying voters into groups of housing neighbourhoods helps campaigners see the geographic distribution of the voters and predict what might be the most effective campaign strategy to obtain each particular group's votes. Kom, like other Thai electoral candidates, transformed the conceptual voter classification into a tangible "election campaign map". This took place during the earliest stages of planning an election campaign in Thailand.

Kom's campaign map was developed from the geographic map of his district. The map located roads, bridges, canals, official offices and local meeting places, such as schools, temples, markets and department stores. In Thailand, houses of similar architectural types are usually located next to or near to one another, and naturally form what Argyle (1994: 113) called "homogeneous neighbourhoods".

Field research for the map was conducted by experienced workers and vote-canvassers, who investigated the type of housing neighbourhood on each block, how many houses were situated within each neighbourhood, and what type of voters lived in individual houses. After their research, the field staff plotted *every* housing unit onto the map, making it as close to the actual map as possible. They then used the official registration list to determine the number of registered voters living in each house and noted it down on the spot. At this point, the revised campaign map showed every housing unit in the constituency's territory, specifying the number of registered voters living

10 Fieldnotes, 2 February 2005.

in each house and demarcating streets, roads, bridges, canals (*keblong*) and alleys (*soi*).

The making of Kom's election campaign map started in November 2004, roughly three months prior to the elections on 6 February 2005. Kom called a full board meeting of his core vote-canvassers, field staff leaders and the campaign management team. He laid the campaign map with details of housing units and registered voters on the table. Each of Kom's core vote-canvassers marked neighbourhood areas in which he believed he had a strong influence in mobilising votes – in other words, areas where he was sure of the canvassing ability of his local vote-canvasser networks. At this stage, every housing neighbourhood was divided into various-sized electioneering blocks. Nicknames of core vote-canvassers were written down with black ink in the middle of each electioneering block along with the numbers of votes each of them, as the head of chains of vote-canvassing command, were certain to deliver. The number of votes to be delivered was written down in pencil and consistently updated during the campaign period.

Kom relied on his core vote-canvassers to identify which neighbourhoods were “ours”, “theirs” and “undecided”. Because of their personal influence and strong connections in local neighbourhoods, core vote-canvassers were able to identify which blocks were under the influence of the opponent's vote-canvasser networks. Electioneering blocks confirmed by core vote-canvassers to be under their networks were Kom's “our”-vote bases, *thansiang*. “Our” voters living in *thansiang* blocks were expected to cast their ballots for Kom no matter what happened during the campaign. Electioneering blocks not claimed by any of Kom's core vote-canvassers were identified either as “their” or “undecided” neighbourhoods.

Voters living in electioneering blocks that were under boundaries of influence of the opponent vote-canvasser networks were identified as “their” voters. On Kom's campaign map, electioneering blocks of “their” voters were painted in the colours of his opponents' political parties. According to Kom, the neighbourhoods full of “their” voters were regarded as “lost” electioneering blocks, and he would not attempt to campaign there because trying to gather support in these neighbourhoods would be fruitless.¹¹

Parts of the constituency that were not under any vote-canvassing networks were identified as “undecided” or “floating” electioneering blocks. Undecided voters were the majority of the electorate in Kom's constituency. Kom selected only some segments of undecided voters, in particular those living in middle-class-oriented, non-gated neighbourhoods, to be the target

11 A formal interview with Kom, 18 November 2004.

of his campaign. On an election campaign map, these areas of targeted undecided voters were painted red, indicating first priority in Kom's campaign.¹²

In brief, the campaign map was a tangible tool that helped Kom and his campaigners plan an efficient election campaign. It portrayed how many "our" votes Kom had; how many votes belonged to his opponents; how many votes were undecided; and which groups of voters were selected as campaign targets. Kom and his campaigners used this campaign map as the reference for further planning of election campaign strategies. Kom's campaign map was a poster-sized paper and was hung on the corkboard on the wall in Kom's office in his "safe house" ("*sep bao*")¹³ where he had secret meetings with core vote-canvassers and campaigners.

Kom's "our" voters living in the "open house" category – old rural communities and slums – constituted about 20 per cent of his constituency voters. His biggest competitor had about 10 per cent of the electorate as a solid vote base. This meant approximately 70 per cent of the electorate were floating or undecided voters. Those undecided voters were the main target of Kom's election campaign. During the last two months prior to the election, Kom concentrated time, money and manpower in door-to-door campaigning to win over votes from targeted undecided groups living in semi-closed, semi-open neighbourhoods.

Vote-Buying

Kom secured ties with his vote-canvassers and voters living in the "open house" category by the use of money, political patronage and local, informal power. Most residents of old rural village communities and slums were rela-

12 Fieldnotes, 24 January 2005.

13 "Safe house" ("*sep bao*") is a loan phrase from English. Thai politicians and businessmen call their secretive residences "safe houses". Kom normally stayed with his mother in the family house situated in a luxurious gated neighbourhood far from his constituency. He used a commercial building on the high street of the constituency district as his official election campaign centre, where voters could pick up campaign leaflets and posters and leave their messages. Kom also had a house in a gated neighbourhood in the constituency. He occasionally stayed at this house when he visited the constituency and it was too late to travel back to his primary house. He called the constituency house his "safe house". He held secret meetings with core vote-canvassers at this house. Also, most of his campaign-related documents were stored there. The house was gated with high walls and big trees and located in the quiet corner of the neighbourhood. It was guarded with a professional security service 24 hours a day. No outsiders could see what was going on inside the house.

tively poor and had no independent sources of power – financial power, social connections, status-occupational linkages – outside the communities. They depended significantly on a number of local influential figures to solve both domestic and collective problems, such as personal finances, flooding, disease and neighbourhood conflicts on a day-to-day basis. Most of them felt they were obligated to vote for whomever local power-holders suggested and viewed vote-buying money as additional gifts or rewards. Also, they did not dare to vote otherwise because they were afraid of the possibilities of violent intimidation and local influential figures' refusal to help them in the future. This fear factor was, indeed, the foundation of the effectiveness of vote-canvasser networks in mobilising votes. Kom himself had no direct dealings with either vote-buying or violent threats.

Very few candidates at the national level openly engage in the process of handing out cash to local voters. Instead, most candidates deliver money to vote-canvassers, who control the chains of command in vote-canvassing networks operating in the communities. Core vote-canvassers deduct some of the money as their administration fee. At the operational stage, core vote-canvassers divide the rest of money into several sums and transfer each of them to different intermediate vote-canvassers under their chain of command. These intermediate vote-canvassers also subtract some money for themselves, dividing the rest into smaller amounts and giving it to cell vote-canvassers to hand over to voters. Each cell vote-canvasser is responsible for delivering vote-buying money to no more than 25 households. They were also in charge of transporting this small group of voters to the polling booths on election day. The candidates and campaigners realised that a large part of the money they gave to core vote-canvassers was deducted along the vote-canvassing chains before reaching the voters. But as long as the voting results were satisfactory, no one would raise the issue.¹⁴

Leadership Style

Money and patronage are not the only factors crucial to winning elections; the candidate's personal characteristics (*bukhalik*) and achievements (*phon ngan*) are also essential factors in being victorious in Thai elections (Callahan and McCargo 1996: 388-389). In this context, good characteristics, *bukhalik*, mean the candidate should be good-looking. He or she should be charming and articulate in public. In addition, the candidate should be well educated at

14 An interview with Aek, one of Kom's key core vote-canvassers, on 2 November 2004. Aek's girlfriend's father, Phun, was a village headman of an old rural village in Kom's constituency.

prestigious universities in Thailand or Western countries¹⁵ (Callahan and McCargo 1996: 388). While the candidates who have beautiful and handsome faces make sure that their hairstyle and make-up enhance their appearance, those who cannot rely on physical attributes focus on creating a persona they think the electorate will warm to.

In the inner-city constituencies, candidates tend to project themselves as being part of a highly educated new generation of prestigious families with elegant and sophisticated personalities. There is a firm belief, common among Thai candidates and campaigners, that voters in inner-city constituencies prefer candidates with a “*phudi*” character. “*Phudi*” literally means a person who possesses good morals and polished characteristics.

The opposite characteristic of *phudi* is *nakleng*. According to Thak (1979: 338-340, cited in Ockey 2004: 7), *nakleng* is a traditional Thai leader who is tough, decisive, mannish, charismatic and loyal to friends. Most male Thai electoral candidates in the provincial and rural constituencies choose to express their *nakleng* characteristics. Younger candidates in suburban constituencies also often adopt the *nakleng* style, although a milder version of it. Most of them project themselves as down-to-earth, easygoing, generous, decisive promise-keepers. They usually wear casual clothes to campaign, speak in loud voices, and are quick to answer the electorate’s requests.

Kom’s actual personal characteristics leaned more towards the *phudi* than *nakleng*. However, his experienced campaigners and vote-canvassers, who were familiar with this suburban constituency, strongly suggested he adopt a more *nakleng* style in order to appeal to local voters, as Kom explained:

Before I ran for election I was a typical well-educated member of the upper class. I was always a polite, soft-spoken man. [...] But the faction’s campaigners as well as vote-canvassers told me I had to change in order to win the heart of local people around here. They are *chao ban* local villagers. It will be much easier to make them to accept me as their leader if I am a *nakleng*-style candidate.¹⁶

Another essential campaign factor in Thai elections is the candidate’s output or results, called *phon ngan*, for the constituency. For many Thai voters, candidates highlight their achievements, *phon ngan*, when they pay attention to the people, regularly visiting the constituency (many provincial MPs have their main homes in Bangkok, and many Bangkok MPs live outside their

15 Doctoral degree holders generally earn social prestige in Thai society. In politics, the public often has a special trust in the abilities of parliamentary candidates with Ph.D. degrees.

16 An informal interview with Kom, 7 February 2005.

constituencies), and keep contact with their supporters by participating in and sponsoring local social ceremonies – weddings, funerals and celebrations. In other words, a good MP should be easy to reach and quick to respond to his constituency's requests, ranging from expenses for local social ceremonies to official development projects, either personally or through their informal vote-canvasser networks (Callahan and McCargo 1996: 388). Between the politician who works hard in the legislative committee in the parliament and the one who works closely with the local community's interests, almost all rural and urban poor voters would choose the latter to be their representative. As mentioned by Nelson (2002: 319), if Thai candidates and members of parliament want to achieve and maintain stable bases of voters, they must "try to keep their relationships to the electorate alive by regularly attending social functions".

Door-to-Door Campaigning

Kom did not live in the constituency. He also did not usually participate in community affairs. However, his mother had been active with local women's groups and his brother had attended to routine local services as his representative. Kom had also remained in close contact with his core vote-canvassers after the elections. The electorate, therefore, could access Kom's resources via his mother or his core vote-canvassers.

While Kom used personal vote-canvasser networks as the main mechanism to distribute money to voters, he campaigned door-to-door to demonstrate his "desirable" personality and leadership style to the electorate. While running the door-to-door campaign, Kom always talked to voters colloquially. Every now and then, he would lift up small children and play with them for several minutes. He greeted voters with respect. The purpose of this behaviour was to send a message to voters that he was not an arrogant upper-class person, but a down-to-earth leader who did not see himself as better than local voters. Taking Kom's educational and financial background into account, it was obvious that the characteristic of a down-to-earth, ordinary man is not Kom's genuine self, but was created to match local voters' preferences. His forced "down-to-earth" personality and "*nakleng*" leadership style were designed to boost his charm and impress the targeted voters. Kom adopted a dress code and carefully crafted his personality in order to create the image of an ordinary man, as he described in the following:

I have to wear a casual cotton shirt with jeans and speak loudly when campaigning door-to-door. I also travel to local communities by van or pick-up car to emphasise *kwam pen chao ban* (the villager-ness) in me. I am their patron alright, but I am the patron to whom they can relate.

It is crucial to make the villagers believe that I do not see myself as the superior person from the city, and that I am an easygoing local leader.¹⁷

The door-to-door campaign was time-consuming but Kom and his campaigners thought it worthwhile. It gave Kom the opportunity to meet many local voters in person and to create a sense of connection between himself and local voters. Kom’s campaigners believed that voters who had met and talked to Kom face-to-face were much more likely to vote for him than those who did not.¹⁸ Kom kicked off door-to-door campaigning six weeks prior to election day. The main targets of his door-to-door campaign were voters living in semi-closed, semi-open house neighbourhoods.

A typical door-to-door campaign day went as follows:

4.00–5.00	Visits a local fresh food market. Kom’s staff usually bought a large amount of fresh food from many stalls while Kom was parading through the market, claiming that they were for the staff’s meals throughout the day. The food was cooked for the staff at the end of the day, but the actual purpose of buying such a large amount of food was to impress the food sellers and to emphasise Kom’s generosity in the <i>nakleng</i> tradition.
5.00–6.00	Donates food to the monks along the streets with local people.
6.00–8.00	Visits local primary and secondary schools. Kom talked with students, teachers and parents informally before school started and gave a brief formal campaign speech to the students at eight o’clock after the national flag-raising ceremony.
8.30–10.30	Walks around the targeted neighbourhoods. Kom usually distributed calling cards and policy leaflets to voters, talked to them in a friendly way, and bought plenty of snacks and drinks for his campaign staff from every local shop we walked past.
10.30–11.30	Makes merit at the temple – offering lunch meals to the monks and receiving Buddhist blessings.
11.30–14.00	Lunch break
14.00–18.00	Walks around the targeted neighbourhoods.

17 A formal interview with Kom, 7 January 2005.

18 A group interview with Kom’s campaigners, 26 December 2004.

18.00–22.00	Attends social ceremonies – in particular, weddings and funerals. Has dinner with vote-canvassers and supporters. Socialises with Muslim voters at local coffeehouses.
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The whole campaign team included approximately 20–25 people. All of them were children and close relatives of Kom’s personal employees. Kom paid them 300 to 500 THB on a daily basis. All staff had three free meals and free transportation every day.

The Impact of National Politics

The national election campaign of his political party had been important to Kom’s election campaign in both 2001 and 2005 because it was the effective mechanism for Kom to attract votes from the undecided middle class. Kom relied on his party’s media-based national campaign that concentrated on the party’s leader candidate concept and populist policy pledges to win over votes from the middle class who lived outside the sphere of his influential networks of vote-canvassers. Similar to other candidates, Kom and his campaign team expected that middle-class voters who supported his party leader as prime minister would vote for him as well. This was reflected in all of Kom’s billboards and campaign posters posted throughout the constituency – those posters showed Kom and his party leader smiling together with the latter’s supporting message and signature at the top. Kom stated that to have his party leader walking around the communities with him, meeting his potential voters and delivering a political speech that would be televised on the evening news and published in the newspapers were extremely important to his campaign and would definitely win him extra votes, especially from the undecided middle-class voters.¹⁹

Meanwhile, Kom’s personalised old-style vote-canvasser networks continued to play a significant role in canvassing votes from groups of low-income voters living in the rural villages and congested communities. Kom’s case exemplifies a hybrid form of electioneering at the individual constituency level. The landslide victories of the Thai Rak Thai party in both party-list and constituency-based systems in the 2001 and 2005 general elections were the result of the party’s hybrid form of election campaigning, called “dual tactics” by the Thai Rak Thai campaigners, that responded to different kinds of voters with a combination of Thai-style and Western campaign methods.

19 A formal interview with Kom, 19 January 2005.

Conclusion

By examining vote-canvassing networks in some detail, this article has helped illuminate the black box of Thai electoral politics, previously neglected in the Thai electoral studies literature. It has demonstrated that a set of systematic campaign patterns – including the making of an election campaign map and the identification of voters along residential lines – remains central to election-campaigning practices in Thailand. As we have seen, Thai candidates and campaign workers categorise neighbourhoods into three housing groups: the open house (*ban poet*), closed house (*ban pit*), and semi-closed, semi-open house (*ban pit-pit poet-poet*) neighbourhoods. This categorisation is based on how voters living in each neighbourhood respond to vote-canvassers and their patronage-based, money-oriented electioneering methods. This house-based voter segmentation is a campaign formula commonly used by veteran and new electoral candidates alike; yet it remained hidden to earlier analyses of Thai elections.

The findings of this article challenge Anek's concept (1996) of “two democracies”, which argues that in political terms, Thailand is effectively two distinct countries with rural voters influenced by money, local leaders, political factions and corrupt politicians while more well-educated, urban middle class voters are more oriented toward the alternative policies offered by competing parties. The case study of Kom, a 2005 parliamentary candidate in a suburban constituency of Bangkok, has shown that some voters in urban areas are as patronage-based and money-oriented as those in rural villages. At the same time, some voters in the rural provinces are as interested in party policies as many voters in Bangkok. Thai society is, in fact, deeply fragmented and too diverse and complex to be divided in such a simplistic manner.

On the surface, Kom seemed to be just the kind of “new breed” politician the reformists who wrote the 1997 constitution desired, with his post-graduate degree, wealthy family and successful career outside politics. However, as this detailed case study of his campaign showed, despite this, Kom still needed vote-canvasser networks and “old money” political elements to win votes in old rural villages and urban slums in his constituency. He also needed to mobilise new forms of vote-canvasser networks, disguised as *sai* connections, to win over some middle-class voters. In addition, personalism based on Kom's individual leadership style, was central to his political marketing campaign, in much the same way that Thaksin's “candidate concept” was key to the latter's national political marketing. The case study showed that cliques, informal power relations and vote-canvasser networks continue to be significant in Thai electoral politics despite explicit political reforms designed to limit their influence. The new element of Thaksin-style political

marketing is salient; yet its impact was rather more marginal than might be expected. Rural and low-income voters are willing to accommodate the networking influences of local socio-economic and political leaders, who become vote-canvassers when elections take place, mainly because they cannot afford to lose the patronage of influential figures. Many middle-class voters are aware of the “moral divide” at play between “modern”, “sophisticated”, “well-educated”, “urban” voters who reject vote-canvasser networks and the “patronage-ridden”, “low-educated”, “rural” voters who are submissive to local informal power, identifying themselves as being among the more sophisticated. However, in practice, some accept the voter-mobilisation of local connections, a subtle new form of vote-canvasser networks, and their patronage-based and money-oriented electioneering methods. Indeed, the reliance of ordinary citizens on informal and formal leaders in Thailand is unlikely to change in the near future unless the great economic inequality and social gaps between different sections of Thai society are diminished.

In short, this article has demonstrated that electoral campaigning in Thailand, as in other emerging democracies, is a much messier process than generally preconceived, and there is little evidence that such campaigning is rapidly transforming itself into a “modern” set of processes. Old-style electioneering based on informal social networks and patronage personal ties – including family, kinship, cliques, factions and local community groups – remains essential in winning over rural and urban poor voters. Meanwhile, a significant segment of the diverse middle-class actually make their voting decisions under the influence of local connections and implicit vote-canvasser networks, although they are keen to identify themselves as “more sophisticated”, “well-educated” voters. The case study of Kom’s election campaign showed that the role of the much-vaunted middle-class voters is not decisive, even in suburban areas, and political marketing is not displacing traditional practices. Under the dominant influence of the agenda-setting tycoon-turned-political-entrepreneur Thaksin Shinawatra, successful candidates and political parties in Thailand’s post-1997 political system adopted a hybrid model of electioneering that mixed old-style local vote-canvasser networks and national political marketing. This article suggests that rather than linear transformation, political hybridisation is a key trend in Asia’s developing democracies.

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