

# Opinions of Voters towards the Issue of Political Participation during the General Election of 2014: The Case of Kalasin, Thailand

Kittisak Jermsittiparsert<sup>1,2</sup>, Puthisat Namdech<sup>2</sup> & Noppon Akahat<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Political Science, College of Government, Rangsit University, Thailand

<sup>2</sup> Political Science Association of Kasetsart University, Thailand

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Political Science and Law, Kalasin University, Thailand

Correspondence: Kittisak Jermsittiparsert, Faculty of Political Science, College of Government, Rangsit University, Thailand. Tel: 66-866-222-495. E-mail: kittisak.j@rsu.ac.th

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## Abstract

This research aims to study voters' opinions within the province of Kalasin, Thailand with respect to the topic of political participation during the general election of 2014 and to conduct a comparative study on the collected opinions, which will be determined by individual factor and employ a quantitative analysis research method in the form of questionnaires as a research tool. This study's database is compiled from information collected from selected number of 397 voters domiciled within Kalasin. Statistics tools include, namely, Arithmetic Mean, T-Test, and One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). From the data analysis, the findings reveal that, with regard to the average means of voters' opinions within the province of Kalasin with respect to the topic of political participation during the general election of 2014, the overall result is average ( $\bar{x} = 3.40$ ). Voters turnout ( $\bar{x} = 3.88$ ) is found to contain the highest level of opinions whilst a political related public assembly ( $\bar{x} = 2.71$ ) is found at the lowest ranking. Nevertheless, upon comparing between the average means of voters' opinions within the province of Kalasin with respect to the topic of political participation during the general election of 2014 using individual factor assessment, it is discovered that Kalasin voters, as vary in sex, age, education background, occupation, and earned income, bare significant statistic differences when examining their opinions towards political participation during the general election of 2014. In contrast, Kalasin voters varying in marital status hold trivial statistic differences towards the concerned issue.

**Keyword:** opinion, voters, political participation, general election of 2014, Kalasin

## 1. Research Background and Importance

An election is considered as one of political tools that represents political participation by the public- recognised as the true owner of sovereign powers- through the form of choosing their representatives (Nakchatree, 2003, p. 6).

It also represents the people's say on the governing and running of the country, of which can be witnessed from various forms of actions calling out or supporting decisions made under a democratic political system (Pongpaew, 2003). The kingdom of Thailand has been governed under democracy since 1932, with over 19 sets of constitution and a total amount of 25 general elections thenceforth. However, it is viewed that Thailand does not really have an absolute democracy as there have been 12 incidents of coups d'état. Still, an aspiration for the people to live harmoniously under a democratic society is coveted by the Thais as it is believed to suit the needs of the Thai society. Over times, it has been made clear that democracy, notwithstanding its many weakness and

loopholes, is far better than any form of dictatorship (Raksasat, 1994, p. 111). Moreover, Thai society has placed great values upon democracy and, as a matter of fact, democracy can offer solutions to many problems existed within the society (Wasee, 1994, p. 8). In order to achieve an absolute democracy, the public must be well informed with regards to their rights and duty. More importantly, political participation must be taken up by the public for it is a crucial key to developments in politics (Boonbongkarn, 1991, pp. 38-39).

A study on political participation has been vastly conducted since 1920 when a school of behavioural sciences was established from American politics studies (Charoensinolan, 2011). Up to present days, many distinguished forms of political participations have been created and used by different societies across Thailand, for example, by Tinnabhan Nakata, Pornsak Pongpaew, Sujit Boonbongkarn, and Tin Pratchayapruk. These contain ideas and structures that are derived from American politics studies system. For this research, researchers have opted for McClosky's framework (1968, pp. 252-253) which refers to political participation as a voluntary act to partake in a number of activities, which relate to the selection of leader, as well as having certain influences over public policy or government policy decision making, either as a direct or indirect form. Such activities include vote casting, keeping up with news on politics, giving financial supports to political candidates or to political parties as well as being constantly alerted towards issues of politics, of which can be determined by becoming a member of chosen political party or supporting election campaigns organised by political parties.

The study explores issues concerning political participation in current political climate where mass conflicts have been spreading throughout the society especially over the past 7-8 years, of which such event has led to great political awareness by the public across urban as well as rural areas. Coupling with the advancement in telecommunications and technology, presenting in the forms of mobile phones, televisions, satellites, and the internet, just to name a few, this has enabled freedom of expression to grow even in public spaces. It also allows groups of people to express their views and get their ideas together within a blink of an eye, giving them a chance to establish their own ideological groups. Such phenomenon highlights significant attention valued by people with many differences and diverse political views. Accordingly, it could be said that the concept of "Political Ideals" has starting to manifest itself once again, after its brief appearance during 1973-1976. The general election held on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011, thereby, can be said to be the first time that there are unprecedented number of voters, far greater than ever existed throughout its political history, turning up to cast their well-informed and ideologically-driven votes, whilst taking their considerations upon the issue of righteousness of the country leader in the accounts (Sawasdee et al., 2011, p. 1).

Following the event of Yingluck Shinawatra's government petitioning for the royal appeal to have the parliament dissolved on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013, succeeded by the Election Commission of Thailand (ETC) issuing a date for the next general election to be held on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, the authors view that the people's political ideals and standing points have evidently emerged. The phenomena can be witnessed in two main particular assemblies, one of which demands political reforms before having the election, known as People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). The group mainly comprises of the people residing within Bangkok and those from the southern regions, where massive supports are given to the Democrat Party. The other group is known as the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), containing members from outer regions around Bangkok, the north and the north eastern that pour their supports over Pheu Thai Party (PTP). Both groups represent political movements fighting for their ideological goals and arguing for their stands as well as their political structures within the democratic society.

Evidently, during the aforementioned general election, great light has been shed upon the importance of determining and choosing between difference political sides of the voters. For the political climate surrounding this election, it would be impossible to overlook one particular argument concerning the individual's electoral right as to whether such right should be weight and treated as equal or not. On this regard, Prof. Sombat Thamrongthanyawong, Ph.D., former rector of the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) argued that "One-man-one-vote cannot yet be used with Thailand. If the system really is right, then why it does not work for Thailand? Thai people are not stupid but everyday they have to make a living so they do not spend much time thinking about politics. Now, we should try to explore ways that would minimise possible damages. When different results have been reached, it means that there are indeed certain factors that make differences. Take South Africa for example, this country is more developed than Thailand. Its electoral system only asks voters to vote for party-list representatives, no constituent representatives. This is because constituent MPs are more capable to easily buy off votes. This is also a direct democracy with the principle of one-man-one-vote. For Germany, they also have a system where half of their MPs are from constituent representatives and another half drawn using party list." (Kaosod Online, 2013)

Accordingly, the above notion has triggered the authors' interest upon this study with respect to the topic of political participation during the period of which a general election of 2014 has been issued by the royal decree. It would be interesting to look into the claim that Thai people "are not stupid but everyday they have to make a living so they do not spend much time thinking about politics"—as said by Thamrongthanyawong—and examine their level of participations accessing possible contributing factors that may have an effect on the issue in question. Following such controversial claim, many arguments have been widely discussed and debated, questioning the identity of these group of people, where are they from? and who are they? Across mainstream media, state sector and certain group of people living in Bangkok are told that the accused group is comprised of "the stupid and undereducated", of which are undeniably referred to the supporters of PTP—the north eastern which are the majority of Thai population. The north eastern people, arguably, are regarded as the least uneducated with the lowest incomes comparing to others who live in different regions throughout the country. As a result, they have been labeled with the impression of distaste and repulsion, rendering them as vulgar in the eyes of the middle and the upper class. (Wongsajjachoke, 2011, 1875)

Ergo, this research purports to study voters in the province of Kalasin, locating in the central north eastern region with the population of approximately 1 million, most of which are Thai-Esarn. The province is surrounded by 6 other north eastern provinces. On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011 general election day, Kalasin had an estimated of 72 per cent of voters' turnout. (Election Commission of Thailand, 2011) All of Kalasin's MPs, as drawn from its 6 constituencies, are members of PTP. Consequently, a study on voters residing within Kalasin province attempts to introduce new perspectives when examining political participations engaged by Esarn people. The study covers the duration between the announcement of the royal decree ordering the parliament to be dissolved in December 2013 and up to February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014. Also, in order to effectively run an analysis of the latest election results, it is of utmost importance to grasp firm understandings towards Thai politics. By conducting a study on elections within a well-established research framework, together with an impartiality as well as a systematic planning, it would enable the researchers to discover complex inter-related relationships of various phenomenon including the views and attitudes of diverse groups of people living across the nation, and the opinions of voters whose differences also vary in age gap and socio-economic status, towards the issue of political participation in the democratic society.

## **2. Research Objectives**

- 1) To examine differences in Kalasin's voters' opinions on the issue of political participation during the general election of 2014.
- 2) To conduct a comparative study on the Kalasin's voters' opinions towards the issue of political participation during the general election of 2014 using individual factor assessment, namely, factors concerning sex, age, education background, occupation, and earned income of the studied voters.

## **3. Scope of the Research**

This study aims to examine voters' opinions within the province of Kalasin with respect to the topic of political participation during the general election of 2014. The studied area is set to be within the province of Kalasin where a total population number of 756,663 are registered as eligible voters for the 2014 general election (Election Commission of Kalasin, 2014). Sampling size is calculated using Rathachatranon's method (2013), which produces a sampling size of 397 research subjects. Cuter Random Sampling technique is performed on a group of total registered voters within all 18 Kalasin's districts. The research duration is from December, 2013 to February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014 (during the affected period of the royal decree issuing the organising of 2014 general election).

## **4. Research Findings**

### *4.1 General Information*

It is found that most of the subjects are male (54.9%) with the age ranging between 41-50 years old (29.7%), are married (68.3%), hold primary degree as their highest education qualifications (40.6%), work in agricultural sector (53.7%), and make an average monthly income of lower than 5,000 Baht (44.1%).

#### *4.2 Average Means of Voters' Opinions within the Province of Kalasin towards the Topic of Political Participation during the 2014 General Election*

It is discovered that the overall result is perceived as average ( $\bar{x} = 3.40$ ). Upon conducting different factor assessment, it reveals that, on the topic of election turnout, overall voters' opinions towards voting ( $\bar{x} = 3.88$ ) is ranked fairly high. When reviewing between different factors, it is found, from highest to lowest rankings, that most subjects regard voting as a way to assert their rights ( $\bar{x} = 4.41$ ) and joining as a member of political parties ( $\bar{x} = 3.19$ ) is placed as average. Further study on to the topic reveals that the subject see the becoming of political party member as the most effective way to gain understandings of politics ( $\bar{x} = 3.31$ ). Vis-a-vis electoral campaigns, voters views are situated around average means ( $\bar{x} = 3.67$ ) and when conducting different factor analysis, it shows that the subjects mostly link election campaigns to democracy advocacy ( $\bar{x} = 3.92$ ) whilst participating in political gathering or upheavals ( $\bar{x} = 2.71$ ) is perceived and placed at average level by voters. More detailed study onto the topic has shown that the majority of the subjects view an engagement in political mob as a tool to protect and assert their rights ( $\bar{x} = 3.07$ ) while keeping informed with news and politics is deemed to be relatively average ( $\bar{x} = 3.54$ ). Upon conducting various factor assessment, it is presented that the subject see being up to dated with current news and politics would best produce better understandings over the issue of politics ( $\bar{x} = 3.87$ ).

#### *4.3 Hypothesis Testing*

A comparative study of differences in voters' opinions within the province of Kalasin with respect to the topic of political participation during the general election of 2014, which is comprised of (1) Voting, (2) Becoming political party member, (3) Electoral campaigning, (4) Public assembly or upheaval, and (5) Being informed about current news and politics. The study also utilises various factor assessment approaches, namely, factors concerning difference in sex, age, education background, occupation, and earned income together with the use of T-Test and One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). In essence, the study reveals that Kalasin voters, as vary in sex, age, education background, occupation, and earned income, bare significant statistic differences when examining their opinions towards political participation during the general election of 2014. In contrast, Kalasin voters, when considering the difference on marital status, hold trivial statistic differences towards the concerned issue.

Table 1. Summary of hypothesis testing

Independent Variable	Opinion on Political Participation		
	P-Value	Consistent with Hypothesis	Inconsistent with Hypothesis
1. Sex	.05*	✓	
2. Age	.00**	✓	
3. Marital Status	.39		✓
4. Education Background	.03*	✓	
5. Occupation	.00**	✓	
6. Income	.00**	✓	

\* Significant Statistic Value of .05 \*\* Significant Statistic Value of .01

## 5. Discussion

As discovered in the research findings that voters varying in sex perceive different views when it comes to political participation during the 2014 general election, this is consistent with reports presented by Srijanto (2009), Khantikul (2011) and Thanonsuk (2011) while contrasting the results given by Jomejaturong (2006). With reference to voters' different factor on age, their opinions are found to be in contradictory. This is coherent with results found by Supean (2003), Malaka (2006) and Khantikul (2011) while contrasting results produced by Jomejaturong (2006). With respect to voters' different aspect of education background, their perceptions portray to be inconsistent. Such findings is said to be true with cases presented by Kurdmalee (2004), Jomejaturong (2006), Jeananan (2009) and Chindaphrom and Kaewkong (2013) whereas the findings by Kesarotayan (2007) and Khantikul (2011) seem to be in contradictory. Upon taking into consideration over an element of voters' difference in occupation, their views are deemed to be in contrast, which rather contracts the argument by Jomejaturong (2006). As to the factor of difference of income, opinions are different across the studied voters, which is in accordance with the reports given by Kesarotayan (2007) and Jeananan (2009), still, contradicting those of Jomejaturong (2006). Lastly, considering difference of voters' marital status, of which the result turns out to be inconsistent, this findings also differ from the results produced by Khantikul (2011).

## 6. Recommendations

From the study on voters' opinions within the province of Kalasin towards the issue of political participation during the general election of 2014, overall, it is estimated to be around average means. Accordingly, relevant parties responsible for organising the election should express their standing points towards the promotion of public participation, as echoed by the concept of democracy. For example, there should be opportunities available to those who wish to openly express their political ideas in public spaces, which goes along with the principle of public participation in political affairs laid down in the constitution. Also, civil society should be encouraged to take on the role of assisting the holding of election in election units located across the community with voluntary supports given by willing hands of people. Several tasks can be assigned to the volunteers, such as giving out useful information, detecting signs of corruption in the election, or assisting in any other possible way instead of just casting their votes in the ballots. Such opportunities of the aforementioned participations can provide the people with greater incentives to partake in more various forms of political activities. Furthermore, the promotion of public participation, other than the existing channels, can be motivated by exploring other alternative approaches that would allow more people to take part in greater variety of political participations. This could also be reached out through different channels of various institutions such as family unit, education institutions and the media so as to invite the people's interests as well as their positive attitudes towards the subject of election, which could ultimately lead them to become citizens with active political awareness and recognise the importance of their parts that can be played to serve their community at large.

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