

A STUDY ON THAI VOTERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS POLITICAL MARKETING AND BRANDING: A CASE OF THE DEMOCRAT AND PHEU THAI PARTIES, THAILAND

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Abstract

The political marketing field seems new compared to others, but it has been growing rapidly; especially in this decade of capitalism with voters being more consumerist. It might be argued that political parties all around the world have decided to apply political marketing communication to influence voters in general elections, with a potentially high rate of success. The use of marketing in politics seems to penetrate Thailand as well, since two main political parties; The Pheu Thai and the Democrat parties have highly emphasized their marketing strategies, which could be seen as a new phenomenon in a Thai political context.

Therefore, this research aims to study the perception and attitude of Thai voters toward political marketing and branding of the parties. These could be divided into two objectives: (1) to investigate voters' perceptions toward brand images of the 'Pheu Thai' and 'Democrat' parties, and (2) to investigate voters' attitudes toward the political marketing campaigns and branding of the parties, and examine whether demographics has an impact on those attitudes or not.

These objectives were developed into conceptual models and hypotheses, which were then tested by using quantitative research techniques. The sample used for this research was 300 Thai citizens, all whom have the right to vote in a general election.

The results obtained from this research show that the political marketing and branding could gain the consumer voter's engagement, whilst also having a significant impact on their final decision. In addition, the research findings suggest that the way people perceive marketing depends on the demographics; the corporation or organisation should put across the right message through the right media channels to the right target audiences. Equally, each political party should be more concerned about the image of their leader, as the findings indicate that a positive image of the party leader could lead to that party becoming the first choice in the voter's mind.

Keywords: Political Marketing, Political communication, Political Branding, Corporate branding, Branding, Thailand

Introduction

In the context of today's society, every aspect of people's life is likely to interact with brands whether it be during shopping, watching television or surfing the Internet. It could be true to say that nowadays branding might be one of the most important marketing strategies for many organisations to drive them to their summits, not only in the private sectors but also in the public sector.

No one can deny that, in this day and age, branding has become more associated with politics, although some political scientists argue that politics should be concerned with ideology rather than marketing strategies (Reeves, Chernatony and Carrigan, 2006). This can be called 'Political Marketing' where the use of marketing tools has merged into the political context (LeBaron, 2008).

It is probably true to say that political parties in many countries worldwide - namely, the United States, Canada, Western Europe (Lees-Marshment, 2001, cited in LeBaron, 2008) - are using more and more branding techniques to differentiate themselves in order to win an election. When it comes to the Thai political context, the political competition seems to be more intense since the Thai Rak Thai (Pheu Thai) Party have established their political brand and used various marketing communication tools to communicate their brand messages to political consumers. This has resulted in their victory in the both the 2001 and the 2005 election with a unanimous vote. This is a good example to illustrate the success of using marketing tools in the political context.

Because of this phenomenon, the Democrat party, which is considered the main rival of the Thai rak Thai (Pheu Thai) party, had to rethink their strategies, which seemed to be traditional and generally quite ordinary. The leader of the Democrat party; Abhisit Vejjajiva, stated clearly in 2008 that, "The party has to win again for the next election" (Positioning Magazine, 2008) and he also said that, "Using a marketing plan is acceptable, the party did not oppose, but it has to be under the ideology" (Manchainimitra, 2008). Thus, the Democrat party has been trying to rebrand itself.

The great success of Pheu Thai and the rebranding of the Democrat Party would imply that Thai political parties might be more concerned about the importance of marketing in the political context and how to use it professionally. To make the picture of political marketing and branding in Thailand clearer, the perceptions of Thai voters toward the party's marketing and branding should be considered.

Therefore, this dissertation will study the perception and attitude of Thai voters toward political marketing and branding of the parties. Hopefully, this research would be beneficial for those who are interested in the field of political marketing, specifically in Thailand.

Aims of the research

This research aims to study the perception and attitude of Thai voters toward political marketing and branding of the parties. These can be divided into two objectives: (1) to investigate voters' perceptions toward brand images of the 'Pheu Thai' and 'Democrat' parties, and (2) to investigate voters' attitudes towards the political marketing campaigns and branding of the parties, and examine whether demographics has an impact on those attitudes or not.

Literature Review

Political communication and marketing

Communication might be considered to be one of the most vital skills for humans and it might be true to say that humans rely on their communication skills to achieve their goals in daily life.

Cheypratab (1997) said that “communication is about the transmission of the message from someone to someone, the former being called the sender and the latter being called the receiver, by using media in order to accomplish the sender’s goal.”

When it comes to political communication, MacNair (2007) defines this as “being largely mediated communication, transmitted through the print and electronic media”. In the age of mass communication, political communication seems to move from communication in direct personal or face-to-face activities, as it used to be in the past, to indirect communication via various mass media (Lilleker, 2006).

It is probably true to say that modern political marketing is part of political communication and, before it was used in many countries all around the world, it had its origins in the United States as Maarek (1995) identified “The United States as the first country to experiment with modern political communication techniques, then apply them systematically” (1995). This is because of their political system: democracy, in which elections are probably considered the most important part of the politics process. Therefore, each political party has adopted marketing and communication strategies to use in order to gain the votes of people.

The American Marketing Association (2007) gave a simple definition of political marketing as, “Marketing designed to influence target audiences to vote for a particular person or party or proposition”, similarly to Mona and Ming (2009) who defined political marketing as thus, “Political Marketing may be characterised as the application of marketing concepts to the study of the strategic process involving voters and politicians (and their parties)”.

Furthermore, Bulter and Collins (1994) state that “Political marketing is the marketing of the ideas and opinions which relate to public or political issues or to specific candidates. In general, political marketing is designed to influence people’s votes in election... Political marketing, however, employs many of same techniques used in product marketing, such as paid advertising, direct mail and publicity.”, all of which lead to suggest that political marketing is associated with political campaigns and can therefore be concluded that its highest goal is to persuade people to vote for the marketing entity.

Political Communication channels

It could be argued that the selection and use of different channels is important to lead a campaign to its success. The campaign consultants have to use the right media for the right message (political advertisement) and to reach the right target audiences, because all channels, both by traditional media such as Television, Radio, Magazines, Newspapers, and also by new media such as Social networks, Mobile phones etc. could give different results (Maarek, 1995). Moreover, different channels will have advantages and disadvantages.

Effects of political advertising on voting behaviour

Many research works have considered the conditions under which political advertising is more or less likely to be effective, and researchers found that televised political advertising is likely to have stronger effects on voters who have low involvement in the political campaigns. Lee Kaid (2008) said that, “Political television advertisements are also more likely to affect the votes of citizens who are undecided at the time of exposure or who are late deciders”. Moreover, research shows that advertisements that focus on political issues are likely to be more effective than the advertisements which concentrate only on the party or the candidate’s image. Additionally, the advertising messages that could arouse voter emotions are found to be more effective. However, Lee Kaid (2008) also stipulates that the ways people perceive political advertising and marketing depends on their demographics such as gender, age and

education. Therefore these factors need to be taken into consideration when looking at the effects of political advertising on voting behaviour, as they may alter the way in which political advertising is perceived and thus change its overall effect on a person's voting behaviour.

Political Branding

Branding has become a major part of organisation strategy, not only for profit-making organisations, but also in non-profit organisations like political parties. The American Marketing Association (AMA) (Lake, 2012) defines a brand as a "Name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers."

Reeves, Chernatony and Carrigan (2006) said about brands and political parties that, "If commercial brands are assuming to increase power in consumers' lives, then it is possible that the way and nature that people make choices about political parties is akin to how they make choices about their commercial brands". Additionally, when looking at branding in terms of political marketing, Lees Marshment (2009) said that, "Branding is about how a political organisation or individual is perceived overall. A brand offers something additional, which is more psychological and less tangible. It is concerned with impressions, image, attitudes and recognition. Branding helps the party or candidate to help change or maintain reputation and support." Recent studies demonstrate a link between the branding concept and political parties. This research has concluded that, like other organisations, political parties have used logos and symbols to define themselves (Lilleker, 2006).

The brand values are normally communicated through the "name", which could be symbolic of the party's members and voters. The logo would also represent what the party stands for, for example, some political parties might use an image of a bird to build the concept of "freedom" into the voter's or public's perception.

Thus, it is clear that branding techniques have been used by political parties in order to convey their image to the public, and maintain or create their reputation so as to gain more support or votes. These could be an element of the party campaign professionalisation and caused by the consumerisation of electoral behaviour (Lilleker, 2006).

Corporate image

Corporate image refers to how a corporation is perceived; this is generally about the perceived image of what a corporation stands for. It might be true to say that a good image seems to be very important for political parties, to be accepted by voters, and most political parties are probably aware of that.

Corporate Identity

Corporate identity refers to the way in which organisations present themselves. Cornelissen (2008) suggests that at first, it was restricted to the element of visual design such as logo or symbols, but it has developed to include all forms of communication, like corporate advertising, sponsorship, etc. and all external facing behaviour in the marketplace. He further proposes that an "excellent" corporation could have a good alignment between corporate identity and corporate image, as the image of an organisation should be traced back to their identity, which is contained in a set of values and related competencies.

Politics of Thailand

Contemporary Thai politics fall within a framework of democracy and a constitutional monarchy. A hereditary monarch is the head of state, whilst an elected prime minister is the head of government; where the judiciary is independent of the executive and the legislative branches. Thai politics has taken this form since a political revolution in 1932, which introduced democracy into Thailand for the first time, and was then further developed by constitutional reforms in 1997 (Hicken, 2006).

Similarly to several countries around the world, for Thailand, there have been two main political parties playing the main role in the country's politics. These are the Democrat party, the oldest political party of Thailand, and the Thai rak Thai party (which has now changed its name to Pheu Thai), a new party that arose in 2001 when the first election under the 1997 constitution was held. (McCargo and Pathamanand, 2005)

Pheu Thai party

In 1998, at the beginning of the Pheu Thai party, the party was named as "Thai rak Thai" and was founded by Thaksin Sinawatra; a successful Thai businessman in the telecommunications industry. The other founding members at that time were mainly academic and successful businessmen with a high level of education and had a good image. The party integrated the model of the professional political marketing into their election campaigns (McCargo and Pathamanand, 2005). Moreover, the party invested in market research to learn about what Thai voters wanted and to establish the image of the party's leader, Thaksin Sinawatra. This was to make sure that his image matched the demands of Thai voters. Three years later, the party's campaign would eventually bring about the greatest success of the party in 2001.

The Thai rak Thai party was able to take the majority of seats in parliament to be the governing party, not only in 2001 but also in the 2005 general election (before a year of political crisis involving Thaksin in Thailand). During this political crisis, there was a coup d'état by the Royal Thai Army against Thaksin Sinawatra, which took place on 19th September 2006. Thaksin Sinawatra, as the then prime minister, was expelled from the position and from the country. Following this, Thailand held another general election in July 2011, which seemed to be good opportunity for the former Thai rak Thai party to reform as a brand new political party. They reformed as the "Pheu Thai Party", founded by Bunjongsak Wongrattanawanna as the first party leader and later replaced by Yingluck Sinawatra, Thaksin Sinawatra's sister. The Pheu Thai party won this 2011 election and Yingluck Sinawatra became the 28th prime minister and the 1st female prime minister of Thailand.

Despite having a new name, the party used the same strategies that Thai rak Thai used previously (The Manager Newspaper, 2011). The strategies were aimed at making people of all ages, with no gender bias and in every social class, more aware of the Pheu Thai party's link to Thai rak Thai brand. This was through various channels of integrated marketing communications; namely TV advertisements, radio, social networks, billboards, flyers, poster, newspapers, magazines in addition to political events such as road shows around the country. Moreover, the same as the Thai rak Thai party did before, Pheu Thai party used populist policies to reach the masses; for example "One student – One tablet", an educational policy which the party promised if the party won the election, with primary school students to be given a free tablet computer and ensuring that every school has high speed Internet (Hanlon, 2011). Other examples include economic policies like the grantee BT 15,000 salary of all graduates, the creation of 100,000 jobs and increasing of the minimum wage nationwide (The Nation, 2011).

Democrat party

The other main party in Thailand is the Democrat party, the oldest party in Thailand, founded by Khuang Aphaiwong on 6th April 1946. The Democrat party presented themselves clearly within the “urban” and “modern” segment, judging by the education and social background of their party members. Moreover, the main target groups of the party have been concentrated in the capital and the southern region, which could be considered as more urbanised and wealthier than other parts of Thailand (Phongpaichit, 2007).

As the oldest party, the Democrat party seems to be perceived as conservative and the working style is argued to be bureaucratic (Jantrakiri, 2012). This has been suggested to be a barrier for the party to reach to and connect with the masses, and may have thus resulted in the party losing the election in 2001 and 2005 (Phongpaichit, 2007). As a result of these election losses, the party leader at that time, Chuan Leekpai, stepped down from the position and Abhisit Vejjajiva took over as the new party leader.

The party, now led by Abhisit, seems to be entering a new era under his leadership, as he has created a new vision and wants to rebrand the party (Vorapitrayuttra, 2006). Vorapitrayuttra said that “because the party had a new leader, Abhisit Vejjajiva, the party thought that it was time to rebrand themselves and this might help the party win an election again”. He also identified the old personality of the party as very conservative, old fashioned and bureaucratic. These would be good explanations for why the Democrat party decided to change.

The party created a brand identity structure, which consisted of a new motto, a new slogan, adding colours and editing the logo. These would be the brand messages to represent the brand personality mentioned above. Moreover, Abhisit could be considered part of the new brand, according to the work of Tantitecha (2004). She noted that Mr Abhisit has a unique personality to represent: a reliable, creative leader of the new generation of democrat party followers with an excellent educational background (as an Eton and Oxford graduate) giving him a good, knowledgeable image (Phongpaichit, 2007).

The Democrat party has been using IMC (Vorapitrayuttra, 2006) via various channels such as TV, radio, billboards, banners, posters and flyer advertisements and public relations like road shows events, as well as emphasising through social networks like Facebook and Twitter. These could make the Democrat party known as marketing professionals who can use the marketing communication tools effectively to reach more groups of people of all ages, careers and social classes (Marketeer, 2010). In addition the the IMC the democrat party utilises the Far-East Advertising agency to make the campaigns more practical and professional.

Finally, there is a clear statement in the work of Vorapitrayuttra (2006) that correlates with the above readings on Thai political parties, that they are becoming more consumer-driven. This is consistent with the research of Reeves, Chernatony and Carrigan (2006) who state that political parties in today’s world have changed the focus from ideology to “voter-driven” or “marketing orientation” strategy.

Methodology

This research aims to study the attitudes and perceptions of Thai voters, but the previous reviews and research seems not to be insufficient information to achieve the research aim. It is therefore necessary to collect further data and analyse this information by using the deductive and quantitative approach to fully accomplish the research aim and research questions, including the hypothesis. Thus the survey approach has been adopted in this dissertation, with a well-structured questionnaire to collect data.

The questionnaire of this research can be divided into 3 main sections, which are related to: (1) perceived image (2) perceived political marketing and branding (3) demographic information.

When it comes to sampling, it is probably important to identify the confidence interval to extend the level of accuracy (Malhotra et al., 2009). In most studies, the level of certainty is set at 95 percent so as to decrease some errors. Thus, for this research, a 95 percent level of confidence will be adopted.

The number of Thai people who have the right to vote in 2013 is 47,321,180 people, thus due to the sample size calculating formula (Anton, 1995, cited by Palihawadana, 2010), the number of the sample will be 384. The researchers took approximately 78% of the calculated sample (384) for conducting the survey because of time and budget limitations. These are the reasons for reducing the calculated sample size. Therefore, the final sample for the research is 300.

In data analysis techniques, T-test will be used to test the means and the different perceptions toward the parties' images between two groups; Pheu Thai and Democrat voters, as well as to investigate voters' attitudes towards the political marketing campaigns and branding of the parties. Additionally, Chi-square testing will be used to investigate the association between voters' demographics and perceived political marketing of the party, also finding the association between voter's preferences and the perceived political marketing of the party.

Findings:

1. Perceptions toward brand image of the parties

This study aimed to investigate voters' perceptions toward the Pheu Thai and the Democrat images as political parties in their own separate rights. The results showed that the perceived images of the Democrat party in terms of political ideology, working style and transparency are not the same as those for the Pheu Thai party, and show that typically supporters have perceived the Democrat party as a conservative, bureaucratic and transparent party. These findings are in parallel with Phongpaichit's (2007) findings that the Democrat party seems to be perceived generally as conservative, bureaucratic and transparent, whilst Pheu Thai voters have perceived the Pheu Thai party as liberal, non-bureaucratic and in between transparent and secretive; the same as the party clearly states in their declaration (Pheu Thai, 2011). On the other hand, both groups perceive their party in the same ways; in terms of party characteristics and political base; in their perception, the parties are slightly simple in characteristics, as well as mass-based (please see in appendix 1). These findings would thus be consistent with Jantrakiri (2012) and Hanlon (2011)'s theories that both parties want to reachout and engage with the masses in order to win the election.

2. Attitudes toward political marketing and branding

The results show that all of the statements, which can be grouped as "perceived marketing and branding", are clearly supported with very high significance level at $p < 0.001$. It might be concluded that political marketing and branding is important to voters when they vote. For other details in each statement please see the table in appendix 2.

A Chi-square testing method has been also applied to test the association between perceived political marketing and demographics: gender, annual income, education, as well as voter's preference. The results have led to suggest that all hypotheses are supported at a high level of significance, namely $p < 0.001$. From the results, it is true to say that the way people perceive marketing and branding depends on gender, annual income, education and voter's preference. These results match the works of Lee Kaid (2008). This also adds supports Hanlon (2011) who explains that the great

victories of Pheu Thai (Thai rak Thai) in the 2001 and 2005 elections were supposed to come from their integrated marketing strategies, which targeted various groups of age, gender and social class.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the importance of political marketing and branding in a Thai political context. The results obtained from this research indicate that the political marketing and branding can indeed gain consumer voter's engagement, whilst also having a significant impact on their final decision. In addition, the research findings suggest that the way people perceive marketing depends on the demographics of the voting individual, such as gender, annual income, education and voter's preference. It is also evident that each political party should put across the right message via the right media channels to reach the right target audiences (voters). Moreover, each political party should be more concerned about the image of the party's leader, as the findings indicate that a positive image of the party's leader could result in that party becoming the first choice in the voter's mind.

When considering voters' perceptions toward the parties' images, the results reveal that the perceived image of the Democrat party in terms of political ideology and working style are more conservative and bureaucratic. These perceptions are in contrast to the party's new brand identities, which aim to be more liberal and non-bureaucratic. On the contrary, the research findings show that voters perceive Pheu Thai party as liberal and non-bureaucratic; the same as the party clearly states in their declaration.

According to the literature reviews, it is advisable for a political party to eliminate the gap between their identity and their image so as to be a strong brand party. This ultimately can lead to the party becoming a successful political party as Colnelissen (2008) suggests that an "excellent" corporation will have a good alignment between corporate identity and corporate image. All in all, this study emphasises on earlier research that marketing and branding are significantly important for political parties, and identifies that this is certainly the case in Thailand, as political parties are increasingly more concerned about their brands and marketing campaigns as an important tool to influence voters and win elections.

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Appendices

1. Perceptions toward brand image of the parties

	Group*	N	Mean	t	Sig.	Significance Level
Democrat and Pheu Thai image (Political ideology)	1	197	3.3909	-10.964	0.000	P<0.001
	2	103	5.4466			
Democrat and Pheu Thai image (Working style)	1	197	3.2487	-8.693	0.000	P<0.001
	2	103	4.8544			
Democrat and Pheu Thai image (Party characteristic)	1	197	4.1980	0.074	0.941	P>0.10
	2	103	4.1845			
Democrat and Pheu Thai image (Political base)	1	197	4.2183	-1.608	0.109	P>0.10
	2	103	4.5437			
Democrat and Pheu Thai image (Transparency)	1	197	3.4467	-3.050	0.003	P<0.01
	2	103	3.9903			

Group 1 refers to Democrat voters.

Group 2 refers to Pheu Thai voters

2. Attitudes toward political marketing and branding

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Good reputation is important...	300	5.4367	1.27727	0.07374	73.724	0.000
Party image is important...	300	5.5967	1.25402	0.0724	77.301	0.000
Party name is important...	300	4.7833	1.489	0.08597	55.641	0.000
Slogan and motto are important...	300	4.8233	1.33344	0.07699	62.652	0.000
Logo is important...	300	3.7067	1.52151	0.08784	42.196	0.000
Branding of the party is important...	300	4.61	1.36042	0.07854	58.693	0.000
Roadshow campaign is important...	300	4.9	1.35504	0.07823	62.633	0.000
Billboards, posters and flyers are important...	300	4.6467	1.41958	0.08196	56.695	0.000
TV advertisements are important...	300	4.6433	1.45022	0.08373	55.457	0.000
Radio advertisements are important...	300	4.4267	1.38239	0.07981	55.464	0.000
Press advertisements are important...	300	4.6767	1.4649	0.08458	55.295	0.000
Online advertisements are important...	300	4.5	1.44115	0.08321	54.083	0.000
Social networks are important...	300	4.7467	1.40084	0.08088	58.689	0.000
Party's official site is important...	300	4.4533	1.45196	0.08383	53.124	0.000
Leader image is important...	300	5.84	1.36404	0.07875	74.156	0.000