

Public Opinion Polls In the 2023 Thai General Election: Unanalyzed Demographic Data

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Abstract

By surveying public opinion before and during elections, the results of various polls inform us about the popularity of political parties and candidates, as well as predict the number of seats each political party may secure in the parliament and election outcomes. Surveys are beneficial for polling agencies, mass media, political parties, and candidates, as they provide insight into the preferences and predictions of the electorate. The findings of this study show that the typical opinion poll can fall short of serving the public as owners of sovereignty, as it often neglects to survey policies and issues relevant to the people. Additionally, polls fail to analyze demographic data that could help society understand the origin and trajectory of public opinions, issues, and needs. Economic, social, political, and cultural factors can impact survey results, as explained by Pierre Bourdieu. He elucidated the survey of public opinions and underscored the significance of demographic data analysis with class perspectives. When polling agencies overlook and exhibit bias in their surveys, they assume a guiding role in politics. This is because they prescribe information and the direction of the political situation through various media channels. Such a situation represents symbolic violence. To break free from this, prioritizing the analysis of demographic data and public policies in surveys could redirect attention from the political competition landscape to the issues and needs of the people.

Keywords

Demographic Information, Public Opinion Poll, Pierre Bourdieu, Class, Bias

Introduction

During the period leading up to the 2003 general election in Thailand, there was a multitude of election polls conducted by various polling agencies affiliated with educational institutions or academic units. Examples include the NIDA Poll, Suan Dusit Poll, Poll of the King Prajadhipok's Institute, and private polling agencies such as Super Poll. Media-related polls also played a significant role in the election, with outlets like Thai Rath, PPTV, NationTV (conducted in collaboration with educational institutions), and others actively engaging in online polls. Noteworthy is the collaboration of online media outlets, including TODAY, The Matter, The Momentum, and Prachatai, which joined forces to conduct a public opinion survey. In public opinion polls, regardless of the polling office's experience in conducting surveys, the ultimate measure of their accuracy lies in the election results. Popularity surveys and predictions of election outcomes constitute a crucial aspect of political communication, enabling people to stay informed about elections and related news. The media plays a pivotal role in presenting and analyzing survey results strategically for predictive purposes.

The presentation of survey results by various polling agencies comes in diverse formats and across a variety of channels. The presentation often includes colorful infographics, the use of images, and the incorporation of percentages to rank issues or make comparisons. The data analysis stage is often conducted by inviting survey authors, academics, or relevant individuals to collaboratively interpret the results. Analyzing and evaluating the political and election landscape is also done through YouTube channels. Polling agencies engaged in public opinion surveys present different topics, explaining and expanding on various program segments. News anchors of these programs highlight information derived from surveys that contribute to a better understanding of politics and elections. In addition, polling agencies provide clear and concise descriptions of the analytical results to make it easier for readers to rapidly comprehend the survey findings. This can involve presenting brief analyses to enhance the accessibility and understanding of the results.

Thai politics following the 2014 coup until 2023, where political power remained in the hands of the military and conservative factions, contributed to the growth in popularity of parties such as the Pheu Thai and Move Forward Party. The latter emerged after the dissolution of the Future Forward Party, positioning itself as a democratic party and gaining increasing popularity. Public opinion surveys in the early stages of the 2023 election campaign, conducted by various polling agencies consistently pointed towards the rising popularity of the Move Forward Party. However, pre-election surveys conducted 1-2 weeks before the general election showed a significant shift in the popularity trends. They indicated a substantial increase in popularity for the Move Forward Party, and Pita Limjaroenrat, the leader of the party, especially among the younger generation (Generation Z).

The Move Forward party has employed various election strategies, including utilizing technology for campaigning and reaching out to the younger demographic through platforms like TikTok. Clear and democratic political positioning, along with the creation of catchy slogans for campaigning, such as "Me Lung, Mai Mee Rao" (If we continue to elect the "Old Generals" there will be no chance for the ordinary people like us), has contributed to the party's growing popularity.

In the field of political psychology, this phenomenon can be explained through both the "Underdog Effect" and the political "Bandwagon Effect" (Farjam, 2021; Unkelbach et al., 2023; van der Meer et al., 2016). Initially, the Move Forward Party was considered as an underdog, trailing behind Pheu Thai. However, in the later stages of the campaign, the party adjusted its strategy, leading to a significant increase in popularity. The NIDA Poll specifically noted that the increased support for the Move Forward Party came at the expense of Pheu Thai, especially in the southern and eastern regions of Thailand. This was attributed to the party's clear stance and effective campaign strategy, making it easier for those desiring change to decide in favor of the Move Forward Party ("Kao klai raeng," 2023).

That said, Unkelbach et al. (2023) pointed out that, while the Bandwagon Effect may be observed among eligible voters, the socio-economic status (SES) and subjective social status (SSS) of social classes play a crucial role in the Political Bandwagon Effect. Decision-making in politics is influenced by social class differences, with individuals in the lower SES strata tending to choose options aligning with societal preferences. This is due to the greater influence of societal norms on this group. Similarly, Han & Kwon (2023) highlighted the impact of regional economic inequality on societal perceptions and political behavior, emphasizing how socio-economic disparities at the regional level create a social context where citizens develop class-based identities that influence political participation and voting behavior.

Social class, therefore, carries more significance than objective socio-economic conditions in defining one's social status. This aligns with the work of Bourdieu (1993), who proposed that, in public opinion surveys, social class (as interpreted through perspectives, capital, position, and status) underlies the conditions of opinions, attitudes, expressions, and various practices (pp. 153-154). However, in explaining and analyzing the results of opinion surveys, polling agencies do not incorporate factors related to social class to interpret the perspective of the sampled population. As a result, the opinions of the people are not fully transmitted, and the voices of the public are not accurately represented. The analysis of public opinion survey results in the 2023 election, particularly regarding the analysis of popularity and campaigning strategies of the Move Forward Party, largely overlooks the factors related to social class. Instead, the analysis tends to focus on age groups or

generational cohorts, and political preferences that emerge in the interpretation of the survey results (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 143-144).

Bourdieu discussed public opinion surveys as emphasizing various crucial aspects that often go unmentioned. One of these aspects is "social class," which does not simply refer to categorizing people based on economically quantifiable factors indicating wealth or assigning them numerical values, or as Bourdieu termed it, "class on paper" (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 7). Instead, social class represents a group of actors occupying similar positions, adhering to and accepting similar conditions, and having the opportunity to benefit and express themselves in similar ways. The position of individuals in a social space is defined by various forms of capital, particularly economic and cultural capital, with this capital itself determining the social class. Those in proximity share material conditions related to their positions, along with experiences, perceptions, opinions, and expressions, ultimately leading to the construction of shared thoughts and habitus (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 83).

The collection of individual-level demographic data in public opinion surveys is almost absent as a factor in analyzing survey results or changes in survey outcomes. There may be an inclusion of factors such as age and residence to explain and analyze results. However, this is often done for predicting and understanding the election strategies of political parties. While analyzing survey results together with personal data can contribute to a better understanding of the public's opinions, problems, and needs, it is not consistently integrated into the analysis of survey outcomes.

This article explores the negligence and bias that lead to the oversight of demographic data in analysis. If poll analysis incorporates a comprehensive analysis of demographic data, it would reveal the class dynamics and social structure, as in Bourdieu's definition. This approach should provide a better understanding of the origins of survey results and the social, economic, and political circumstances that shape people's thoughts, attitudes, and expressions in a particular manner. In essence, it delves into the origins of opinions. This research is part of the study titled 'Behind the 'Thoughts' in the Survey of Public Opinion in the 2023 Thai General Election.' By examining these aspects, the study aims to uncover insights into how demographic factors influence public opinion.

Literature Review

This article focuses on opinion polls that aim to predict outcomes due to their scientific methodology. Numerous studies emphasize the importance of methodology, acknowledging its potential weaknesses. However, new approaches are continually being developed to enhance the reliability of survey results and address their vulnerabilities (Kennedy et al., 2021). For instance, the work of Skoric et al. (2020) analyzes the power of diverse online social media data in predicting elections and public opinion. They suggest using machine learning-based estimates for more accurate predictions than traditional

surveys, though emphasizing the need for statistical considerations in the analysis. Additionally, Bailey (2023) discusses the challenges of the science process that guides public opinion surveys and random sampling. However, traditional random sampling in surveys has shown failures, leading to the use of Meng's Equation to clarify sampling errors in group selection. While emphasizing the benefits of weighting in surveys, it's crucial to acknowledge the associated limitations.

In the conduct of surveys, biases can occur throughout the survey process, from issue framing to the interpretation of survey results (Clarke et al., 2017; Fry & Brint, 2017). However, the work of Shirani-Mehr, Rothschild, Goel, and Gelman (2018) has demonstrated biases and analytical errors in surveys that persist beyond what polls indicate. Biases and inaccuracies arise from errors in survey methodology, such as accessing sample groups, non-diverse sample selection, and complex sampling methods. While polling agencies generally overlook these errors, they reveal the flaws in survey results, as evident in the clear biases during the 2016 United States presidential election.

Yudin (2020) examined biases in election surveys in Russia and found that surveys do not closely resemble the role of representing the overall public opinion. However, they can construct a political reality because Russia employs surveys as a tool to create political legitimacy for election results. Surveys thus become instruments for guiding, maintaining power, and reducing political unrest. Similarly, Kim and Lee (2023) indicate that surveys may not directly present survey results to represent public opinion, especially when commissioned by politicians. The obtained results may not be accurate. The media's role in competitive reporting also influences the votes of competing candidates, shaping the political landscape. In terms of technology, the vulnerability of technology can introduce errors. This implies that, regardless of how methodologies or technologies are viewed as neutral tools, polling agencies and mass media are significant reasons why these tools may become more problematic.

This itself illustrates that bias can occur both in the survey process and among those involved in the survey process, from the initiation of the survey to the translation and analysis of survey results. Morris (2023) has pointed out that public opinion surveys conducted using scientific methods, while widely accepted today, still face various problems. In the case of the conflict in Ukraine (occurring in 2022) and the authoritarian regime in Russia, a crucial question is whether public opinion surveys can expose people's true thoughts and serve as a primary tool in liberating individuals from authoritarian rule. Based on Morris's research (2023), it is evident that surveys have become a significant tool in supporting the Russian government, and the media itself benefits the government. The genuine opinions of people in society, therefore, may not accurately be measurable, even in the present day.

Despite the increasing popularity of online surveys, they still have many skeptics. For instance, Landreville et al. (2015), Madson and Hillygus (2019), and Subekti and Mutiarin (2023) suggest that online social media can polarize and induce bias. Bias arises from perception, as media can shape the content presented to viewers. Additionally, survey participants perceive surveys as trustworthy when the results align with their opinions. Importantly, surveys influence the creation of ideological divisions, which serve as motivation for conducting surveys and elections. Moy et al. (2001) point to psychological factors in explaining public opinion expression dynamics through Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory. According to the theory, the fear of being isolated from the minority voice causes people not to express their public opinions. However, individuals are more willing to speak or communicate publicly when considering basic information, media usage, and the importance of the specific topic or subject under discussion issue.

Shin and Ognyanova (2022) suggest that the news source and content presented are crucial to the quality of a website. Low-quality news from a website is more likely to be retweeted than high-quality news. This contributes to the influence of repetitive messages on online media consumers. Fujiwara et al. (2021) also highlight the impact of online social media, indicating its influence on both increasing and decreasing candidate votes. On one hand, it can increase candidate votes by disseminating positive messages or rallying supporters. On the other hand, it can decrease votes through the spread of negative content, disinformation, or attacks on candidates' reputations.

The neglect of analyzing fundamental data and biases in survey operations has led to a disregard for the importance of the population, social classes, and societal structures that shape opinions. For instance, Laurison (2016) highlights the relationship between social class and political participation. Factors such as income, education, and occupation are associated with voting behavior, participation in political campaigns, and engagement with political issues. Lindh and McCall (2020) emphasize the significance of social class in political opinion, highlighting that the relationship between social class and politics can change during society, economy, and/or politics undergo transformations. These changes can lead to a better understanding of the relationship between class positions, class identities, and political opinions, including political leanings.

Similarly, Baum and Kernell (2001) point out that economic class is related to supporting a nation's leader, especially during peacetime. However, in wartime, class differences in support become less clear due to external influences playing a more explicit role. Therefore, a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of survey results would be beneficial if surveys incorporate fundamental data and conduct in-depth analyses.

Theoretical Framework

This article employs Bourdieu's observations from public opinion surveys, as presented in "Public Opinion Does Not Exist" (Bourdieu, 1979), and his concept of class from "What Makes a Social Class? On The Theoretical and Practical Existence Of Groups" (Bourdieu, 1987). These serve as the foundation for constructing a framework to comprehend the phenomenon of public opinion surveys during Thailand's national elections in 2023.

For Bourdieu, social class is not something easily defined merely by poverty or wealth. If social class is viewed in relation to the economy, addressing poverty would then mean solving it through economic means. This perspective reflects a social construct known as "epistemological couples," where knowledge pairs are constructed by social reality to generate societal truths (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 66). By enhancing the objectivity of knowledge about social classes, even though it may have subjective elements reflecting perspectives or embedded biases. For instance, addressing inequality through economic strategies often reduces individuals in lower social classes to mere statistics, overlooking their diverse experiences and treating them as objects in need of assistance. So, the epistemological couples contribute to shaping societal reality.

In reality, any understanding of "social class" should not be limited to just economics because "social class" is related to various dimensions in society. These dimensions include economic factors such as wealth and income, but also encompass education, occupation, social networks, lifestyle, power dynamics etc. If viewed from a sociological perspective, whether through the lens of popular phenomena, ethno-linguistics, or constructivist sociology, social actors who come together and form groups to perform various actions create social realities (Bourdieu, 1987, pp. 2-3).

The expression of individuals in relation to the positions they must adjust to in society, as Erving Goffman termed it, the "sense of one's place," (Goffman, 1951, p. 297) is the feeling that individuals have or develop based on their interactions in a given situation. They continue to be deferential in their respective spaces and encourage others to maintain distance or preserve their position in life (Goffman, 1959, p.67). These can be considered as strategies ingrained in the subconscious and manifest in what can be referred to as modesty or pride. In reality, these social distances are encoded in the body. In other words, the physical and perceptual distances tend to replicate themselves in subjective experiences regarding distance. Spatial distance is associated with patterns of dissatisfaction or misunderstanding, while closeness takes the form of involvement to varying degrees.

The feeling that individuals have toward being in a certain status or position also involves an awareness of the existence of the statuses or positions of others at the same time. Proximity to habitus, experienced in the form of attraction or personal rejection, forms the foundation of the entire process. Whether it is cooperation, friendship, love, association,

etc., and even the principles of partnership and enduring relationships, including legal consequences, all stem from this basic understanding.

People's opinions do not emerge independently; "opinions" are connected to the capital that individuals possess, their habitus, and their social positions. These conditions are interrelated over time and through expressions in various spaces, gradually leading to the construction and clarification of thoughts until they become "opinions." However, surveys of public opinion conducted systematically involve asking questions, providing answers, interpreting results, and presenting survey findings as percentages, as commonly observed. Such methods do not necessarily contribute to a deeper understanding of the nature of individuals.

Bourdieu discussed public opinion surveys or polls, pointing out that, when considering ontology, epistemology, and methodology, there are shortcomings in the surveying of public opinion. The methodologies, question formulation, answers, interpretation, and presentation do not lead to a profound understanding of the respondents' nature or help in comprehending the social structure. Public opinion surveys typically involve short-term investigations with limited questions, and both the questions and answers (along with their sequence) are predetermined. Often, the questions and answers guide individuals to think in the abstract, even about things they may not have considered before. When respondents do think, it is within the framework of the predetermined answers, resulting in responses that tend to align with the provided guidance. Additionally, surveys often do not account for responses such as "don't know" or "no opinion." If they do, these answers are not thoroughly analyzed. Subsequently, survey results are often presented in percentages and rankings for easy understanding, but in contemporary times, they are commonly presented through infographics to enhance visual appeal and ease of comprehension. However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that a significant portion of survey outcomes is predetermined (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 153-154, 160).

The numbers, whether in percentages or rankings, signify the mechanism of transforming words, thoughts, and diverse opinions into quantifiable figures. Undoubtedly, the conversion of expressions into numbers through quantitative methodologies is a crucial tool in sociology. However, the numbers we understand represent symbols that present accuracy, truth, directness, and universality. Nevertheless, numbers do not serve a strictly straightforward purpose, as they are embedded with nuances in the form of text or codes to guide the reader in interpreting and confirming the presented text or code as accurate, making it widely recognizable. The role of numbers is found to be revealing, as they highlight identities distinctly, attracting readers to consider only what the numbers present. To truly understand the origins and destinations of opinions, it is necessary to analyze social classes, revealing the dimensions of opinions as well as the structure of society (Bourdieu, 1993, p.163).

Research Methodology and Data Collection

This study was conducted by gathering data from a variety of sources, including research documents, public opinion survey reports, video clips, and in-depth interviews with key informants. The semi-structured interviews served as a vital tool in this research. The primary data sources for this research consisted of the following three groups: 1) The person in charge of conducting public opinion surveys in Thailand Election 2023, two polling agencies within two educational institutions, and media participating in conducting public opinion surveys. 2) News media personnel who both present and analyze the results of public opinion surveys from various media channels. This group included individuals from television news, radio news stations, newspaper journalists, and local news reporters who work for regional news and events specific to locality. 3) Political science experts with a role in analyzing the results of public opinion surveys in election contexts.

In the writing and analysis of research data, this study has anonymized the names of interviewees, pollsters, news agencies, and affiliations of the main data providers. Fictitious names have been used to preserve the confidentiality of the data providers and to ensure that they can comfortably answer questions. The interviews have been transcribed, and data have been categorized within the framework of the concept of social class and the survey of public opinions by Bourdieu. This was done to reveal any deficiencies in the public opinion survey conducted during the 2023 Thai national elections and to identify areas where improvements can be made to enhance the value of future public opinion surveys. In this article, the term “public opinion poll” is used interchangeably with “election poll” because this article adopts Bourdieu’s idea that “public opinion does not exist.”

Research Results

In conducting public opinion surveys, whether through face-to-face interviews, telephone, or online methods, the survey questions typically include demographic information and the key issues under investigation. The survey results usually consist of details about the sample and the analysis of the survey data. However, the analysis often lacks an examination of the demographic data dimensions that would provide a deeper understanding of respondents' perspectives or the reasons behind the survey results. Some polling agencies provide demographic data, such as age, occupation, and residence of the respondents, which could be relevant to the interpretation of survey results. However, not all agencies utilize this information to explain and enhance the understanding of survey outcomes. Some polling agencies rely on theoretical concepts to support observed phenomena and survey results, overlooking the analysis of basic data. Analyzing basic data is crucial, as it holds significance comparable to survey results. Applying Bourdieu's class concepts, which emphasize individual and societal conditions determining social class and

the origin of opinions, integrating basic data with survey results can enhance understanding of both the public and society.

Upon studying four polling agencies labeled A, B, C, and D, it was observed that failure to analyze basic data to comprehend the political origins and political behavior in society, including the sociocultural context, occurred due to: (1) Neglecting demographic information and conducting scientifically grounded public opinion polls; and (2) Confirmation bias and selective exposure. The detailed findings are as follows:

Neglecting Demographic Information and Scientific Public Opinion Poll

The polling agencies A, B, and C conducted data collection using traditional methods. Polling agency A collected data through both traditional and online methods. In the traditional data collection process, they calculated sample groups, collected data from target groups, verified the actual presence of data collectors in the field, and asked predominantly open-ended questions. After collecting the data, responses to open-ended questions were processed by experienced personnel to convert qualitative data into quantitative data (Amnaj, 2023).

Polling agency B called sample group numbers. Interviewers underwent training to eliminate political and personal biases and entered respondents answers into a computer program. The system administrators then organized the responses into scores. Daily random checks were conducted on contact and responses (Banjong, 2023).

Polling agency C, with collaboration from the Thai National Statistical Office (NSO), worked on Enumeration Areas (EA). The NSO created EAs for all populated areas of the country as a statistical foundation for its national surveys and census activities. Agency C collected data nationwide through in-person interviews, training data collectors across various levels, organizing teams for on-site data collection, and using applications for location tracking and real-time reporting. Regional supervisors randomly checked data collection to minimize errors.

Polling agency D was a collaboration between two media organizations that participated in public opinion surveys. They collected data through online channels that did not allow the characterization of the sample group. However, they believed that respondents had political awareness, as they volunteered to participate in the survey and were not compelled to answer questions. Respondents were expected to provide truthful answers voluntarily. Due to the online nature of the platform allowing individuals to respond more than once, IP addresses were checked along with abnormal responses that might lead to inaccuracies. The processing did not include all results to account for potential discrepancies (Damkerng, personal communication, October 12, 2023). Similar to Polling Agency A, which collected data through online methods, there was a verification process to ensure the accuracy of the data.

For the opinion surveys using traditional methods (e.g., Polling Agencies A, B, and C), even though they collected data with consideration for accuracy according to the procedures, political scientists and political analysts still raise questions, as exemplified by the following:

To be honest, I have criticized these polling agencies for a long time, stating that I have never been interviewed or been a part of any poll. There have been no phone calls, no forms to fill out, and I've never heard from them. Thus, I doubt the reliability of the polling procedures. I am not confident...and this is a problem. However, I think in today's society, conducting polls is a tool to increase the power of fairness and credibility. In particular, it has a potential impact on guiding the ethical conduct of the middle class. But if the middle class lacks information, polls become an important supporting tool for trust. In that sense, I think polls can have a singular impact. (Chana, personal communication, August 13, 2023)

Even experienced political journalists, who have been in the field for a long time, were still not confident in the survey process and its results. For example, Mr. Samchai (assumed name), a local news reporter, expressed the following doubts:

Polling, at times, encounters varying opinions in data collection among different groups and areas. Additionally, there is online data collection where a political group called 'wave generators' influences the received data...and the trend is positive. (Samchai, personal communication, August 19, 2023)

While most polling agencies emphasized the importance of survey procedures and sampling techniques, they also provide explanation for why these sample groups are considered representative of the population to ensure reliable survey results. From the perspective of Bourdieu, public opinion surveys operated on the basis of methods seeking knowledge and answers using scientific methodologies grounded in the philosophy of positivism. However, the public opinion surveys studied individuals with diverse circumstances, contexts, expressions, thoughts, and emotions, rather than examining objects with uniform properties. Therefore, attempts to explain the random sampling methods, repeated data verification to reduce bias and errors, and IP address checks to minimize data inaccuracies did not necessarily contribute to building trust in the polling data.

In analyzing responses from election-related surveys, there was an examination of survey's issues, but a lack of analysis of demographic data. There was only an explanation of details, relying on answers obtained from methodologies based on positivist thinking. Neglecting demographic data was a result of a segmented approach with bias in the

methodology. From the study of the four polling agencies in this research, two cases could be distinguished. In the first case, demographic data was segmented without disclosing the details of key fundamental factors, as seen in Polling Agency A (which conducted surveys using both traditional and online methods but did not distribute or analyze individual fundamental data). Distributing or analyzing this data was likely viewed as too time-consuming and without sufficient benefits. For example, in analyzing political-party popularity, a detailed analysis could reveal both advantages and disadvantages for the political parties (Amnaj, personal communication, October 4, 2023). The intention not to analyze this fundamental data, while understandable, results in surveys that do not generate additional benefits beyond predictions, which can be equally beneficial. That is, if a survey shows high popularity for a particular political party, that party can use the survey results for its advantage.

In the second case, the separation of the analysis of demographic data from survey results was not neglected by Polling Agencies B, C, and D. However, they did not integrate the results of the analysis of demographic data with the survey results to understand the societal trends and broader social context that shaped the opinions and behaviors of the sample groups. Only selected demographic data were discussed to understand the survey results. Specifically, Polling Agency B distributed demographic data in their survey result reports. During the 2023 election campaign, Polling Agency B conducted analysis sessions of survey results on YouTube, involving academics and incorporating some basic data analysis, although the focus was on analyzing the relationships between various variables. Similarly, Polling Agencies C and D analyzed basic data and presented the results on a news station that funded the survey. The analysis involved examining the relationships between various variables, similar to Polling Agency B.

Although all three polling agencies in this study analyzed basic data, the process was conducted and utilized in a segmented manner. For example, the analysis of the relationship between age groups and political-party popularity, or occupation and political-party popularity, did not connect all the basic data analysis with the survey results. For example, the analysis presented to the public did not indicate the state of the economy, society, and politics, what issues people were facing, what changes they desired, or what factors were influencing their desires. Integrating comprehensive basic data analysis with survey results would provide a clearer and more credible picture of the current political landscape and the changes people are seeking.

Furthermore, polling agencies did not analyze responses such as 'don't know,' 'undecided,' 'not voting,' or 'not sure.' While the response design of many polling agencies assigned importance to these answers, they were not analyzed. Some polling agencies justified this by stating that the reasons for not analyzing these responses were either due to

their statistical insignificance or because, in some cases, the results of these opinions ranked second. For instance, Polling Agency B, which reported high survey results in certain provinces during 2023, did not analyze these results even when they ranked first or second. Even in analysis sessions on YouTube, there was no mention of these results. Instead, the focus was on regional political analysis and verifying the accuracy of the survey results with local data, analyzed by academics specializing in regional politics. Therefore, the failure to analyze reveals a disregard for the opinions of those who choose not to express their views, which goes against the polling agency's stated objectives of predicting preferences or election outcomes.

Understanding Confirmation Bias and Omission Bias in Opinion Polls

In the 2023 Thai national elections, several polling agencies used online channels for surveys. The advantages include cost savings in operations, easy accessibility for a large number of people, and faster data analysis and processing. However, a significant challenge of this method is the inability to access a representative sample of eligible voters. This is because individuals from different groups have varying online social media usage behaviors (Hargittai & Karaoglu, 2018). Therefore, the reliance on online surveys, touted as a versatile tool for polling, raises questions about the biases of surveyors. As Kampol (personal communication, October 24, 2023) observed, regarding the neutrality of pollsters: "Using online questions implies that respondents voluntarily come to answer the questions, and that is not the same as obtaining a fully representative sample... it seems like there is a certain intention involved in it."

Pariser (2011) pointed out that the perceived lack of bias may be due to the Internet's search algorithms, which create bias by sharing and presenting only information that aligns with one's beliefs (p. 7). As a result, the bias becomes a perceived lack of bias, as the presentation caters to what one wants to see, leading to the impression that what one believes is the accurate truth. Therefore, a crucial consideration in online surveys is the bias resulting from the Bandwagon Effect, which not only influences media and followers, but also creates and is confirmed by a significant number of opinions moving in the same direction in the online community. This phenomenon confirms the potentially-erroneous belief that there is no bias, particularly among those involved in conducting surveys and presenting analyses and interpretations of survey results.

Polling agency D was a collaboration between two media outlets, 1 and 2, with different follower groups and online social media channels. Media Outlet 1 had fewer online social media channels than Media Outlet 2. Due to the wider range of channels and diverse content presented by Media Outlet 2, including political issues, the survey results of polling agency D tend to lean toward the political orientation of Media Outlet 2 and the followers of Media Outlet 2. This is because when followers of that media outlet have a political bias in

the same direction, it reflects in the survey results. The survey results, therefore, align with the same political direction. Polling Agency D has acknowledged the weaknesses and challenges of online surveys, where the Internet generates repetitive content leading to online trends. Trends affect the emotions and sentiments of the public, given that elections involve a large number of people and are intertwined with preferences and dislikes. However, these vulnerabilities and challenges are not highlighted as much as the focus on creating a political atmosphere with political activities as part of society (Damkerng, personal communication, October 12, 2023).

The use of the active citizenry, civil society, political activities, and political awareness was employed to explain the survey participants and online surveys. This approach aligns with the election situation and the political stance of Media Outlet 2, a prominent perception source in society. It seeks to confirm the standpoint/bias and establish credibility for the survey results and the surveyors. While acknowledging the vulnerabilities and challenges of online surveys by Polling Agency D, the focus was redirected towards linking these principles with survey results. The questioning was not directed towards the data collection method used in the survey. Instead, it involved setting the stage for analysis by presenting survey results and demographic data, inviting scholars to further analyze the results. Some factors, such as education, occupation, and income were highlighted to complement the survey results. This helped align the characteristics of the surveyed majority with the extended factors, ensuring the accuracy and fairness of the survey results, and diverting attention from the overlooked weaknesses and challenges of the survey.

Polling Agency C, which conducts surveys with media sponsorship by using traditional methods, has acknowledged bias in surveys that align with what scholars mentioned about using experience to aid in interpreting results. Many survey personnel, who are often teachers or researchers, use their experience and additional knowledge in interpreting results (Chana, personal communication, August 13, 2023). This is consistent with the results of Poll B during this election period, where the survey results were re-interpreted repeatedly, leading to a change in the initial findings. Specifically, the original survey results favored the Forward Party as the most popular party. However, through repeated interpretation, the findings were transformed into the idea that the Phalang Pracharat Party would gain the highest number of representatives.

During an election period, questions related to policies are crucial because they provide insights into the public's needs, issues requiring attention, and expectations at both individual and societal levels. However, this research found limited interest in surveying political party policies. Some polling agencies did not address policy-related issues at all, while others, even when conducting policy-related surveys, did not integrate the findings into the overall analysis of political popularity. Omission bias in policy matters, which is essential

in influencing people's decisions, was evident. For instance, Polling Agency D did not include policy-related questions in its survey for a few reasons: 1) Its primary objective was to determine public preferences, focusing on understanding voters's popularity. 2) Policy surveys require a more extended period to conduct. 3) Asking about policies may yield sensitive responses that could lead to social controversy, such as in the case of Article 112, which imposes severe penalties for defamation or insults against the monarchy. These factors influenced Polling Agency D's decision not to inquire about policies in this particular survey (Damkerng, personal communication, October 12, 2023).

Polling Agency C did not specifically include questions about policies, but rather integrated them within the answers to certain questions. Similarly, in the analysis of survey results, a political approach was taken to understand the electoral strategy of parties, political factions, and the prediction of election outcomes. Notably, there was no indication of incorporating survey results focusing on policy issues or problems into the overall analysis.

For Polling Agency B, there was a survey related to policies of interest to the public at the provincial level. However, in the survey on overall popularity, there were no specific questions related to policies. The agency explicitly mentioned that the polling agency has conducted policy surveys before, but most people were not interested. They were only interested in which political party or candidate will win the election. Therefore, in this election poll, the polling agency did not conduct policy surveys. As a result, the survey merely predicted the election outcome (Banjong, personal communication, August 27, 2023).

For Polling Agency A, during the 2023 election period, the majority of their surveys mainly consisted of questions regarding the popularity of political parties. However, there were also surveys related to election campaign policies that the public found satisfactory.

Discussion

Public opinion surveys are crucial because they can provide a better understanding of election trends, predict election outcomes, evaluate the popularity of political parties and candidates, and inform election campaign strategies for political parties. Additionally, they provide insights into the needs, expectations, and issues faced by the public. However, as surveys are conducted based on conventional normative thinking, emphasizing question design, sample group identification, and minimizing biases to ensure scientifically reliable results, deviations from proper methodologies may occur due to oversight or error.

For example, Shirani-Mehr et al. (2018) studied polling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and they found that, despite the importance placed on methodology, survey practitioners often overlook such errors. Alternatively, surveys may be utilized as a political tool, as demonstrated by Yudin's (2020) study on election surveys in Russia. The author found that survey results were used to create favorability towards the government rather than representing the public's opinions. This phenomenon aligns with Kim and Lee (2023), who

found that surveys do not straightforwardly present their results as a representation of public opinion. The findings underscore that, despite polling agencies claiming adherence to methodology, in practice, surveys may not conform. For instance, this research found that surveys can be used as a business tool to increase viewership or support the political leanings of survey practitioners or sponsors.

Although surveys are designed with an emphasis on the credibility and accuracy of their results, some studies attempt to address methodological issues to achieve the most accurate and minimally biased survey results. This includes solving problems related to statistical adjustments used in the analysis, weighting adjustments, or sampling methods to obtain a sample group with minimal errors (Bailey, 2023; Kennedy et al., 2021; Skoric et al., 2020). These approaches are developed based on the positivist paradigm, focusing on tools and methods rather than the overall societal context. The underlying belief is that, if the tools and methods are good and follow the correct processes, the resulting outcomes will be accurate. This is similar to online surveys attempting to address the analytical process to reflect the most accurate survey results, and aiming to analyze emotions, feelings, and the surveyor's intentions. To that end, there is a large amount of digital data that should be further analyzed for a better understanding of surveyors, as can be observed in the works of Kim & Lee (2023) and Pekar et al. (2022).

Online surveys that are easily accessible to surveyors and operators, with the ability to collect, analyze, and process data quickly and at a lower cost than traditional surveys, gained popularity during the 2019 Thai national elections. However, concerns have been raised about their reliability (Kennedy et al., 2021; Dong & Ying, 2021). These concerns apply to both surveyors, who need Internet access, and survey participants (Valentino et al., 2020). Internet accessibility may introduce bias as participants might favor presenting and supporting a particular political party or candidate. There might be peer influence from friends sharing similar political opinions to participate in the survey. Some may take the survey multiple times using different devices to influence the results in their desired direction. Additionally, these surveys may not follow a scientific research method as there is no random sampling. Surveyors might be influenced or receive their direction from online media on the Internet, leading to the Bandwagon Effect phenomenon (Chatterjee & Kamal (2021); Farjam (2021)). The presentation of survey results on online platforms can influence perception, tracking, and decision-making of online media users, potentially impacting election voting preferences.

Bias in surveys can occur throughout the entire survey process. Scholars such as Fry and Brint (2017) and Clarke et al. (2017) have noted biases in surveys. These biases and inaccuracies can arise from survey respondents, polling agencies, the survey process, analysts interpreting survey results, and supporters of the surveys, as observed in works by

Landreville, White and Allen (2015) and Madson and Hillygus (2020). They propose that online media can exacerbate and contribute to biases because online media shapes content that influences public opinion. The communication strategies of political parties, like disseminating selective portions of rallies and circulating short clips on TikTok for easy consumption, contribute to bias. Algorithmic systems displaying repetitive or related content influence voter decisions.

Moy et al. (2001) and Fujiwara et al. (2021) highlight the psychological factors in online social media. When individuals repeatedly consume the same media to the point of believing it represents the majority or is a prevailing trend, they may not consider the content and quality beyond what is embedded in the media. From a psychological perspective, this behavior stems from a desire not to be a minority voice. This fear may manifest in the inclination of thoughts and actions toward what is perceived as the majority voice. In this context, it can be observed, particularly toward the end of the election campaign, that political parties present slogans to inform the public of their stance, such as "If we continue to elect the 'Old Generals' there will be no chance for the ordinary people like us" by the Move Forward Party, and "Think Big, Do It for Thailand Tomorrow" as well as "Land Slide" by the Pheu Thai Party. While some individuals choose not to express their opinions, studies show that some polling agencies prioritize responses like "Don't know," "No opinion," or "Undecided" without thorough analysis and explanation. Considering Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory (1974), it is not surprising that many people choose to respond in line with the polling agency's questions.

When surveys and analyses neglect to emphasize fundamental data, the survey results become nothing more than predictions of election outcomes and trends, overlooking the perspectives of the public, social classes, and societal structures that shape opinions. Although this may seem impartial at first glance, since opinions are shaped by various forms of capitals, which play a crucial role in determining social class, class analysis involves examining these different forms of capital. Public opinion surveys can analyze people's social class based on demographic data. Hence, considering various factors such as class, society, and opinions reveals their interconnectedness, as highlighted by Laurison (2016) and Lindh and McCall (2020). They point to the intricate relationship between social class, political opinions, and active politics, as changes in society, economy, and politics have a profound impact on these dynamics. This implies that as societal, economic, and political factors evolve, the relationships and opinions change accordingly. Understanding people's relationships within social classes, positions, and identities in society is crucial because the nature of the relationship between social class and politics can change when there are transformations in society, the economy, and politics. Aligning with the observations of Baum and Kernell (2001) and Evans and Menon (2017) discuss the political discourse on social

class manifested through political parties in European and American societies, particular during the election.

Analyzing social class in opinion surveys not only helps explain the origin and trajectory of social and political opinions, societal structures, and social circumstances, but also serves as another way to cross-verify survey results for accuracy, neutrality, and reliability.

Conclusion

The public opinion surveys in the 2023 Thai national elections, conducted both through traditional and online methods, were solely aimed at short-term predictive outcomes. The surveys were based on a scientific approach that did not benefit the public as intended. Conversely, the surveys served the polling agencies. If a polling agency can accurately and quickly predict situations, it will enhance its reputation. This, in turn, influences mass media, especially during elections when polling agencies compete to present survey results promptly, stimulating viewer interest. Various media channels, including television, radio, newspapers, and online platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, played a significant role in influencing business to gain benefits such as increased advertising revenue during this election. Media participation in surveys, both traditional and online, greatly impact public awareness and interest. Polling agencies collaborate with media to directly shape survey methods and questions for the benefit of media outlets and political parties. A crucial question is where the public, the source of survey results, fits into the benefits of these surveys. Due to the inadequate sampling methods employed by most polling agencies, demographic data is often overlooked during analysis. Besides serving as a tool for information tracking, when media and polling agencies prioritize surveys and present the results, the audience following these analyses gains various information tailored to the preferences of the media and polling agencies. Overall, the involvement of media in surveys serves not only the purpose of providing information but also influences political strategies based on the survey results, thereby shaping the public's understanding and interest.

In the 2023 election, it is clear that online polling played a crucial role in swiftly presenting survey results. Some polling agencies even organized platforms to analyze the survey findings. However, online surveys were still questioned for their accuracy and reliability, especially the sample groups and the participants' intentions in taking part in the survey, which may introduce bias.

For traditional surveys, there is a noticeable reliance on personal experiences in the analysis and interpretation of results, impacting the presentation of survey findings. Media polls, often driven by business objectives, actively contribute to shaping survey methodologies to serve the interests of the media outlet. However, this involvement raises concerns about the impartiality of the surveys. These factors affect public perception,

especially for consumers who lack insights into the background of media operations and polling agency practices. During a period where democratic power returns to the hands of the people in elections, it becomes crucial for the public to make informed decisions about selecting representatives for governance. The information provided by the media, which ideally should serve as an unbiased source, and the actions of polling agencies should be scrutinized during this election season. In this context, ethical conduct is essential for both media outlets and researchers participating in surveys, ensuring that survey results are presented responsibly and without undue influence, especially in the competitive landscape of political parties and media businesses.

The bias evident throughout the survey process is a distortion that affects accuracy, credibility, fairness, and equality in surveys. This is because it does not reflect the true situation but is simultaneously a reality that the polling agency wants to see and present. This is a form of guiding results in a certain way, leading to political manipulation and symbolic violence, as seen in the information provided and manipulated by polling agencies for their benefit.

To ensure that the survey reflects the opinions of various groups in society more clearly, the analysis of demographic data is crucial. This is because capital serves as a condition for the habits and class of individuals in society, with interrelations over time and expressions in social fields. These gradually shape opinions through surveys. In this instance, the survey almost neglected both the survey itself and social issues during a certain period. However, for Bourdieu, class is not measured solely by economic capital; it is also measured by the relational distance between individuals, a distance determined by capital. Therefore, an individual's position in the class comprises habitus, economic capital, and significant expressions that play a crucial role in shaping thoughts, knowledge, and feelings. Experiences in a particular position and interactions with others in the same and different positions contribute to these aspects, forming the origins of opinions. Bourdieu emphasizes that surveys that consider every opinion equally, analyze outcomes as mere numbers, and use numbers as tools to demonstrate underlying principles do not understand the nature of society and the diverse origins of opinions. It is not surprising, then, that survey results are not always beneficial to the public and do not necessarily contribute to a true understanding of the people, considering the differences and diversity of opinions that prevail.

Therefore, if one wishes to comprehend society, it is important to understand the origins of opinions that contribute to perceiving the overall societal structure and its issues. Surveys must not only present predictive results but also analyze demographic data alongside investigating policy issues and problems to ensure accurate, credible, and explanatory survey and analysis outcomes. This allows different opinions to be accurately reflected, providing political parties, candidates, and the public insight into whether the

presented political party policies accurately reflect the needs and problems of each group. It also determines which policies address specific group issues and which ones address the overall needs. The results of these surveys and analyses are vital tools for monitoring the work to address the problems of the party in power. Importantly, it emphasizes the significance of empowering the people as owners of democratic power, not just as survey respondents or, even worse, as individuals whose thoughts are guided, led, and influenced by polls and polling agencies. Therefore, polling agencies in Thailand should conduct public opinion polls, election polls, and analyze election results to better understand voters, why they think the way they do, and why they vote the way they do.

However, conducting such activities may be challenging during election periods due to limited time. Polling agencies may therefore start by surveying other issues to raise awareness among the public about specific problems: their significance, their impact, and what actions should be taken regarding those issues.

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