

The Interaction Among the Factors Affecting to the Social Movement: The Case of Thailand's Movement for Marriage Equality

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Abstract

Since the Marriage Equality Act has been officially legalized on the 23rd of January of 2025, Thailand has celebrated as the third country in Asia and so far, the first country in Southeast Asia that has the legalization of same-sex marriage. However, throughout the evolution of the movement for marriage equality in Thailand, it is no bed of roses. This research paper aims to study the interaction of some factors which lead to the dynamics and directions of this movement. The factors consist of resource mobilization, political opportunities, and framing. This qualitative research employed in-depth interviews and documents and media analysis, utilizing three major social movement theories; Resource Mobilization Theory; Political Opportunity Structure Theory; and Framing Theory to comprehensively understand the movement's dynamics and mechanisms. The study shows continuous and complex mutual reinforcement among those three factors. Effective resource mobilization creates new political opportunities, appropriate political opportunities facilitate influential framing development, also recognized framing enhances resource mobilization capacity. Some critical turning points demonstrate the synergistic effects leading to the movement's accomplishment. Besides, the research has discovered some key findings which are expanding the resource concepts to encompass digital and cultural resources, developing cross-institutional networks and cross-Thai characteristic context, and multi-dimensional framing approaches engaging multiple belief systems. In conclusion, this study fills knowledge gaps in analyzing social movements through systematic theoretical frameworks and expectedly contributes to developing social movement theory for the Asian context, providing valuable recommendations for academics, social movements, and policymakers.

Keywords: social movement, marriage equality, marriage equality in Thailand, resource mobilization, political opportunity, framing

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Introduction

The legal recognition of marriage equality in Thailand, which took effect on 23 January 2025, marked a historic turning point reached after more than two decades of struggle. The achievement made Thailand the first country in Southeast Asia and the third in Asia to grant such recognition (Pan-oo, 2023). The scale of the legislative consensus was striking. The House of Representatives approved the bill by 400 votes to 10 on 21 December 2023, and the Senate followed by 130 to 4. These were not narrow victories but overwhelming endorsements of a position that had commanded little political support only two decades earlier.

The case is analytically valuable because of the gap between the movement's modest means and its decisive outcome. The movement operated with limited financial resources, no single dominant organization, and a chronically unstable political environment, and yet it prevailed. Explaining that gap requires more than an inventory of the movement's activities.

Figure 1

A 23-Year Journey to Marriage Equality in Thailand



A previous study by the authors (Suntitissadeekorn et al., 2026) examined the movement through three established frameworks in social movement studies, namely resource mobilization theory, political opportunity structure, and framing theory, and documented how the movement performed within each dimension. That study established the foundation but applied the three theories largely in parallel. It demonstrated that all three mattered, yet it did not fully explain how they worked together. This omission is not trivial. Applied in isolation, each theory leaves a residue that none can absorb on its own: resource mobilization explains how the movement built capacity but not why resources appeared at particular moments; political opportunity explains which windows opened but not why the movement was prepared to act when they did; and framing explains the messaging but not why certain frames resonated when others failed. This unexplained residue is precisely the interaction among the three.

The present paper takes up that interaction as its central question. Rather than asking what each factor contributed, it asks how each factor activated, constrained, and amplified the others over the life of the movement, and what their interaction produced that no single factor could have produced alone.

Research Objective and Questions

The objective of this study is to analyze the interaction among resource mobilization, political opportunity, and framing in Thailand's marriage equality movement, in order to explain the dynamic mechanisms, rather than the discrete contributions, that drove its legal and social transformation.

This objective deliberately departs from the analytical logic of most single-theory and even multi-theory studies of social movements, which tend to treat resources, opportunities, and frames as separable explanatory variables and to ask which carried the greatest weight. The authors' earlier study followed that logic and, in doing so, reached the limits of what a parallel application of the three theories can explain. The present study begins from the opposite premise, namely that in this case the explanatory power lies not in any one factor but in the relationships among them, and that those relationships are directional, sequenced, and cumulative rather than static. Treating interaction as the object of analysis, rather than as background, is what renders intelligible the movement's central paradox: the achievement of substantial success with limited means.

Three guiding questions structure the analysis. First, through what directional mechanisms did each factor (resource mobilization, political opportunity, and framing) activate or amplify the others over the course of the movement? Second, what aggregate outcomes did this interaction produce that could not be attributed to any single factor acting alone? Third, what does the Thai case imply, both theoretically for how social movement scholars conceptualize the relationship among these three classic factors and practically for movements operating under comparable constraints elsewhere in Southeast Asia?

In addressing these questions, the study builds directly on the three-dimensional foundation established in the authors' published work (Suntitissadeekorn et al., 2026) and extends it toward an integrative account in which interaction, not accumulation, is the principal driver of change.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative design that combines document and media analysis with in-depth interviews, covering the period from 2012 (the year in which a same-sex couple was first refused marriage registration) to January 2025, when the marriage equality law took effect. The design and dataset are shared with the authors' published study (Suntitissadeekorn et al., 2026); the present paper applies them to a different analytical question.

Primary data come from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight key informants selected through purposive sampling: three civil-society activists, three politicians who initiated or advanced the legislation, and two influential public figures. Informants were selected on four criteria: direct participation across the study period; a significant role in at least one of the three theoretical dimensions; the ability to speak to decision-making and strategy; and informed consent. Secondary data were drawn from mainstream media, alternative and social media, official government documents, and statements from relevant organizations.

Analysis proceeded in four steps: (1) deductive and inductive coding, with deductive codes drawn from the three-theory framework and inductive codes left open to themes emerging from the field; (2) content analysis within each dimension to identify patterns, themes, and relationships; (3) synthesis and interpretation in the Thai context, integrating data across the three dimensions (the step that yields the present analysis); and (4) verification through triangulation across data sources, methods, and theories. For the interaction analysis specifically, the third and fourth steps are central, because directional claims (for example, that framing drove resource mobilization) were retained only where they were corroborated by more than one informant and consistent with the documentary record.

The research observed standard ethical safeguards, used only publicly disclosed material in the documentary analysis, obtained explicit consent from interviewees, and was approved by the Maejo University research ethics committee (COA No. HS010/68). As a qualitative, interpretive study set in a politically sensitive field, its findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable.

Foundation: The Three Dimensions in Brief

The interaction analysis that follows builds directly on the three dimensions established in earlier work. This section therefore summarizes them briefly, without restating the full argument. A full treatment is available in the authors' published study (Suntitissadeekorn et al., 2026).

Resource mobilization: The movement mobilized resources across multiple dimensions, namely human, financial, network, organizational, and communicative, despite financial constraints. Particularly notable were digital resources (the #MarriageEquality hashtag, used some 1.3 million times worldwide), cultural resources (Boy's Love series and traditional performance arts), and a decentralized network of 58 rainbow organizations. Financial scarcity, rather than disabling the movement, pressed it toward low-cost, high-reach innovation.

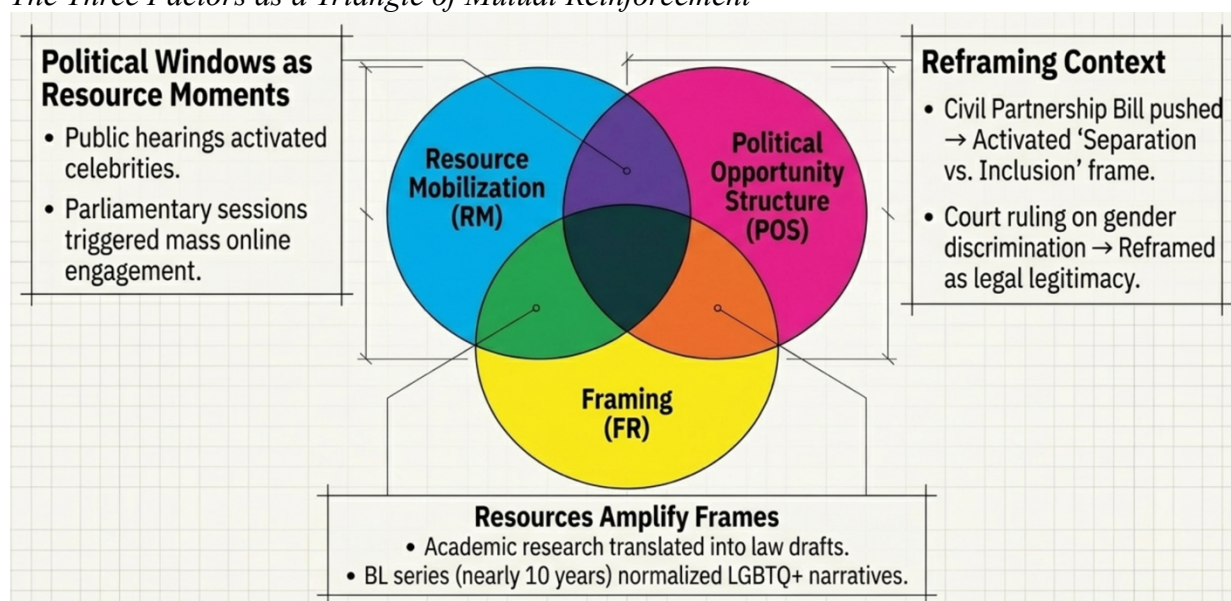
Political opportunity: The movement capitalized on shifting political conditions, including democratic openings under the 2017 Constitution, government transitions, and favorable timing, while navigating a fragile and frequently interrupted opportunity structure. The transition from the Prayut government to the Srettha government, which prioritized the legislation, was a decisive opening, as was the cross-party alliance that brought competing parties' bills into a single consolidated draft.

Framing: The movement reframed marriage equality from a “special privilege of heterosexual couples” to “a basic human right,” and deployed audience-specific frames (love for the public, human rights for the state, and economic benefit for the business sector), woven together with distinctly Thai cultural references so that equality felt native rather than imported (Snow, 2004; Snow et al., 2013).

Each dimension is necessary to the account, but none is sufficient on its own. The remainder of the paper examines what emerges when the three are read together.

Findings: The Interaction Analysis

The central finding is that the three factors did not operate as parallel tracks but as a triangle of mutual reinforcement, with each one feeding, triggering, and amplifying the others over time.

Figure 2*The Three Factors as a Triangle of Mutual Reinforcement*

The following subsections describe the principal directional mechanisms and then the cumulative outcomes they produced.

Framing Drove Resource Mobilization

The movement's most consequential move was to reframe a minority-rights question as a shared social issue, and that reframing directly produced resources the movement did not have to buy. By redefining marriage equality as “everyone's issue,” the movement converted public attention into participation, the clearest case being the viral #MarriageEquality phenomenon. As one informant explained, the movement operated with minimal funding precisely because the frame performed the mobilizing function that financial resources usually perform, in that once the issue went viral the public carried it forward without central funding. Framing here is not merely message design but a resource-generating mechanism. This is consistent with Castells's (2012) account of mobilization in the network society, in which framing and digital participation collapse into a single process.

Political Openings Unlocked Resources

Changes in political leadership did not simply create legislative windows; they released resources into the movement. The shift from a government that engaged the issue reluctantly to one that was deeply invested in gender-related law accelerated the process and brought state backing and institutional resources within reach. In other words, the political opportunity structure functioned as a valve on resource flows, not only as a gate on legislative timing.

Mobilized Resources Widened the Frame

The relationship ran in reverse as well. As public support accumulated, the movement gained the confidence and standing to expand its agenda beyond marriage itself to include legal gender recognition, appropriate healthcare for gender-diverse people, and protection for sex workers. Growing human and reputational resources thus enlarged the movement's framing ambitions rather than merely consolidating its original demand.

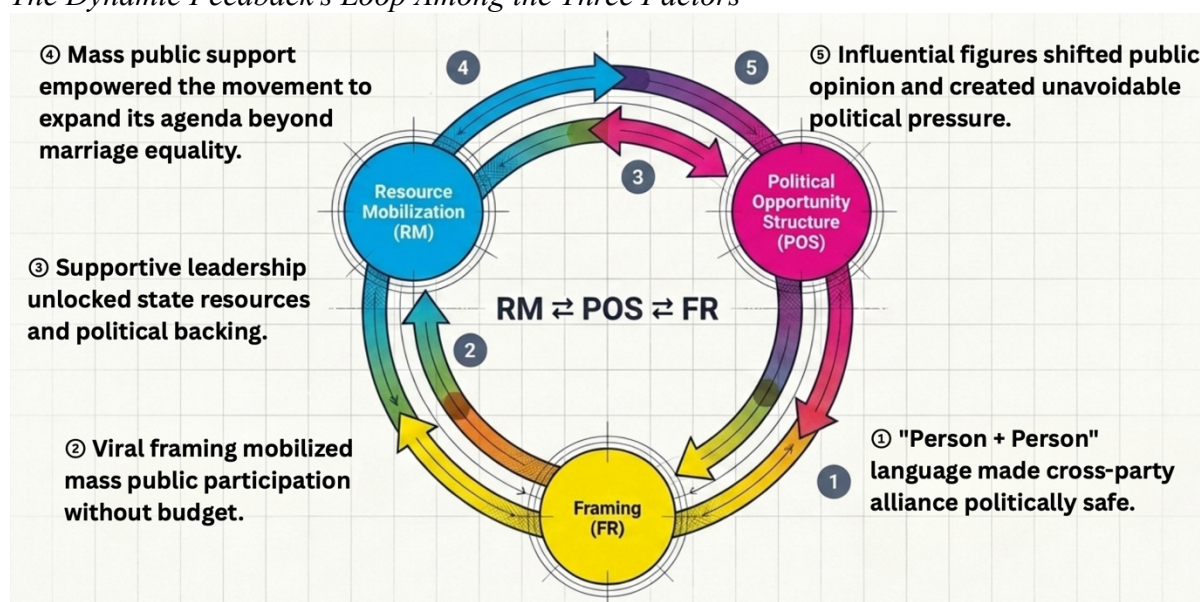
Mobilized Resources Generated Political Opportunity

Finally, the movement's human resources, namely its influential figures, broad coalition, and demonstrated public support, translated into political pressure. Shifting public opinion at scale made the issue increasingly difficult for political actors to ignore, effectively manufacturing opportunity rather than waiting for it. Human resources, in this sense, became political leverage.

These mechanisms describe a loop rather than a sequence. Framing produces resources; resources and openings reinforce one another; and the resulting pressure reshapes the political environment and licenses bolder framing, so that the cycle compounds. Over twenty-three years, this compounding is what carried a marginal cause to an overwhelming legislative consensus.

Figure 3

The Dynamic Feedback's Loop Among the Three Factors



What the Interaction Produced

The loop generated three outcomes that no single factor could have produced alone.

Synergy: The combined work of civil society, politicians, academics, media, and influencers produced an effect greater than any one actor's contribution. As one activist observed, everyone contributed in their own way and from their own angle, and the cause became something everyone owned together (Activist A01, interview, May 2, 2025). Crucially, the movement sustained itself without central command, because the interaction itself, rather than a controlling organization, generated momentum. The engagement metrics reflect this distributed ownership: the term “marriage equality” and its hashtag drew 3,139,246 engagements across 7,770 messages.

A qualitative leap: The interaction transformed the issue's status, not merely its visibility. Marriage equality moved from a niche concern to a mainstream political agenda item, to the point that it appeared on nearly every party's electoral platform. This is a change in kind, not degree, and it is difficult to explain without the reinforcing loop: framing made the issue

popular, popularity made it politically valuable, and political value made it a competitive necessity.

Dynamic equilibrium: The movement's goal was never only the passage of a law. The deeper aim was to shift the balance of social acceptance so that equality would be lived rather than merely legislated. The interaction analysis shows why this framing was coherent: because success was produced by a continuously reinforcing system rather than a single legislative event, the movement could plausibly treat the law as a new equilibrium point rather than an endpoint.

Discussion

A Dynamic Integration Framework

The conventional resource-mobilization expectation, that more resources yield more success, does not fit this case. The movement had a limited budget, no dominant organization, and a fragile political environment, and still won decisively. The explanation proposed here is a Dynamic Integration Framework: success arises not from maximizing any single factor but from sustaining a continuous, reinforcing interaction among resources, political opportunity, and framing. On this view, the relevant unit of analysis is not the factor but the loop.

This directly challenges the resource-centric assumptions in the classical formulation of McCarthy and Zald (1977) and the resource typology of Edwards and McCarthy (2004). The Thai case suggests that resource constraints can themselves be generative, pressing a movement toward communicative innovation and distributed, low-cost mobilization that produces collective ownership and, ultimately, an outcome exceeding the sum of the parts. The point is not that resources are irrelevant but that their effect is conditional on their interaction with framing and opportunity.

Fragility, Opportunity, and the Regional Context

The interaction also clarifies the political-opportunity findings. The Thai opportunity structure was fragile, marked by frequent parliamentary dissolutions, a 2014 coup, and pandemic-related delays. This condition differs sharply from the comparatively stable Western contexts analyzed by Meyer and Minkoff (2004). Yet the movement converted instability into an environment it learned to navigate, adapting repeatedly to changing conditions. International pressure operated through a boomerang-style dynamic (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), as global LGBTQ+ norms, Taiwan's precedent, and Thailand's Universal Periodic Review commitments fed back into domestic opportunity. The eventual breakthrough is well described by a multiple-streams account (Hoefer, 2022), in which problem, policy, and politics streams converged to open a policy window. The present analysis adds, however, that the movement's prior framing and resource work are what made it ready when the window opened.

Contribution

The study's contribution is threefold. Theoretically, it advances social-movement analysis from a parallel application of three theories toward an integrative, dynamic account in which interaction is the explanatory mechanism. Empirically, it offers a fully worked Southeast Asian case in which a resource-poor movement succeeded through integration rather than accumulation. Practically, the Dynamic Integration Framework offers a usable lens for

movements operating under similar constraints across the region: the decisive lever is not acquiring more of one resource but engineering the reinforcing relationships among framing, opportunity, and mobilization.

Conclusion

Thailand's marriage equality movement demonstrates that a movement need not command the most resources to prevail; it requires an effective integration of resources, opportunity, and framing, sustained over time. The three factors that earlier analysis treated separately are best understood as a single reinforcing loop whose compounding momentum, over more than two decades, carried a marginalized cause to an overwhelming legislative consensus and a measurable shift in social attitudes. The law that took effect in January 2025 is, in the movement's own terms, less a finish line than a new starting line, and the framework developed here is offered both as an explanation of how that outcome was reached and as a tool for others working toward social change under comparable conditions.

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