

***Policy Communication Strategies of Palang Pracharat Party for the Songkhla
Region 1 Member of Parliament Election Campaign***

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were to study the policy communication strategies of the Palang Pracharat Party in Songkhla Province Region 1 in the 24 March, 2019 parliamentary election, including the political situation before the election, the process of communication management and the tactics used. This was a qualitative research based on participatory observation and in-depth interviews with 30 key informants, consisting of the candidate, campaign workers, voters who were community leaders, and academics/strategists, all chosen through purposive sampling for their involvement in the topic under study. The results showed that voters were weary of the usual political parties and local conflicts. They wanted a Member of Parliament from a new party that could form a government and influence local development policies. They were concerned with the rising cost of living, social inequality, low wages and low prices for agricultural commodities. There were 4 steps in the Palang Pracharat's policy communication management process: (1) fact finding, emphasizing the needs of voters; (2) planning; (3) multimedia communications to reach all target groups; and (4) continuous evaluation to find ways to improve the communications. The main policy communication strategies were (1) building awareness among all target groups using both traditional media and new media; (2) building up key communicators in every community; (3) building up a network of supporters and allies among private and public sector organizations and the press; and (4) intensive evaluation to assess levels of awareness, understanding, attitudes and voting behavior.

Keywords: parliamentary election campaign, political communication strategy, political party, voter awareness

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Introduction

Parliamentary elections are a part of the democratic political process outlined in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand. The first parliamentary elections were held in 1948 and the most recent parliamentary elections were held on 24 March, 2019. In the most recent elections, there were 5 major parties vying for seats: Palang Pracharat, Peua Thai, Democrat, Anakot Mai, and Phum Jai Thai, as well as several smaller to medium-sized parties.

Public policies are the important platforms that political parties want to communicate to voters to let them know what they will do if they are in power. Ira Sharkansky (1970) wrote that policies describe the activities that politicians will do if they are part of the government. This includes managing education and social services and building infrastructure, as well as making new rules, regulations and laws to control and oversee the activities of individuals and corporate citizens.

Political parties thus try to form policies that meet the needs and desires of the citizens. Then they try to present their policies to the people as widely as possible through different communication channels, comprising traditional media and new media. Traditional media are those media that transmit a message directly from the message sender to the message receiver via one-way communication. Some traditional media can transmit text only, images only or audio only, such as newspapers, billboards and radio. Other traditional media, such as television and cinema, can transmit images, text and audio messages at the same time. New media, on the other hand, enable two-way communications in which the message senders and message receivers can both transmit messages to each other, and they can be in the form of images, text and audio at the same time thanks to new technology and communication networks. Several new media have been developed and they are becoming well known and popular (Burnett and Marshall, 2003).

Region 1 Electoral District in Songkhla Province is a place where the 2019 parliamentary election was especially hotly contested. It was a battle between Palang Pracharat Party, the Democrat Party, Anakot Mai and Phum Jai Thai. The other smaller parties were just like a decoration. Each party presented policies that covered development plans at the national, provincial and town level, and each party tried to make their policies a different alternative for voters. However, communicating these policies to the public requires effective communication techniques. If the communication is not done right, a major policy point may be perceived as trivial (Witiyatorn Torkaew, 2013).

The results of the March 2019 parliamentary elections surprised many people. The Palang Pracharat candidate won with 35,770 votes, compared to 28,383 votes for the Democrat candidate. This had never happened in the past 30 years. Part of the reason for the victory was probably that the Palang Pracharat Party employed effective policy communication strategies.

This led to the researcher's interest in analyzing the Palang Pracharat Party's campaign tactics in Region 1 Songkhla Province and how they communicated the party's policies to the public.

Objectives:

1. To study the political situation in Songkhla Province Region 1 before the March 2019 parliamentary elections.
2. To study the Palang Pracharat Party's communication management process in the March 2019 parliamentary election campaign.
3. To study the Palang Pracharat Party's policy communication strategies for the March 2019 parliamentary election campaign.

Definitions

“Communications strategies” means clever methods used by the Palang Pracharat Party to communicate their policies to the public.

“Policy communication” means transmitting messages about the Palang Pracharat Party's policies through channels to effect changes in the knowledge, attitudes and behavior of message receivers.

“Parliamentary election campaign” means the campaign to win votes in Region 1, Songkhla Province in March, 2019.

“Political situation” means the political conditions in Songkhla Province before the March 2019 parliamentary election.

“Communication management process” means the steps used by Palang Pracharat to communicate their policies during the March 2019 parliamentary election campaign.

“Songkhla Province Region 1” means one of the 8 electoral regions drawn up for Songkhla Province in the 2019 parliamentary election, covering the Mueang Songkhla municipal area.

Expected benefits

1. Knowledge will be gained about the political situation in Songkhla Province Region 1 before the March 2019 parliamentary elections.
2. Knowledge will be gained about the Palang Pracharat Party's communication management process in the March 2019 parliamentary election campaign.
3. Knowledge will be gained about the Palang Pracharat Party's policy communication strategies for the March 2019 parliamentary election campaign.
4. Academic knowledge and understanding will be gained about how to efficiently set strategies to communicate a political party's policies during an election campaign, and this will be written down for future reference for those interested.
5. In practice, besides knowing the factors that influence the setting of policy communication strategies, strategists can learn more about beneficial political situations and apply that knowledge for campaign communications planning.

Research methods

Type of research: qualitative, using the methods of participatory observation and in-depth interviews.

Key informants: People involved with communicating Palang Pracharat Party's policies in Songkhla Region 1 electoral region, consisting of 1 Member of Parliament candidate for the Palang Pracharat Party, 5 campaign workers, 22 voters who were community leaders, and 2 academics/strategists. They were chosen through purposive sampling.

Research tools: an observation form and a structured interview form.

Data collection: the observation, interviewing and data recording were performed by the researcher himself and a research assistant. Key informants were contacted in person and they gave consent to have the interviews recorded with audio and video recording.

Data verification and analysis: Data triangulation was done to compare the data obtained in interviews with data from related persons and the process showed that the data obtained were accurate and reliable. Methodological triangulation was also done by comparing the data from observation, interviews and content analysis with data from related documents. Before drawing conclusions, the member check method was also used to validate and reinforce the data on the topics studied. Finally, data were analyzed by systematically categorizing the data according to the research objectives.

Results

On the first topic of the political situation in Songkhla Electoral Region 1 before the March 2019 parliamentary election, the region has long been dominated by the Democrat Party for the past 30 years. Before the election this time there was a rather serious conflict about who would be the Democrat parliamentary candidate for the region, the former Member of Parliament representing Songkhla or a new party candidate, and the party members had to vote on it. The ill will demonstrated between some members of the Democrat Party in that conflict caused some voters in Songkhla to feel disillusioned with the party.

Most voters hoped that whichever party won the MP position for Songkhla would be a big enough and successful enough party to form the next government, so that the MP would have a good chance of directing central government funding towards development projects to benefit Songkhla Province. Many commentators believed that the Palang Pracharat Party had the best chance of forming the next government.

Voters were concerned that the cost of living had been rising steadily for quite a long time. The prices of food, consumer products and services had been increasing while their salaries were not. Many people felt they could not make ends meet financially. Farmers had to deal with dropping prices for many of the commodities they produced. Because Songkhla Electoral Region 1 comprises urban, suburban and rural areas, there is a wide range occupations and great disparity of income in the region, so social

inequality is another big issue. Voters in Songkhla were also impacted by the former intense conflicts in the national political scene.

As for the Palang Pracharat Party's campaign communications management process, it began with fact finding to discover what problems were most on the minds of Songkhla voters, and what they most desired in a parliamentary representative. Fact finding was also done about who the message senders would be, what messages would be communicated, what channels would be used and who the target message receivers were.

Once the key problems and issues were identified, the campaign communication managers had to plan communications to reach every target group, meaning different communities, groups, occupations, genders and age groups. They made plans to exploit every kind of media and every possible channel.

For implementing the communications process, the Palang Pracharat Party used every kind of medium to communicate its policies, including traditional media such as TV, radio, posters, vinyl banners and cutout signs, and pamphlets, as well as new media including Facebook and Line applications, with messages aimed at every target group.

To evaluate campaign communications, assessments were made at every stage, from before officially submitting a candidate, to the run-up to election day, to during the election and after, and the results of evaluations were used to improve communications.

As for the final topic of the Palang Pracharat's policy communication strategies, the first was to build public awareness of the party's policies on a national level, provincial level and town level. The policies were communicated to every community, group, occupation, gender and age group, not just once, but continually, up to election day as allowed by law. The party used traditional media such as TV, radio, posters, vinyl banners and cutout signs, and pamphlets, as well as new media including Facebook and Line applications.

Another strategy was to build up communication leaders in every community. These leaders cooperated by communicating to the people in their communities about the party's policies and many other messages, so that messages could be spread widely and quickly.

Another of the party's strategies was to build up a network of supporters and allies among private and public sector organizations and the press. The Palang Pracharat candidate had worked as a local politician before and had run for Member of Parliament before, so he already had a support base. It was easy to expand on this base because of the reach and influence of the Palang Pracharat Party on a national level. It is a large party and many of the members worked for the previous government. The network of allies was very large.

The Palang Pracharat Party was serious about evaluating its campaign strategy and used academically sound methods and principles to intensively and continually assess levels of public awareness, understanding, attitudes and voting behavior. They used the information from systematic evaluations of public knowledge and sentiment to

adapt their policy communication methods and approaches, and in the end the party was successful in creating a positive attitude about the party's candidate and policies, and in influencing the voting behavior of local people.

Recommendations

Suggestions for application: political parties can apply the research results for campaign communications planning and management in areas with similar conditions so they can effectively communicate their policies to voters widely and regularly.

Suggestions for further research: This research was limited by time, so further research should investigate more about the specific content of messages used to communicate the party's policies and how the policy communication strategies were developed. Other research could also compare the Palang Pracharat Party's policy communication strategies with strategies used by other political parties to find more useful insights.

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