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Political party popularity and Buddhist policy advocacy: An analysis of university students' political preferences in Bangkok

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors that affect the popularity of political parties among university students in Bangkok, Thailand. This demographic represents educated urban youth. The research focuses on five key variables: political identity, political party policy, political communication, political perception, and political party popularity. Political party popularity is defined as the degree of support, positive attitudes, and emotional attachment toward a party that influences electoral behavior. In this study, the term “Buddhist-oriented policy” refers to policy positions that emphasize the institutional protection of Buddhism, promote moral governance based on religious principles, and advocate for identity-based narratives that connect national and religious values. Using a cross-sectional survey involving 300 students and employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the findings indicate that political identity and political communication are the only significant predictors of popularity of political parties. Political communication significantly influences political perception, while political identity does not. Additionally, political perception does not have a significant impact on party popularity, and there are no statistically significant indirect (mediated) effects. Moreover, political party policies, especially those oriented toward Buddhism, show no significant direct or indirect effects on either perception or popularity. These findings suggest that for educated urban youth, alignment with political identity and communication processes may

hold greater influence than policy content and religious values. This indicates a potential generational divergence in political behavior, rather than a definitive shift within the broader Thai electorate.

Keywords: Buddhist policy orientation, political communication, political identity, political party popularity, political perception

Background and Significance

The relationship between religion and politics has long been a central topic in political science, particularly in societies where religion is deeply embedded in cultural identity and governance (Stenger et al., 2026). In Thailand, Buddhism is practiced by the majority of the population and is closely intertwined with national identity, social values, and state institutions. The Thai constitution recognizes Buddhism as a protected religion, and the monarchy has historically served as its patron, reinforcing the symbolic and institutional linkage between religion and politics. As a result, political parties have often incorporated Buddhist principles and policy advocacy into their platforms, using them as strategic tools to mobilize support, legitimize authority, and appeal to voters' moral values (Stenger et al., 2026). However, it is important to distinguish between “State Buddhism,” which refers to the state's institutionalized protection and formal endorsement of Buddhism, and “Political Buddhism,” which involves the strategic use of Buddhist symbols, narratives, and moral discourses for political mobilization and populist appeal. Such strategies have been particularly effective among traditional and conservative groups who perceive Buddhism as a cornerstone of Thai identity. However, the extent to which these religiously grounded political appeals remain effective in a rapidly changing society is an important question that warrants further investigation.

Thailand's contemporary political landscape has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades, marked by political instability, military interventions, constitutional reforms, and increasing polarization (Miller & Conover, 2015). These developments have contributed to the emergence of more complex forms of political engagement, particularly among younger generations. University students, as a key segment of the educated youth population, are exposed to diverse sources of information, including digital media, global political discourse, and critical academic environments. This exposure shapes their political attitudes, making them more likely to question traditional authority structures and ideological narratives (Twenge et al., 2016). From a theoretical perspective, this shift can be understood through Secularization Theory, which posits a declining influence of religion in modern societies, and Post-Materialism (Inglehart), which suggests that younger, educated cohorts increasingly prioritize self-expression, individual autonomy, and progressive values over traditional religious and material concerns. At the same time, political identity has become increasingly salient in polarized contexts, functioning not only as a reflection of policy preferences but also as a broader social identity that encompasses values, emotions, and group affiliations (Bankert et al., 2017; Huddy et al., 2015). This shift suggests that young voters may evaluate

political parties based more on identity alignment and communication effectiveness than on specific policy content, including religious policies.

Despite the recognized importance of these dynamics, existing research on political behavior in Thailand has largely focused on rural voters, patronage networks, and electoral mobilization, with relatively limited attention given to urban, educated youth. This gap is particularly significant in light of recent political developments, such as the youth-led protests between 2020 and 2023, which explicitly challenged traditional institutions, hierarchical authority, and the role of religion in politics. These movements highlight a generational shift in political engagement and underscore the need to empirically examine the attitudes of educated urban youth. Moreover, while studies in Western contexts have extensively examined the roles of political identity, communication, and perception in shaping political preferences, these relationships remain underexplored in Southeast Asian and Buddhist-majority contexts (Dalton, 2016; Miller & Conover, 2015). In particular, there is a lack of empirical research on whether Buddhist policy orientation continues to influence political party popularity among university students, or whether its significance is diminishing amid modernization and globalization.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the structural relationships among political identity, political party policy—especially Buddhist-oriented policy—political communication, political perception, and political party popularity among university students in Bangkok. By employing Structural Equation Modeling, the research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding both direct and indirect influences on political preferences. The rationale for this study lies in its potential to contribute to both theoretical and practical domains. Theoretically, it advances the understanding of political behavior in Buddhist-majority societies by integrating perspectives on social identity, political communication, and perception formation, while also incorporating secularization and post-materialist perspectives to explain generational change. In practice, it offers valuable insights for political parties seeking to engage younger voters, as well as for policymakers and educators concerned with democratic development and generational change in political culture. In doing so, the study highlights the evolving nature of political preferences among Thailand's emerging electorate and the shifting relevance of religion in contemporary political competition.

Objective

1. To assess the level of political party popularity among university students in Bangkok, including descriptive measures of support, attitudes, and attachment.
2. To examine the factors influencing political party popularity, with particular emphasis on the influence of Buddhist policy advocacy.
3. To develop a structural equation model explaining political party popularity among university students in Bangkok.

Literature Review

Political party popularity has long been understood as a multidimensional construct shaped by psychological attachment, communication processes, policy alignment, and perception formation. In contemporary political science, increasing attention has been given to how these factors interact, particularly among younger and more educated voters whose political orientations are still evolving. This section synthesizes key theoretical and empirical contributions relevant to political identity, religion and politics, political communication, and political perception, with a focus on their implications for political party popularity in the Thai context.

Political identity constitutes a central explanatory variable in electoral behavior, conceptualized as a form of social identity that reflects an individual's psychological attachment to political groups (Huddy et al., 2015; Huddy & Bankert, 2017). Rooted in social identity theory, political identity shapes how individuals interpret political information, often leading to selective perception and motivated reasoning (Miller & Conover, 2015). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that party identification is one of the strongest predictors of political attitudes and voting behavior (Bankert et al., 2017; Dalton, 2016). In multi-party systems, partisanship operates not only as ideological alignment but also as an affective and group-based attachment that influences evaluations of political actors (Bankert et al., 2017; Westwood et al., 2018). Among university students, political identity formation is particularly dynamic, shaped by education, peer interaction, and exposure to diverse viewpoints (Kristensen & Solhaug, 2017; Twenge et al., 2016). These processes make political identity a critical factor in understanding educated youth's political preferences.

The intersection of religion and politics, particularly in Buddhist-majority societies, introduces additional complexity. While Buddhism is often associated with moral governance and cultural identity, its role in political mobilization varies across contexts (Stenger et al., 2026). Political parties in Thailand have historically incorporated Buddhist policy advocacy—such as promoting Buddhist values, protecting religious institutions, and reinforcing national identity—to attract support. Recent political discourse in Thailand has included proposals such as strengthening state support for Buddhist institutions, embedding moral education in public policy, and advancing legislation to protect Buddhism's status within the nation. These policy directions reflect ongoing attempts to institutionalize religious values within governance frameworks. However, the effectiveness of such strategies depends on voters' perceptions of relevance, authenticity, and alignment with broader socio-political concerns. Importantly, existing studies present mixed findings: while some research suggests that religion continues to serve as a powerful mobilizing force in Southeast Asia, other studies indicate a declining influence among younger and more educated populations, particularly in urban settings where secular values and global norms are more prominent. This contradiction highlights the need for context-specific empirical investigation. Comparative research suggests that religion's influence on political behavior is often mediated by partisan identity and issue salience rather than operating as a direct determinant (Castle & Stepp, 2021). Among university students, exposure to secular education and global perspectives may reduce the salience of religious policy advocacy, leading to more issue-based or

identity-driven political evaluations.

Political communication plays a pivotal role in shaping both political perception and party popularity, particularly in the digital age. Advances in communication technologies and the rise of social media have transformed how political messages are disseminated and received, enabling more interactive, personalized, and immediate engagement with voters (Cain, 2020). Research indicates that effective communication strategies enhance candidate evaluations and strengthen party support, especially when messages are tailored to audience characteristics and delivered through preferred channels (Alvidrez, 2017). For university students, who are highly engaged with digital media, political communication serves not only as an information source but also as a mechanism for identity reinforcement and political socialization. From the perspective of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), political communication can function through both central and peripheral routes. In the Thai context, policy content—including religious or Buddhist-oriented policies—represents the central route, requiring cognitive engagement and critical evaluation. In contrast, communication style, emotional appeals, leader image, and symbolic messaging function as peripheral cues, which may be particularly influential among younger voters navigating high-information environments. This distinction is crucial in understanding why communication effectiveness may outweigh policy substance in shaping political preferences. Moreover, communication can influence political attitudes both directly and indirectly by shaping perceptions of credibility, competence, and responsiveness.

Political perception refers to the cognitive and evaluative processes by which individuals interpret political information and form judgments about political actors. It is influenced by prior beliefs, identity, and exposure to communication, as well as cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and heuristic processing (Bougher, 2017; Miller & Conover, 2015). Theoretical models such as the elaboration likelihood model suggest that individuals may process political information through central (analytical) or peripheral (heuristic) routes, depending on their motivation and ability (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In practice, even among educated individuals, the dominance of peripheral cues—such as trust in communicators, emotional resonance, and social identity alignment—may override central processing of policy content, especially in fast-paced digital environments. Empirical evidence shows that political perception significantly influences political support, acting as a mediating mechanism between communication, identity, and behavioral outcomes (Claassen et al., 2021; Zabinski & Bolsen, 2017).

Despite extensive research in Western democracies, there remains a notable gap in understanding how these factors interact in Southeast Asian and Buddhist-majority contexts, particularly among university students. Existing studies in Thailand have largely focused on rural voters and patronage-based politics, leaving urban, educated youth underexplored. This study addresses this gap by integrating political identity, Buddhist policy orientation, political communication, and political perception into a comprehensive framework to explain political party popularity. By explicitly incorporating competing theoretical perspectives and contextual political developments, the study moves beyond descriptive synthesis toward a more critical and integrative understanding of political behavior. By doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding

of electoral behavior in emerging democracies and highlights the shifting priorities of younger generations in contemporary political landscapes.

Research Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework integrates social identity theory, political communication theory, and attitude formation theory to explain the popularity of political parties among university students in Bangkok. It proposes that political party popularity is influenced by political identity, Buddhist policy orientation, political communication, and political perception, with perception acting as a mediator. Political identity reflects a psychological attachment that shapes attitudes and behavior (Huddy et al., 2015), while Buddhist policy orientation reflects religion's role in shaping political preferences, depending on its perceived relevance and resonance with voters' values (Stenger et al., 2026). However, the influence of Buddhist policy orientation on political perception is not assumed to be universal; rather, it is contingent upon individuals' religiosity and value alignment. For more secular or post-materialist-oriented voters, religious policy cues may have limited cognitive impact, thereby weakening the pathway from policy orientation to perception. Political communication highlights the influence of media and messaging, especially in digital contexts (Cain, 2020), while political perception captures the cognitive evaluation process underlying attitude formation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Furthermore, while the framework positions political perception as a mediator, it also acknowledges the role of affective partisanship, where political identity can directly influence party popularity through emotional attachment, bypassing cognitive evaluation processes. This suggests that not all political judgments are mediated by perception, particularly among individuals with strong identity-based affiliations. Overall, the framework suggests that political party popularity results from both direct effects of identity and communication and indirect effects through perception, reflecting a combination of affective and cognitive processes.

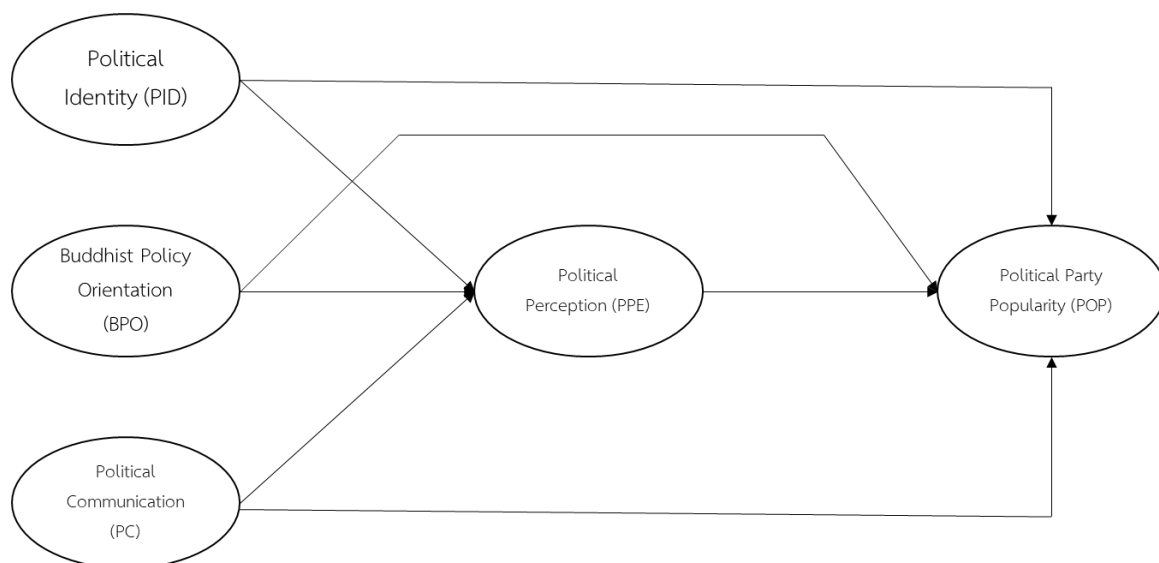


Figure 1 Research conceptual framework

Methods

1. Population and sample

The population of this study consisted of university students in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area, drawn from four categories of higher education institutions: public autonomous universities, private universities, Rajabhat universities, and Rajamangala Universities of Technology, totaling 54,269 students based on official statistics (Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, 2026). From this population, four universities were selected by simple random sampling: Kasetsart University (Bangkhen campus), Kasem Bundit University, Chandrakasem Rajabhat University, and Rajamangala University of Technology Tawan-ok (Chakkrachongphuvanart Campus).

The sample size was determined at 300 students in accordance with recommendations for PLS-SEM analysis, including the 10-times rule and guidelines suggesting 150–300 cases for models of moderate complexity (Sarstedt et al., 2022). A stratified random sampling technique was initially employed to ensure proportional representation across institutions. However, the final sample distribution was uneven, comprising 204 students from Kasetsart University, 48 from Kasem Bundit University, 46 from Chandrakasem Rajabhat University, and 2 from Rajamangala University of Technology. This concentration of respondents from Kasetsart University may introduce institutional bias and limit the generalizability of the findings, as the sample may disproportionately reflect the characteristics and perspectives of students from a single institution. Although stratified sampling was applied, practical constraints in data collection affected proportional balance. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution, and future studies are encouraged to employ more balanced sampling or apply statistical weighting techniques to improve representativeness across institutions.

2. Research tools

The research instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire designed to measure five key constructs: political identity (PID), Buddhist policy orientation (BPO), political communication (PC), political perception (PPE), and political party popularity (POP). The questionnaire was developed based on an extensive review of relevant literature and adapted from established scales in political behavior research (Alvidrez, 2017; Bankert et al., 2017; Bougher, 2017; Huddy et al., 2015). It consisted of two main sections: 1) demographic information and 2) measurement of latent variables. All items in the second section were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), allowing standardized assessment of respondents' attitudes and perceptions. Regarding political identity (PID), the construct was operationalized as the strength of psychological attachment and identification with a political party, rather than categorical party affiliation. This approach aligns with social identity theory and affective partisanship literature, which conceptualize identity as a continuous attitudinal construct reflecting emotional and cognitive attachment (Bankert et al., 2017; Huddy et al., 2015). Thus, a Likert scale is appropriate for capturing variation in the intensity of political identity among respondents. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in political science and survey methodology.

A pilot test was conducted with a small group of university students to refine item clarity and wording. The reliability of each construct was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. The results showed that all constructs demonstrated good reliability: political identity ($\alpha = 0.84$), Buddhist policy orientation ($\alpha = 0.79$), political communication ($\alpha = 0.82$), political perception ($\alpha = 0.81$), and political party popularity ($\alpha = 0.85$). Overall, the research instrument exhibited strong psychometric properties, supporting its appropriateness for examining the relationships among political identity, Buddhist policy orientation, political communication, political perception, and political party popularity among university students in Bangkok.

3. Data collection

Data collection was conducted during February 2026 using a structured questionnaire administered to university students in Bangkok. The survey was distributed through both online and offline channels to ensure broader accessibility and participation across different universities and academic disciplines. Online questionnaires were disseminated via social media platforms and university networks, while paper-based questionnaires were distributed in classrooms and common areas with prior permission from relevant institutions. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study's purpose, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained before participation, and no personally identifiable information was collected to ensure anonymity. The data collection process lasted approximately 4 weeks, yielding 300 valid responses, deemed sufficient for subsequent structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis.

4. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS. The process included data screening (missing values, outliers, normality) and descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations). The measurement model was assessed for reliability and validity, with indicator loadings ≥ 0.70 (≥ 0.60 acceptable), Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability ≥ 0.70 , and AVE ≥ 0.50 (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Discriminant validity was confirmed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT < 0.85 . The structural model was then tested using bootstrapping (5,000 samples), with significance at $p < 0.05$. Model fit was evaluated using SRMR (< 0.10) and NFI (> 0.90), while explanatory power was assessed using R^2 (0.25, 0.50, 0.75 for weak, moderate, strong). Effect sizes ($f^2 = 0.02, 0.15, 0.35$) and predictive relevance ($Q^2 > 0$) were also examined, along with direct, indirect, and total effects to assess mediation.

Results

1. Measurement model assessment

The measurement model was evaluated to ensure the reliability and validity of all constructs prior to testing the structural relationships. The assessment included indicator reliability, multicollinearity, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, following established PLS-SEM

guidelines (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Indicator reliability was assessed using outer loadings, as presented in Table 1. All indicators exhibited loadings ranging from 0.704 to 0.987, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70. This indicates that the observed variables adequately represent their respective latent constructs. High loadings, particularly for indicators such as CP (0.987) and ICB (0.934), indicate strong measurement quality and confirm that the indicators meaningfully contribute to their constructs.

Table 1 Outer loadings (indicator reliability)

Construct	Indicators	Loadings
BPO	PD, PPO, PRF, PS	0.716–0.844
PC	CC, CS, EI, PM	0.760–0.838
PID	AR, CP, SI	0.711–0.987
POP	PPAR, RCI	0.704–0.740
PPE	AE, ETC, ICB, PBI, PPP	0.724–0.934

Multicollinearity among indicators was examined using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with all values ranging between 1.372 and 3.208, well below the critical threshold of 5.00. This confirms that there are no serious multicollinearity issues that could bias the model's estimation. Internal consistency, reliability, and convergent validity were evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE), as shown in Table 2. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.685 to 0.891, indicating acceptable reliability. Although the value for political party popularity (POP = 0.685) is slightly below 0.70, it remains acceptable in exploratory research contexts. Composite reliability values ranged from 0.685 to 0.892, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming strong internal consistency. Furthermore, AVE values ranged from 0.521 to 0.734, all above the minimum requirement of 0.50, indicating that the constructs explain more than half of the variance in their indicators.

Table 2 Reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
BPO	0.875	0.873	0.634
PC	0.879	0.880	0.647
PID	0.889	0.891	0.734
POP	0.685	0.685	0.521
PPE	0.891	0.892	0.624

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio. As shown in Table 3, the square root of AVE for each construct is greater than its correlations with other constructs, satisfying the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Additionally, HTMT values were all below 0.85, confirming that each construct is empirically distinct.

Table 3 Discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion)

Construct	BPO	PC	PID	POP	PPE
BPO	0.796				
PC	0.625	0.804			
PID	0.716	0.343	0.857		
POP	0.605	0.645	0.605	0.722	
PPE	0.339	0.529	0.244	0.469	0.790

2. Structural model assessment

The structural model was evaluated to examine the hypothesized relationships among variables, including multicollinearity, path coefficients, and mediation effects. Multicollinearity among constructs was assessed using inner VIFs, which ranged from 1.403 to 3.091, indicating no critical multicollinearity and confirming that the predictor constructs do not overlap excessively. The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Figure 2 and Table 4.

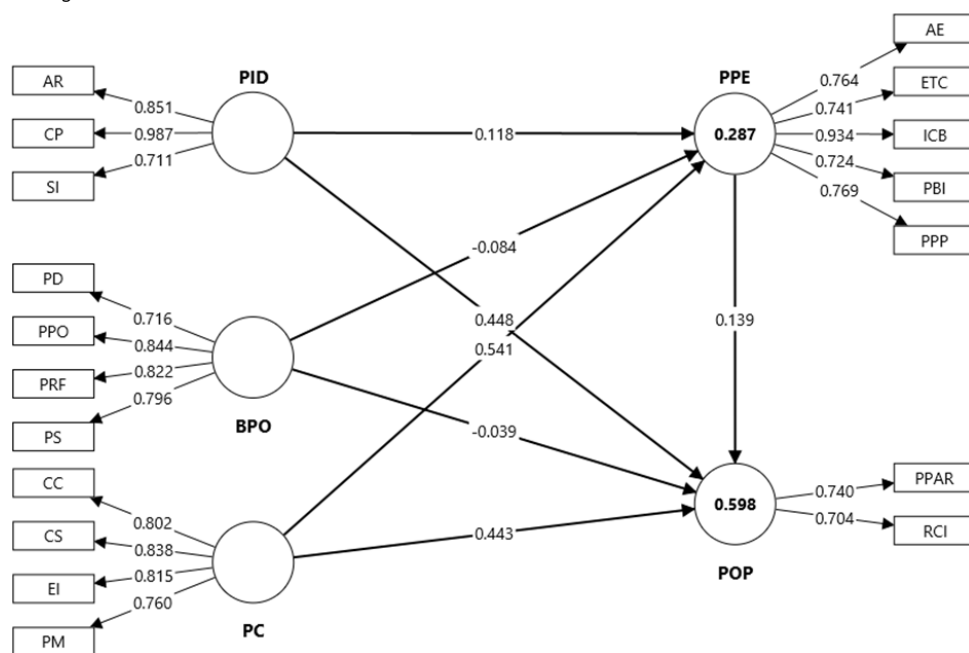


Figure 2 SEM model

Table 4 Path coefficients and hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	PID $\rightarrow$ PPE	0.118	1.177	0.239	Not supported
H2	BPO $\rightarrow$ PPE	-0.084	0.652	0.514	Not supported
H3	PC $\rightarrow$ PPE	0.541	6.053	0.000	Supported
H4	PPE $\rightarrow$ POP	0.139	1.635	0.102	Not supported
H5	PID $\rightarrow$ POP	0.448	4.468	0.000	Supported
H6	BPO $\rightarrow$ POP	-0.039	0.308	0.758	Not supported
H7	PC $\rightarrow$ POP	0.443	4.080	0.000	Supported
H8	PID $\rightarrow$ PPE $\rightarrow$ POP	0.016	0.868	0.385	Not supported
H9	BPO $\rightarrow$ PPE $\rightarrow$ POP	-0.012	0.545	0.586	Not supported
H10	PC $\rightarrow$ PPE $\rightarrow$ POP	0.075	1.551	0.121	Not supported

Table 4 presents the results of hypothesis testing, revealing that political communication (PC) and political identity (PID) are the primary determinants of political party popularity (POP) among university students. Political communication shows the strongest influence in the model, with a highly significant effect on political perception (PPE) ($\beta = 0.541$, $t = 6.053$, $p < 0.001$) and a strong direct effect on party popularity ($\beta = 0.443$, $t = 4.080$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that effective messaging and communication strategies play a central role in shaping both how political parties are perceived and how much support they receive. Similarly, political identity significantly influences party popularity ($\beta = 0.448$, $t = 4.468$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that students' sense of political affiliation or alignment directly drives their support for political parties. However, political identity does not significantly affect political perception ($\beta = 0.118$, $p = 0.239$), implying that its influence operates more directly rather than through evaluative processes. In contrast, Buddhist policy orientation (BPO) does not have a significant effect on either political perceptions or party popularity, with low, non-significant coefficients (BPO $\rightarrow$ PPE: $\beta = -0.084$, $p > 0.05$; BPO $\rightarrow$ POP: $\beta = -0.039$, $p > 0.05$), indicating that religious policy advocacy is not a key factor for this group. The model's explanatory power is reflected in the R^2 values, where political communication and related predictors explain a substantial proportion of the variance in political perception and political party popularity. These values indicate that while the model has moderate predictive capability, a considerable portion of variance remains unexplained, suggesting the presence of additional influencing factors beyond those included in this study. Furthermore, the relatively high correlation between political identity (PID) and Buddhist policy orientation (BPO) suggests potential conceptual overlap among respondents' national, cultural, and religious identities. This collinearity may partially mask the independent effect of BPO,

as elements of religious identity could be subsumed within broader political or national identity constructs. This finding highlights the importance of carefully distinguishing between these constructs in future research. Moreover, political perception (PPE) itself does not significantly influence party popularity ($\beta = 0.139$, $p = 0.102$), suggesting that students' evaluations of parties do not strongly translate into support. The mediation analysis further confirms that none of the indirect effects (H8–H10) are significant. This indicates that the model does not exhibit mediation effects; rather than “direct-only mediation,” the findings suggest that political identity and political communication operate as independent, direct drivers of political party popularity without reliance on perceptual evaluation as an intervening mechanism. Overall, these findings highlight that political party popularity among university students is primarily shaped by identity-based attachment and communication effectiveness, while religious policy orientation and perceptual evaluation play a limited role.

Discussions

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that political party popularity among university students in Bangkok is primarily shaped by political identity and political communication, while religious policy advocacy and evaluative perception play a limited role. The significant influence of political identity on party popularity reinforces social identity theory, which posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their group affiliations, and these identities strongly guide attitudes and behavioral choices (Huddy et al., 2015; Huddy & Bankert, 2017). This suggests that, even in a dynamic, less institutionalized political context such as Thailand, young voters develop meaningful political attachments that directly influence their support for political parties. Importantly, the strength of political identity in this study suggests that students are not merely identifying with specific parties, but are likely aligning with broader ideological and value-based identities, such as progressive versus conservative orientations. In the Thai context, these identities may reflect positions on issues such as democracy, institutional reform, social equality, and tradition. This adds important nuance to the statistical findings, indicating that political identity is a multidimensional construct encompassing values, emotions, and generational perspectives, rather than a simple matter of party affiliation. At the same time, political communication emerges as the most powerful factor, significantly affecting both political perceptions and party popularity, consistent with political communication theory's emphasis on media, messaging, and digital engagement in shaping political attitudes (Alvídrez, 2017; Cain, 2020). The particularly strong effect of communication on perception indicates that how political parties communicate—especially through digital platforms—plays a critical role in shaping young voters, who are highly exposed to diverse, interactive information environments.

This finding can be further understood through the concept of “social media logic” and the “echo chamber” effect, where repeated exposure to aligned messages, algorithm-driven content, and peer networks reinforces particular viewpoints and constructs perceived political reality. In such environments, the style, frequency, and emotional tone of communication may become more influential than

the substantive content of policies, shaping perceptions in ways that are socially amplified rather than individually deliberated. In contrast, the non-significant effects of Buddhist policy orientation challenge traditional assumptions about the centrality of religion in Thai politics, suggesting that religious policy advocacy does not resonate strongly with educated youth despite Thailand being a predominantly Buddhist society (Stenger et al., 2026). This finding aligns with broader research indicating that the political influence of religion is often contingent upon context, issue salience, and voter characteristics rather than being universally dominant (Castle & Stepp, 2021). However, this result should be interpreted with caution in light of potential limitations in construct validity. Specifically, the measurement of BPO in this study primarily reflects traditional and institutional dimensions of religious policy, which may not adequately capture more contemporary, individualized, or symbolic forms of religious identity among younger voters. As a result, the non-significant findings may partly reflect a mismatch between the construct's operationalization and the evolving nature of religious-political attitudes among university students.

In this sense, rather than indicating the absence of religious influence, the findings may suggest a transformation in how religion is interpreted and expressed politically—shifting from formal policy endorsement toward more personal, value-based, or implicit forms of identity. Future research should therefore reconceptualize Buddhist policy orientation to incorporate these modern expressions, including hybrid identities, selective religiosity, and issue-based moral positioning. Furthermore, the absence of a significant relationship between political perception and party popularity, along with the lack of mediation effects, suggests that students' political decisions are not primarily driven by rational or evaluative judgment. This challenges the traditional “rational voter” model in political science, which assumes that individuals make decisions based on systematic evaluation of policies and performance. Instead, the findings support the notion of “expressive voting,” in which individuals choose political parties to express identity, values, and group belonging rather than to maximize instrumental benefits. In this context, affective and symbolic considerations outweigh cognitive evaluation, reinforcing the dominance of identity and communication over perception-based judgment. Instead, these findings support dual-process theories such as the elaboration likelihood model, which propose that individuals often rely on peripheral cues—such as identity and communication style—rather than systematic evaluation when forming attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Overall, the results indicate a notable shift in political behavior among Thailand's emerging electorate, where identity-based attachment and communication effectiveness outweigh traditional factors such as religious policy and cognitive evaluation. This has important theoretical implications, as it extends social identity and political communication frameworks to a Southeast Asian, Buddhist-majority context, while also highlighting the need to refine how religion-related constructs are conceptualized and measured in contemporary political research. Practically, the findings suggest that political parties seeking to engage young, educated voters should prioritize building strong political identities and adopting effective, targeted communication strategies rather than relying solely on traditional religious policy

platforms. These changes reflect broader transformations in political culture and highlight the evolving nature of democratic participation among younger generations in Thailand.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample is unevenly distributed across institutions, with a large proportion of respondents from a single university, which may introduce institutional bias and limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the use of a cross-sectional research design limits the ability to infer causal relationships among variables, as the data capture perceptions at a single point in time. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to examine changes in political attitudes and behavior over time. Third, the study focuses exclusively on university students in Bangkok, representing an educated urban youth demographic; therefore, the results may not be generalizable to other population groups, such as rural voters or older generations. Additionally, the measurement of certain constructs, particularly Buddhist policy orientation, may not fully capture contemporary or individualized expressions of religious identity, which could influence the observed relationships. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings, and future research is encouraged to address these constraints to enhance the robustness and applicability of the results.

Body of Knowledge

This study contributes new knowledge by demonstrating that, in a Buddhist-majority, emerging-democratic context, political party popularity among educated youth is primarily driven by political identity and political communication rather than religious policy orientation or evaluative perceptions. It extends social identity theory by confirming that identity-based attachment directly influences political support even in less institutionalized party systems, while also advancing political communication theory by highlighting the dominant role of communication—particularly in digital environments—in shaping both perception and popularity. Importantly, the study challenges conventional assumptions about the centrality of religion in Thai politics by providing empirical evidence that Buddhist policy advocacy does not significantly affect political preferences among university students. Additionally, it refines existing models of political behavior by showing that political perception does not function as a key mediator, suggesting a shift toward more direct, identity-driven, and communication-based decision-making processes among younger voters. Critically, these findings support the “Expressive Partisanship” model, in which political behavior is driven by identity expression, emotional attachment, and symbolic alignment, rather than the traditional “Policy-Voting” model that assumes voters make decisions based on rational evaluation of policy content. This contribution is particularly significant in the context of emerging democracies, where political preferences among younger, educated voters appear to be shaped more by affective and communicative factors than by policy considerations. Overall, this research offers a context-specific theoretical integration that enhances understanding of political behavior in Southeast Asia and reflects evolving patterns of political engagement among the new generation.

Suggestions

1. Suggestions for applying the research findings

1.1 Political parties should prioritize strengthening political identity and developing effective communication strategies, particularly through digital and social media platforms, as these factors have the strongest influence on political party popularity among university students. Emphasis should be placed on clear, engaging, and relatable messaging that aligns with young voters' values and lifestyles.

1.2 Policymakers and political actors should reconsider their reliance on religious policy advocacy, as Buddhist-oriented policies had no significant impact on the political preferences of educated youth. However, this recommendation should be applied with caution, as the findings are specific to the youth demographic. For broader electoral success, political parties may need to adopt a “dual strategy,” maintaining religious or traditional policy appeals for older or more conservative voter groups while simultaneously employing identity-based and communication-driven approaches to engage younger, urban voters.

1.3 Educational institutions should promote political awareness and critical thinking skills to encourage informed and active civic participation among students. Finally, future research should expand the scope to include other regions, age groups, and additional variables—such as media literacy, trust in institutions, or political efficacy.

2. Suggestions for future research

To further understand the evolving dynamics of political behavior in Thailand and similar contexts. In particular, future studies are encouraged to incorporate qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, to explore why Buddhist policy orientation does not significantly influence young voters. Such methods could provide deeper insights into whether this is due to apathy, perceived irrelevance, reinterpretation of religious values, or active rejection of traditional political narratives.

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