

## Red, Yellow, or No Shirt: Where do University Students of Thailand Stand?

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### Abstract

Amidst the immense hardship to achieve a consensus on the definition of democracy, having allowed political rivalries of Thailand in the past decade to proclaim themselves as democratic, albeit with different emphases, the participation of personnel and students of various universities in such conflicts has led to branding of their respective institutes with a stigma of political biases towards certain factions. In view of that, this research was purposed to study and compare political attitudes of students in a university, which has provided support, participated, and contributed to the “Bangkok Shutdown” incident by blocking 1 of 7 strategic points, by individual factors of field of study, birthplace, parental occupation, and parental income. Data were collected from 400 undergraduates enrolled in the first semester of academic year 2016 through a questionnaire, and analysed through statistics of frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, one-way ANOVA, Tukey's pairwise comparison, and Pearson's correlation coefficient at significance level of 0.05. The findings revealed that, despite the university being branded as a part of Yellow Shirt faction, the students showed weak inclinations towards Red Shirt faction. Only those from Humanities-Social Sciences seemed to have yellow shirt attitudes. Birthplace and parental occupation did not affect political attitudes of the students in this university, while students whose parents had the highest and lowest incomes tended to take Yellow Shirt standpoints, and those whose parents had moderate incomes leaned towards Red Shirt attitudes.

**Keywords:** *Contemporary Thai politics, political attitude, Red Shirts, Yellow Shirts, university Students*

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### 1. Introduction

In reality of “democracy”, Held (2006, p. 1) led his prominent work “Model of Democracy” with “nearly everyone today says they are democrats no matter whether their views are on the left, centre or right. Political regimes of all kinds in, for instance, Western Europe, the Eastern bloc and Latin America claim to be democracies” or at least “moving towards the establishment of democracy” (Bellamy, 1987, p. 1), whether on the rationale from late 20<sup>th</sup> century when a number of individuals began to concur that this form of governance would become humanity's ultimate form (Fukuyama, 1992) or “Universal Value” (Sen, 1999), amidst the immense hardship to achieve a consensus on the definition (Nwogu, 2015, p. 131) insofar as it could be deemed that no definition was unanimously accepted (Wanthana, 2008, p. 245), leading to a state of vagueness on the actual purpose of democracy, apart from creating loopholes allowing dictators around the globe to proclaim that their authoritarian governances were democratic. At least in principle, these loopholes can be observed in the history of Thailand, where absolute monarchy had been deemed more democratic than democracy of eras that followed. Even military coups d'état were also regarded as an approach to restore and/or protect democracy in a sense (Eoseewong, 2013, p. 30; see also Pathumwat, 2016; Chainam, 2007, as cited in Panduprasert, 2013, p. 104).

Under the circumstance of deeply-rooted political conflicts of modern Thai society (Satitniramai, Mukdawijitra & Pawakapan, 2013, p. 141), Sattayanurak (2014, pp. 8-9) has described the substantiations of “United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship” (UDD) and “People's Democratic Reform Committee” (PDRC) in “Democracy and Inequality of Thais” as a clash between “democracy that sanctions majority rule” and “democracy under constitutional monarchy” ideologies, in a similar sense (Satitniramai, Mukdawijitra & Pawakapan, 2013) established on the essence of this political conflict in “Re-examining the Political Landscape of Thailand” as “a conflict in which the “Red Shirts” fights to protect democratic political principles of election or representative democracy where authority and legitimacy from being elected are of utmost importance, while the “Yellow Shirts” contests to diminish legitimacy of election though monitory democracy. In respect of political ideology, the UDD and PDRC both hold democratic

principles but with different emphases, which a democratic theorist realised its emergence in practice (Bellamy, 1987, p. 1), particularly when contemporary democratic theories have not provided any explanation on such as being static political process, but implied certain kinds of political systems that extend over particular standards or directives that allow the connotation of being democratic (Pateman, 2013, p. 61).

While Satitniramai, Mukdawijitra and Pawakapan (2013, p. 35) hypothesised that Red Shirts were people who were below university diploma level in education, earned irregular income being freelancers, entrepreneurs, low-skills labour, low-tier public servants, and salespeople, whereas Yellow Shirts were better and higher in socioeconomic status, education, and job security. Manachotphong (2014, p. 58) was able to point out through statistical means that the Red Shirts tended to have higher proportion of informal workforce, being entrepreneurs, freelancers, or housekeepers, compared to the Yellow Shirts. The rationalisations behind the Red Shirts were to resolve disparity issues and demand the return of the former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, while the Yellow Shirts gave importance to solving corruption and promotion of conservatism and nationalism, seeing as Thailand was not ready for democracy due to lack of education of the majority of people, and tended to favour populist policies and decentralisation less than the Red Shirts.

Surprisingly, in research conducted in the past, having become another segment with significant roles in such political conflict, “university students” were hardly given any importance. On the Red Shirts’ side, though without formal announcement of affiliation, Student Federation of Thailand, League of Liberal Thammasat for Democracy, Chulalongkorn Community for the People, Liberal Kasetsart, Liberal Assembly of Chiang Mai University for Democracy, particularly Daodin (Figure 1) and New Democracy Movement (Figure 2) were listed as groups of students from universities in the capital and regional provinces whose viewpoints were in line with the Red Shirts, and predominantly considered in association therewith by the military government and mass media (Manager Online, 2015; Daliynews, 2016). As for the Yellow Shirts, Network of Students and People for Reform of Thailand (along with People’s Movement to Overthrow the Thaksin Regime) were considered one of the early allies of Suthep Thaugsuban in the formation of PDRC on 29<sup>th</sup> November, 2013 (Bangkok Post, 2013). Moreover, many universities provided support (Tiebtienrat, 2015, p. 84), participated in (Figure 3), and contributed to “Bangkok Shutdown” on 13<sup>th</sup> February, 2014; blockages of Pathum Wan Intersection by Chulalongkorn University, of Asoke Intersection by Srinakharinwirot University and National Institute of Development Administration, and of Lad Phrao Intersection by Kasetsart University (The Nation, 2014), for instance.



**Figure 1** Anti-Coup of Daodin



**Figure 2** Dictatorship Ousting Activity of NDM



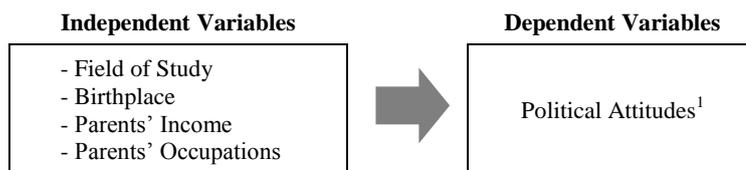
Figure 3 Gathering of RSU



Figure 4 Bangkok Shutdown of CU and TU

In similar perspective to Jermstittiparsert (2014, p. 145)<sup>1</sup>'s observation on the consequences from economic, political, and societal developments causing even greater disparity among members, studying political culture of a specific nation with a blanket approach as done in the past (e.g. Somwichian , 1971, pp. 35-37, as cited in Masmichainara, 2005, p. 91; Jermstittiparsert, 2008, pp. 72-73) should not be able to devise a conventional deduction to explain such erratic circumstance. This research thus intended to study and compare political attitudes of students in a university, which has provided support, participated, and contributed to the “Bangkok Shutdown” incident by blocking 1 of 7 strategic points, by individual factors, namely, field of study, birthplace, parental occupation, and parental income, in response to the point at issue of whether or not, and in what way, students of the university being branded as a whole for being politically biased to a specific standpoint (Salawin, 2013), certain stances of a group of executives and lecturers in particular (Prachatai, 2013), and the escalation into conditionality of employment from a private firm (Mota, 2013) were coherent with empirical data.

**Conceptual Framework**



**2. Methodology**

**2.1 Population and Sample**

The population herein comprises of undergraduates enrolled in the first semester of 2016 academic year (August-December 2016) of a university in Thailand, employing Cochran's infinite population formula (1977) to calculate sample size for a 95% confidence level and 5 % margin of error, resulting in a population of 400.

Utilising probability sampling in multistage, primarily clustering 2 faculties into each field of study, resulted in 1) Health-Science, with Faculty of Nursing and Faculty of Science, 2) Technology-Engineering, with College of Engineering and Aviation Institute, 3) Humanities-Social Sciences, with Faculty of Liberal Arts and Faculty of Political Science, 4) Economics-Business, with College of Tourism and Hospitality and Faculty of Accountancy, and 5) Art-Design, with Conservatory of Music and Faculty of Digital Art.

<sup>1</sup> Divided into 7 categories: 1) Extremely Red ( $\bar{X} = 2.68 - 4.00$ ) 2) Red ( $\bar{X} = 1.34 - 2.67$ ) 3) Slightly Red ( $\bar{X} = 0.01 - 1.33$ ) 4) Neutral ( $\bar{X} = 0$ ) 5) Slightly Yellow ( $\bar{X} = -0.01 - -1.33$ ) 6) Yellow ( $\bar{X} = -1.34 - -2.67$ ) 7) Extremely Yellow ( $\bar{X} = -2.68 - -4.0$ )

## 2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The process employed a questionnaire derived from literature reviewing (e.g. Satitniramai, Mukdawijitra & Pawakapan, 2013; and Manachotphong, 2014), along with interviewing experts (e.g. Chaletorn, 2016 a committee member of Thai Reform Institute, Rangsit University and former leader of PDRC). Data were collected during 21-25 November, 2016, and analysed through statistics of frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, one-way ANOVA, Tukey's pairwise comparison, and Pearson's correlation coefficient at significance level of 0.05.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Individual Factors

Among the sample of students from five fields of study, 80 students each, a total of 400, over half were born in Bangkok and Vicinity (34.5%) and central region (26.5%). Most were with parents who were entrepreneurs (41%), and earned average monthly incomes between 40,000-49,999 baht (27.3%).

### 3.2 Political Attitudes of Students

Despite being branded as leaning towards the faction of Yellow Shirts, analysis of empirical data revealed that, in general, the students of this university held "slightly Red" ( $\bar{X} = .0208$ ) political attitudes. Of all 400, as much as 45.3% were "slightly Red" while 37.0% were "slightly Yellow", and the rest of 17.8% were "neutral". There was no student who showed such attitudes on "Red/Yellow" or "extremely Red/Yellow" degrees.

**Table 1** Individual Factors and Students' Political Attitudes

Birthplace	Qty	%	Parental Income	Qty	%
Bangkok and Vicinity	138	34.5	Below 30,000 baht	43	10.8
Northern Region	39	9.8	30,000-39,999 baht	95	23.8
Northeastern Region	70	17.5	40,000-49,999 baht	109	27.3
Central Region	106	26.5	50,000-59,999 baht	73	18.3
Southern Region	47	11.8	Over 60,000 baht	80	20.0
Parental Occupation	Qty	%	Political Attitude	Qty	%
Public Servant	73	18.3	Extremely Red	-	-
Private Employee	64	16	Red	-	-
Entrepreneur	164	41	Slightly Red	181	45.3
Agriculturalist	42	11.5	Neutral	71	17.8
Freelance	57	14.3	Slightly Yellow	148	37.0
			Yellow	-	-
			Extremely Yellow	-	-

### 3.3 Students' Political Attitudes by Individual Factors

Considering "field of study" factor, to ascertain via empirical data whether the students of different fields in this university would have the same trend of political attitudes or not through one-way ANOVA not only revealed that students of different fields had different political attitudes, but also found that primarily, students in 4 out of 5 fields of study showed a slight tendency toward the Red Shirts, only students from Humanities and Social Sciences showed slightly Yellow political attitudes ( $\bar{X} = -.0988$ ).

**Table 2** Students' Political Attitudes by Fields of Study

Field of Study	N	Mean	S.D.	F	p-value
Health Sciences	80	.0088	.2917	3.680	.006**
Engineering Technology	80	.0550	.3001		
Humanities and Social Sciences	80	-.0988	.3947		
Business Economics	80	.0800	.3661		
Art and Design	80	.0588	.3055		

Through Tukey's pairwise comparison, it was discovered that students in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences ( $\bar{X} = -.0988$ ) had significantly different political attitudes from students in Engineering Technology ( $\bar{X} = .0550$ ) and Art and Design ( $\bar{X} = .0588$ ) at statistical significance of 0.05, and students in Business Economics ( $\bar{X} = .0800$ ) at statistical significance of 0.01.

**Table 3** Pairwise Comparison of Students' Political Attitudes by Fields of Study

	Mean	1	2	3	4	5
1	.0088	-	.906	.251	.661	.879
2	.0550	-	-	.031*	.990	1.000
3	-.0988	-	-	-	.007**	.025*
4	.0800	-	-	-	-	.994
5	.0588	-	-	-	-	-

Next, in consideration of "birthplace" and "parental occupation", it was found that different birthplaces and parental occupations did not affect political attitudes, consistent with Siamwalla and Jitsuchon (2012)'s conclusion that it was only fictitious that region or occupational status would be predictors of Red Shirt. Still, through one-way ANOVA, it was indicated that students from northeastern region ( $\bar{X} = -.0186$ ) and those whose parents were public servants ( $\bar{X} = -.0288$ ) had slightly leaned towards Yellow Shirt attitudes while students from other regions and those whose parents had different occupations had slight tendencies toward Red Shirt.

**Table 4** Students' Political Attitudes by Birthplaces

Birthplace	N	Mean	S.D.	F	p-value
Bangkok and Vicinity	138	.0304	.3672	.629	.642
Northern Region	39	.0769	.2528		
Northeastern Region	70	-.0186	.3141		
Central Region	106	.0047	.3336		
Southern Region	47	.0404	.3634		

In this case, even though statistical instrument did not find any difference in political attitudes among students of different birthplaces, the indication that students from southern region ( $\bar{X} = .0404$ ) and Bangkok and Vicinity ( $\bar{X} = .0304$ ) had slightly Red attitudes while students from northern region ( $\bar{X} = -.0186$ ) showed slightly Yellow attitudes, was an actuality that opposed notions of a number of academics suggesting "northerners" (Archamas, 2010) and "northeasterners" (Ativanichayapong, 2014) were Red Shirt, whereas "southerners" (Uwanno, 2009) and "Bangkokians" (Siamwalla & Jitsuchon, 2012) were Yellow Shirt, but agreed with Satitniramai, Mukdawijitra and Pawakapan (2013) which exemplified transformations of social landscape, particularly those of economics and politics, that led to a new group of people with new sense of citizenship, or the lower middle class that made up the majority of the society, residing throughout urban and rural areas.

**Table 5** Students' Political Attitudes by Parental Occupation

Parental Occupation	N	Mean	S.D.	F	p-value
Public Servant	73	-.0288	.3454	.579	.678
Private Employee	64	.0391	.3462		
Entrepreneur	164	.0250	.3456		
Agriculturalist	42	.0595	.2642		
Freelancer	57	.0228	.3541		

As for the idea that students whose parents were private employees, entrepreneurs, agriculturalists, and freelancers would incline towards Red Shirt attitudes, whereas those whose parents were public servants would do contrariwise while not statistically substantial enough to ascertain, this could emphasise the hypothesis of Satitniramai, Mukdawijitra and Pawakapan (2013) and Manachotphong (2014)'s findings, which proposed that the Red Shirts tended to take up less stable occupations, compared to the Yellow Shirts.

**Table 6** Students’ Political Attitudes by Parental Income

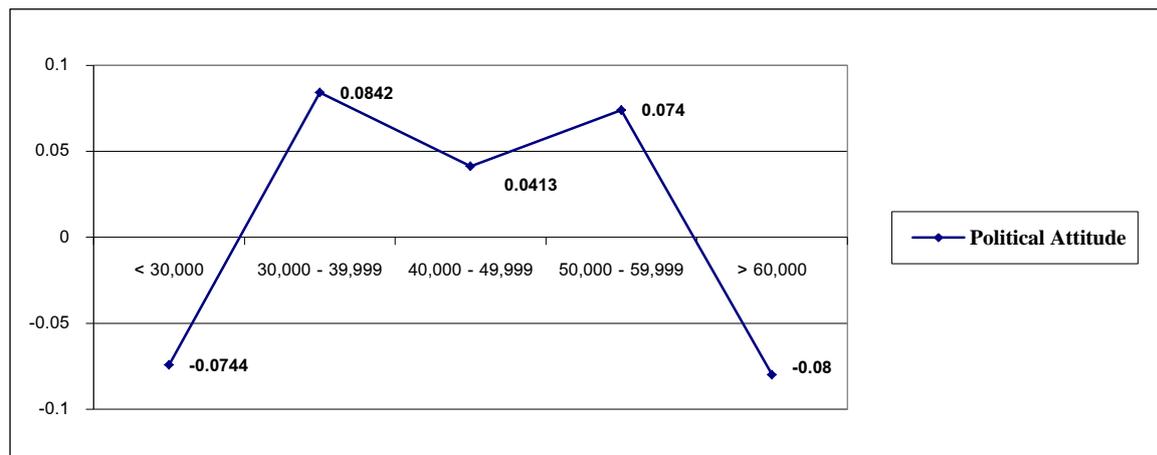
Parental Income	N	Mean	S.D.	F	p-value
Below 30,000 baht	43	-.0744	.4338	4.130	.003**
30,000-39,999 baht	95	.0842	.3253		
40,000-49,999 baht	109	.0413	.2685		
50,000-59,999 baht	73	.0740	.3313		
Over 60,000 baht	80	-.0800	.3626		

Regarding “parental income”, one-way ANOVA revealed that differences in parental income affected students’ political attitudes, and Tukey’s pairwise comparison further showed that attitudes of students whose parents earned over 60,000 baht significantly differed from those whose parents earned between 30,000-39,999 baht, and 50,000-59,999 baht at statistical significance of 0.05, inconsistently with Siamwalla and Jitsuchon (2012) which established that it was also fictitious that economic status would be a predictor of Red Shirt.

**Table 7** Pairwise Comparison of Students’ Political Attitudes by Parental Income

	Mean	1	2	3	4	5
1	-.0744	-	.074	.305	.142	1.000
2	.0842	-	-	.890	1.000	.011*
3	.0413	-	-	-	.967	.099
4	.0740	-	-	-	-	.037*
5	-.0800	-	-	-	-	-

The final finding of this study, in view of the trend of students’ political attitudes by parental income, was students with highest and lowest parental incomes tended to have Yellow Shirt standpoints, whereas those with moderate parental incomes leaned towards Red Shirt attitudes, agreeing with Laungaramsri et al. (2012, pp. 2-3) who proposed about the Red Shirts that even though the majority of which were grassroots or lower middle class, it also consisted of landowners, investors, farmers, merchants, and lower-tier public servants, distinguishing the Red Shirts from other social movement by its “crossing of class” characteristic, as suggested by Satitniramai, Mukdawijitra and Pawakapan (2013, pp. 35, 39) that the Red Shirts were composed of people of socioeconomic statuses while the majority being grassroots was not the poorest group in the society.



**Figure 5** Students’ Political Attitudes by Parental Income

**4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

To conclude, the results indicated that the society’s perception of the political standpoint of this university through interpretation of executives’ stances and participations in political activities of some

personnel and students was erroneous and deviated far from the reality, being branded “(slightly/moderately/extremely) Yellow, though actually a “slightly Red” group. Furthermore, the results pointed that political attitudes of the students were not the same throughout. In addition to the differences in extents, attitudes of students in 4 out of 5 fields of study were on the contrary to the public understanding. Birthplace, parental occupation, and parental income led to more interesting findings that the first two were not able to differentiate students’ political attitudes while the latter, on top of the ability to do so, also emphasised hypotheses and findings of some academics that while the majority of Red Shirts were grassroots, it was not the poorest group in the society.

Therefore, it is crucial to remind members of this society that this cycle of political conflicts extending over a decade, stigmatising any institution of being politically biased, especially opposing that of one’s own, with limited evidence, provoking division into political factions for the sake of dispute, not only impedes the goal for harmony of this nation, but also creates misunderstandings that can grow into serious conflicts deeply rooted in the society, even more problematic to resolve.

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