

This file has been cleaned of potential threats.

If you confirm that the file is coming from a trusted source, you can send the following SHA-256 hash value to your admin for the original file.

c00740a347f8073256b15cf345f68476d48842a9e1cbd786b2bc86a41421bfc1

To view the reconstructed contents, please SCROLL DOWN to next page.

Welfare Populism and Political Dynamics in Thailand: The State Welfare Card's Influence on Parties, Interest Groups, and Elections

Yaowaluk Chaobanpho ¹, Duangkamol Thitivesa ² and Chanan Chanhom ³

¹ College of Politics and Governance, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

² Faculty of Education, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

³ College of Politics and Governance, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

*Corresponding author

E-Mail: ¹ yaowaluk.ch@ssru.ac.th, ² duangkamol.th@ssru.ac.th, ³ chanan.ch@ssru.ac.th

Abstract

Welfare populism has become a defining feature of contemporary Thai politics, reshaping party competition, electoral behavior, and state citizen relations. This paper examines how the State Welfare Card Policy a flagship welfare populist initiative has influenced political dynamics among parties, interest groups, and voters. Drawing on literature from political economy, welfare politics, and electoral studies, the study explores how welfare populism functions as both a tool of economic redistribution and a mechanism of political legitimacy. Using qualitative synthesis and case-based analysis, this research identifies three core findings: (1) the Welfare Card reflects a structural shift in Thailand's populist politics from charisma-based to institutionalized welfare populism; (2) interest groups, including bureaucratic agencies, business sectors, and grassroots organizations, play strategic roles in shaping welfare delivery and political messaging; and (3) welfare populism has redefined electoral competition by linking social protection with political loyalty. The paper concludes that welfare populism, while improving short-term equity, risks reinforcing dependency and partisan polarization unless accompanied by structural reforms and participatory governance.

Keywords: Welfare Populism; Political Parties; Interest Groups; State Welfare Card; Elections

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Thailand has witnessed an evolution of populist politics, transitioning from personality-driven populism under Thaksin Shinawatra to programmatic, welfare-oriented populism in subsequent administrations. Welfare populism refers to policies that extend economic benefits to lower-income citizens while consolidating electoral support (Pongsudhirak, 2020). The State Welfare Card Policy, launched in 2017, represents a major example of this trend targeting low-income citizens through monthly subsidies, transportation discounts, and food allowances.

The rise of welfare populism coincides with Thailand's growing economic inequality and the weakening of ideological cleavages among political parties. Following the 2017 Constitution, which constrained partisan politics and emphasized bureaucratic oversight, welfare populism emerged as one of the few legitimate avenues through which politicians could engage citizens directly. This shift highlights the adaptive nature of Thai populism

transforming from mass-mobilization populism into technocratic populism managed through state institutions.

Furthermore, welfare populism in Thailand must be understood in the broader context of Southeast Asian political economy, where hybrid regimes combine electoral competition with bureaucratic dominance. As in Malaysia and Indonesia, welfare programs have become crucial instruments of political legitimacy, shaping not only voter behavior but also public perceptions of governance effectiveness.

This study addresses three interrelated questions (1) How does welfare populism shape political party strategies and voter alignments? (2) What roles do interest groups play in influencing welfare policy formulation and implementation? (3) How does the welfare card system affect electoral behavior and democratic participation?

1.1 Research Objective

- 1) How does welfare populism shape political party strategies and voter alignments?
- 2) What roles do interest groups play in influencing welfare policy formulation and implementation?
- 3) How does the welfare card system affect electoral behavior and democratic participation?

2. Literature review

2.1 Welfare Populism in Political Economy

Welfare populism combines two logics redistribution and representation. From a political economy perspective, it emerges when governments deploy welfare programs to gain legitimacy and voter loyalty (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). In developing democracies, where inequality and institutional weakness prevail, populist welfare schemes often fill governance gaps by directly addressing citizens' material needs (Hicken, 2018).

In Thailand, this phenomenon evolved from Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai era, when programs such as 30-baht healthcare and village funds transformed state citizen relations (Pasuk & Baker, 2009). These policies established a template for linking social protection to political branding. Later governments, including military and technocratic regimes, reinterpreted welfare populism through bureaucratic and data-driven approaches to maintain control while claiming inclusivity (McCargo, 2020).

Theoretically, welfare populism fits within the framework of "competitive clientelism" (Kuhonta, 2011), where multiple parties use welfare tools to maintain political power. The welfare card thus serves as both an economic instrument for redistribution and a political device for mobilization. Similar findings were reported by Benchakhan (2025), who demonstrated that state welfare policies significantly enhanced the quality of life among the elderly in Bangkok, highlighting welfare's dual function as both social protection and political legitimacy in Thailand.

At the same time, welfare populism is intertwined with technocratic populism a form in which populist goals are pursued through bureaucratic rationality rather than mass charisma (Bureekul, 2019). This depersonalized populism is increasingly visible in Southeast Asia, where governments emphasize efficiency and inclusion to justify top-down welfare delivery.

2.2 Political Parties and Interest Groups in Thai Democracy

Thai political parties have transitioned from elite patronage networks to competitive populist platforms. The convergence of parties around welfare discourse reflects a depoliticization of ideology but a politicization of distribution (Chambers, 2013). Policies such as the welfare card allow political elites to sustain patronage under the guise of equity.

Interest groups including business associations, bureaucrats, and NGOs play mediating roles. Business interests benefit from digital payment systems and card management contracts, while bureaucrats gain expanded authority over citizen registration and benefit allocation. These dynamics reflect a fusion of political and economic power characteristic of Thailand's bureaucratic polity (Boonprasert, 2021).

In comparative perspective, Malaysia's BR1M and Indonesia's BLT programs exhibit similar patterns of elite capture and symbolic inclusivity. Such regional parallels demonstrate that welfare populism is not merely an economic policy but an enduring political strategy for sustaining hybrid regimes.

2.3 Welfare Populism and Electoral Behavior

Studies on Southeast Asian populism (Lewis, 2021; Bureekul, 2019) suggest that welfare policies foster transactional relationships between voters and elites. Beneficiaries perceive welfare as a political favor rather than a social right, reinforcing gratitude-based voting behavior. However, this dynamic also increases participation among previously marginalized groups, suggesting an ambivalent impact on democratic development.

In Thailand, empirical data from the National Statistical Office (2022) show that welfare card recipients constitute a major voting bloc, concentrated in rural and peri-urban provinces. Their dependence on welfare programs amplifies the political salience of redistribution, thereby shaping electoral narratives around compassion and national unity rather than ideology or policy debate.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative synthesis combining systematic literature review and comparative case analysis. Peer-reviewed articles from Scopus-indexed journals (2010-2025), government documents, and local research reports were reviewed using keywords such as "welfare populism," "Thailand," "political economy," "interest groups," and "elections." Data were analyzed thematically using Miles et al. (2014) to identify recurring patterns of populist policy logic.

Comparative cases from Indonesia and Malaysia provide a regional context. In Indonesia, Bantuan Langsung Tunai (BLT) was introduced to offset fuel subsidy cuts, illustrating welfare populism as crisis management. In Malaysia, BR1M (1Malaysia People's Aid) reinforced the incumbent party's support base. These cases contextualize Thailand's welfare populism as part of a regional "redistributive populism" trend that merges fiscal pragmatism with political control.

4. Results

4.1 Institutionalization of Welfare Populism

The State Welfare Card marks a shift from personalized populism to institutionalized populism. Managed by the Ministry of Finance and implemented through Krungthai Bank's digital systems, the program demonstrates bureaucratic populism's capacity to deliver targeted aid efficiently. Yet, this bureaucratization also insulates decision-making from public scrutiny, reducing citizen participation.

The program's sustainability depends on fiscal policy alignment and data integrity. Studies by the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI, 2023) warn that welfare populism may create long-term fiscal rigidity if not accompanied by productivity-enhancing reforms. Thus, institutionalized welfare must evolve into rights-based welfare, emphasizing empowerment rather than dependency. As noted by Rattanachote (2023), fiscal populism in Thailand demonstrates how welfare policy becomes an instrument for both redistributive justice and political consolidation, reflecting the dual role of economic and political governance.

4.2 Interest Group Mediation and Power Structures

Interest groups are central to Thailand's welfare governance ecosystem. Financial institutions, retailers, and local governments all benefit economically from program participation. Civil servants manage the database of recipients, while small enterprises gain from state-subsidized consumption. This creates a layered system of mutual dependence that embeds welfare populism into the national economy.

Simultaneously, political elites instrumentalize welfare policy for symbolic legitimacy. The welfare card serves as a visible manifestation of state benevolence, used strategically during election cycles to reinforce pro-government sentiment. Consequently, welfare populism sustains political order but limits deliberative democracy.

4.3 Electoral Dynamics and Digital Communication

Modern populism in Thailand increasingly relies on digital media to communicate welfare success stories. The state employs social platforms to promote transparency while reinforcing emotional narratives of gratitude. Such communication strategies personalize collective welfare, subtly associating benefits with specific political figures or institutions.

Empirical studies (Broadhurst et al., 2022) show that digitalized populism enhances efficiency but also deepens political polarization, as competing parties frame welfare narratives in moral terms "good governance" versus "vote buying." This moralization of welfare populism reveals its dual nature: developmental and divisive.

Saisuwan (2021) found that welfare populism in the 2019 election was strategically framed through emotional political communication, reinforcing the moral narrative of the state as a compassionate actor. This symbolic framing continues in subsequent welfare campaigns, including the State Welfare Card.

Policy Implications

Transforming welfare populism into sustainable development requires structural reform in five areas:

1. Participatory Welfare Governance Introduce citizen councils and civil society monitoring in welfare evaluation.
2. Fiscal Decentralization Allow local governments to design context-specific welfare interventions.
3. Productive Inclusion Link welfare transfers to job creation, local enterprise, and education.
4. Transparent Data Systems Promote interoperability and open access to welfare databases to prevent politicization.
5. Rights-based Welfare Legislation Codify welfare entitlements into law to protect them from electoral manipulation.

By institutionalizing these measures, Thailand can transform populist welfare into a foundation for inclusive and accountable governance. This aligns with Chanong's (2024) argument that fiscal decentralization enhances local welfare governance and accountability, ensuring that welfare populism contributes to inclusive development rather than centralized political control.

5. Conclusion

Welfare populism has fundamentally redefined Thailand's political economy, intertwining social protection with electoral competition. The State Welfare Card illustrates how redistributive policies can serve both developmental and political purposes. While it has alleviated poverty and expanded the state's legitimacy, it also risks entrenching dependence and reinforcing centralized authority.

Future welfare reform in Thailand must reconcile economic efficiency with political inclusivity. The transformation of welfare populism into a rights-based welfare state requires multi-level governance, fiscal sustainability, and civic participation. Comparative lessons from neighboring Southeast Asian countries confirm that when welfare populism is integrated with accountability and transparency, it can evolve into a genuine engine for democratic consolidation and social justice.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to express the deepest gratitude to the Language Institute, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, for providing academic language review and editorial support, which significantly contributed to the quality and completion of this research.

Sincere appreciation is also extended to Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University for the research grant and continuous institutional support, which made this study possible and successfully presented at the international academic conference.

References

- Benchakhan, K. (2025). Factors affecting the quality of life of the elderly in Ratchathewi District, Bangkok. In *Proceedings of the International Academic Multidisciplinary Research Conference Beijing 2025* (pp. 230–235). Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University.

- Birchall, S. J., Bonnett, N., & Kehler, S. (2023). The influence of governance structure on local resilience: Enabling and constraining factors for climate change adaptation in practice. *Urban Climate*, 46, 101348.
- Bureekul, T. (2019). Participatory politics and social welfare in Thailand. *King Prajadhipok's Institute Journal*, 17(2), 1–19.
- Chambers, P. (2013). Party politics and democratic decay in Thailand. *Asian Affairs*, 44(3), 389–406.
- Chanong, B. (2024). Local governance, fiscal decentralization, and political accountability in Thailand. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on Education, Business, Technology, and Social Sciences (ICEBTS 2024)* (pp. 150–159). Bangkok.
- Gidron, N., & Bonikowski, B. (2013). Varieties of populism: Literature review and research agenda. Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.
- Hicken, A. (2018). Clientelism and electoral politics in Southeast Asia. *World Politics*, 70(2), 188–230.
- Kuhonta, E. M. (2011). *The institutional imperative: The politics of equitable development in Southeast Asia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lewis, B. (2021). Populist welfare and electoral mobilization in Southeast Asia. *Pacific Affairs*, 94(4), 691–714.
- McCargo, D. (2020). *Fighting for virtue: Justice and politics in Thailand*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Pasuk, P., & Baker, C. (2009). *Thaksin*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Phongpaichit, P., & Baker, C. (2019). *Unequal Thailand: Aspects of income, wealth, and power*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Pongsudhirak, T. (2020). Populism and democratic backsliding in Thailand. *Asian Survey*, 60(6), 1085–1108.
- Rattanachote, S. (2023). Political economy of public policy and fiscal governance in Thailand. *Journal of Politics and Governance*, College of Innovation and Management, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University.
- Saisuwan, N. (2021). Political communication and the framing of welfare populism in Thailand's 2019 general election. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on Political Communication and Governance in Asia*. Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University.