Measuring Democratization in Thailand after Political Reform

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Abstract: Data on Thailand obtained at the time of parliamentary elections during 2001 and 2002, are examined to assess levels of commitment to democracy in the context of a theoretical framework of democratic consolidation. The analysis shows considerable progress being made – support for democracy is high and there is a high level of democratic participation. Trust in institutions is also high, even in the face of low levels of trust of fellow citizens. Our evaluation of Thai democracy indicates a society well on its way toward democratic consolidation to a degree that compares favorably with more established democracies throughout the world.

Concept of the Study

Celebration of the "era of democracy or the " third wave of democracy has become tempered by concerns over the ability of democracies to survive. Distinctions between "semi-democracies and "democracies - or even " polyarchies - have become less significant than their " consolidation or persistence (Diamond and Plattner, 2001). As with the concept of democracy, the concept of " consolidation is trenchantly debated. Linz and Stepan define a "consolidated democracy as one in which: 1) no national, social, economic, or institutional constituencies attempt to create a non-democratic regime or secede from the state; 2) a strong majority of public opinion believes that democratic institutions and procedures are the most appropriate way to

govern, even in the face of major economic problems or dissatisfaction with incumbents; 3) governmental and nongovernmental groups accept the control of laws, procedures, and institutions created through democratic processes (2001, 95). Such a minimalist concept is a base point to begin deeper explorations of democratic survivability at the end of the "third wave of democratic development.

Few emerging democracies offer a better laboratory for exploring democratic consolidation than Thailand. The political history of Thailand has been marked by alternating periods of autocratic government and control of the government by democratic institutions since the downfall of the absolute monarchy in 1932. By 1986, however, only slightly over six years could be characterized as truly democratic, that is, involving exercise by mass publics of the choice of electoral alternatives in a free and open competition of political parties (Chai-anan, 1990). The decade of the 1980s, however, was an evolution of democratic government in which Thai democracy appeared not only to sustain itself, but the instruments of democracy succeeded as governing agents. During this period, Thai political parties performed traditional party functions of interest articulation and aggregation, offered cues to voter choice, translated voter choices into governmental leadership, and provided the basis of government during a period unequaled in general prosperity for the nation and in enhanced quality of life for Thai citizens.

The evolution of democracy in Thailand has been so dramatic that even the most ardent proponents of Thailand as a " semidemocratic state, now admit, grudgingly, that "Thailand has been shifting incrementally away from semi-democracy toward democracy (Chai-anan, 1995, 340) and "By late 1992, Thailand 's government met our criteria for democracy in citizen participation, electoral competition, and civil liberties (Neher and Marlay, 1995, 49).

The radical transformation of the electoral system under the new constitution, however, brought about even more dramatic changes producing, for the first time, a majority party in charge of governing, and a new set of institutions designed to place elections and government beyond reach of corruption, fraud, and abuse of the voting process. The establishment of these truly democratic institutions and practices in Thailand, admittedly, has been a relatively recent phenomenon. There remains, then, room for an issue of the degree of "democratic consolidation (Linz and Stepan, 2001; O 'Donnell, 2001) in an evaluation of the status of democracy in Thailand.

As Linz and Stepan indicate, one of the most significant measures of democratic consolidation is the level of public opinion holding the belief that democracy is the most appropriate system for governing collective life (2001). This paper presents data from surveys of Thai respondents obtained at the time of parliamentary elections in 2001, and, virtually one year later, in 2002. Here, we provide an over-view of Thai political opinions based upon some of the first (if not the only) probability samples of political opinion in the Thai nation as to support for democracy among citizens of Thailand.

These opinions occur following major events in the Thai political process: 1) adoption of a new constitution that radically restructured the system of elections and other democratic institutions; and 2) creation of new institutions for democratic governance, such as the Constitutional Court, a national Election Commission, and a National Counter Corruption Commission - all independent of the government. The latter has power under the Constitution to charge, try, and remove from office public officials judged guilty of corruption. The National Election Commission has authority to declare specific district elections invalid and to hold new

elections in which a candidate may be disqualified for practices in violation of election laws.[1]

This new constitution and the institutions it has created represent a step-level shift in the movement toward full democracy in Thailand. It is not clear how these events may or may not have influenced opinions measured in this study.

This study also addresses a fundamental issue raised by at least two Thai scholars (Laothamatas, 1996; Pasuk and Baker, 2001), the strong cleavages that exist between Bangkok elites and orientations of the villages. According to this view, Thailand is a tale of two democracies - that of sophisticated urban elites (with origins or current status in Bangkok) and that of a rural, often isolated, parochial interest that views political activity, especially elections, as opportunities for personal or community benefit. This perspective is important because, historically, it has been the position taken by Bangkok elites that has determined the fate of democratic government in Thailand.

The difference between urban and rural constituencies (according to the elite "urban view) is that:

Voting in farming areas is not guided by political principles, policy issues, or

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[1]The National Election Commission invalidated 75 elections of the 200 districts in the March 2001 Senate election. Subsequently, repeated elections were invalidated until finally the last *changwat* (province) election was validated after the fifth election.

what is perceived to be in the national interest, all of which is (regarded as) the

only legitimate rationale for citizens casting their ballots in a democratic election.

The ideal candidate for rural voters are those who visit them often, address their

immediate grievances effectively, and bring numerous public works to their

communities. (Laothamatas, 1996, 202)

The ability of rural constituencies to acquire substantial power in parliaments under these

conditions often leads to doubts among the middle class, the mass media, and even academics as

to the efficacy of the democratic processes. For these groups, "democracy turns out to be the rule

of the corrupt and incompetent (Laothamatas, 1996, 208). This creates a dilemma, for although

the middle class opposes authoritarian rule, in principle, they hold rural constituencies in

contempt, regarding them as "parochial in outlook, boorish in manner, and too uneducated to be

competent lawmakers or cabinet members (Laothamatas, 1996, 208).

The problem is that urban, educated, cosmopolitan candidates, who are skilled policy

experts, are often held in equal contempt by villagers. They are often regarded as being alien to

rural electorates in terms of taste, culture, and outlook, who "fail to stay close to the voters in

both a physical and cultural sense (Laothamatas, 1996, 208). Veiled contempt for rural-dwellers

by sophisticated Bangkok elites posed no problem under authoritarian regimes. However, once

democratic elections tipped the balance in favor of rural areas, significant gaps in perceptions

and meanings of democracy developed.

These cleavages have, over the past decade, produced considerable political conflict that

only recently seems to be abating. The threat posed by this cleavage lies in the relative

enthusiasm for democracy and its ability to hinder democratic consolidation. There is growing

evidence that, while the middle class opposes authoritarian forms of government that restrict individual freedoms and exercise a heavy hand over commerce, the uncertainty of changes in government, even by democratic processes, can be viewed as destabilizing the economic environment on which entrepreneurs depend. The possibility that government may be seized by politicians with "populist agendas poses an even more direct threat to the interests of a class that stands significantly above the average voter in Thai elections. The traditional emphasis on the "middle class as an engine of democracy appears to be declining in favor of a view that middle-class support for democracy exists primarily when it coincides with class interests in curbing the power of government. This means that one cannot expect middle-class enthusiasm for democracy when it poses conflicts with private interests of the middle class. This latter view is expressed both by Laothamatas (1996), who argues that the 1991 coup could not have been sustained except for support from the middle class, and Chai-anan (1998), who notes that the role of the middle class in Thailand, vis-a-vis democracy, has been "reactive rather than proactive (156) and that its primary interest in democracy has been "to safeguard their own freedom and the freedom of the market (158).

Some studies (Albritton and Prabudhanitisarn, 1997; Albritton, et al., 1995) indicate that these differences between urban Bangkok and rural constituencies disappear when controlling for education. However, secondary analysis of data gathered by Logerfo (1996) indicates that, even controlling for education, significant differences between Bangkok and rural areas remain. More recent research (Albritton and Bureekul, 2001; Albritton and Bureekul, 2002) support the latter view. Respondents from Bangkok and rural areas differ markedly on a variety of indicators, such as support for democracy, criteria for choosing candidates in election, and

tolerance of corruption. The data in this study provide the basis for a re-examination of the fundamental cleavages between urban and rural dwellers in support for democracy and democratic values occurring after a year under a new government of the Thai Rak Thai Party.

Corruption is also a very common theme in Thai politics. Corruption in government is one of the excuses offered for the military to intervene, as it did in 1976, and 1990 to bring down democratically elected governments. Popular discourse, especially among the intelligentsia, supports the belief that political corruption is one of the dominant features of Thai politics.

The issue of experiences of corruption looms as a counter to the conventional discourse. A comprehensive study of corruption by Pasuk and a team of researchers, however, indicated that only roughly 20 percent of the population had actually experienced corruption, themselves. This paper also examines the experience of corruption among Thai respondents one year later. In this analysis we compare the personal experiences of corruption by geographic region, as well as the level of tolerance of corruption by respondents located in different regions of the nation.

Structure of the Research

The data for this analysis were obtained in a probability sample of eligible voters in the Thai nation during December 2000-January 2001.[2] The procedure was a three-stage probability sample stratified by *changwat* (province) to insure regional representation plus an over-sampling of Bangkok. There followed a systematic sampling process based upon clusters of voting units (precincts), followed by a systematic sampling of voters in the selected voting units. The results of this procedure yielded 16 *changwat*, from which came 1082 respondents. The data were then weighted by population.

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[2]Eligible voters include all Thai citizens 18 years of age and older.

The second survey was taken about one year later. It constitutes a probability sample based upon a random sample of legislative district, then a sample of 100 voting units from across the fifty legislative districts, then a random sample of 1500 individuals across the 100 voting units from a population of 54,894. (The "skip interval" produced a total sample of 1546.)

This process produced a probability sample of the Thai eligible electorate. It represents some of the few (if not the only) probability-based samples of the Thai population for political and social attitudes. Here, we present the data that characterize the Thai population across the kingdom in their attitudes toward democracy, indicating the level of attitudinal consolidation of democratic values among the Thai people and testing causal models that appear in the literature to represent the sources of support for democracy.

Support for Democracy

The sample includes a very high level of respondents expressing support for democratic processes and institutions. Table 1, shows that over 90 percent of the electorate is satisfied with democracy and the way it works in Thailand. In addition, 84.3 percent say that democracy is always preferable to authoritarian forms of government and over 90 percent indicate confidence in the ability of democracy to solve problems of the nation. Using a ten-point scale evaluating democracy in Thailand, less than 3 percent of the sample prefers alternatives to democratic

Table 1: Satisfaction with Democracy Among Thai Respondents, 2002 N=1546

How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in our country?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Not at all satisfied	16	1.0	1.1
Not very satisfied	128	8.3	8.4
Fairly satisfied	845	54.7	55.7

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Very satisfied	529	34.2	34.8
Missing	28	1.8	100.0
Total	1546	100.0	

Which of the following statements is closest to your opinion?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Under some circumstance authoritarian government is preferable	163	10.5	10.6
For people like me it does not matter	78	5.0	5.1
Democracy is always preferable	1295	83.8	84.3
Missing	10	.6	100.0
Total	1546	100.0	

Which of the following statements is closer to your own view?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Democracy cannot solve our problems	141	9.1	9.2
Democracy is capable of solving our problems	1388	89.8	90.8
Missing	17	1.1	100.0
Total	1546	100.0	

governance and less than seven percent indicate that democracy is unsuitable for Thailand today

(Table 2). In a superficial way, Thais are highly supportive of the "idea of democracy in

virtually every dimension.

**Table 2: Preference for Democracy over Authoritarian Government, 2002
N=1546**

How suitable is democracy for Thailand today?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Democracy is totally unsuitable	9	.6	.6
2	12	.8	.8
3	4	.3	.3
4	8	.5	.6
5	61	3.9	4.2
6	55	3.6	3.8
7	123	8.0	8.5
8	229	14.8	15.8
9	207	13.4	14.3
Democracy is perfectly suitable	740	47.9	51.1
Missing	98	6.3	100.0
Total	1546	100.0	

To what extent would you want our country to be democratic now?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Completely authoritarian	5	.3	.3
2	0	.0	.0
3	3	.2	.2
4	3	.2	.2
5	27	1.7	1.8
6	33	2.1	2.3
7	53	3.4	3.6
8	136	8.8	9.3
9	207	13.4	14.1
Completely democratic	999	64.6	68.1
Missing	80	5.1	100.0
Total	1546	100.0	

The fact that 39.3 percent of the sample rate the economy as bad or very bad and only

14.3 percent rate it as good or very good in this survey, implies that the high level of

commitment to democracy obtains in the midst of both objective and subjective economic

difficulties, thereby reinforcing the significance of the high level of democracy adherents.[3] But, in the face of such high levels of support for democracy, what does the concept of democracy mean in the context of Thai political society and culture?

One possibility is the distinction between subjective and objective indicators of democracy. The "ideology" of democracy has its roots in Thailand from the 1932 downfall of the absolute Thai monarchy. More recently, the period of democratic government 1973-76, reinforced democratic values in a way that has persisted since that time. It is possible, therefore, to hold highly democratic values even under authoritarian regimes and the commitment to democracy has been sustained in periods of both democratic and authoritarian rule. It was precisely this mass commitment to democracy that failed to sustain the military coup in 1991. Clearly, a military regime is no longer tolerated by a society with high commitments to democratic values.

Another possibility is that the meaning of democracy is quite different in Thailand from European and American meanings as a result of the difference between so-called "Asian values" that place a greater emphasis on communal orientations as opposed to individualistic ones. The expectation is that Thai respondents would express values that differ markedly from those of Europeans and Americans, if it were not for the fixed choice format of the questionnaire.

This latter issue is resolved here by focusing on a question designed to elicit respondent's own definition of democracy. The response to the question, "What comes to mind when you hear the word 'democracy'?" is open-ended, allowing the respondent to offer subjective meanings of

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[3]It is important to note that Thai optimism about the future is high. 53.1 percent of respondents believe that the economic situation of their family will be better in the near future; only 9.5 percent believe that it will be worse.

the term. If the responses to the question are more in terms of substantive democracy, especially if they involve economic or other egalitarian concepts, then the study of democracy in Thailand should pursue these meanings for a better understanding of how democracy differs substantially between the Euro-American and Asian contexts.[4]

Meanings of Democracy in Thailand

Only slightly over 70 percent of Thai respondents could formulate clear concepts of the meaning of "democracy" (Table 3). Only 25 percent were able to give a second response and about 7 percent, a third. Among those who responded, however, respondents' understandings of democracy do not appear to differ substantially from their European and American counterparts. Table 3 indicates that over 50 percent perceive democracy in terms of traditional values of liberal democracy. 38.2 percent of the sample gave responses such as "freedom of speech, press, expression," and another 15.1 percent gave responses indicating political equality – "one man one vote," "equality before the law." "Individualism" (11.9 percent) was a combination of values such as "respect for individual privacy," "self-reliance," "having one's own views," "independence." Most surprising was the low response rate in terms of traditional "Asian values" as commonly understood – good governance, social equality, or duties to society. Only one respondent mentioned "openness or government transparency," and no one mentioned "solving employment," "providing social welfare," or "finding someone a job." No one suggested freedom from corruption.

Table 3: Meaning of Democracy Offered by Thai Respondents in Open-ended

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4 It should be noted that the questions on the survey were prepared by Asians. The Thai portion of the study was administered by a Thai research institute. Although most of the researchers were trained in the United States, the Thai co-author of this paper was educated through the Ph.D. degree in Thai educational institutions.

Questions, 2002, N=1546 (Positive Responses to Question: *"When you hear the word 'Democracy' what first comes to mind?"*

Categories of Response	Percent Responding	Cumulative Percent
Freedom and Civil Liberties	38.2	38.2
Political Equality	15.2	53.4
Individualism	11.9	65.3
Equality, Justice, or Fraternity	7.7	73.0
Participation and Citizen Empowerment	7.2	80.2
Democratic Process	7.2	87.4
Generic Responses to Democracy	6.0	93.4
Participation and Citizen Empowerment	5.0	98.4
Duties	1.3	99.7
Good Governance	0.3	100.0

No substance in answer, DK, No response = Missing   29.7

An analysis even more sensitive to democratic orientations indicates a Thai public strongly supportive of democratic institutions. When asked about alternatives such as "replacing parliament with a strong leader, "abolishing opposition parties, "letting the military run things, or "having a nation governed by experts, respondents reject these alternatives by large margins (Table 4). Among these alternatives to an elected parliament, support for military governance is lowest, with over 80 percent rejecting this alternative.

**Table 4: Percent of Respondents Accepting Alternatives to Democracy, 2002
        N=1546**

	SA	A	D	SD	N
Opposition parties should be abolished	12.1	24.9	36.2	26.8	1527

	SA	A	D	SD	N
The military should come in to govern the country	5.8	13.1	31.1	50.0	1536
We should get rid of parliament and let experts decide everything	6.9	13.9	30.8	48.4	1527
We should replace parliament with a strong leader	6.7	15.7	32.9	44.7	1534

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

When attitudes toward civil liberties are examined, however, there is more ambiguity in the Thai population 's commitment to liberal democratic values. Table 5 shows that Thais are somewhat anxious about social instability. While still strongly supporting the concept of freedom of speech, diversity of political and social views appears threatening (75.8 percent) and nearly half the respondents (45.5) are not prepared to tolerate minority viewpoints.

This finding requires some interpretation. A key to understanding the Thai abhorrence of social conflict emerges in the questions concerning the effect of diverse political views and the threat to the harmony of the community posed by politically active groups. The high level of anti-libertarian support for both of these positions indicates a deeply held, but subtle, antipathy to conflict.

To the extent that political debate and challenge threaten societal harmony, Thais are averse to contentious discourse. The strongly held belief that "political leaders should tolerate views of challengers   (Table 5) may represent as much a distaste for political dissidence, as a support for alternative views. However, the strong level of support for free speech, despite its possible consequences, shows that Thais value civil liberties to a high degree.(Table 5).

Table 5: Support for Liberal Democracy, 2002   N=1546

	SA	A	D	SD
Diverse views will tend to make society chaotic	37.8	38.0	16.2	8.0
Free speech is not worth it if we have to put up with the danger to society of social disorder	9.9	15.4	37.9	36.8
We should not have to tolerate political views that are fundamentally different from those of the majority	15.1	30.4	36.7	17.9
Political leaders should tolerate views of challengers	57.8	35.4	4.7	2.0
Harmony of the community is threatened by organized groups	47.8	35.9	9.4	6.9

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

This study addresses the issue of support for democracy from a class perspective, as well as from the perspective of an urban-rural cleavage that marks Thai politics. Taken together, these issues represent some of the more pressing concerns for democracy in Thailand. Here, we present the empirical data that outline the variations in Thai society as they indicate the true political diversity of the Thai people.

Tables 6 and 7 provide support for Anek's hypothesis that Bangkok attitudes and values differ substantially from those of rural areas. In this case Bangkok shows the lowest level of support for democracy compared with the rest of Thailand. Analysis of variance indicates that

these distinctions are significant (P<.000). The data indicate that, contrary to much elite opinion,

democracy obtains lower levels of support from the metropole, while more rural areas, show

significantly higher levels of commitment to democracy. Bangkok residents are significantly

Table 6: Analysis of Variance in Support for Democracy by Location, 2001 N=1546

	Mean Score	N	SE	F-level	Sig. of F
Muang	28.1719	128	.2665	9.062	.000
Suburb	27.9919	248	.2230		
Rural	28.7599	883	.0987		
BKK Downtown	26.8939	66	.4775		
BKK Suburbs	27.5867	75	.0853		
Total	28.4193	1400			

lower in their support for democracy than other locations. "Downtown Bangkok, or the core

city, shows the lowest score on democratic support, while rural respondents show the highest

levels of support for democratic governance. When Bangkok (combining both "Downtown

Bangkok and suburban Bangkok) is compared with other areas, the results show even more

marked differences in levels of support for democracy (Table 7).

Table 7: Analysis of Variance in Support for Democracy: Bangkok Versus Non-Bangkok, 2001   N=1546

	Mean Score	N	SE	F-test	Sig. of F
Bangkok	27.2624	141	.3280	20.881	.000
Non-Bangkok	28.5488	1259	.0867		
Total	28.4193	1400	.0853		

Suchit Bungbongkarn (1996) has argued that people with higher levels of education are a) more cynical about politics, and b) therefore, less likely to participate in democratic processes, such as elections. His argument is based upon substantially lower voter turnouts in Bangkok than in the rest of the country. The argument, however, is an ecological one and the data of this study represent a possibility for testing this proposition on an individual level.

When OLS regression is used to estimate impacts of education and Bangkok residency on political participation, the results support Suchit's analysis. Also confirming the analysis of Logerfo's data noted above, however, Bangkok respondents are significantly less likely to participate in political activity, even controlling for education (Table 8). The results are virtually the same when support for democracy is analyzed by Bangkok residency controlling for socioeconomic status. Analysis shows that the higher the socioeconomic status, the lower the support for democracy (Table 9).

Table 8: Regression of Political Participation Scores on Education and Bangkok Location, 2001
N=1546

Dependent Variable: Political Participation

Independent Variables	Regression Coefficients	t-test	Sig. of t
Years of education	-.017	-3.086	.002
Bangkok	-.331	-4.389	.000

| (Constant) | 7.284 | 46.570 | .000 |

R=.156

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There are, still, independent effects of Bangkok residency that have negative impacts on support for democracy even controlling for socioeconomic status. The evidence consistently supports the view that democracy has less support from elites, especially Bangkok elites, than it does among the rural majorities in the Thai hinterland.

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Table 9: Impacts of Socioeconomic Status and Bangkok Location on Support for Democracy, 2001   N=1546

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Dependent Variable: Support for Democracy

Independent Variables	Regression Coefficients	t-test	Sig. of t
SES	-.301	-3.243	.001
Bangkok	-.896	-2.817	.005
(Constant)	26.739	43.649	.000

R=.143

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The Role of Civil Society in Political Participation and Trust

Organizational membership in Thai society is low. Only 39.1 percent of Thai respondents claim membership in any formal organization (Table 10). When informal associations in groups are the subject of discussion, only 13.5 percent claim to socialize with others in group activity (Table 10). The overwhelming proportion of formal memberships are accounted for by residential

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Table 10: Percent Claiming Formal and Informal Affiliations in Civil Society Associations

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	Percent Yes	**Percent No**
Formal Associations	39.1	60.9
Informal Associations	13.5	86.5

N=1546

associations (21.7) and agricultural associations (17.0) (Table 11). Trade association, labor

union, volunteer group, and citizen movement activity is negligible. Political memberships

appear among the lowest of the possible associations (Table 11). The profile of Thai citizens

represented by this indicator suggests that civil society in Thailand is relatively weak.

TABLE 11: Affiliations of Thai Respondents with Formal and Informal Groups Representing Civil Society.   N=1546

Formal Associations:	Percent Reporting Affiliation
Residential Associations	21.7
Agricultural Associations	17.0
Volunteer Groups	2.8
Religious Groups	2.7
PTAs	1.8
Political Parties	1.7
Alumni Associations	1.1
Sports or Leisure Club	1.0
Producer cooperatives	0.6
Citizen Movements (NGOs)	0.5
Trade Associations	0.5
Candidate Support Organizations	0.5
Labor Unions	0.3
Consumer Cooperatives	0.1
Informal Associations:	
Colleagues Who Interact Outside Work	3.5
Groups at Community Schools	2.3
Friends Who Exchange Information	2.3
Friends Who Do Business	2.1
Friends Who Share Hobbies	1.1
Informal Credit or Loan Associations	1.1

These data require a frame of reference in order to put them in perspective. Are these

levels of citizen participation in civil society associations low? Putnam cites General Social Survey and other studies indicating that membership in organizations in the United States declined to a little less than 70 percent by the early 1990s (2000: 59). By this comparison, civil society in Thailand is weak, indeed.

Associational memberships may be multiple, that is, some of the memberships in individual associations may be accounted for by respondents who are members of more than one association. The way to examine this possibility is by creating a score for each respondent, indicating the number of affiliations to which he or she belongs. Respondent scores on membership in all associations are summed and presented in Table 12.

TABLE 12: Scores on Civil Society Participation Among Thai Respondents: Numbers of Memberships Associated with Each Respondent   N=1546

	Frequency	Percent
Formal Groups:		
0	999	64.6
1	357	23.1
2	147	9.3
3	35	2.3
4	4	.3
5	4	.3
6	1	.1
7	2	.1
Informal Groups:		
0	1402	90.7
1	114	7.4
2	18	1.2
3	8	.5
4	3	.2
5	1	.1
Sum of Formal and Informal Groups:		
0	953	61.6
1	343	22.2
2	168	10.9
3	48	3.1
4	17	1.1
5	7	.5
6	4	.3
7	3	.2

| 8 | 2 | .1 |
| 10 | 1 | .1 |

This index of participation in civil society groups shows that only 12.3 percent of respondents have memberships in more than one formal group association and only 1.9 percent have affiliations with two or more informal groups. When memberships in both formal and informal groups are combined, the numbers improve (16.2 percent with more than one affiliation), but not by much. The conclusion is that very few Thais are members of more than one association, whether of informal or formal groups, and that most of these are members by virtue of residency or agricultural necessities.

The thesis of Putnam 's work is that social capital, in the form of civil society, provides some of the necessary underpinnings of democracy. He argues that voluntary associations are "schools of democracy and that participation in such associations provides the basis for involvement in political life (2000: 339). The logic of his argument leads to a hypothesis that people who are associated with voluntary organizations are more likely to have the skills and interest to participate in politics and that civil society leads to participation in political society.

The data of this study permit testing of this hypothesis. We construct a measure of political participation by summing responses to seven questions: Did the respondent vote in recent Senate and Parliamentary elections (2 questions), and whether they engaged in three other specific activities. The other two questions indicate whether respondents are interested in politics and how often they follow news about politics.

When this measure of political participation is regressed on scores of membership in both formal and informal groups, the results show a significant level of association (Table 13). The broad affirmation of membership in groups in general has a stronger correlation with the political participation index than the measure constructed from summing the individual associations. In both cases, however, it is membership in formal organizations that appears to produce higher

levels of political participation. Informal associations (that could include bowling activities) have negligible impacts on political activity.

Table 13: Effects of Civil Society Participation on Individual Political Participation

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	Regression Coefficient	**t-test**	**Sig. of t**	**R**	**N**
General Group Association	.431	8.961	.000	.23	1467
Total Formal and Informal Group Associations	.208	6.857	.000	.18	1467
Formal Group Associations	.276	7.279	.000	.19	1467
Informal Associations	.192	2.532	.011	.07	1467

Previous studies of the Thai electorate (Albritton and Bureekul, 2002) indicate that the strongest explanation of political participation is respondent's sense of political efficacy. Table 14 represents an effort to improve the explanation of political participation by adding a summed indicator of political efficacy to the equation. In addition, the equation includes the measure of rural-urban location noted previously.

The results show considerable improvement in the explanation of political involvement when these variables are added to the equation. Political efficacy, as expected, is the stronger of the three variables, but not by much. Membership in associations is also a highly significant predictor of political participation and the rural-urban indicator is not far behind. The high levels of statistical significance indicate that these effects are largely independent of each other. The strength of political efficacy confirms findings of previous studies showing that it represents a consistent and highly significant behavioral explanation of political participation. The analysis also indicates strong, positive impacts of participation in civil society on political participation. Finally, civil society participation is related to the urban-rural locations of respondents in Thailand. This latter finding is consistent with earlier evidence that the urban-rural cleavages,

while related to SES, are stronger in their ability to explain Thai political behavior (Albritton and Bureekul, 2002). The sum of the studies suggests that, in Thailand, there are effects of urbanization that influence political behavior independently of socioeconomic status. The data in this study also offer suggestions as to what those independent effects might be and their origins. This latter topic will be treated below in the analysis.

Table 14: Political Participation as a Function of Participation in Civil Society, Rural-Urban Location, and Political Efficacy   N=1467

	Regression Coefficient	Beta	t-test	Sig. of t
Civil Society Participation	.307	.162	6.14	.000
Political Efficacy	.096	.169	6.74	.000
Urban-Rural Location	-.167	-.143	-5.41	.000
R = .315				

This study also examines the impact of participation in civil society associations on attitudes toward institutions of government and society. If civil society is seen as a source of confrontational politics or "radical democracy,   participation in these associations should produce negative feelings toward government institutions, especially the extent to which respondents trust these institutions.

In fact, trust in Thai political institutions is quite high (Table 15). Respondents express a high level of trust in two of the new institutions created by the current constitution, the Constitutional Court and the Counter-Corruption Commission (Table 15). The levels of trust are so high that those who express low levels of trust may be attributed to a cynical minority, present in every society. The third institution created by the constitution, the Electoral Commission, also receives a high level of trust, but suffers, probably, from controversies associated with rulings in

the Senate election, requiring as many as five waves of re-elections in some provinces.

Association of this latter institution, the ECT, with Thai electoral politics probably tarnishes

Table 15: Trust in Social and Political Institutions (In Percent of Valid percent), 2001
N=1546

How much trust do you have in each of the following institutions?

	A great deal	Quite a lot	Not much	None at all
The Courts	24.4	49.0	23.9	2.7
National Government	18.0	51.1	28.6	2.3
Political Parties	11.5	40.2	42.1	6.3
Parliament	14.3	46.3	34.0	5.5
Civil Service	17.7	51.6	26.2	4.5
The Military	29.6	50.4	17.4	2.6
The Police	16.6	42.0	33.9	7.5
Local Government	21.3	46.8	26.3	5.6
Newspapers	11.6	44.1	39.5	4.8
Television	22.8	56.7	19.1	1.4
The Election Commission	20.2	49.8	26.0	4.0
NGOs	12.9	46.8	33.0	7.2
Local Mps	17.0	45.5	30.8	6.7
Constitutional Court	33.5	48.3	15.2	3.0
Counter-Corruption Commission	31.5	48.3	17.7	2.5

its reputation because of Thai aversions to contention and conflict. Even so, the Electoral

Commission receives substantial trust from 70 percent of the population, implying that these

basic, constitutional institutions command substantial confidence and respect among Thai

citizens.

It is important to note that these high levels of trust in Thai institutions are associated

with very low levels of trust in fellow Thai citizens. When asked to choose between statements

"most people can be trusted" and "you cannot be too careful in dealing with them," 82.3 percent

chose the latter. Trust in political institutions is largely unrelated to general levels of trust in

society as a whole.

Table 16 presents these associations in an ANOVA analysis that indicate relationships

between participation in civil society and levels of trust in major institutions of government and

society. It provides significant support for a conclusion that participation in civil society in

TABLE 16: Associations Between Civil Society Association and Trust in Political and Social Institutions

	r	F-test	Sig. of F
The Courts	.04	1.938	.164
The National Government	.05	3.162	.076
Political Parties	.11	17.716	.000
Parliament	.01	.097	.756
Civil Service	.05	3.623	.057
The Military	.07	7.739	.005
The Police	.01	.194	.660
Local Government	.13	24.470	.000
The Election Commission	.07	5.793	.016
NGOs	.07	4.625	.032
Local MPs	.13	21.795	.000
The Constitutional Court	.06	3.855	.050
The Counter-Corruption Com.	.01	.174	.677
Newspapers	-.06	5.107	.024
Television	.02	.485	.486
Trust people in government	.07	7.825	.005
Overall level of trust	.10	8.289	.004

Thailand contributes to the inculcation of trust in political and social institutions. Not only is the

indicator of participation in civil society organizations associated with the overall level of trust

and trust in officials in social and political institutions, such participation is associated with

positive levels of trust, especially in political parties, the military, local government, and local

MPs. To a somewhat lesser degree, participation in civil society is associated with trust in the

national government, the election commission, NGOs, the Civil Service, and the Constitutional

Commission. One irony is that participation in civil society is negatively associated with trust in newspapers. Far from being a stimulus of confrontational politics, civil society in Thailand appears to be reinforcing of allegiances to the most important political and social institutions of the nation.

Participation in civil society is associated, in a bivariate relationship, with age and SES. Older people are more likely to be involved in civil society movements than younger people and people of lower SES are more likely to be involved in civil society than upper status people. Both findings are somewhat counter to a conventional discourse that envisions civil society groups as largely confrontational in nature. The finding that civil society associations are associated more with older society, however, accords with Putnam's basic argument that the virtues of civil society associations are declining increasingly among the young. The finding that upper-status people are lower in civil society associations is most likely a result of their urban locations. In fact, SES and rural-urban location are so highly correlated (r=.525) that the two variables do not survive in the same equation predicting participation in civil society. (Rural-urban is the stronger of the two.) The configuration of civil society in the Thai case, then, is composed of older, lower status people, primarily from rural areas.

The picture of the sources of civil society participation becomes somewhat clearer in a multiple-variable equation (Table 17). The equation shows that participation in civil society is largely a function of people who are older, who hold more traditional values, and who live in rural areas. This is not the picture of civil society led by radical social activists current in popular images of the struggle for democracy. The portrait that emerges is one of a highly domesticated civil society with lower levels of involvement of the young, the modernistic, or the urban dwellers.

TABLE 9: Sources of Support for Participation in Civil Society   N= 1495

Variables	Regression Coefficients	Betas	t-test	Sig. of t
Urban Location	-.202	-.325	-13.25	.000
Age	.004	.079	3.23	.001
Traditionalism	.012	.078	3.14	.002
R = .336	F = 64.21			

Conclusion

The data obtained for this study show a relatively high level of attitudinal support for democracy. Thais appear persuaded that democracy is not only the best of all alternative forms of government, but that democratic institutions and processes can be trusted to solve the problems of the nation. Furthermore, the meanings they ascribe to democracy are consistent with liberal democratic views in European and American contexts. When Thais are faced with a choice, they do not perceive autocratic government of any type as a solution to the aspirations and expectations of Thai citizens.

When the concept of democracy is extended to the criteria of "liberal democracy, the results are slightly less positive. The aversion of Thais to conflict, including political conflict, appears to produce a preference for curbs on freedoms of expression, if those expressions jeopardize the tranquility of the social order. When the threat of social conflict is absent from the question, respondents reject the view that political leaders should not compromise with the opposition and indicate that they should tolerate the views of challengers. Despite evidence of socially disruptive actions by "social activist groups, this cross-section of the Thai population appears to hold conflict-avoidance as a major criterion in evaluating institutions and practices in the developing democracy.

The relatively high levels of trust in the military, the police, and the civil service appear consistent with nations that experience relatively high levels of insecurity from natural forces, as well as physical threat from within society. These attitudes characterize rural societies in which

populations rely on institutions of social control to maintain an orderly society. These particular institutions have historic importance in Thai society, especially the civil service. Throughout Thai history, dictatorship and democracy, the civil service has been the one constant in a "bureaucratic polity" (Riggs,

The attitudes and orientations to democracy observed in this study are fully consistent with a consolidating democracy. As we attempt to interpret the data, however, two issues arise to confound confident interpretations. The first is a need for comparative perspectives. When we note levels of support for democracy or democratic institutions of Thailand, any ability to generalize from the data calls for some basis of comparison. For example, compared to other institutions, trust in political parties appears to be low. By comparison with other nations, however, these same values may be quite high. Our hope is that in the final collation of individual country studies, the levels of trust and confidence in democracy and its institutions will become clearer.

A second important dimension in evaluating the data occurs from the static nature of the data obtained here. The more fundamental issue of whether confidence in democracy is increasing or ebbing requires future survey measures for which the current analysis can only be a baseline.[5] Our efforts to evaluate the status of Thai democracy at this time, however, indicate a society well on its way to democratic consolidation to a degree that compares favorably with more established democracies throughout the world.

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[5]Fortunately, we have two additional surveys from early 2001 and early 2000 that tend to support the picture painted here. Unfortunately, these surveys are not identical in some of the important questions asked. See Albritton and Bureekul, 2001; Albritton and Bureekul, 2002.

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