# THE FUTURE FORWARD PARTY:
# A CASE STUDY OF POPULISM IN DIGITAL ERA
# WITH COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES
# FROM THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT

BY

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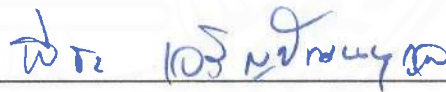
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# ABSTRACT

This research investigates the populist elements within the Future Forward Party (FFP) of Thailand by examining its rise amidst the political, economic, and social milieu post the 2014 coup, leading up to the 2019 general election year. The study delves into the FFP's political discourses and proposed policies, analyzing their resonance with populist attributes and assessing how they optimized to the demands of a society yearning for change.

Moreover, the research extends into a comparative analysis between the FFP and Italy's Five Star Movement (FSM), offering a broader perspective on populism's digital manifestations. It investigates how both parties harness digital platforms to engage with supporters, emphasizing the role of technology in modern political movements. This comparison sheds light on each party's distinct approach to utilizing digital tools for political communication, mobilization, and policy-making, reflecting their respective political contexts and ambitions.

The research has shown that the FFP responded to Thailand's political, economic, and social dynamics from 2014 to 2019, portraying the FFP as a leader of change driven by a desire for democratic reforms, socio-economic equity, and

inclusivity, particularly resonating with Thailand's youth and the people who were not satisfied with the existing structure. The study explores the FFP's populist orientation, highlighting its rhetoric against elite dominance and its commitment to direct democracy and public engagement, positioning it within the populist spectrum while maintaining a liberal democratic core. Additionally, a comparative analysis with the FSM delves into the use of digital platforms in political processes, contrasting the FFP's focus on transparency and incremental reform with the FSM's more radical direct democracy approach. This juxtaposition underscores the potential of digital tools in reshaping political engagement, offering insights into the evolving landscape of political participation and the significance of digital strategies in enhancing democratic governance and citizen involvement.

**Keywords:** Future Forward Party, Five Star Movement, Populism, Thailand's Political dynamics, Digital platforms, Direct democracy and public engagement

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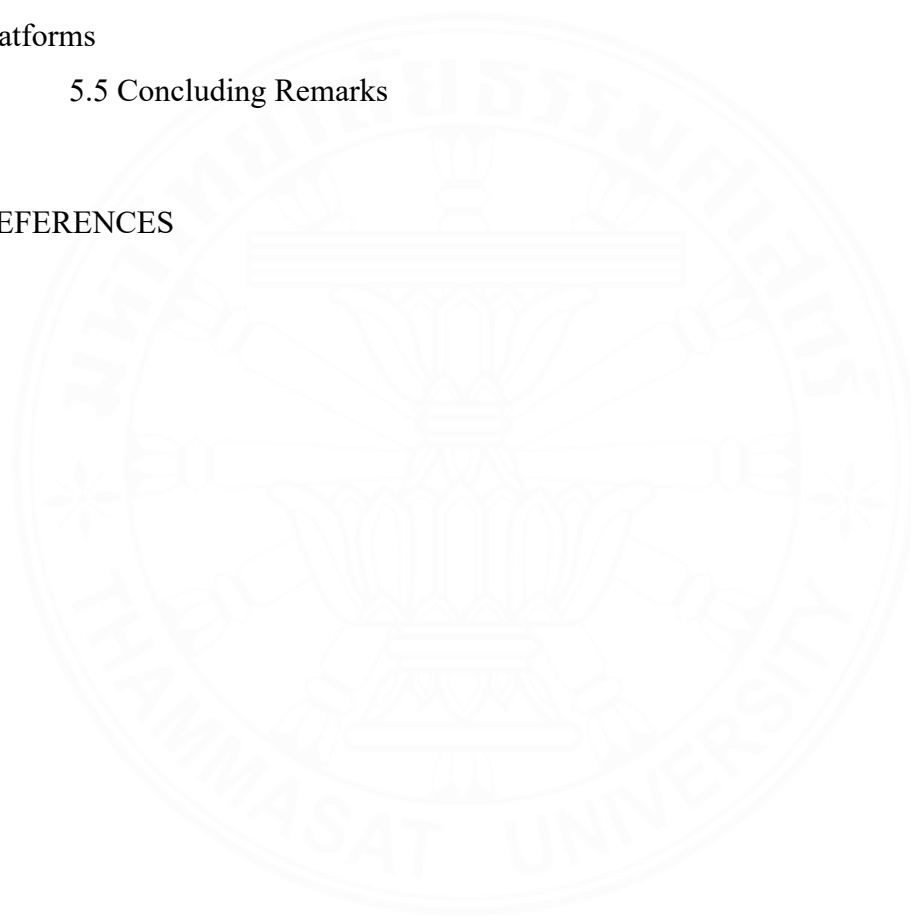
Santiphong Thongchapo

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| Symbols/Abbreviations | Terms |
|---|---|
| FFP | Future Forward Party |
| FSM | Five Star Movement |

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background and Significance of the Study

Populism has long played a pivotal role in Thai politics, most notably, during Thaksin Shinawatra's tenure from 2001 to 2006. Despite a broad academic debate without a unified definition, populism is often associated with anti-establishment sentiments (Müller, 2016). While populism is typically viewed with skepticism due to its negative implications, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) highlight its potential to rejuvenate political spaces, fostering engagement and spotlighting marginalized or ignored issues. However, they also caution against the dangers of populism, especially in its extreme forms, where it threatens democratic foundations by undermining institutional checks and balances and promoting majority rule at the expense of minority rights.

More recently, in the fluctuating arena of Thai politics, the Future Forward Party (FFP) gathered remarkable attention by emerging as the third-largest political force in the 2019 election, highlighting a compelling narrative of new political ideologies rooted in confronting systemic injustices. The FFP, enshrining an "anti-establishment" ideology, mounted formidable opposition against monopoly capitalism, authoritarian military leadership, and a centralized bureaucratic state, which were perceived as continual propagators of structural injustices (McCargo & Chattharakul, 2020).

The efficacy of the FFP's political discourses and policies hinges notably upon the confluence of political, economic, and social conditions that permeated Thai society prior to the 2019 national election. The political terrain, especially post-2014 coup against Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, coupled with a precarious economic stability and detectable societal skepticism towards the genuineness of Prayuth's coup, appeared to furnish a fertile ground that facilitated the thriving of the FFP's popularity, particularly amongst the youth and first-time voters.

While it has been asserted that the FFP inherently displays discernible facets of populism through its political discourses and policy outlines, a thorough examination to determine whether the FFP can genuinely be classified as a populist

party is requisite. If this is the case, identifying its particular populist features demands additional academic exploration. This involves a deep dive into how the FFP, with its profound anti-establishment tendency, navigated and found resonance amidst Thailand's existing conditions prior to the 2019 election, and how it tailored its discourses and policies to leverage these conditions effectively.

To enhance the analysis, it is notable that one of the prime traits of any populist movement includes the tendency towards more direct participation of the people. Particularly, in this contemporary context, the FFP emphasizes online participation as a key policy to reach a broader audience. To gain a deeper understanding of potential the FFP's digital-centric populism, it is instructive to draw comparisons with the Five Star Movement (FSM) in Italy, recognized as a notably successful anti-establishment entity in Europe. Initiated in 2009 by the comedian Beppe Grillo and web strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio, there are evident similarities between the two, especially in their early positioning as alternatives to the existing political framework and their use of online platforms to actively engage with the population.

On the one hand, the FFP has shown how digital media can be instrumental in political campaigning and fostering online civic engagement. This is exemplified by their Open Government Initiative, which provides a transparent window into the activities of Members of Parliament, showcasing data on their performance, attendance, and voting behaviors, and even enabling citizens to submit complaints and follow up on public administrative issues. On the other hand, the FSM's evolution from a blog to becoming Italy's largest parliamentary faction after the 2018 elections represents a remarkable political journey. Its Rousseau platform—named after the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau—embodies this digital approach, enabling member participation in decision-making processes and epitomizing a tech-driven direct democracy (Giacomini, 2022). Critically, when analyzing their online platforms, the FSM's Rousseau stands out for its comprehensive engagement features, allowing members to actively contribute to law-making and crucial party decisions. This approach showcases an advanced application of direct democracy, moving beyond conventional political frameworks. In contrast, the FFP's digital strategy, though innovative, adopts a more tempered approach to direct democracy. This juxtaposition is vital for understanding the distinct operational and ideological elements of each party's digital engagement,

offering insights into the FFP's use of technology to connect with and mobilize its supporters.

The potential populist nature of the FFP encourages deeper academic investigation due to its unique position in Thai politics. Understanding whether and how the FFP could be potentially classified as a populist entity is significant for several reasons. First, it provides insights into the evolving nature of populism in a digital age, especially in a context like Thailand where political dynamics are rapidly changing. Second, analyzing the party's trajectory could offer valuable lessons on how new political movements can influence established political landscapes and respond to public demands for justice and equality. Third, by examining the party's potential for populism, researchers can contribute to broader discussions about the role of populism in democracy, particularly how it can elevate political participation. Lastly, this research could serve as a comparative framework to understand global populist trends, especially in how digital platforms influence modern populism as both the FFP and FSM have successfully harnessed digital platforms to drive political transformation, signifying a broader global trend in the political domain. Although the FFP's tenure was brief, its impact on Thai politics persists, showcasing digital media's potency in campaigning and facilitating political online interactions.

## 1.2 Objectives of Study

1. To explore the Future Forward Party's political discourses as well as proposed policies and examine the connections between these discourses and policies and Thailand's situation post-2014 coup up to the 2019 general election, using a populism framework.
2. To analyze the Future Forward Party's online strategy via its interactive platforms within the Open Government Initiative, in comparison to the Five Star Movement's Rousseau platform.

## 1.3 Research Questions

1. In what manner do the key political discourses and proposed policies of the Future Forward Party reflect the political, economic, and social conditions of Thailand from 2014 to 2019?

2. Based on its political discourses and policies leading up to the national election year in 2019, how can the Future Forward Party be classified within the spectrum of populist parties?

3. What are the similarities and differences in a comparison of the Future Forward Party and the Five Star Movement as digital parties?

## 1.4 Research Methodology

A qualitative method approach will be used to analyze data from both primary sources and secondary sources.

In order to answer the questions **(1) In what manner do the key political discourses and proposed policies of the Future Forward Party reflect the political, economic, and social conditions of Thailand from 2014 to 2019?** and **(2) Based on its political discourses and proposed policies, how can the Future Forward Party be classified within the spectrum of populist parties?** The analysis on both the demand side, the underlying forces shaping public perspectives and beliefs, and the supply side, the strategies used by the FFP to craft and convey their narratives to address unmet demand of the people.

### 1.4.1 Analysis on the demand side of populism

This study will employ the "bottom-up" framework as detailed by Eatwell & Goodwin (2018). The "demand side" will be investigated. This will be segmented into four primary areas: Distrust, Destruction, Deprivation, and De-alignment.

#### 1.4.1.1 (Elite) Distrust

This section will explore into the potential roots of mistrust which could shape populist narratives within governmental and political frameworks. The analysis will be grounded in findings from academic journals, research papers, and trustworthy news sources.

### 1.4.1.2 Economic disparities: Destruction and deprivation

Given the intertwined nature of the concepts of Destruction and Deprivation, they will be examined concurrently. The focus will be on Thailand's economic landscape from 2014 to 2019, utilizing academic studies and economic reports from reputable entities like the World Bank and the National Economic and Social Development Council of Thailand. Emphasis will be placed on indicators showcasing unequal economic opportunities, exploring them from the angle of relative deprivation.

### 1.4.1.3 (Political) De-alignment

This segment will explore research concerning the waning and fluctuating allegiance to traditional political factions and declining loyalty in traditional political parties will be studied.

### 1.4.2 Analysis on the supply side of populism

Utilizing the theoretical framework outlined by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), the supply side will be investigated. Their model presents society as divided into two inherently opposing groups: the morally upright populace and the corrupt elite, asserting that political actions should resonate with the "volonté Générale" (general will) of the citizens.

The study will analyze the political narratives and policies proposed by the FFP, drawing from their official platforms such as their website and YouTube Channel. This primary data will be supplemented by insights from secondary sources, like academic studies, to comprehensively understand how the FFP formulates "the people" from "the elites" and underscores the expression of the general will of the people. Furthermore, interviews and speeches by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the leader of the FFP, will also be examined to identify correlations and consistency with the content presented on their official platforms.

Additionally, the three-dimensional framework of populism— material, symbolic, and political—as proposed by Filc (2010), will serve as a foundation for categorizing the position of the FFP within the populism spectrum and whether it tends to lean towards inclusionary or exclusionary stance.

### 1.4.3 Analysis on the host ideology of populism

Populism can manifest in different democratic contexts. However, its core ideological principles often align with broader ideologies. As noted by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), understanding the coexistence of populism and other primary ideologies within the FFP requires examining political discourse, policy proposals, and relevant academic studies.

### 1.4.4 Analysis on underlying ideologies and the application of the online interactive platforms of the Future Forward Party and the Five Star Movement

The FSM has been chosen for an in-depth comparative analysis with the FFP for several compelling reasons. Firstly, both the FFP and FSM arose during periods of significant public skepticism towards their respective political establishments, which profoundly shaped their political strategies. Additionally, each party has gained substantial support from younger demographics, utilizing online platforms extensively to communicate their messages and mobilize support. Despite these surface-level similarities, the unique societal contexts of Thailand and Italy offer a rich backdrop for examining the distinct ways in which each party's digital platforms were developed and utilized.

In terms of their respective online platforms, the advanced and notable Rousseau platform of the FSM stands out for its depth and breadth in enabling members to actively participate in law-making and pivotal party decisions, thereby embodying a forward-thinking approach to bypassing traditional political intermediaries. The ambitious implementation of direct democracy by the Rousseau platform contrasts with the FFP's approach, which, though also innovative, is seen as more moderate in its application of direct democracy principles. Therefore, this comparison is crucial to uncover the operational and ideological nuances between the two, providing a deeper understanding of how the FFP leverages digital platforms to engage with and empower their constituents.

The study will engage in a detailed examination of underlying ideologies and the application of the online interactive platforms of both parties. Specifically, the application will be analyzed through the Fuller Democracy framework, an all-encompassing framework for participatory governance. This model empowers

citizens to actively engage in all facets of the political discourse, ensuring their voices are central from inception to conclusion of the political process. The foremost aim of this democratic approach is to dismantle any monopolistic control by the elite over political decision-making along with the contributions of other scholars in the field to answer the question **(3) What are the similarities and differences in a comparison of the Future Forward Party and the Five Star Movement as digital parties?** by pinpointing the similarities and differences in their online outreach strategies.

The analysis will be conducted using secondary sources which are academic studies and research concentrated on two main areas: the ideologies underpinning the digital platforms of both the FFP and the FSM, and the operational features of these platforms.

## 1.5 Scopes of the Study

This study will focus on two main areas. The first area involves analyzing the political discourses of the FFP, as presented on their official website, YouTube channel, and in interviews with Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the party leader, from its founding year in 2018 to the national election year in 2019. This analysis aims to uncover how the political landscape in Thailand, especially during the Prayuth government from 2014 to 2019, may have fostered an environment conducive to the emergence of a populist party like the FFP.

The second area of focus will be a thorough investigation into the FFP's implementation of direct democracy, with a special emphasis on the Open Government Initiative and its online engagement platforms. The study will compare these aspects of the FFP with the FSM's Rousseau platform to understand how the FFP's approach to digital democracy compares with that of the FSM. This comparative study will help highlight the role of these digital platforms in promoting direct democracy and engaging with the public, reflecting the FFP's and FSM's adoption of digital tools to further their populist agendas.

**1.6 Structure of the Study**

Chapter 2 will provide a literature review to establish the foundational concepts for the study, which include populism and digital democracy. The chapter will then delve into the era of Thaksin Shinawatra, often characterized as a populist leader in Thai politics. This will be followed by an examination of Prayuth leadership from 2014 to 2019. Additionally, the chapter will explore literature related to the FFP and the FSM, positioning them within the broader context of the study's themes.

Chapter 3 will analyze both the demand side, the underlying forces shaping public perspectives and beliefs primarily during Prayuth leadership from 2014 to 2019, and the supply side, the strategies used by the FFP to craft and convey their narratives to the unmet demand of the people from its founding year in 2018 to the national election year in 2019.

Chapter 4 conducts a comparative analysis of the FFP's embrace of direct democracy, examining the Open Government Initiative and its online interaction platforms in relation to the FSM's Rousseau platform, a trailblazing digital platform that played a significant role in the FSM's initial parliamentary activities.

Chapter 5 will revisit the analysis presented in Chapter 3, highlighting the interplay between the demand forces shaping public sentiment during the Prayuth era and the FFP's strategic narrative construction. Additionally, it will reflect on the comparative analysis conducted in Chapter 4 between the FFP's and FSM's approaches to direct democracy and digital engagement. The limitations of the study will also be addressed. Finally, the conclusion will address the study's implications and suggest potential areas for future research.

# CHAPTER 2
# REVIEW OF LITERATURE

## 2.1 Political Concepts

### 2.1.1 Populism concept

The populism concept has been variously shaped by different scholars. Nonetheless, there is no consensus on how the concept should be theorized. In order to comprehensively understand the populism concept, different suggested narratives of populism concept are to be laid out.

Nadia Urbinati (2018), in her article "*Political Theory of Populism,*" traces the roots of populism back to the democratization processes in the nineteenth century. Populism, not a modern novelty, emerged both as an intellectual vision and a political movement, with its initial instances recorded in Russia and the United States. These initial movements, different in their origins and nature, were nevertheless unified by a common thread: an ideology opposing industrialization and corporate capitalism, and idealizing a communitarian, agrarian society. Various manifestations of populism throughout history and across geographies—from the United States and Canada to Latin American nations and Western Europe—reveal its adaptability and its capability to function within various political structures, from democracies to dictatorships.

Populism has often been considered an ambiguous concept, fundamentally revolved around anti-establishment sentiments. Müller (2016), in *"What is populism?",* defines it by contrasting a morally pure people against a morally inferior elite, identifying an intrinsic link between populism and anti-pluralism. While such definition encapsulates the essence of exclusive populist narratives, it is somewhat criticized as a narrow definition as it avoids variations of "leftist populism" or "inclusive populism", which broadens democracy's scope by incorporating previously excluded social groups.

Comparative studies of populism have employed various analytical dimensions to differentiate between its types. Citing the work of Dani Filc (2010), particularly "*The Political Right in Israel: Different Faces of Jewish Populism,*" three dimensions to distinguish populism types are articulated: material, political, and

symbolic. The material dimension focuses on state resource distribution, with exclusionary populism emphasizing targeted state resources allocation to specific groups and inclusionary populism often perpetuating welfare chauvinism. Politically, inclusionary populism aims to amplify the voices of neglected groups, while its exclusionary counterpart restricts certain groups from participating in the democratic process. Symbolically, the dimension entails defining "the people" and "the elites," where the rhetoric and symbols either inclusively or exclusively define particular groups.

It is perceivable that populism, whether positioned as a guardian of the oppressed or a perilous simplification of democracy, invariably commands a significant influence on political dynamics across varied socio-political landscapes. The dialogue thus continues, exploring its multifaceted expressions and implications on democratic structures.

An essential reading material for a student exploring populism is "*Populism: A Very Short Introduction*" by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017). The book is an attempt to describe the form and dynamics of populism as a global phenomenon. The authors adeptly investigate the complexities, navigating through the concept's varied forms, origins, and impact across diverse political landscapes.

Central to the narrative is the presentation of populism as an ideology that divides society into two intrinsically antagonistic entities: the morally righteous people and the corrupt elite, arguing that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people. Furthermore, they illustrate that populism can manifest in diverse forms, intertwining with various ideological strands (e.g., socialism, nationalism) and can be observed across both the right-wing and left-wing political spectrum.

Additionally, the book also explores the interplay with Democracy, to begin with the Populism and Democratic Tensions, the authors showcase the paradoxical relationship between populism and democracy, where populism can simultaneously champion democratic ideals by advocating for political inclusivity, while also potentially eroding democratic structures through authoritarian tendencies. Followed by Inclusion and Exclusion, illuminating how populist movements can

empower marginalized voices while potentially marginalizing others, particularly those deemed as "others" or "elites" by populist narratives.

Equally compelling is the book's examination of populism's dual-faced implications. On one end, Mudde and Kaltwasser acknowledge the potential of populist movements to rejuvenate political spaces, fostering engagement and spotlighting marginalized or ignored issues. On the other, they cast light on the perils, outlining how populism, particularly in its radical forms, poses threats to democratic structures, potentially destabilizing institutional checks and balances and marginalizing minority voices in favor of an unbridled majoritarianism.

In essence, Mudde and Kaltwasser have crafted a work that stands out for its analytical depth, offering a foundational base from which to explore and understand the diverse trajectories of populist movements across the global stage.

A more recent development of populism has been studied in "*National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy,*" authors Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin (2018)**.** An explorative journey to explain the rise of national populism across the Western world. Eatwell and Goodwin strategically dismantle typical generalizations about national populism, pinpointing its deep-seated roots within the socio-political landscapes of Western democracies.

A crucial framework introduced by the authors to understand national populism pivots around the four D's: Distrust, Destruction, Deprivation, and De-alignment. Firstly, Distrust of elites, identifying a pervasive skepticism towards the political elite, they observe a widespread sentiment that these figures are increasingly disconnected from the populace. Secondly, Destruction, it is comprehensively explored in relation to both economic and cultural contexts. It involves an erosion of previous societal structures and norms, be it through economic disparities, unemployment, or the dissolution of cultural homogeneity. This destruction nurtures a collective fear and anxiety, stimulating desires for stability and a reversion to perceived "better times." National populists appeal to these sentiments by advocating for the restoration of lost structures and norms. Thirdly, (relative) Deprivation, while absolute living standards may have improved, the authors note that feelings of deprivation emerge from relative comparisons, where certain demographic groups perceive themselves as being left behind economically and culturally. This perceived deprivation, fueled by inequalities

and unmet expectations, is leveraged by national populists, who present themselves as champions against an unjust system, promising to recalibrate the scales of socio-economic justice. Last but not least, De-alignment focuses on the diminishing loyalty of voters towards traditional political parties. The authors illustrate that this disconnect is not merely a reflection of political apathy but can be attributed to the perceived failure of established parties to represent the people's interests adequately. National populists navigate through this de-alignment, providing alternative platforms that seemingly align more closely with the disillusioned voters' values and concerns, thus reshaping the political allegiance landscape.

Interestingly, much of their focus has been on the key "bottom-up" trends, or what scholars call the "demand side." This encompasses the foundational forces that influence public perception and worldview, as opposed to the "supply side," which examines how national populists exploit these underlying forces, the communication strategies of charismatic leaders, the tactics opponents employ during particular elections, and the manner in which various media outlets — both traditional and modern — report on these matters.

### 2.1.2 Digital democracy

Dahlberg (2011) presents an array of interpretations surrounding digital democracy, delineating four distinct perspectives—liberal-individualist, deliberative, counter-publics, and autonomist Marxist—each with its own conception of the democratic subject, the nature of democracy advocated, and the employment of digital media to achieve democratic objectives. The liberal-individualist perspective envisions digital media as an enhancer of individual participation in democracy, a tool for the circulation of information, and a facilitator of public opinion expression. Deliberative proponents perceive the internet as a platform for rational debate and collective decision-making, valuing the creation of well-informed public opinion. The counter-publics approach emphasizes digital media's potential to enable the formation of political groups, activism, and the emergence of alternative discourses. Lastly, the autonomist Marxist stance views digital networks as the groundwork for self-organized, inclusive participation in a democracy that exists beyond centralized state and capitalist systems. Dahlberg's analysis posits that digital media not only serves as an instrument for democratic practice but also

as a vehicle for forging new democratic structures, each paradigm proposing unique strategies to fulfill its democratic ideal.

Moffitt (2018) examines the complex relationship between populism and social media. He identifies four conceptual "traps" that frequently appear in the discourse surrounding digital political engagement. He starts by dismantling the prevailing narrative that social media platforms provide a direct and unfiltered channel between populist leaders and their followers. He addresses the fallacy of direct communication, where the immediacy of social media interaction is often misinterpreted as a genuine connection. This critique is essential in recognizing that the simplicity of clicking "like" or "share" does not necessarily translate into a substantive political relationship. Moffitt further challenges the myth of unmediated representation, arguing that political messaging, regardless of the medium, undergoes strategic construction tailored to specific agendas, and thus it is never truly unmediated.

In his study, Moffitt also confronts the overestimated belief in the interactivity of populist communication on social media. He points out that, contrary to expectations of a two-way dialogue, the communication strategy employed by many populist leaders resembles a traditional broadcast model, limiting real interactive discourse. Additionally, he refutes the assumption that there's a homogeneous approach to social media use among populists. Moffitt's findings indicate a broad spectrum of social media engagement across populist figures, with varying degrees of sophistication and strategic intent.

Fuchs (2021) further highlights the challenges brought forth by digital capitalism. He defines capitalism as a societal system driven by the accumulation of power, with money capital as a key form of this power. This accumulation extends beyond the economy to politics—where it becomes the accumulation of decision-making power—and culture—where it is the accumulation of reputation. He argues that such accumulation leads to inequality, exploitation, and injustice in various societal aspects. Digital capitalism, according to Fuchs, is characterized by the digital mediation of traditional capitalist processes, including power dynamics, class and political struggles, and globalization, with digital corporations playing a significant role.

Fuchs emphasizes the centrality of public political communication in democracy. He refers to the "public" as spaces and goods that are open to everyone,

like public parks or public media. The public sphere is seen as critical for political debate and opinion formation, mediating between society's various subsystems. In the context of the digital age, however, not all digital communication constitutes a digital public sphere. When digital practices are shaped by commodification, domination, and ideology, they do not foster a public sphere but rather represent an alienated, colonized, and feudalized space. Fuchs contends that public service and civil society Internet platforms, which operate on non-capitalist principles, negate the negative political economy of digital capitalism and are essential for advancing the digital commons across various domains, including environmental sustainability, economic socialism, participatory democracy, and cultural connections.

Natani (2021) investigates the transformative impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on democratic societies, highlighting its potential to redefine citizenship, enhance governmental accountability, and revitalize citizen sovereignty. The advent of the internet and ICTs has introduced novel methods for citizen engagement, addressing legitimacy concerns within traditional democratic frameworks. Social media, despite the challenges of political apathy, particularly among youth, presents fresh opportunities for civic participation, promising to remodel democratic practices. Yet, this optimistic perspective is balanced by an awareness of the complexities and potential perils of digital democracy, such as increased surveillance and the erosion of public-private boundaries. The internet's global influence prompts a reevaluation of governance models and political expectations. Although the ICT revolution initially promised greater accountability and a closer connection between governments and their constituents, its complete adoption is hindered by resistance, partly due to the dramatic shifts in power dynamics it entails. Representative democracy, while enduring, is being complemented by emerging decentralized and informal forms of political dialogue and involvement facilitated by digital media tools.

In 2023, Umar Congge, María-Dolores Guillamón, Achmad Nurmandi, Salahudin, and Iradhad Taqwa Sihidi conducted *a systematic literature review* that documented the significant impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on various societal facets, especially democracy. The advent of ICT has simplified communication and democratized information accessibility

worldwide. This shift is a stark contrast to the past, where engaging with information and democratic processes was cumbersome. The digital age has opened up new avenues for citizens to participate in democratic practices. The study identifies key facets of digital democracy: Firstly, the internet enhances democracy by providing a platform for public participation and expression. Secondly, it underscores that in the digital democracy era, freedom of expression must be balanced with ethical standards. Public awareness is thus critical in maintaining ethical e-democracy. Lastly, the study cautions against the potential for capitalism and elite groups to exert control over digital democratic processes, advocating for societal vigilance to safeguard democratic integrity.

Fuller (2023) conceptualizes digital democracy as a form of self-government enabled by instantaneous, peer-to-peer digital communication. Digital democracy eliminates traditional barriers to participation in large-scale democracies. The internet's advent has erased physical constraints, thereby influencing key democratic factors such as frequency, transparency, and direct communication. In this new era, citizens can effortlessly engage in decision-making forums, enjoy immediate and extensive transparency, and communicate peer-to-peer without intermediaries. Democracy's five stages—ideation, deliberation, decision-making, implementation, and re-evaluation—are transformed. Online modalities like petitioning and participatory budgeting benefit from digital platforms, enhancing accessibility and informed decision-making. Digital technology also revitalizes urban planning and public consultations by offering structured, flexible, and immersive experiences, fostering informed consensus-building.

Furthermore, the "Fuller Democracy" model, designed by Fuller, is an all-encompassing framework for participatory governance. This model empowers citizens to actively engage in all facets of the political discourse, ensuring their voices are central from inception to conclusion of the political process. The foremost aim of this democratic approach is to dismantle any monopolistic control by the elite over political decision-making. To achieve this, Fuller Democracy is grounded in ten fundamental principles that collectively work to uphold its integrity and effectiveness, ensuring a truly participatory democratic environment. These principles advocate for power to circulate freely without monopolization, human-centric political participation excluding non-human entities, direct democracy to counteract oligarchy, and flexible

collective action without permanent alliances. They highlight the importance of diverse individual perspectives, discourage sabotage of democratic decisions, and suggest harnessing negative human traits productively. Furthermore, they emphasize respecting public input, valuing experts based on track records, and maintaining a robust middle class to ensure political and economic equality.

## 2.2 Populism in the Previous Era of Thai Politics, the Rise of Thaksin Shinawatra

Populism has been a significant theme in Thai politics, particularly evident in the era of Thaksin Shinawatra, but its roots can be traced back and its echoes found in later years as well. Thaksin's era, roughly from 2001 to 2006, witnessed a distinctive kind of populism, which blended economic policies aimed at uplifting the rural poor with a charismatic leadership style that resonated with a significant portion of the population.

Initiating with a contextual analysis of the circumstances conducive to the emergence of populism, Choi (2005) describes the political context by revealing that the newly-established political party, "Thai Rak Thai" (TRT), under the populist Thaksin Shinawatra, secured a decisive victory against the coalition government helmed by neoliberalist Chuan Leekpai in the 2001 election. The dichotomy between the two leaderships is visible in three pivotal aspects: Firstly, Chuan's administration was committed to globalization, involving liberalization, reduced government size, and a free market, valuing foreign investment and exports as primary sources of post-crisis economic development finance. In stark contrast, Thaksin sought to insulate Thailand from sudden shifts in the international business climate, placing a priority on stimulating domestic demand and gradually transitioning away from an export-driven economy. Secondly, while Chuan's government prioritized reinforcing the contemporary economic sector, especially the financial sector, and was hesitant to subsidize the rural economy, Thaksin accorded high policy priority to the agricultural sector. Lastly, Chuan chose minimal government direct intervention in the market, whereas Thaksin favoured a more robust state role in aiding the Thai economy.

Concerning the economic context, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis indicated that people across all regions experienced an elevation in poverty, albeit with varying intensities, especially among the rural population in the agricultural sector in

Northeast Thailand. This region, which showed robust political support for TRT and exhibited the highest poverty rates, seemingly forged a connection between poverty and the surge of populism. In essence, economic crisis and poverty incidence could be viewed as conditions that potentially facilitated the rise of populism.

On the social context, rising inequality as a result of the financial crisis in 1997 fueled social dissatisfaction as the gap between rich and poor widened. Therefore, the rural poor became increasingly resentful of the urban rich. Ironically, a billionaire businessman was the first to recognize the political potential of the provincial masses in the north and east and became the symbol of the poor's hopes and dreams.

It was shaped by a schema that drew a sharp distinction between "the people" and "the elite." His populism, serving as a reaction to the extensive demands from the vast majority of Thai citizens for improved living conditions (Markou & Lasote, 2015), did not gain traction among the country's middle and upper classes or its elites. Within his discourse, two opposing factions were delineated: "the grassroots, the non-privileged people" (largely referring to Thailand's farmers and agriculturists) and "elite, aristocracy, and royalists" (often associated with corrupt institutions, conservative businessmen, the military, the Privy Council, aristocracy, and the royalist).

A further study compared Thaksin political discourses between his first term (2001-2004) and second term (2004-2006) provides evidence that Thaksin's populism increased during the years (Hawkins & Selway, 2017). Before the first election in 2001, Thaksin demonstrated a relatively low degree of populism in his rhetoric. However, the National Counter-Corruption Committee (NCCC) in December 2000 and the Constitution Court in 2001 seemed to turn him into a more populist direction. The NCCC indicted Thaksin for concealing his assets when briefly appointed as deputy premier in 1997. Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court was on pressure as Thaksin had just trumpeted his huge election victory, mobilized supporters, and later acquit him of the case. If removed by the NCCC, it would be a case of Thailand's old elite removing someone who had been elected "by the people" and dedicated to work "for the people." In short, Thaksin was, in fact, reluctant to turn to the populist path but eventually he had to as a result of him being under attack by his opposition. Thaksin populism really took off in March 2004 after facing increasing attacks in the press and

on public platforms, especially over his management of the upsurge of violence in the far south, but more generally over a range of issues including corruption, government aid for Shinawatra businesses, the privatization of state enterprises, and the government's handling of avian influenza. Thaksin's speeches were hit into three main themes: "I give to all to you", "I belong to you", and "I am the mechanism which can translate the will of the people into state action." Interestingly, evidence was provided to show the change in his speech over years for example he stopped filling his speeches with English to denote international and modernity, instead used dialect and earthy humour as well as stopped quoting Bill Gates, and instead often mentioned his own family and sex life.

In addition, numerous studies have compared Thaksin's populism to that of populist leaders globally. Noteworthy is that prior researchers have identified striking similarities in Thaksin's populism to leaders in Latin America, particularly.

## 2.3 The Prayuth Leadership (2014-2019)

In May 2014, a significant shift in Thai politics started with a military coup against Yingluck Shinawatra's government. Leading the forefront was Prayuth, who later assumed the role of Prime Minister, supervised by a predominantly military legislature.

Neelapaichit (2020) offers an insightful examination of the regime's distinctive traits. The regime was marked by: restricted political pluralism, lack of a comprehensive or directing ideology, low political mobilization, and the leader's authority, although vaguely defined, remained consistently predictable.

A pivotal move by Prayuth's government was the alteration of the constitution, favoring mechanisms that bolstered the dominance of the military and traditional elites. This significantly diluted the influence of electoral dynamics. The controversial Section 44, granting expansive powers to the junta, hinted at underlying resistance within various societal and political groups. The objective behind such measures was presumably to curtail democratic tendencies and sideline dissenting voices, ensuring the regime's unchallenged dominion over national governance (Neelapaichit, 2020).

Shifting the lens to the economic arena, Solomon (2018) underscores the junta's period as one marked by commendable GDP growth, record-breaking exports, and unprecedented tourist influx. A landmark initiative was the sanctioning of the $45 billion Eastern Economic Corridor, an amalgamation of ports, railways, and industrial zones. Concurrently, ties strengthened between Sino-Thai magnates and Pracharath initiatives, focusing on rural economic enhancement. While the outcomes of such collaborations remain ambiguous, Kongkirati and Kanchoochat (2018) posit that they facilitated major corporations in bolstering small businesses.

The social fabric also underwent changes during this era. Solomon (2018) accentuates a common sentiment among Thai citizens, especially the youth and nascent voters, that the 2014 coup was strategized to reinforce the hegemony of Thailand's elites. These demographics manifested discernible dissatisfaction towards Prayuth's leadership. The era thus stood as a testament to the deep-seated generational and ideological divides within Thai society, mirroring both acceptance and opposition to authoritarian rule.

## 2.4 Future Forward Party

The emergence and rise of the FFP in Thailand's political arena came as a revelation to many. Founded shortly before the 2019 election, its surprising third-place finish was both a testament to its immediate impact and an indicator of the shifting political winds in the nation.

McCargo and Chattharakul (2020) describe in their book "*Future forward. The Rise and Fall of a Thai Political Party*" the trajectory of the FFP and its charismatic leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkrit. An affluent industrialist and former student activist, Thanathorn rallied supporters around addressing structural injustice in Thai society, calling for a vote towards "change, hope, and new generation leaders." Furthermore, critical to the FFP's narrative and strategy was its online presence. Branding itself as "a member-owned political party," it capitalized on Thanathorn's charisma and leveraged the magnetic pull he had, especially among the youth. His robust resistance against the establishment, matched with a genuine respect for grassroots movements, found resonance with many. The party, significantly present on internet-based platforms, unveiled several online initiatives, one of the most notable

initiatives is "the Open Government Initiative of the FFP," comprising two primary online platforms: the Open FWP Project section on the FFP's official website which allows the public to monitor parliamentary activities, and a community website, where individuals can submit and track the progress of complaints concerning public administration. Nevertheless, total traffic to the main FFP's website was between 500 and 1,500 hits per day, while the community site did not have enough traffic to generate a report. The initiative is clearly a work in progress.

The party, leveraging advanced digital tactics and focusing on relevant policy discussions, successfully improved its online presence, outperforming its rivals in content quality and engagement. With a youthful social media team, it generated extensive content on a tight budget, strategically utilizing advertisement and promotions (McCargo and Chattharakul, 2020). Ockey's study (2020) also highlights social media's critical role in the FFP's campaign strategy, especially crucial given the restrictions on formal campaigning imposed by the then military government. Leveraging Facebook's widespread use in Thailand, the party cultivated a substantial following that surpassed older political parties and contemporaries. It also effectively utilized YouTube, with a channel focusing on campaign content and political discussions, gaining traction by engaging with popular movements like Rap Against Dictatorship. Despite Twitter and Instagram being less emphasized, these platforms facilitated interactions and trending hashtags, enhancing the party's visibility and support, particularly among the youth. Additionally, the FFP adeptly used Line for member organization and communication, fostering a network that supported both online engagement and local community building. These strategies were not only for promotion but also crucial in countering misinformation and attacks on social media, showcasing the party's proactive stance in maintaining its reputation and electoral appeal.

The FFP had its appeal among first-time voters. Statistically, the FFP can be regarded as a youth-centric party, with its 6.33 million nationwide votes coming predominantly from the 7.3 million first-time voters (as cited in Chattharakul, 2019). In spite of its appeal among young voters and its innovative use of social media for political engagement, the FFP faced structural challenges in establishing a robust organizational framework beyond its digital presence. The lack of traditional grassroots infrastructure, which older parties possess, presented an ongoing challenge for the FFP.

Despite these hurdles, the party's success marked a potential shift in Thai politics, suggesting a future where new parties might adopt similar approaches, integrating digital strategies while navigating the complexities of Thailand's political landscape. The FFP's trajectory and its ability to overcome legal and structural obstacles could significantly influence the nature of political party development in Thailand (Ockey, 2020).

As Lertchoosakul (2020) asserted, from the onset of the election campaign, the FFP stood out by prioritizing new voters, targeting them with policies that addressed issues previously overlooked by major parties, such as ending military conscription, advocating for LGBT rights, and pushing for decentralization. Their staunch opposition to "old politics" and the military junta (NCPO) resonated strongly with young voters disillusioned by military governance. In contrast, other parties did not prioritize young voters, focusing instead on their established voter bases linked to ideological or regional affiliations. Pheu Thai and Thai Raksa Chart aimed to attract their traditional supporters with policies tailored to the lower middle class, rural, and urban poor. On the other hand, parties like Palang Pracharat, which supported the military's continued influence, targeted conservative factions and groups opposed to Thaksin-aligned movements, such as the PDRC and PAD.

Ockey (2020) further described that, in the 2019 election, the FFP had aligned itself with the pro-democracy camp, alongside Pheu Thai and Thai Raksa Chart parties. The latter was formed to help Pheu Thai circumvent the limitations imposed by the new constitution. When Thai Raksa Chart was dissolved for involving a royal family member in its campaign, its potential voters and vote canvassers shifted their support to the FFP. This strategic realignment significantly benefited the FFP, allowing it to inherit the electoral networks of Thai Raksa Chart and secure a substantial number of constituency seats, particularly in regions where it directly competed with Pheu Thai and Thai Raksa Chart. This shift underscores the FFP's success in consolidating support within the pro-democracy faction, capitalizing on the disbandment of Thai Raksa Chart to enhance its position in the Thai political landscape.

More recently, the paper "The Banning of Future Forward" (McCargo, 2022) discusses the controversial dissolution of the Thailand's FFP by the Constitutional Court in February 2020, focusing on the court's contentious interpretation of the 2017 Political Parties Act regarding party loans. The FFP, a significant new political force

appealing especially to young voters and securing 81 seats in the 2019 elections, faced numerous legal challenges seen as efforts to curb its progressive influence. The court's ruling, perceived as politically motivated and lacking legal clarity, triggered widespread criticism, academic dissent, and youth-led protests, signaling a deep generational rift in Thai society. This event marked a critical juncture, highlighting the tensions between judicial decisions and political movements and illustrating the escalating conflict between traditional Thai power structures and a politically mobilized younger generation.

## 2.5 Five Star Movement

The pervasive influence of digital technology on political landscapes is prominently illustrated by the Italy's FSM, characterized as one of Europe's most successful anti-establishment movements. Founded in 2009 by comedian Beppe Grillo and web strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio, The FSM transformed from a blog to the largest parliamentary group following the 2018 national elections, traversing an unconventional political trajectory.

The FSM was notably conceptualized and propelled by Beppe Grillo's blog, initiated in 2005, becoming a beacon for his political and ideological leanings (Bassini, 2019). The interaction and popularity of the blog, bolstered by the prevailing financial crisis and controversies surrounding traditional parties, exemplified the resonance of its anti-establishment rhetoric among the populace.

Gentiola Madhi's study, "*A Five Star Digital Populism*" (2014), explores further by highlighting Grillo's early recognition of the internet's potency as a strategic communicative tool. His messages, centered around societal change and awakening citizens against the political elite, were encapsulated in candid calls for expanded social solidarity, achievable through mechanisms like basic income distribution and supportive measures for small and medium enterprises. Furthermore, FSM's advocacy for reforms—ranging from anti-corruption initiatives, efficient tax collection, stringent environmental protection, to expansive national internet access—indicates an alignment with progressive and constructive national debate alterations.

The internet's role in amplifying populist movements is underscored by the FSM's direct, unmediated communication with the populace. Madhi (2014) emphasizes

how online strategies were leveraged to prioritize the "ordinary man's" wisdom and validate the populace's role in a "war of generations" aimed at orchestrating a new political order. Rooted in principles that champion direct democracy, such as "one is worth one," the movement espouses a political philosophy that starkly identifies the political caste as the "enemy of the people" and proclaims that "parties are dead." Consequently, the FSM predicates its efforts on a continuous assault against established political norms and elites, with a vision to construct a 'new world' wherein politicians are considered employees of the citizenry.

In essence, the FSM's noteworthy achievements derive from a blend of charismatic leadership and a collective sense of disillusionment, frustration, and distrust among grassroots electorates towards the prevailing political caste (Madhi, 2014). The comprehensive exploration of the FSM's evolution, strategies, and ideology in the literature presents a compelling case study of digital populism's influence and mechanisms within modern political frameworks.

Deseriis & Vittori (2019) critically analyze the FSM's innovative approach to political engagement, contrasting it with Michels' iron law of oligarchy, which describes political parties as hierarchical and elitist. Founded by Beppe Grillo in 2009, the FSM challenges traditional party dynamics by leveraging its Rousseau platform to enable direct participation, allowing members to propose legislation and partake in policy deliberations and decision-making. This digital engagement model seeks to reduce intermediary roles, directly connecting members to the decision-making process, albeit with structured controls that limit the depth and breadth of this engagement. Despite aiming to lower participation barriers and democratize political involvement, the FSM faces challenges in sustaining active and meaningful member engagement, as indicated by varying participation rates in their online initiatives. This scenario underscores the complexities and constraints of implementing digital democracy within political movements, illustrating the tension between participatory ideals and practical limitations in digital engagement platforms.

Mosca (2018) delves into the FSM's innovative integration of digital tools in enhancing political participation and decision-making, highlighting the movement's evolution from Beppe Grillo's blog as a primary communication hub to the more

sophisticated Rousseau platform. This platform, especially after Gianroberto Casaleggio's passing, signifies a leap in the FSM's digital engagement, offering a medium for members to propose and debate legislative initiatives directly. The adoption of online ballots and the platform's evolution underscore a shift towards more inclusive and interactive democratic practices, aligning with the movement's core principle of direct democracy. This technological embrace is not merely functional but is imbued with the movement's "technopopulism," which merges a critique of conventional politics with a belief in technology's potential to democratize and streamline political processes. This reflects a broader trend towards digital democracy where technology empowers direct citizen engagement in governance.

The FSM's narrative is also deeply rooted in cyberutopianism, viewing the internet as a crucial democratic arena that transcends its role as a mere tool, becoming a space for transparent, participatory, and non-hierarchical political processes. This vision extends to how the movement perceives digital platforms' roles in ensuring political accountability and transparency, advocating a political model that contrasts with traditional professionalized politics. The FSM champions a form of political engagement that is temporary and service-oriented, resonating with their broader rejection of conventional political mediation and emphasizing a direct connection and accountability to the electorate. Through these digital endeavors, the FSM aspires to foster a democratic ethos that is more responsive, participatory, and in tune with the ideals of direct democracy, leveraging modern technology to bridge historical democratic principles with contemporary political engagement (Mosca, 2018).

In examining the digital platform "Rousseau" by Giacomini (2022), it becomes apparent that its naming was not coincidental but deeply symbolic, reflecting an aspiration toward direct democracy as envisioned by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This platform served as the operational core of the FSM, encapsulating a direct democracy model where members could actively participate in legislative processes and decision-making. Casaleggio associated the platform's purpose with overcoming the limitations of representative democracy, where citizens' freedom is transient, limited to election periods, and where elected representatives make decisions on behalf of the community. In contrast, "Rousseau" aimed to facilitate continuous and direct citizen engagement in

political processes, embodying Rousseau's ideals that sovereignty should reside with the people, exercised directly rather than through representatives.

Giacomini (2022) goes on to explain the platform's functionalities which were diverse, encompassing legislative proposal discussions, voting mechanisms, and educational tools, thereby fostering an engaged and informed community of users. This digital participation extended to various aspects of the FSM's activities, including electoral matters and movement participation. The core philosophy drawn from Rousseau's "The Social Contract" emphasizes the distinction between individual wills and the general will—the latter being a collective expression aiming at the common good. Rousseau's theory underpins the platform's intent to cultivate a political environment where the general will, determined through the broad participation of virtuous citizens, guides decision-making, contrasting with a system where individual or group interests prevail. Moreover, Rousseau's concept that the state is founded on a social contract where individuals collectively renounce certain freedoms to achieve common benefits resonates with the platform's ethos. It sought to operationalize this philosophy by enabling direct involvement of citizens in governance, thereby challenging traditional representative frameworks and aiming to realize a form of democracy that is more responsive, participatory, and aligned with the common good. In essence, the "Rousseau" platform was not just a tool for the FSM but a manifestation of a deeper ideological commitment to direct democracy, reflecting a modern interpretation of Rousseau's seminal ideas on governance and civic engagement.

## 2.6 Identifying Gaps in Literature

### 2.6.1 The lack of research on the political discourses and proposed Policies of the FFP

Populism elements have long been observed in Thai politics. There have been several studies exploring the rise of the previous populist party, Thai Rak Thai, during Thaksin Shinawatra's premiership (2001-2006). The economic condition of Thailand during that period which just suffered from the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 was usually been described as the prime factor contributing to the rise of the

populist party. Thaksin's populism was frequently compared to populist leaders in other countries especially those in Latin America by applying various tools to analyze the political discourses where populism elements can be detected and measured.

In May 2014, Thailand experienced a political upheaval with a military coup ousting Yingluck Shinawatra's government, subsequently leading Prayuth to become the Prime Minister, backed by a military-influenced legislature. Prayuth's government notably altered the constitution to enhance the military and traditional elite's power, diminishing the electoral process's significance and leveraging Section 44 to consolidate control, which sparked resistance across various societal segments. Socially, there was a pervasive belief, particularly among the youth and first-time voters, that the coup aimed to maintain elite dominance, resulting in widespread discontent with Prayuth's administration and highlighting the era's stark generational and ideological divisions within Thai society.

The above underlying condition contributed to the emergence of a new political phenomenon in the name of the FFP which came a surprisingly strong third in the 2019 election after the election had been postponed many times. Despite the fact that the party was dissolved a year later shortly after its founding, the FFP's political campaigns left some vital lessons to the study of Thai politics. They demonstrated elements of populism, "anti-establishment" sentiments, with an emphasis on structural injustice in Thai society and appealed to those who also perceived the flaws of the current structure.

On the surface, it already demonstrated how the society has been divided into two distinct groups: "the people" those who could see and experienced Thailand's structural injustice, and "the elites" who were the causes of structural injustice.

While the FFP seemingly addressed these disparities head-on, it also showcased a certain degree of pluralism, underscoring the importance of cultural diversity and enabling a reclamation of local identities and histories by ordinary people.

Through the lens of populism, it can be assumed that the impressive winning of the FFP certainly was a result of their political campaigns which addressed the growing unresponsive demands regarding the structural injustice in Thai society

and this laid the foundation for the emergence of a new wave of populism in Thailand during the internet era.

Despite the existing literature, a significant gap persists regarding research into the rise of the FFP from a populist perspective. There is a need for additional studies to distinguish the political discourse and proposed policies of the FFP, aiming to discern its populist potential in response to Thai society's conditions, especially during the recent junta government's term between 2014 and 2019.

**2.6.2 The absence of research on other aspects of digital approaches Beyond the use of social media.**

The FFP tried to directly engage with the public through online mechanisms. While some literature explores the FFP's use of social media to engage various supporter groups, comprehensive analysis focusing on other digital dimensions is lacking. Specifically, there is a scarcity of research examining the party's digital approach, especially concerning its Open Government Initiative, which includes two key online platforms: the Open FWP Project section, enabling public monitoring of parliamentary actions, and a community website for logging and tracking public administration complaints. Although the two online platforms were considered works in progress and only attracted limited online traffic, it is worth exploring the underlying ideologies and functionalities of the platforms to understand how the FFP, with its populist tendency advocating for direct democracy, envisioned its online interactive engagement with the public.

In this context, the FSM has been selected for a comparative study to enrich the analysis. The FSM's renowned Rousseau platform, known for its extensive and deep engagement with the public, stands as a contrast to the FFP's digital endeavors. By comparing these two parties' digital strategies, the research aims to uncover the nuances in how they employ online platforms to facilitate public engagement and participation. This comparative perspective will shed light on the operational and ideological distinctions between the FFP's and FSM's approaches to digital democracy, offering a broader understanding of how political entities can leverage digital tools to foster direct and participatory democratic processes.

# CHAPTER 3
# INVESTIGATING POPULISM IN FUTURE FORWARD PARTY'S POLICIES AND DISCOURSES: ADDRESSING UNMET DEMAND OF THE PEOPLE

From the viewpoints of both demand and supply, the demand aspect explores the societal and personal elements driving the public's gravitation towards populist values. In contrast, the supply dimension investigates the strategies used by the FFP to craft and convey their populist narratives to meet this demand. This examination aims to untie the interconnected dynamics of demand and supply in relation to the FFP, shedding light on the factors propelling its rise and the repercussions for the shifting political landscape of Thailand.

## 3.1 Populism Definition

Populism is a political ideology and movement characterized by the juxtaposition of "the people" against "the elites." It fundamentally embodies an anti-establishment sentiment, opposing existing power structures and elites perceived as corrupt or disconnected from the common populace. This sentiment aims to rally the general public against those in power who are seen as neglecting or oppressing the needs and desires of ordinary people (Müller, 2016).

Populism is notable for its flexible ideology, allowing it to adapt to various political contexts and align with left-wing, right-wing, or centrist policies. This ideological flexibility enables populist movements to attract a broad base of support across different social and economic groups, making it an adaptable and potent political force (Urbinati, 2018).

Another key feature of populism is its advocacy for direct democracy and increased public engagement in political processes. Populists often call for referendums, greater transparency in governance, and mechanisms that allow citizens to have a direct say in political decisions. This focus on direct involvement aims to bridge the gap between the government and the governed, empowering ordinary people to influence policy directly (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Symbolic representation plays a crucial role in populism, involving the use of rhetoric and imagery that resonate with the common populace. Populists often employ nationalist or culturally significant symbols and narratives to frame the elite as out of touch or harmful to the nation's values and traditions. This symbolic language helps to solidify the populist appeal and foster a sense of unity and purpose among supporters (Filc, 2010).

Populism can manifest in both inclusive and exclusive forms. Inclusive populism seeks to broaden democracy by incorporating previously excluded social groups, thereby expanding political participation and representation. Conversely, exclusive populism promotes the interests of a particular group while marginalizing others, often fostering division and conflict within society. This dual nature allows populism to adapt to various social and political environments, making it a versatile tool for different movements (Müller, 2016; Filc, 2010).

Populism frequently emerges in response to socio-economic conditions such as economic inequality, cultural upheaval, and political disenfranchisement. It seeks to address the grievances of those who feel left behind by the current system, offering solutions that challenge the status quo and promise a return to more equitable and just governance (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

All in all, populism is a dynamic and adaptable political ideology that fundamentally opposes the established elite and advocates the cause of the common people. Its anti-establishment sentiment rallies the general populace against those perceived as neglecting or oppressing their needs. The flexibility of populism allows it to align with various political ideologies, attracting diverse support across different social and economic groups. Advocating for direct democracy and increased public engagement, populism empowers ordinary citizens to influence policy and governance. Symbolic representation through resonant rhetoric and imagery strengthens its appeal, fostering unity among supporters. Populism can be both inclusive, broadening democracy by incorporating marginalized groups, and exclusive, promoting specific interests while marginalizing others. Emerging often in response to socio-economic challenges, populism addresses the grievances of those left behind, offering solutions that challenge the status quo and strive for a more equitable and just society.

**3.2 Demand Side of Populism**

To begin the investigation, the underlying forces in Thai society will be explored, especially between 2014 and 2019.

**3.2.1 Distrust**

**3.2.1.1 Thailand's political paradox: The historical interplay of authoritarianism and fragile democracy**

Neeranuit Traijakvanich and Rujira Rojjanaprapayon (2020) provide the historical background of Thailand's political paradox that, throughout its political timeline, Thailand has regularly grappled with political turbulence. Military coups, characterized by the military's takeover, have been a recurring element in Thai politics, traceable back to the Siamese intervention in June 1933. This tendency leans towards Authoritarianism, wherein a government exercises strong central control with limited freedoms for its citizens. This ideology has fostered a power structure where control is exerted without checks and balances. In contrast, while Western nations underwent a lengthy process to establish democracies, Thailand transitioned directly from an absolute monarchy to a democracy in 1932. However, due to the societal framework of Thailand at that period, the newly adopted democracy often found itself challenged (Traijakvanich & Rojjanaprapayon, 2020).

Building on the above points, the prevailing Authoritarian tendencies from regular military interventions and Thailand's abrupt political transition serve as foundations for the enduring uncertainty in its political arena.

**3.2.1.2 The growing feeling of voicelessness**

A more recently instance has been highlighted by Korbsusol Neelapaichit, (2020). Prayuth Leadership visually begun in May 2014 when a military coup against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra took place. After that, Prayuth led an authoritarian regime with no democratic practice and ruled the country with absolute power and later appointed as the Prime Minister by a military-dominated national legislature, distinguishing itself with several following key characteristics: limited political pluralism, absence of an elaborate or guiding ideology, non-intensive political mobilization, and leader exercising power within formally ill-defined but quite predictable limits. Prayuth's government has notably engineered the constitution,

endorsing mechanisms that institutionalized the military and traditional elites' dominance, subsequently minimizing the impact of electoral forces. The implementation of Section 44, known for granting the junta extensive authority, has unveiled subtle but significant opposition from various societal and political groups. Such strategies perhaps aimed at curtailing democratic practices and marginalizing oppositional forces, thereby allowing the regime to retain a firm grip on the nation's governance structures.

In August 2016, Prayuth's administration conducted a referendum for a new proposed constitution. Despite 61 percent of voters supporting it, there were concerns about the government's stringent control over the referendum proceedings and restrictions on opposing campaigns. The constitution was later ratified in 2017. "This constitution was design for us," said Somsak Thepsuthin, a prominent leader of Palang Pracharat Party, back in November 2018 (McCargo & Alexander, 2019). Evidently, the 2017 constitution provided distinct advantages to the pro-junta party. This was particularly evident in the formation of the 250-member Senate, of which 104 were retired or active-duty military and police officers. Additionally, the 2017 constitution granted the Senate the authority to vote in the election of a prime minister (McCargo & Alexander, 2019). Despite the introduction of the new constitution, the government's failure to finalize the timeline for the general election deepened the skepticism of the Thai people towards the junta government.

Then, there was a prevailing belief among Thai citizens that the coup and ensuing leadership were orchestrated to preserve the supremacy of Thailand's elites. This notion was particularly salient among the youth and first-time voters, a demographic that exhibited varied but tangible degrees of dissatisfaction towards Prayuth's administration. Here, the generational and ideological divisions within Thai society come to the fore, reflecting an interplay of acceptance and resistance towards authoritarian governance (Solomon, 2018).

The 2014 coup marked Thailand's first extended period under authoritarian rule since the democratic movement overthrew military dictatorship in 1973. From May 2014 to March 2019, nearly five years passed without elections, as the junta solidified its hold by repressing opposition, including Red Shirts and other democratic groups. Despite widespread demands for the restoration of electoral

democracy, progress was sluggish and fraught with uncertainty. Numerous protests, led by former Red Shirts and student activists critical of the regime, demanded elections despite a virtual ban on public gatherings and the junta's extensive authority to quell dissent. Although the junta initially promised to hold elections, it consistently delayed the electoral process (Lertchoosakul, 2020).

As a result of the growing discontent with Prayuth's administration, many people feel that their voices are being sidelined. This sentiment has made them more receptive to a political party offering a more participatory or direct model of democracy, ensuring their perspectives are considered.

### 3.2.2 Destruction and deprivation

#### 3.2.2.1 Thai economic performance between 2014-2019

According to the 2014-2019 World Bank report on Thailand Economic Monitor, the coup in 2014 initially led to economic disruptions and investor caution. Thailand's GDP growth was at a mere 0.9% in 2014. However, this situation gradually stabilized as the military-led government provided a semblance of political stability.

In the subsequent years, the country's economic growth picked up, accelerating to 2.8 %, and by 2018, it reached 4.1%. This resurgence was driven primarily by export-oriented industries and a boom in tourism. Domestic consumption also played a significant role.

In 2019, a significant election year, Kanokrat Lertchoosakul (2020) noted the challenges faced by Thailand's economy. The past ten years, overshadowed by political turbulence and military governance, witnessed an average GDP growth of about 3%, trailing the 4% of the preceding decade. This economic trajectory positioned Thailand behind regional peers like Indonesia and Vietnam. The downturn was especially apparent in the first half of 2019, which posted the grimmest numbers since the political upheaval of 2014. By the year's second quarter, GDP growth had plummeted to a 2.3% rate, the lowest point not seen in almost half a decade. This period saw a contraction in agriculture, diminished exports, and reduced imports. May of that year marked a troubling low in consumer confidence, spanning a 19-month period. The year's initial quarter registered a mere 2.8% growth year-over-year. The trading frictions between the US and China adversely influenced Thai export dynamics

and investment flows. Compounding these issues was the robustness of the Thai currency, which eroded export advantage.

Furthermore, Solomon (2018) highlighted that during the tenure of the junta, there was a green signal for substantial infrastructure projects. Among these, the $45 billion Eastern Economic Corridor stood out, encompassing an array of ports, railways, and industrial zones. In a noteworthy collaboration, the influential Sino-Thai magnates aligned with the Pracharath initiatives, aiming for deeper penetration into the rural economic tapestry. While the tangible outcomes of these ventures remain ambiguous, they have offered large corporations a pivotal platform to bolster smaller businesses, as analyzed by Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayooth Kanchoochat (2018).

All in all, despite facing significant challenges, Thailand's economic growth made notable progress during the period from 2014 to 2019.

### 3.2.2.2 Economic inequality

#### (1) Income inequality

Despite economic growth, income inequality in Thailand has remained a persistent concern. Between 2014 and 2019, the country underwent significant political and economic changes, but these had only a slight impact on its already high levels of income inequality.

According to the NESDC report 2019 (The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council [NESDC], 2020), income inequality in Thailand has eased since 2006. The Gini coefficient of income in 2019 reflected the best situation of income distribution since 1988. However, when compared to other countries, Thailand's Gini coefficient remains high. Among ASEAN countries with available data in 2015, Thailand had the highest income inequality.

A World Bank (2020) publication further elaborates on the situation of income inequality in the 2019 election year. Firstly, the Gini coefficient[1] for income of Thailand reached 0.433 in 2019, marking the highest income inequality level in East Asia. Secondly, the average monthly income of rural households was around 68 percent of urban households. Lastly, the average income level of rural

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[1] Gini coefficient of 0 represents perfect equality, while a coefficient of 1 implies perfect inequality.

households in the Central region (excluding transfers) was over 60 percent higher than that of rural households in the North and Northeast.

**Figure 3.1**

*Income Inequality Coefficient by Administrative Regions, 1988-2019*
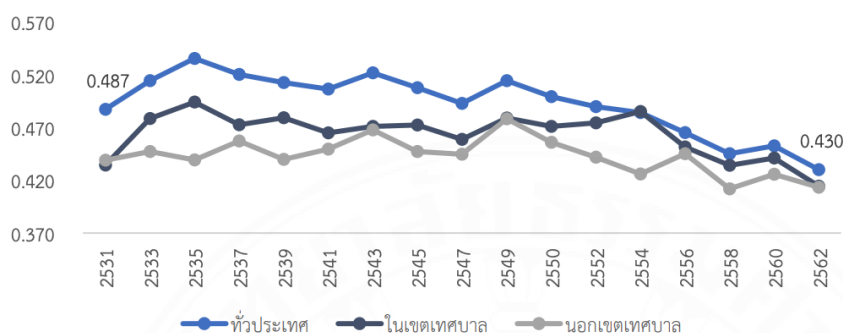


*Note*. Reprinted from *Analysis Report on the Poverty and Inequality Situation in Thailand 2019* (p. 46), by NESDC, 2020.

Regarding the gap between the rich and the poor, there remained a significant disparity between the wealthiest 10 percent and the poorest 10 percent of Thai people. This gap had continuously widened from 1988 until 2013. While the income of the wealthiest 10 percent remained relatively stable since 2013, the income of the poorest 10 percent gradually increased. As a result, the income difference between the two groups reduced from 34.8 times in 2013 to 15.9 times in 2019. In 2019, the poorest 10 percent earned an average of 2,049 Baht per month, while the wealthiest 10 percent earned an average of 32,663 Baht per month.

**Figure 3.2**

*The Average Income of the Population in the Highest and Lowest 10 Percent Income Deciles*



*Note*. Reprinted from *Analysis Report on the Poverty and Inequality Situation in Thailand 2019* (p. 11), by NESDC, 2020.

## (2) Net Asset Inequality

Inequality in net asset, calculated by subtracting total liabilities (both formal and informal) from total assets, remained high in 2019. The Gini coefficient for net asset was 0.6442 in 2019, down slightly from 0.6453 in 2017 and 0.6651 in 2015. Despite this reduction, net asset ownership inequality remains high. The top 10 percent of income earners hold about one-third of the total net assets, equivalent to the combined share of the bottom 60 percent of the population. The increased inequality in net asset compared to total asset ownership highlights the impact of differing debt ratios across income groups. The top 10 percent of earners, despite having higher debt levels, primarily incur formal debts with lower interest rates, resulting in lower debt servicing burdens compared to other income groups, which have a higher proportion of informal debts with higher interest rates.

**Table 3.3**

*Net Asset Inequality Coefficients*

| ประเภทสินทรัพย์ | ค่าสัมประสิทธิ์ความไม่เสมอภาค | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2556 | 2558 | 2560 | 2562 |
| ทรัพย์สินรวมสุทธิ | 0.6554 | 0.6651 | 0.6453 | 0.6442 |

*Note*. Reprinted from *Analysis Report on the Poverty and Inequality Situation in Thailand 2019* (p. 43), by NESDC, 2020.

**Figure 3.4**

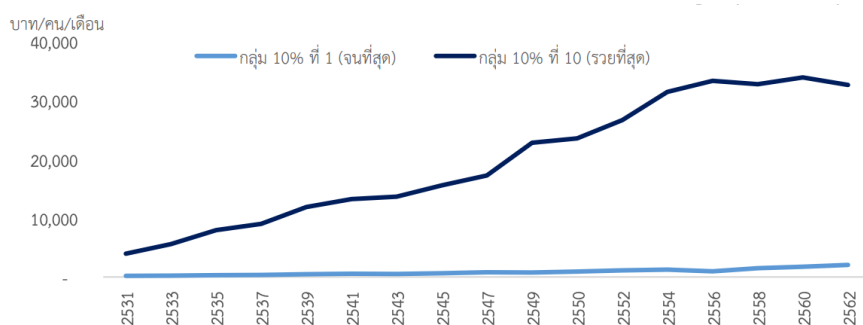*The Proportion of Net Asset Classified by Income Group, 2013-2019*
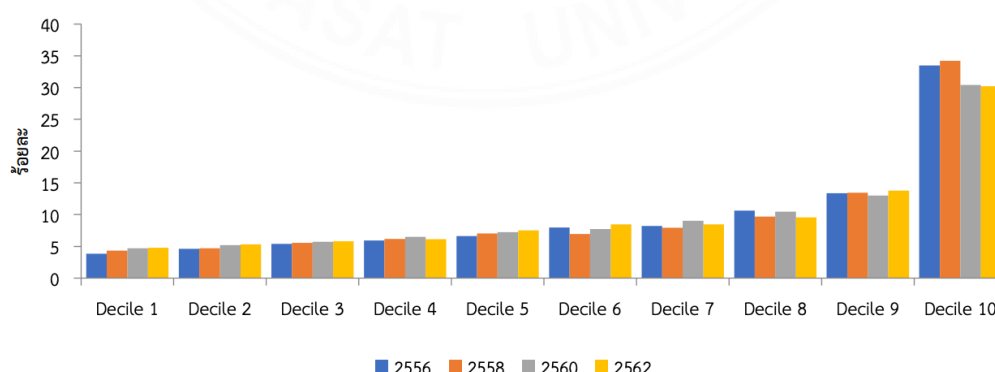


*Note*. Reprinted from *Analysis Report on the Poverty and Inequality Situation in Thailand 2019* (p. 43), by NESDC, 2020.

**(3) Poverty rate**

The NESDC report (2015-2019) highlighted a remarkable decline in poverty. In 2015, the proportion of poor people decreased from 65.17% in 1988 to 7.2% in 2015, equating to 4.8 million individuals. The poverty gap narrowed from 9.66% in 1998 to 1.14% in 2015, and the severity of poverty decreased from 3.41% to 0.3%. However, 2.24% of the population, or approximately 1.5 million people, remained severely poor and needed assistance.

In 2016, the poverty rate fluctuated and went up to 8.6%, representing 5.81 million poor people. Rising living costs and declining agricultural incomes contributed to this slight increase. The poverty gap decreased from 7.80% in 2002 to 1.42% in 2016, and the severity of poverty declined from 2.69% to 0.38%. Chronic poverty also showed a reduction, though specific targeting and social welfare provision were still necessary.

In 2017, the number of poor people decreased to 5.3 million, or 7.87% of the population, due to economic expansion and government policies. Despite improvements, it remained crucial to focus on lifting the population out of poverty to achieve the goals of the 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan.

However, in 2018, the proportion of poor people increased to 9.85%, or 6.7 million people, up from 5.3 million the previous year. This rise was due to reduced economic benefits for the poor, particularly in the agricultural sector, which faced declining product prices and income.

By 2019, the poverty situation improved significantly, with the proportion of poor people decreasing to 6.24%, representing 4.3 million people, down from 6.7 million the previous year. This improvement was driven by economic expansion and extended government assistance measures.

**(4) The situation of income and net asset inequality and poverty in Thailand until the 2019 election year**

Despite improvements since 2006, as indicated by the NESDC, the Gini coefficient for income reached 0.433 in 2019, reflecting significant disparity compared to other ASEAN nations. The World Bank highlighted that rural households earned about 68% of urban incomes, with rural Central region incomes over

60% higher than those in the North and Northeast. The gap between the richest and poorest 10% narrowed from 34.8 times in 2013 to 15.9 times in 2019, but substantial inequality remained.

Net asset inequality also persisted during this period, with the Gini coefficient for net assets slightly decreasing to 0.6442 in 2019. The top 10% of income earners held about one-third of total net assets, highlighting a stark concentration of wealth.

Poverty rates fluctuated significantly, initially decreasing to 7.2% in 2015 but rising to 9.85% in 2018 due to economic challenges in the agricultural sector. By 2019, poverty had reduced to 6.24%, driven by economic expansion and government assistance. The number of poor households decreased to 5.04%

### 3.2.2.3 The incubation of destruction and deprivation under Prayuth's leadership

While the redistribution of economic opportunities between rural and urban populations and between the rich and the poor in Thailand might not be as pronounced as in Western countries dealing with immigration-driven ethnic shifts, the concept of relative deprivation remains relevant. Despite indicators of economic improvements during Prayuth's regime, including steady economic growth and gradual improvements in income, wealth, and poverty alleviation, enduring income inequality and economic disparities, with wealth heavily concentrated among the top earners, persist. These conditions can foster feelings of relative deprivation among rural and poorer populations. Such sentiments provide fertile ground for populist parties that promise to address their unfulfilled aspirations.

### 3.2.3 De-alignment

#### 3.2.3.1 Erosion of the de facto two-party system

Unlike many Western countries, Thailand did not have a clear two-party system in the same manner as countries like the United States. However, two dominant parties, namely Democrat Party and Pheu Thai Party (along with its predecessors), consistently played significant roles in Thai politics, with their impact and relevance varying over time. In the 2000s, Thailand's last four elections – in 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2011 – each featured a face-off between the longstanding

Democrat Party and a pro-Thaksin rival, suggesting that a de facto two-party system had taken root (McCargo & Chattharakul, 2020).

**(1) Democrat Party**

Established in 1946, the Democrat Party is Thailand's oldest political party. It has a long history and has often represented the interests of the urban middle class, especially in Bangkok and the southern provinces. Key issues for the party include constitutional monarchy, free-market policies, and decentralized governance. The party has often been associated with royalist elements (Laothamatas, 1996).

**(2) Pheu Thai Party and its predecessor parties**

The Pheu Thai Party is relatively younger but has been a dominant force in Thai politics, especially in the 21st century. It can trace its lineage to earlier parties associated with Thaksin Shinawatra, a telecommunications tycoon who became prime minister. These parties, including the Thai Rak Thai Party and the People's Power Party, were dissolved due to court orders, leading to the formation of successor parties, with Pheu Thai being the most recent incarnation. Pheu Thai and its predecessors have had strong support in the northern and northeastern regions, advocating for populist policies and a platform that appeals to rural voters (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2009).

**(3) Factors contributing to the demise of the Thailand's dominant traditional parties**

The 2019 election highlighted a significant shift in Thailand's political landscape, revealing key factors that accelerated the erosion of its traditional two-party system. Lertchoosakul (2020) describes that the Democrat Party's decline in popularity was significantly influenced by its departure from advocating electoral democracy to pursuing an undemocratic path to power, particularly during the "yellow-red" political conflicts under Abhisit Vejjajiva's leadership. Aligning with conservative movements and opposing Thaksin, the Democrats campaigned against elections and supported military interventions, alienating many potential voters. In a strategic shift, Abhisit later refused to form a coalition with General Prayut, aiming to attract younger voters disillusioned with military governance. This reversal, however, contributed to the party's electoral defeat, as their traditional base shifted to military-affiliated parties like

Palang Pracharat, while younger voters, still skeptical of the Democrats' commitment to democratic principles, opted for parties with a clear anti-NCPO stance, such as the FFP and Pheu Thai.

Furthermore, the decline in Pheu Thai's votes in recent elections was influenced by several factors. The constitution enacted by the junta disadvantaged large parties, preventing them from achieving overwhelming victories. Pheu Thai's focus on the lower-middle-class demographic restricted its ability to attract new voter groups. The new electoral system, which linked constituency MP votes to party list seats, further disadvantaged parties with broad-based support. To mitigate this, Pheu Thai created the Thai Raksa Chart party to capture more party list seats and as a backup in case of dissolution. Despite their strategic division, Thai Raksa Chart's dissolution left Pheu Thai without the votes from 100 constituencies where it did not field candidates, resulting in Pheu Thai securing 137 constituency seats but no party list seats (Lertchoosakul, 2020).

Additionally, McCargo and Chattharakul (2020) describe several key points. Firstly, the new voting system could unfairly punish successful parties by denying them party-list seats, as seen with the Pheu Thai Party. Secondly, this was not just a typical Democrat-Pheu Thai competition; the well-funded Palang Pracharat Party, aligned with the NCPO, emerged as a significant contender. Traditional voters who backed the junta now shifted their support from anti-Thaksin Democrats to Palang Pracharat, wanting General Prayuth to stay as prime minister. Thirdly, Thaksin's influence had waned after spending over a decade away from Thailand, and disagreements arose among his followers. Last but not least, the FFP, a new party with youthful and dynamic leadership that expressed unequivocal and principled opposition to the junta, could prove popular with some sections of the electorate. This appeal may have caused Pheu Thai's votes to be shared more significantly with the FFP.

The factors mentioned earlier contributed to an increasing number of people who are independent of any particular political party, especially traditional ones. The decline or weakening of dominant parties often leaves a political vacuum. Populist parties, with their mass appeal and promise of addressing common

people's concerns, can step in to fill this void, appealing to disaffected voters who feel underserved by the traditional parties.

## 3.3 Supply Side of Populism

In the quest to comprehend populism from a supply-side perspective, the way the FFP capitalized on the underlying forces of Thailand, especially during the Prayuth government (2014-2019), will be explored through their political discourse and proposed policies.

### 3.3.1 Populism: Pitting the people against the elites

To see through the lens of populism, the first step is identifying "the people" and "the elites." As noted by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), the definition of "the people" is fluid and can be reinterpreted by any populist party. While "elites" often refers to the political establishment, the term can also encompass economic, cultural, and media elites in a wider context. All in all, the FFP had its own way of the formulation of "the people" and "the elites."

#### 3.3.1.1 The elites

Future Forward Party is a collectivity of people who share the same dream – the dream of a much better society. Future Forward is a collectivity of people who are not content with the current state of structural injustice. We are saying, this is the time of change. This is the time to deal with structural injustice in our society. When Future Forward talks about structural injustice, we are talking about monopoly capitalism, the army chiefs who are hostile towards democracy. We are talking about a bureaucratic state and its centralization of power. Everybody, it is time because we cannot let Thailand continue like this. Today, Thailand must change. Use one opportunity on 24 March. One vote, one voice. Use our (voting) power to change Thailand, walking forward together!

– Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit

10 March 2019

The Standard Debate

McCargo and Chattharakul (2020) reference the above speech by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, delivered two weeks before election day during a debate hosted by *The Standard,* a leading online media organization. His words shed light on the elite's definition, pinpointing three main pillars of structural injustice that the FFP aimed to address: (1) monopoly capitalism, (2) army chiefs resistant to democracy, and (3) a centralized bureaucratic state.

Given the FFP's strong emphasis on digital engagement with its constituencies, the most appropriate starting point for investigating how the FFP formulated "the elites" by exploiting underlying forces before the 2019 national election is the party's official website and YouTube channel. Taking a closer look at the party's online presence is not merely about observing what they have posted on the internet. It is also about understanding the intelligent and subtle ways the FFP has used to build, strengthen, and disseminate its political narratives and beliefs to online users. The official website and videos on their YouTube channel, which discuss their policy proposals against monopoly capitalism, army chiefs hostile to democracy, and a centralized bureaucratic state, are not just sources of information; they are also crucial tools that the FFP uses to shape public perception, connect with voters, and share their political views and plans. Furthermore, interviews and speeches by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the leader of the FFP, will also be examined to identify correlations and consistency with the content presented on their official website and YouTube channel.

### (1) Monopoly capitalism

Thailand's economic situation is briefly explained in the official website (Future Forward Party, n.d.-b). It states that Since 1957, Thailand has implemented national economic development plans, elevating its status from a low-income to a middle-income country over six decades. Despite this growth, the nation faces structural issues like economic inequality, wealth disparity, reduced global competitiveness, and environmental degradation. These problems have led to a monopolized local market, controlled by a few suppliers and manufacturers.

In an exclusive interview with the Bangkok Post, Thanathorn delved deeper into the issues of economic inequality and wealth disparity in Thailand, highlighting them as critical concerns. He articulated, "We are planning to

abolish the tax schemes that give the rich significantly lower effective rates of personal and corporate taxes...by reducing the tax privilege schemes for the rich, we are talking about 200 billion baht in [additional] tax collection." He further commented, "And the number of people who own a house worth 50 million baht in Thailand – I don't know, maybe, what, 10,000 people? Even less than that. The current tax on land and houses does not have an effect." (Kendall, 2019) Moreover, Thanathorn reiterated his concerns over Thailand's economic disparities during the Economist Impact Events (2019). He referenced a 2018 report from Credit Suisse, a reputable bank, that underscored Thailand's extreme wealth gap, identified as the worst globally. According to the report, the wealthiest 1 percent controlled 67 percent of the country's wealth, marking a more severe disparity than in 2016, when Thailand was ranked third worst, following Russia and India.

The sentiment against monopoly capitalism was reinforced by the interview with Asia Times on November 14, 2019, when asked "Do you agree that the previous and current governments' policies favor a handful of big business families while failing to address the nation's wealth divide?" Thanathorn replied "Oh definitely. I totally agree many sectors of our economy are still under oligopolistic or monopolistic structures. Too many sectors. It gives a few families in Thailand rent-seeking opportunities to create an enormous amount of wealth. That much is clear, that much is known…. If you look at the past coup d'état, these big families were always behind them. So, I think it goes hand-in-hand when it comes to reducing the gap between the rich and the poor, democracy and demilitarization." (Crispin, 2019).

**Strategies to overcome Thai economic inequality**

A video on the FFP's YouTube channel (Anakot Mai [อนาคตใหม่] – Future Forward, 2018c), introducing its policy to eliminate monopoly capitalism presented by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, proposes a set of anti-monopoly capitalism policies. it explores deeper into Thailand's longstanding economic problem. Historically, the nation's vast resources have predominantly been channeled to benefit a select few, leaving the majority on the margins. Addressing this economic disparity, four strategies were put forth. First, Strengthening Market

Competition Laws: While Thailand is not lacking in market competition laws, their enforcement has been rare. The sway of monopoly capitalism has, in the past, muted the potency of these regulations. Revitalizing their enforcement would curtail the dominance and stimulate a more competitive marketplace. Second, Licensing for Local Banks Outside Bangkok: The financial situation of Thailand showcases an obvious irregularity: a scarcity of banks. With fewer than 20 banks, all headquartered in Bangkok, a significant segment of the population remains financially underserved. By encouraging the establishment of banks outside the capital, not only is financial inclusivity enhanced, but local entrepreneurs also gain better access to credit. This notion is underscored by the fact that all of Thailand's top 50 business magnates, as listed by Forbes, operate from Bangkok. Third, Revising Laws Favoring Monopoly Capitalism: Some of Thailand's legislative frameworks inadvertently promote monopolistic tendencies. For instance, the alcohol production law places financial barriers for newcomers, especially smaller entities. Reevaluating and amending such laws can democratize the business landscape. Lastly, Transparent and Fair Government Concession Auctions: A significant chunk of monopolistic power in Thailand stems from government concessions in sectors like television, radio, duty-free, and other public services. Instilling transparency and fairness in these auctions can break the stranglehold of a few and allow for a broader participation. In essence, the FFP's perspective is not against capitalism per se. Instead, it underscores the need for a more equitable distribution of opportunities. They posit that by empowering local businesses at the national level, Thai capitalists will be better positioned to make a mark on the global stage.

**Attempt to distinguish himself from the elites**

Interestingly, Thanathorn, who led Thai Summit Group, a family-owned auto supply company until early 2018, has also attempted to differentiate himself from the so-called elites. This was highlighted in an exclusive interview with Khaosod English (Charuvastra, 2018). He argued that his affluent background should not disqualify him from speaking on behalf of the common people. "I am not part of any term you might use: the elite, the ammart, the moneyed class, the

1 percent... Having wealth and having privilege are different things." Additionally, he asserted that he came from a "new money" background and does not consider himself a member of the traditional elite. The sentiment is reciprocated, he added. "I started to feel that I'm wealthier than the average of my classmates when I was in junior high," he said. "That was when my parents started trying to be "One of Them." They tried entering that circle. But my dad left school when he was in the fourth grade. He went to a fancy dinner, and there were eight spoons in front of him. He did not know what to do." Thanathorn noted that the nouveau riche, who have earned their wealth, should not be equated with those who inherited theirs. "When they look at us, they do so with derision. They say to each other, "These people are just merchants." They insult us," he said. "We have the money, but we do not have big family names they do."

**Through the lens of populism: Against monopoly capitalism**

As mentioned in the analysis on the demand side, the Thai economy continued to gradually grow despite the long-lasting political uncertainty. However, the economic inequality in Thailand still persisted. As a result, in their proposed economic policy and Thanathorn's narratives against monopoly capitalism, the FFP capitalizes on this current by proposing to promote a more equitable and efficient market. This aligns with the narrative that Thailand's resources have been distributed to favor a select few while the majority remains marginalized fits this mold. Once again, the "elite" in this context can be inferred as the monopolistic capitalists and those who benefit from laws favoring monopoly capitalism.

Significantly, the advocacy for measures and laws in favor of a fairer redistribution of economic opportunities aligns perfectly with the inclusionary category of populism on the material dimension. Specifically, local and small-sized entrepreneurs, who were previously discriminated against due to long-established patterns favoring large firms, are the target group for this inclusion.

**(2) Army Chief hostile towards democracy**

Using different sources, we get a clear idea of what the FFP wanted. Futurista's Guide[2] (Future Forward Party, n.d.-f) and the vision of the FFP shown in the official website (Future Forward Party, n.d.-h) tells us they aimed to bring back true democracy and lessen the army's role in politics, especially after the events in 2014. Between April and October 2018, all seven official messages from their website (Future Forward Party, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e, 2018f, 2018g) show their disagreement with the top powers in the country and their push for more democracy. A video on YouTube by a key party member talks about the army's many takeovers in the past and suggests ways to limit their power (Anakot Mai [อนาคตใหม่] - Future Forward, 2018a). Thanathorn's interviews consistently highlight the accusation that the military is to blame for the years Thailand spent without democracy. All these sources show the party's goal to make Thailand more democratic and to challenge old power systems.

**Mission to reunify Thai people: Against the military's strategy to divide and conquer mission to reunify Thai people**

From the FFP's perspective, the military has been a persistent barrier to democracy in Thailand. In an interview with Thai PBS World (2018), Thanathorn articulated, "Our (FFP) message resonates with the people—those who are fed up with the current state of Thai politics, those who are yearning for change and hope. In my lifetime, I have witnessed five coups. Our message is clear: "No more coups," "enough is enough." People have recognized that military interventions do not resolve our issues." He also criticized the military's tactics of the so-called "Divide and Conquer," "They marginalize minorities and demonize politicians, portraying them as the root of the problems and themselves as the saviors. They want us to believe that democracy is the issue and dictatorship is the solution. Yet, if military interventions were successful in tackling problems like corruption, Thailand would be the cleanest country in the world by now." Acknowledging the imperfections in Thailand's

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[2] available for download on the Future Forward Party official website. it serves as a comprehensive manual. This guide sheds light on various facets of the FUTURE FORWARD PARTY such as its suggested political framework, foundational values, vision, mission, and guiding principles.

democracy, Thanathorn emphasized the military's role in deepening these flaws. He expressed a commitment to challenging any forces that obstruct democratic progress, especially those benefiting from the status quo under the conservative regime.

At the Concordia Annual Summit in New York (Concordia, 2018), Thanathorn, again, challenged the military's assertion that democracy was problematic, as exemplified by the Red-Yellow Shirt conflict, which served as a pretext for the latest coup. The FFP rejects this narrative, attributing the real issue to a clique of influential families allied with the military, monopolizing power and wealth. This elite group perpetuates the Red-Yellow Shirt conflict to legitimize their power grabs and distract from their corruption, employing a divide-and-conquer strategy. Despite being labeled minorities, groups like LGBTQ individuals, farmers, and workers constitute the majority.

Furthermore, Thanathorn seized numerous occasions to voice the escalating dissatisfaction among the public toward the military and to strengthen the campaign against military figures who oppose democratic values. This is evidenced by the following remarks:

- He declared, "I believe that they [the military-backed government] cannot resist the wind of change forever. Walk on the streets and you will hear people expressing their dissatisfaction with the government" ("Thai Opposition Leader," 2019).

- "I said last year that I knew I had to fight the dictatorship and I was quite certain I would face legal action" (The Nation, 2019).

- During an interview with NBC News' Andrea Mitchell, Thanathorn discussed his aspirations for Thailand's democratic evolution. He initiated the dialogue by addressing the chronic issue of military intrusion in Thai politics, underscoring the establishment of the FFP as a step towards eradicating such meddling ("Future Forward's," 2019).

Within the context of the FFP's objective to unify the Thai populace against authoritarian rule and diminish military sway in the nation's political landscape, Thanathorn articulated a vital message during his interaction with Bloomberg Television (2019): "To eradicate the coup culture in Thailand, the country needs a new political will and a clear destination." He further detailed this vision in

a discussion with The Star (2019), presenting a concrete future trajectory for Thailand over the next two decades: "We need to democratize, demilitarize, and decentralize". Moreover, the Futurista's Guide (Future Forward Party, n.d.-g) and Our vision section on the FFP's official website (Future Forward Party, n.d.-h) also emphasize that the democracy was purportedly hijacked by the then junta government following the 2014 coup, stemming from a decade-long crisis of pro and anti-Thaksin factions and his subsequent supporters. The crisis allowed a military dictatorship to take advantage of Thai people and remain in power for a long time. However, over time, the military government's self-proclaimed role as a political conflict mediator has diminished in credibility. Conversely, the discontentment among various Thai demographics intensified.

### Official statements against dictatorship

Upon examining all 7 press releases and statements from the party's official website (Future Forward Party, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e, 2018f, 2018g), dated between April 2018 and October 2018, it is evident that each one underscores the narrative of the people versus the elite. Three explicitly criticize the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), an embodiment of "elite" power, consisting of military and police chiefs, imposing restrictive laws and regulations that hinder the democratic process and silence new political voices. Two releases emphasize the FFP's vision for Thailand's transformation. The remaining two express solidarity with supporters who have faced intimidation from government officials.

In particular, the party consistently challenges the legitimacy and actions of existing authorities (such as the NCPO), criticizes delays and perceived injustices in the political process, and speaks against intimidation tactics used by state officers. They frame themselves as defenders of democratic rights and freedoms, standing against an oppressive status quo.

### Towards the goal of reforming the military

A video presented by Pongsakorn Rodchomphu, the then deputy leader of the Future Forward Party, (Anakot Mai [อนาคตใหม่] - Future Forward, 2018a) offers insights into the party's view of army chiefs who have historically been against democracy. The video emphasizes that, over the past 86 years, Thailand has

faced numerous coups and rebellions. On average, the country has seen a coup every 6 years, a new constitution every 4 years, and a change in prime minister every 3 years. There has only been a decade-long stretch that can genuinely be referred to as a democratic era in Thailand. The consistent interference of the military has hindered Thailand's progress. Historically, military regimes have resulted in increased inequality, poverty, and curtailed freedoms. The video proposes military reforms such as reducing general positions, limiting weapon acquisitions, and ending conscription. The goal is to ensure that the military truly represents the interests of the Thai people.

This ambition for military reform was further underscored in Thanathorn's interview with Kendall (2019) from the Bangkok Post. He advocated for cutting military expenditures and the number of generals, abolishing conscription, and expanding the welfare system. Thanathorn articulated that confronting the military establishment, which has instigated 19 coups—12 of them successful—since the inception of the constitutional monarchy in 1932, is the party's foremost objective. "Future Forward has a policy to relegate coups d'état to history," he stated. "We aim to affirm that civilian governance supersedes the military. With approximately 1,400 generals, Thailand has more than nearly any other nation globally...we aim to downsize the army. We're discussing almost 400,000 officers...we plan to halve this number. We advocate for transparent military spending under civilian oversight and intend to abolish mandatory conscription."

Echoed in Thanathorn's dialogue with Crispin (2019) from Asia Times, he addresses Thailand's uncomfortable realities: "At 40, I have already experienced four military coups. Hence, we strive to terminate this relentless cycle of coups and elections to foster a lasting democracy in Thailand. Achieving this necessitates military reform and the demilitarization of society."

**Through the lens of populism: Against Army Chiefs hostile towards democracy**

To put this into a populism context, the frequency of coups, changes in the constitution, and turnover of prime ministers, as presented, suggest a state of continual crisis. Populism often thrives in environments where there is a perceived crisis, as it gives populist leaders a platform to promise radical change or a return to a perceived "golden age" (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). The short-lived

democratic era in Thailand resonates with populist ideals. Populist movements often emphasize a return to genuine democracy, implying that current systems or elites have corrupted or hijacked the true democratic process. The military reforms suggested in the video and Thanathorn's interviews, such as reducing general positions and ending conscription, can be seen as populist measures aimed at redistributing power from "the elite" (in this case, the military) back to "the people." Limiting weapon acquisitions can also be perceived as an attempt to curb the power of this elite.

Importantly, the goal of bringing Thailand back to the democratic track is to give voice to the disregarded groups whose full political participation and representation were curtailed by the military government. This further emphasizes the FFP's inclination towards inclusionary populism on the political dimension.

Moreover, the FFP capitalized on the prevailing political uncertainties in Thai politics as well as the growing sense of voicelessness among the public, which were both caused by frequent military interventions in politics, limiting people's democratic rights. This was reinforced by a political void resulting from the crumbling de facto two-party system on the demand side. While acknowledging that political divisions are typical in any democracy, the party stressed the importance of the Thai populace remaining unified in their collective aim of improving society for current and future generations. As a result, the FFP presents itself as a fresh political entity, chiefly focused on reinstating democracy in Thailand and ensuring that all perspectives are considered in a truly democratic manner.

### (3) Centralized bureaucratic state

The FFP's emphasis on shifting power from the central government to local administrative organizations was shared in both the official website (Future Forward Party, n.d.-d) and policies introduction video on the YouTube channel (Anakot Mai [อนาคตใหม่] – Future Forward, 2018b).

### Five pillars and eight-step roadmap

In a video posted on the FFP's YouTube Channel (Anakot Mai [อนาคตใหม่] – Future Forward, 2018b), Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, who was then the Secretary-General of the FFP, proposed a set of decentralization policies based

on five fundamental pillars. To begin with, he asserted the significance of the electoral process at the local level, emphasizing that local governments ought to be elected by their immediate constituents. The second pillar was the belief that local administrative affairs should be the prerogative of local entities, fostering a sense of community-based governance. However, in practice, there have been significant instances where the central government intervened in these affairs. The third principle advocated for financial autonomy. Local governments should have the discretion to manage and allocate their budgets, thereby tailoring their expenditure to their unique needs. His fourth point is about human resources. Local governments, according to Piyabutr, should be able to recruit and oversee their staff, even though historically they have been allocated a limited number of staff compared to the central bureaucracy. The final pillar, though advocating for the independence of local entities, also underscored the necessity for checks and balances. He posited that the central bureaucracy's oversight ensures that local operations adhere to national legal frameworks.

     Piyabutr's analysis comes against a backdrop of Thailand's swaying between decentralization and centralization. Post the adoption of the 1997 constitution, which leaned towards decentralization, a set of complementary laws were framed. Yet, the 2006 coup stifled this momentum. The situation was exacerbated post the May 2014 coup when the pendulum swung back towards centralization. Consequently, Piyabutr proposed an eight-step roadmap for decentralization as follows. This began with the call to overturn the regulations of the NCPO—an entity that issued 19 laws stymieing decentralization efforts, notably curtailing local elections and impeding local governments. He further suggested embedding decentralization's core tenets within the constitution, revitalizing local government elections, and delineating the overlapping authorities of local and central administrations. He also pushed for augmenting the budgetary allocation and staffing for local governments. His proposals extended to upgrading specific provinces to specialized local administrative units and revising the oversight mechanism of the central government, which is to make it more difficult for central bureaucracy to intervene in local affairs, as well as local people participation over local administration.

**Through the lens of populism: Against centralized bureaucratic state**

Populism often support the idea that the "ordinary people" should have a voice in governance, as opposed to a centralized authority which might be perceived as elitist. By promoting comprehensive decentralization, the party taps into the populist idea of giving power back to the people at a more local and accessible level. Advocating for local residents to elect their governments as well as autonomy in local administrations of local governments, Piyabutr places emphasis on direct democracy, which is fundamental to populism. This ensures that the needs and wants of local communities are prioritized over the decisions of a centralized bureaucracy, perceived as an elite in the FFP's political discourse, that might be out of touch with their realities. Ultimately, his emphasis on local governance, decentralization of power, and active public participation reflects a desire to prioritize the needs and voices of the majority over centralized or elite-driven decision-making processes.

Clearly, the proposed set of decentralizing policies addresses two dimensions of inclusionary populism: material and political. From a material standpoint, both monetary resources, such as local government budgets, and non-monetary resources, like the autonomy of local governments to manage their affairs and human capital, are redirected toward local communities that were previously given lower priority. Furthermore, the heightened political participation of local residents in their local affairs enhances both political participation and representation, aspects that had been historically overlooked by the central bureaucracy.

### 3.3.1.2 The people

A direct reflection of this populist sentiment can be found in the introductory statement of the FFP's official website: "The future we aspire to is a future where the ultimate power truly belongs to the people" (Future Forward Party, n.d.-f). While the term "the people" is invoked, its precise definition remains ambiguous, which might be intentional to appeal to a broader audience or to maintain flexibility in interpretation.

This ambiguity is somewhat clarified in a speech by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit on 10 March 2019 at the Standard Debate. The

definition of the people was formulated around the idea of a collectivity of people with a shared dream of a better society and not content with the structural injustice with its three pillars of monopoly capitalism, army chiefs resistant to democracy, and a centralized bureaucratic state. This has been reinforced by the suggestion of Rangsiman Rome, a leading figure of the FFP, that voters supported the party because they had confidence in the brand and the product the party presented, which are all about opposing military interventions, objecting to sectors of the economy being controlled by privileged insider cliques, and wanting the public sector to address the needs of ordinary people (McCargo & Chattharakul, 2020). Nevertheless, as political discourses and proposed policies of the FFP emphasize mainly being up against the military government and its economic as well as public mismanagement, for many Thai voters, the FFP's branding can be minimized to, to a certain extent, the representation of strong opposition to the continuation of General Prayuth's premiership.

Despite the efforts to include as many people as possible under the previously mentioned idea of a collectivity of people, Thanathorn himself acknowledged in his Bloomberg Television (2019) interview that "securing support from all groups of Thai people is unfeasible. Although we aspire to win the hearts and minds of all Thai people, the limited timeframe compels us to primarily target the educated and urban younger generation below 45 years of age."

**Through the lens of populism: Definition of the people**

Regarding this, the FFP has once again showcased a crucial aspect of inclusionary populism. On the symbolic dimension, people are broadly identified as a collective with a shared dream of a better society, united in their discontent with structural injustice. This definition underscores unity, diversity, and solidarity among various groups within society. The narrative seeks to encompass as many groups as possible under this definition.

### 3.3.2 Norm interpretation aspect of the FFP

Theoretically, populism can appear in various democratic settings, but due to the lack of a basic ideological foundation, it often pairs with larger ideologies, as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) pointed out. This suggests that populism coexists with the larger ideological structure of the FFP.

### 3.3.2.1 The Coexistence with Liberal Democracy

> "…After all, Mr. Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit and company's actions are the honest expression of opinions and, regarding the constitution, the rightful exercise of liberty. The persecution from NCPO, nevertheless, has not affected our political stance which advocates liberal democracy and opposes any form of dictatorship…"

> Future Forward Party
>
> 31 July 2018

The statement from the FFP (Future Forward Party, 2018b) touches upon several key elements central to political discussions, notably liberal democracy. The party's emphasis on "liberal democracy" indicates an alignment with principles such as individual rights, freedom of speech, and rule of law. Populist movements, while varied in nature, sometimes challenge established systems by claiming the systems do not truly represent the will of the people. By asserting their commitment to liberal democracy, it seems that the FFP was trying to assure the public of their dedication to these foundational democratic principles.

Exploring deeper into this ideological structure, it becomes essential to distinguish between democracy—a concept rooted in popular sovereignty and majority rule that can manifest in myriad forms, such as direct, indirect, liberal, or illiberal—and liberal democracy. The latter is characterized as a political regime, which not only respects popular sovereignty and majority rule, but also establishes independent institutions specialized in the protection of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression and the protection of minorities.

### 3.3.2.2 The coexistence with direct democracy

The discourse and policy proposals of the FFP shed light on the nuances of this dynamic. The party's pronounced endorsement of direct democracy is evident in their frequent references within their political narratives. The Futurista's Guide (Future Forward Party, n.d.-e), along with their statement from 1 October 2018 (Future Forward Party, 2018g), emphasizes their preference for direct democracy "within" the party's operation. However, the introduction of Open Government Policy on the website (Future Forward Party, n.d.-f), with its objective to push for public sector

information to be accessible by the public and promote public participation and direct democracy, blurs the distinction between intra-party operations and broader societal governance. This suggests a potential extension of the party's advocacy beyond its internal confines to the wider society.

In this light, populism operates on the basis of a dichotomy between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite." This narrative posits that traditional representative structures fail to capture the will of the people accurately, making direct democracy an attractive proposition (Mudde, 2004). In this regard, direct democracy is perceived in two distinct ways. On one hand, it is considered a challenge to representative democracy because it offers a mechanism that allows citizens to bypass traditional legislative processes. On the other hand, it is viewed as a potent means of increasing citizen participation, fostering a more engaged citizenry, and encouraging effective and transparent governance. This dual nature highlights direct democracy's capacity to both disrupt conventional political structures and enhance the democratic process by empowering individuals to contribute more directly to decision-making that affects their lives and societies. In other words, while it empowers the citizenry to have a direct hand in policy-making, it also raises concerns about the potential pitfalls of unchecked majoritarianism against traditional political institutions and the minority (Abts & Rummens, 2007).

### 3.3.2.3 Interplay between liberalism and direct democracy in FFP

To fully appreciate the role of direct democracy within a liberal framework, one must delve into the essence of liberalist thought. Liberalism, at its core, upholds the idea that individuals are free and autonomous, responsible for knowing what is best for themselves, their community, and society as a whole (Altman, 2010). The fundamental principles of liberalism emphasize the protection of individual rights and freedoms, placing constraints on the majority's power to ensure these rights are safeguarded. This is achieved through a system of checks and balances, independent institutions, and the rule of law. Such principles often prioritize governance that balances majority rule with minority rights, hence the preference for representative democracy in many liberal democracies.

When the FFP advocates for direct democracy, it presents a potential contrast against this liberal backdrop. Direct democracy, in its purest form,

translates to rule by the majority where decisions are made directly by the populace without the mediation of representatives. While this might seem as the ultimate realization of people's power and an extension of individual autonomy, it also brings with it the potential risks associated with majoritarianism. In essence, without proper safeguards, direct democracy can potentially undermine the very principles of liberalism if the majority's decisions impinge upon the rights of the minority or individual freedoms (Altman, 2010).

This creates a complex dynamic, especially for the FFP, which might find themselves navigating the delicate balance between advocating for a system that gives direct power to the people, while also ensuring that the foundational principles of liberalism, such as protection of individual rights and freedoms, are not compromised. This raises the nuanced interplay between direct democracy and liberal thought with their complex relationship.
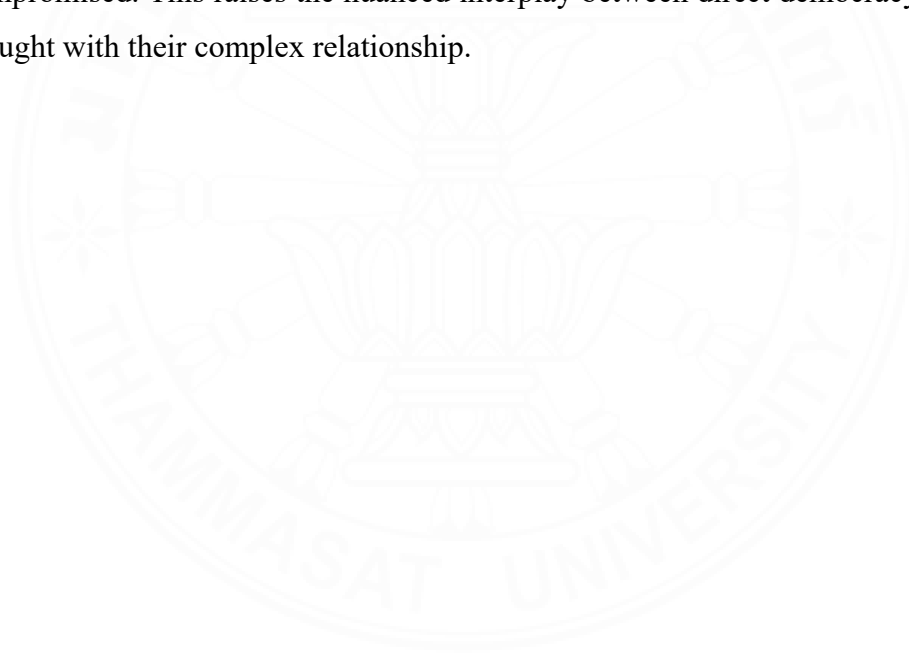
# CHAPTER 4

# A COMPARATIVE INVESTIGATION ON DIGITAL STATEGIES
# OF FUTURE FORWARD PARTY AND FIVE STAR MOVEMENT

The previous chapter analyzed the FFP's political discourses and proposed policies through the lens of populism, considering both the demand and supply sides. It highlighted the interplay between liberalism and direct democracy as the foundational ideology shaping the FFP's populist stance, suggesting a synergy between liberal and direct democracy within the party's framework.

This chapter aims to delve deeper into the FFP's adoption of direct democracy, scrutinizing the Open Government Initiative alongside its online interaction platforms. By drawing parallels with the FSM's Rousseau platform—a pioneering digital platform in FSM's early parliamentary endeavors—the chapter intends to explore the FFP's interpretation of direct democracy by digital strategies. The comparison is particularly given both parties' emphasis on direct engagement with their constituents through digital means, and their self-identification as digitally-native parties. Interestingly, this correlation is enriched by Piyabutr Saengkanokkul's reference to the FSM's youth engagement tactics (Wongratanawin, 2018) making a comparative analysis especially insightful.

The study will engage in a detailed examination of the application of digital democracy, specifically utilizing the Fuller Democracy model along with the contributions of other scholars in the field. The analysis will concentrate on two main areas: the ideologies underpinning the digital platforms of both the FFP and the FSM and the operational features of these platforms. This thorough exploration is designed to illuminate the effectiveness of these platforms in fulfilling the parties' objective to enhance direct communication with constituents via digital means which is considered one of prominent characteristics of a populist party.

## 4.1 The Rise of Five Star Movement

The rise of the Five Star Movement (FSM) in Italy is deeply rooted in a broader context of political, social, and economic discontent that had been brewing for

decades, as described in works by Lanzone and Woods (2015). Starting in the 1980s, Italy experienced a growing crisis of political representation, with traditional parties like the Christian Democrats (DC) and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) losing their grip on Italian politics. By the early 1990s, the postwar party system had undergone significant erosion. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of communism led to the transformation of the PCI, while the DC was hit hard by the "Mani Pulite" (Clean Hands) corruption investigations. Italy's economic challenges, including high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth, exacerbated social discontent. The global financial crisis of 2008 further strained Italy's economy, leading to deeply unpopular austerity measures. Many Italians felt that the existing political establishment was unable to address these economic issues effectively. By the late 2000s, disillusionment with traditional political parties had reached new heights. Scandals and perceived corruption within both left and right political spectrums contributed to a widespread feeling of betrayal among voters, fueling a deep mistrust in the political class.

Populism as a political strategy gained traction in Italy, as it did in many parts of Europe. Populist leaders capitalized on the growing resentment towards elites and the sense of non-representation among the public, politicizing issues of corruption, economic inequality, and national sovereignty. The advent of the internet and social media provided new tools for political mobilization. Beppe Grillo, a comedian and activist, utilized his blog and social media platforms to reach a broad audience, bypassing traditional media channels. Grillo's blog became a focal point for political discourse and organization, allowing him to build a substantial following. In this context, the FSM was officially founded in 2009 (Lanzone & Woods, 2015).

The FSM's advocacy extended to comprehensive reforms, including anti-corruption initiatives, efficient tax collection, stringent environmental protection, and expanded national internet access, reflecting a progressive stance in national debates. The internet played a critical role in amplifying the FSM's populist movement, allowing for direct, unmediated communication with the populace. Madhi (2014) emphasized how the FSM's online strategies prioritized the wisdom of the "ordinary man," fostering a generational conflict aimed at creating a new political order. Rooted in direct democracy principles like "one is worth one," the FSM's philosophy positioned the

political caste as the "enemy of the people" and declared that "parties are dead." Consequently, the FSM's efforts focused on challenging established political norms and elites, envisioning a world where politicians are accountable to the citizenry. The FSM's achievements stemmed from a blend of charismatic leadership and widespread grassroots disillusionment, frustration, and distrust towards the political elite.

## 4.2 The Parallel Paths of the Future Forward Party and Five Star Movement

Both the FFP and FSM capitalized on the potential of digital strategies to circumvent traditional political media and engage directly with a young, digital-native electorate. The FFP's digital-first approach was pivotal in communicating its message of military reduction, conscription ending, and advocating for social and economic reforms, resonating with a populace disenchanted with the status quo (McCargo & Chattharakul, 2020). Similarly, the FSM's inception from Grillo's blog and subsequent use of the internet for political mobilization allowed for the dissemination of anti-establishment narratives and a direct dialogue with the electorate, positioning politicians as servants to the populace (Madhi, 2014).

Both parties demonstrated a successful use of digital platforms to facilitate political change, reflecting a global shift in political operations. The FFP, despite its short-lived existence, left a lasting impact on Thai politics, showing the effectiveness of digital media in political campaigns. On the other hand, the FSM's rise to a dominant position in the Italian Parliament by the 2018 elections underscored a generational struggle against traditional politics, aiming to establish a direct democracy ethos (Bassini, 2019).

The FSM's "catch-all" populist strategy redefined political divisions and aligned with broader populist movements across Europe, offering an alternative to the elitist perceptions of traditional political parties (Lanzone & Woods, 2015). Despite their different trajectories, both parties underscore a critical aspect of modern populism: the use of digital tools not only to communicate a message but also to build a movement grounded in the broader discontent with existing political elites and structures.

**4.3 Underlying Ideology of Open Government Initiative Online Platforms of FFP and Rousseau Platform of the Five Star Movement**

In this section, we delve into the ideological foundations of the Open Government Initiative's online platforms of the FFP and the Rousseau platform of the FSM. These digital initiatives represent distinct visions for integrating technology with political processes to enhance governmental transparency and public engagement. The FFP's initiative, born out of a commitment to direct democracy, aspires to create an open data ecosystem where public sector transparency is the norm and citizen participation is not just welcomed but integral to governance. This system is designed to empower Thai citizens, encouraging active engagement and monitoring in political processes. The Rousseau platform, drawing its inspiration from the democratic philosophies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, seeks to break down the barriers of traditional representative democracy by enabling citizens to actively contribute to the legislative process, embodying the FSM's ethos of digital utopianism. This comparative analysis aims to unravel how each initiative interprets the concept of open government and digital democracy, and to evaluate their potential to reshape the political landscape by placing power back into the hands of the citizenry. Through this investigation, we explore the theoretical and practical implications of these initiatives and their capacity to forge a more inclusive and accountable democratic future.

**4.3.1 Open government initiative of the FFP**

The initiative serves as a cornerstone for the FFP to engage with the wider public. It allows citizens to monitor their Members of Parliament's activities, including profiles, interests, attendance, voting records, and parliamentary discussions. Additionally, the initiative provides a mechanism for logging public issues for investigation and for tracking the progress of these inquiries (McCargo & Chattharakul, 2020). Accordingly, this interactive endeavor is materialized into Open FWP Project and Futurecommunity.co, aimed at promoting transparency in MPs' work.

To fully understand the logics behind Open Government Initiative, it is useful to trace its origins. Broadly speaking, Open Government Initiative can be considered an extension of Open Government Policy, one of the flagship policies of FFP that is briefly described on the website emphasizing transparency, public participation, and

efficient governance with its long-term aim to digitally publish public sector data, disclose state agencies' financial details, and streamline access to state news while safeguarding privacy (Future Forward Party, n.d.-f). The FFP intends for Thailand to boost IT in the public sector and align with global democratic standards. They emphasize equal information access, development of a public data center, and collaboration across government, private, and civic sectors. Their ultimate goal is to enhance direct democracy, facilitating public involvement in essential decisions and budgeting.

The policy has been further elaborated by A video published on the FFP's YouTube channel, presented by Klaikong Vaidhyakarn, a leading figure in digital initiatives for the FFP, detailed a significant policy proposition (Anakot Mai [อนาคตใหม่] - Future Forward, 2018d). His presentation highlighted the stark issue of corruption in Thailand, citing an annual loss of over 200 billion Baht due to inadequate monitoring systems.

In response, the FFP proposes a transformative approach: establishing an open data system that empowers public participation in monitoring. Drawing inspiration from Slovakia's successful overhaul, which went from being one of the most corrupt in Europe to having the most transparent procurement data which, in turn, improved the corruption situation in Slovakia, the FFP envisions a similar trajectory for Thailand. The plan includes making procurement information publicly accessible online, thereby enabling Thai citizens to effectively oversee national and local expenditures. Furthermore, the policy underscores the need for robust legal protections for whistleblowers, asserting that the freedom to question the government is not merely a right but a cornerstone of democracy that amplifies public power. The FFP's principle that ultimate authority resides with the people is echoed in the proposed system. The model adopted by Paris serves as another benchmark, where residents have a say in the allocation of tax revenue through a participatory platform. Citizens propose projects that, after a vetting process, are put to a public vote, with the winning initiatives being implemented locally. This approach is seen as a blueprint for fostering a sense of ownership among Thai citizens, urging them to engage more actively in governance, particularly in the scrutiny of tax expenditure. The FFP's policy thus aspires to cultivate a culture of civic engagement and responsibility in financial governance, rooted in the

belief that such empowerment can lead to significant strides in combating corruption and enhancing transparency.

The connection between the Open Government Initiative and the Open Government policy is not explicitly established; however, given their shared principles, the Open Government Initiative could be regarded as a preliminary implementation of the Open Government policy.

On July 31, 2019, the FFP published a YouTube video documenting their press conference held at the party's headquarters (Anakot Mai [อนาคตใหม่] - Future Forward, 2019). This event marked the launch of the Open Government Initiative, which consisted of the Open FWP Project section on the FFP's official website and Futurecommunity.co, underpinned by a set of principles. According to Piyabutr, the project is held under five foundational principles designed to uphold the integrity and responsiveness of the Future Forward Party (FFP): (1) Commitment to Election Campaign Policies: The FFP pledges to remain true to the policies it advocated for during the election campaign, ensuring that its platform is not just rhetoric but a plan of action. (2) Accountability to Supporters: The party holds itself accountable to the electorate that placed its trust in the FFP, recognizing the responsibility that comes with their support. (3) Consistent Performance by Party Members and Parliamentarians: There is an emphasis on the consistent and diligent work of its party members and elected officials, ensuring that they actively contribute to the party's mission and objectives. (4) Transparency in Party Activities: The FFP is dedicated to transparency across all its operations, allowing the public to fully observe and monitor its internal and external activities. (5) Public Participation in Monitoring Progress: The party encourages active civic engagement, inviting the public to participate in the oversight of its actions and progress. These principles serve to maintain the FFP as an accessible, active political party, ensuring that it operates within the reach of the people, remains answerable to its constituency, and fosters a collaborative relationship between the party and the public.

**4.3.2 Rousseau platform of the Five Star Movement**

At the national level, the FSM did not initially provide physical meeting spaces or political assemblies for its members until 2013. Consequently, members could only engage in the party's activities through Grillo's blog. To introduce digital democratic practices, online ballots were introduced in December 2012, initially restricted to registered users. Starting from October 2013, registered users gained the ability to discuss and amend laws that were being considered in parliament. Following the passing of Gianroberto Casaleggio, the Rousseau platform was launched, incorporating the previous tools. Since the summer of 2016, registered users have also had the opportunity to propose their own laws on the platform. Moreover, since July 2017, non-members have been able to access Rousseau, although they are limited to passive observation and cannot actively participate in the platform (Mosca, 2018).

The Rousseau platform, named after the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was established by the Italy's FSM to foster direct democracy through technology, allowing members to participate actively in the political process (Giacomini, 2022).

The Rousseau platform stands out for its distinct set of ideologies, challenging the conventional norms of representative democracy. Unlike traditional political parties, the FSM deliberately avoids intermediary party structures, considering them inefficient and unnecessary barriers between ordinary citizens and their elected representatives. This unconventional approach is driven by the movement's co-founders, Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio, who sought to establish a direct relationship between citizens and their representatives. This vision is enshrined in the FSM's constitution, granting significant power to its general membership and enabling them to exercise their "sovereign will" through frequent online consultations (Deseriis & Vittori, 2019).

Central to the Rousseau platform's mission is the pursuit of direct democracy, aligning closely with the ideals of Jean-Jacques Rousseau regarding citizen involvement in governance (Lanzone & Woods, 2015). Giacomini (2022) emphasizes in his recent work on To Be or Not to Be "Rousseauian". The Rise and Fall of "Digital Utopianism" in the Five Star Movement the aim of the platform to free citizens from the constraints of representative democracy, offering them a means to directly

participate in political deliberation and decision-making processes. The deliberate choice of the name "Rousseau" for this digital platform holds significant ideological implications. It represents a commitment to realizing the concept of direct democracy through information and communication technologies (ICTs). This choice is rooted in Rousseau's critique of representative democracies, where citizens might believe they are free when voting for representatives but subsequently become "slaves" once those representatives are elected. Significantly, the FSM's vision is centered on open and direct citizen participation, emphasizing that the best way to understand people's desires is to ask them directly.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's doctrine further informs the FSM's ideologies, highlighting the origin of the state from a contract in which individuals surrender unlimited freedom not to submit to a sovereign but to receive the same renunciation from all other citizens. This pact must involve equal individuals and be controlled by the community, not external powers. Within this framework, the direct exercise of power should be entrusted to all citizens collectively, with sovereign power vested in the assembly of the community's members. Laws generated from this assembly prioritize the common good over the interests of specific groups, thereby rejecting the idea that elected representatives can exercise inalienable sovereign power on behalf of citizens. Instead, representatives serve as executors of the people's will, subject to constant monitoring and recall by their constituencies, upholding the concept of an imperative mandate (Giacomini, 2022).

Mosca (2018) further describes that the FSM's strong emphasis on direct democracy is intertwined with its commitment to digital democracy. It views the internet as a "liberation technology," inherently positive and capable of driving progressive change. Additionally, it perceives the internet as a means to transform representative systems into "monitory democracy," characterized by various mechanisms of scrutinizing and monitoring elected representatives beyond elections. The internet is regarded as an instrument for increasing transparency, accountability, and citizen control over political processes. The goal is to create a system where citizens can actively participate in public life without having to delegate authority to a political class, ultimately leading to the potential obsolescence of traditional political parties.

All in all, the FSM's underlying ideologies center on the principles of direct democracy, digital democracy, and the transformative power of the internet. These ideologies are deeply rooted in the movement's commitment to citizen empowerment, transparency, and accountability, with the ultimate goal of creating a political system that minimizes the role of intermediaries and maximizes the direct participation of citizens in decision-making processes (Mosca, 2018; Giacomini, 2022).

### 4.3.3 The parallel ideologies

While both the Open Government Initiative and the Rousseau platform share the goal of enhancing transparency and public participation in governance through digital means, their approaches reflect their unique political and cultural environments.

On the one hand, The FFP's initiative is characterized by its focus on transparency of public sector data, with an aim to boost IT in public governance and foster a participatory culture among citizens. It is a direct response to the challenges of corruption, seeking to create a system where public monitoring is not only possible but encouraged. As a result, a data-driven environment for political accountability is to be established. The FSM's Rousseau platform, on the other hand, emphasizes the concept of direct democracy, allowing members to have a direct say in the legislative process. Therefore, the purpose is more or less to actively transform citizens into law makers. It is grounded in the belief that the internet can democratize political participation and enhance direct citizen involvement in governance, thereby challenging the conventional norms of representative democracy.

Both initiatives strive for a political environment where the power is more evenly distributed among the citizens rather than concentrated in the hands of a few. However, the FFP's approach appears to be more about enhancing the current democratic framework, making it more transparent and accountable as well as aligned with gradual reform focusing on achievable steps within the political system, while the FSM's Rousseau platform is more ideologically driven and ambitious and seeks a more radical transformation of the democratic process, by enabling direct citizen participation and influence in legislative matters.

The success of these initiatives will likely depend on the degree to which they can engage citizens, ensure the integrity and accessibility of the platforms, and effectively translate digital participation into tangible political outcomes.

## 4.4 Functionalities of Online Platforms of FFP and FSM

In this section, we examine the functionalities of the online platforms associated with the FFP's Open Government Initiative and the FSM's Rousseau platform. These platforms are not merely digital extensions of their respective political entities but are critical instruments for facilitating and enhancing public engagement, transparency, and direct democracy. The FFP's Open FWP Project and Futurecommunity.co represent innovative attempts to keep citizens informed about parliamentary proceedings and to involve them directly in the political discourse. On the other side of the spectrum, the Rousseau platform of the FSM operationalizes the party's philosophy of direct democracy by empowering members to contribute to lawmaking and engage in the decision-making process. By dissecting the functionalities of these platforms, this analysis will elucidate how they serve as pivotal points for citizen interaction, providing a two-way communication channel between the public and the political figures.

### 4.4.1. Functionalities of open government initiative online platforms

Sirikanya Tansakun, who was the policy director at the time, introduced two major digital tools/online platforms under the initiative (Anakot Mai [อนาคตใหม่] - Future Forward, 2019). The first is the Open FWP Project section on FFP's official website https://futureforwardparty.org/open-fwp (No longer available) designed to provide regularly updated reports evaluating the parliamentary performance of the FFP's members, both on an individual basis and collectively as a party. The second is the Futurecommunity.co website (No longer available), which operates as a community forum. It serves as a dedicated digital space for engaging with the electorate on issues that extend beyond the parliamentary activities of the FFP's representatives.

**4.4.1.1 The open FWP project section on the FFP's website**

     The section is designed to provide regularly updated reports evaluating the parliamentary performance of the FFP's members (Fig. 4.1). Crafted to enhance public engagement in the democratic process, it provides a transparent overview of the FFP's parliamentary activities. It presents a comprehensive summary that includes time spent record on the debating of each topic which will signify what are the focus of the party, ranking and ratio of party representatives who debate in parliament, attendance records, participation in debates, the progression of motions, and interpellations. Additionally, it details discussions undertaken by all FFP's members of parliament.

**Figure 4.1**

*Report on Open FWP Project Section*
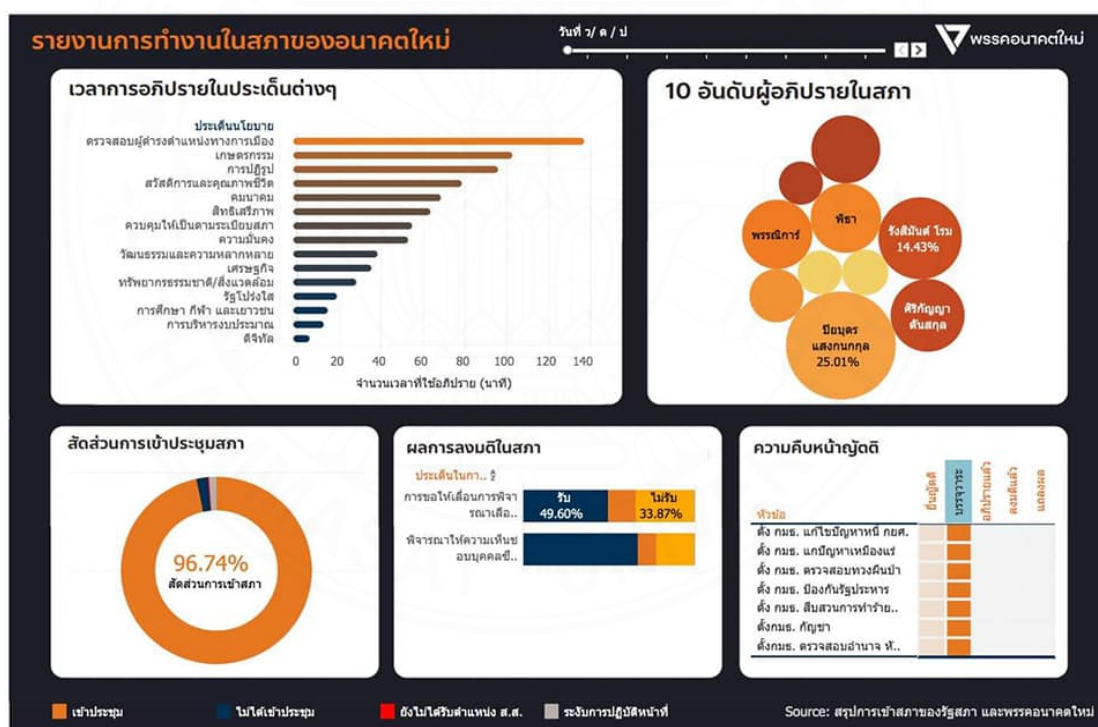


*Note.* Adapted from *Perd Open FWP Project: Konkai Prachachon Tidtam Truajsop Karntamngan Pak* [Opening the Open FWP Project, a citizen mechanism for monitoring and inspecting party work] [Video] by Anakot Mai [อนาคตใหม่] - Future Forward, 2019, 8:38, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2CPU--Q9PM&t=710s

**Figure 4.2**

*Report on Each MP's Profile and Performance*



*Note*. Adapted from *Perd Open FWP Project: Konkai Prachachon Tidtam Truajsop Karntamngan Pak* [Opening the Open FWP Project, a citizen mechanism for monitoring and inspecting party work] [Video] by Anakot Mai [อนาคตใหม่] - Future Forward, 2019, 10:26, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2CPU--Q9PM&t=710s

     This meticulous documentation is structured to empower citizens with the information necessary to actively monitor and evaluate the performance and contributions of their elected representatives.

    **4.4.1.2 The website futurecommunity.co**

     It functions as a community forum (Fig. 4.3) and serves as a digital space dedicated to constituents outside the parliamentary scope of the FFP's MPs. This online resource allows individuals to lodge complaints related to public administration directly to the FFP, seeking resolutions. Each complaint is assigned a tracking number, enabling users to monitor the progress of their case. Additionally, the website features a summary report presenting the status of all received complaints, evaluating the responsiveness and effectiveness of each MP in addressing these concerns. Furthermore, the site analyzes patterns within the complaints such as recurring issues across multiple districts, which could signal systemic problems and potentially trigger

a thorough legislative reassessment to address underlying challenges affecting local governance.

**Figure 4.3**

*The Website Futurecommunity.co*
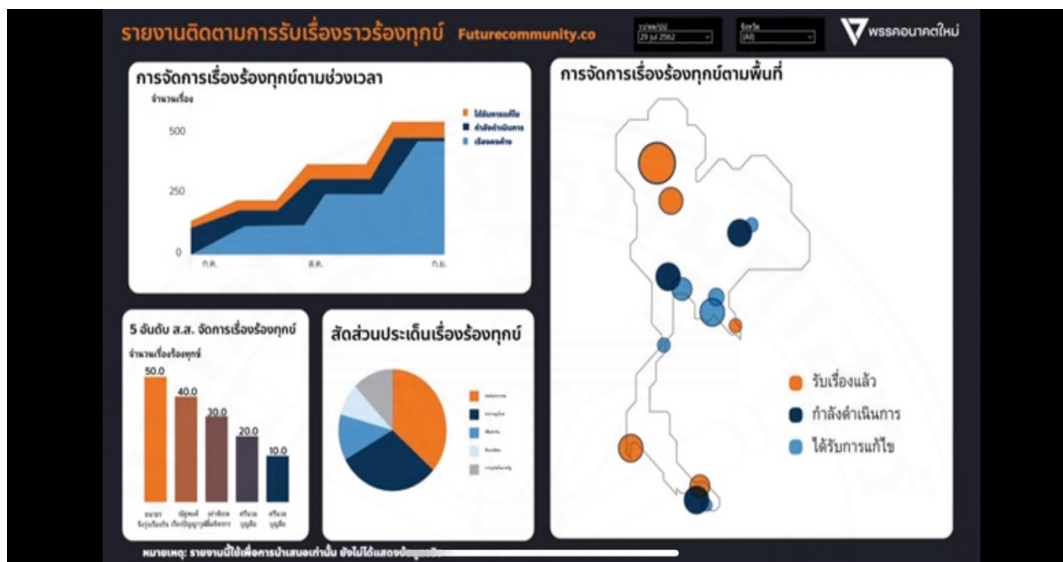
*Note*. Adapted from *Perd Open FWP Project: Konkai Prachachon Tidtam Truajsop Karntamngan Pak* [Opening the Open FWP Project, a citizen mechanism for monitoring and inspecting party work] [Video] by Anakot Mai [อนาคตใหม่] - Future Forward, 2019, 11:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2CPU--Q9PM&t=710s

### 4.4.2 Functionalities of Rousseau platform

The "Rousseau" platform served as the operational backbone of the FSM, functioning as a digital hub for various party activities. As stated on the website rousseau.movimento5stelle.it (No longer available), the platform was designed to administer the FSM's electoral matters at different levels of government, as well as facilitate the active participation of registered members in the party's decision-making processes. It allowed members to engage in discussions, propose amendments to laws, and participate in online voting for legislative proposals, including those at the local, regional, and European levels. Additionally, members could use the platform to select their representatives and administrators, share legal proposals and documents, raise funds, initiate civic actions, access e-learning resources for political and legal education, and receive legal support for issues related to online expression (Giacomini, 2022).

**Figure 4.4**

*Rousseau Platform* (Wired Italia, 2017)



*Note*. Adapted from *Hackerata Rousseau, la piattaforma del M5S* [Rousseau hacked, the M5S platform]. by Wired Italia, 2017, https://www.wired.it/attualita/tech/2017/08/04/hackerata-rousseau-piattaforma-m5s/

**Figure 4.5**

*The Call to Action Area of Rousseau*
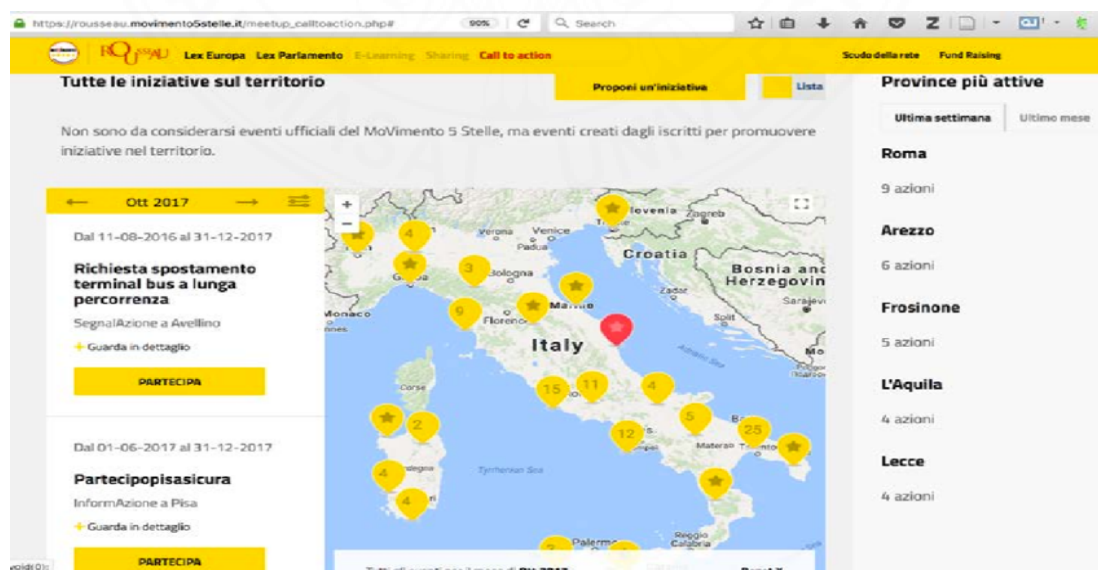


*Note*. Adapted from *Direct Parliamentarianism: An Analysis of the Political Values Embedded in Rousseau* by M. Deseriis, 2017, p. 54.

**Figure 4.6**

*The Categorization of Comments on a Bill Proposal*



*Note*. Adapted from *Direct Parliamentarianism: An Analysis of the Political Values Embedded in Rousseau* by M. Deseriis, 2017, p. 57.

**Figure 4.7**

*A Tutorial in the E-Learning Area of Rousseau*



*Note*. Adapted from *Direct Parliamentarianism: An Analysis of the Political Values Embedded in Rousseau* by M. Deseriis, 2017, p. 62.

According to Deseriis (2017), several key features of the platform were added since it was officially launched in April 2016. In 2017, the platform was

divided into nine areas, which are accessible to all users: Lex Members, Lex Europe, Lex Parliament, Lex Region, Shield of the Net (Scudo della Rete), Fund Raising, E-learning, Sharing, and Call to Action (Figures 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7).

Deseriis and Vittori (2019) suggested that key features of the platform demonstrating direct democracy value are as follows:

(1) **Lex Members**: This feature allows FSM's members to propose their own bills of law. Members can submit their proposals, and these are subjected to special voting sessions. While members themselves vote for their favorite proposals, there is also a screening procedure in place to ensure alignment with the party's principles and objectives.

(2) **Lex Parliament, Lex Europe, Lex Region**: These areas within the platform are dedicated to lawmaking. Elected representatives can upload hundreds of bill drafts in these sections. Members have the ability to provide feedback to their representative, but threaded comments and collaboration among members are limited.

(3) **Vote Functionality**: It allows registered members of the FSM to participate in voting to choose electoral rolls or annul a position within the Movement. It is activated any time users are called to vote for the primaries, approve the party program, or make other political decisions. Additionally, since August 2017, the platform also allows non-members to navigate in guest mode, without voting power and without the possibility of posting comments or submitting proposals.

**4.4.3 The direct democratic potentials of the open government initiative's online platforms of FFP and Rousseau platform of FSM**

In order to understand more of the democratic potential in the FFP's and FSM's online platforms, Fuller democracy, an end-to-end system of direct democracy that allows people to be in control of the political process at all stages with its ultimate goal to prevent elite capture of the political decision-making process (Fuller, 2023), will be utilized as the analytic framework. The main functionalities of the online platforms will be analyzed according to 10 principles of Fuller Democracy.

**1<sup>st</sup> principle: Channel – Don't Control & 3<sup>rd</sup> Principle:**
**Avoid the Iron Law of Oligarchy**

In terms of the flow of political power, the Open FWP Project section on the official website of the FFP offers a transparent overview of MPs' activities, providing data on parliamentary performance, attendance, and voting records. This aligns with the "*Channel – Don't Control*" and "*Avoid the Iron Law of Oligarchy*" principles by dispersing the power to monitor politicians to the citizens, thereby increasing the number of variables (i.e., the number of people who can scrutinize the data) in the governance process. This makes it more difficult for any subset of people to manipulate outcomes and can be recognized as efforts to resist the tendency of oligarchies, as the performance data is not held exclusively by a few but is accessible to all. Additionally, the Futurecommunity.co platform allows individuals to lodge complaints and track their progress. The system decentralizes control over grievance redressal and directly involves citizens in the accountability process. This increases the complexity of the governance ecosystem, making it harder for corruption or concentration of power by a few exclusive groups of people to take root due to the broad and active public participation. Notably, the analysis of complaint patterns across multiple districts by the Futurecommunity.co site provides a mechanism for identifying systemic problems that may lead to legislative reassessment. This is a practical application of the "*Channel – Don't Control*" and "*Avoid the Iron Law of Oligarchy*" principles, where the power to signal and potentially correct governance issues is channeled through a transparent, citizen-driven process. Furthermore, it disrupts the potential for a centralized oligarchy to form within the party's structure by avoiding static intermediaries and allowing for a more fluid and changing structure that can adapt to the needs and concerns of the public.

It is clear that the project demonstrates a favorable tendency toward countering the iron law of oligarchy. Nevertheless, the true measure of direct democracy, according to this principle, is the project's ability to maintain its democratic origins and continuously prevent oligarchic structures in the long run. To avoid the emergence of new power dynamics within the digital platforms themselves, it is crucial for the FFP to continuously evaluate and adapt these tools. This includes ensuring that

the platforms do not become static intermediaries but instead remain dynamic and responsive to the needs of the electorate.

On the other hand, the Rousseau platform, as the digital hub of the FSM, embodies these principles on a broader scale through its design and functionalities. Lex Members, Lex Parliament, Lex Europe, and Lex Region are the features that democratize the lawmaking process by allowing FSM's members to propose their own bills of law and provide feedback on bill drafts uploaded by elected representatives. This open channel of communication and proposal submission increases the number of participants in the legislative process, diluting the concentration of power and reducing the potential for manipulation by a select few as well as reduces the centralization of power and the potential for a ruling class of functionaries to emerge. By involving a wide base of the party's membership in decision-making, these functionalities align with the principles by ensuring that power is channeled through a broad and inclusive institution. Beyond that, the vote functionality further exemplifies the principle by enabling registered members to participate in critical decisions, from choosing electoral rolls to approving party programs. By activating this functionality for various political decisions, the platform challenges conventional political hierarchies and empowers individuals, reducing the risk of oligarchic dominance. The platform's inclusive design, which allows for a wide member base to engage in decision-making, ensures that power is not just disseminated but actively shared among its members, fostering a democratic culture that is resilient to centralization and elite control. The introduction of a guest mode, albeit without voting power, opens up the platform for wider observation, which can serve as an additional layer of transparency and accountability.

### 2nd principle: Include humans, exclude non-humans

The Open FWP Project's design embodies *Include Humans, Exclude Non-Humans* principle. Regarding the potential of promotion of direct human participation, it provides individual citizens with the tools to directly monitor and assess their representatives' performance, thus enabling informed decision-making and active participation in the democratic process. Moreover, by equipping citizens with detailed performance data of their MPs, the initiative potentially reduces the influence of NGOs and other organizations that might otherwise dominate political discourse. While NGOs

and businesses can still advocate for policies or initiatives, the empowerment of citizens through information ensures that individual voters can assess their representatives' alignment with these interests based on their parliamentary performance, rather than relying solely on the narratives constructed by external organizations. Moreover, the Futurecommunity.co platform functions as a direct line of communication between citizens and their representatives, allowing for the lodging of complaints related to public administration. This functionality embodies the principle of human inclusion by facilitating direct participation in governance processes. Furthermore, the analysis of patterns within complaints can reveal systemic problems, enabling a legislative reassessment to address these issues. This approach does not only involve humans in the decision-making process but also ensures that the influence of non-human entities is minimized in shaping legislative priorities.

At their core, both FFP's platforms offer significant potential to boost transparency, accountability, and direct citizen involvement in the democratic process, thereby contributing to a certain degree of direct political participation. However, these platforms do not intentionally exclude non-human entities. Instead, a specific segment of the population, such as NGOs or other organizations, especially those already politically engaged or with higher digital literacy, stands to benefit from these tools.

The Rousseau platform was specifically designed to facilitate the active participation of registered members in the decision-making processes of the FSM. This allows for direct human involvement, aligning with the principle of including humans in democratic processes. By enabling only registered members to propose laws, vote on various matters, and participate in discussions, the Rousseau platform minimizes the direct participation of non-human entities in the decision-making process. This seems to be in line with the principle of excluding non-humans to prevent undue influence on political decisions.

**4th principle: Collective action does not necessitate being a collective & 5th over-alignment (Agreement on cause is not necessary to agree on action)**

The Open FWP project section reflects the principles by allowing for the individual assessment of MPs based on their parliamentary

performance, rather than a blanket support for the party as a whole. The detailed reporting on activities and votes encourages the electorate to make decisions based on specific issues that resonate with them personally, mirroring the flexible and temporary collaboration of pirate crews which works together on an event-by-event basis. This, more or less, contributes to the prevention of the formation of a rigid party structure that demands conformity and can suppress individual judgment and the diversity of thought that contributes to the "Wisdom of the Crowd". Additionally, it also allows individuals to act—whether in advocacy or criticism—without a mandated consensus on the reasons for their actions. For example, a citizen might support an MP for their stance on education, while another supports the same MP due to their environmental policies. By presenting factual data on parliamentary participation, it facilitates a form of decision-making where constituents can align with the actions of their representatives, irrespective of whether they share the same ideological or philosophical motivations. In addition, Futurecommunity.co further exemplifies the principles by providing a space for issue-based engagement as well as a convergence of actions—such as resolving public administration complaints—regardless of the varied underlying causes that concern different individuals. For instance, one person may report a pothole due to concerns about road safety, while another might do so due to the impact on traffic efficiency. Both are united in the action (fixing the pothole) despite differing reasons. Therefore, constituents can address specific grievances and monitor their resolution process, fostering a problem-solving approach that is focused on individual issues and reasons rather than party ideology.

Both platforms uphold the concept that democratic participation need not be tied to a collective identity and reasons. By engaging with specific issues, constituents can participate in a form of democracy that values their individual input while still benefiting from collective action. This approach can mitigate extreme partisanship and foster broader consensus on various issues. Furthermore, the platforms also align with the concept of the "Wisdom of the Crowd", suggesting that a diverse group of individuals, deliberating independently, can reach a more accurate or "correct" decision through their aggregate judgments. The platforms seem to facilitate this by allowing individuals to engage without the need for consensus-driven groupthink, which can lead to uniformity and stifle the diversity of opinion.

In parallel, particular functions in the Rousseau platform demonstrate alignment with these principles, allowing for deeper individual participation. To begin with *Lex Members*, which allows FSM members to propose their own bills of law, the platform supports the principle that individuals should not permanently sacrifice their freedom for collective action. Members can act individually to propose laws and engage in the democratic process. This feature also sidesteps the pitfall of excessive agreement, as it does not require consensus on all issues from all members but rather allows for a diversity of proposals reflective of the *wisdom of the crowd*. The second group of functions, which are Lex Parliament, Lex Europe, and Lex Region, *is* dedicated to lawmaking and provides a platform for representatives to share drafts of bills. While the platform also *has a* screening process that ensures proposed bills align with party objectives, balancing individual input with organizational coherence. Therefore, this screening process has the potential to limit individual inputs to some extent, yet it still allows for individual input and feedback. Last but not least, the vote functionality enables members to vote on a variety of issues, from electoral rolls to political positions within the movement, reflecting the pirate charter approach where members can work together on a particular decision without a permanent commitment to a collective decision. This also allows members to make decisions for a variety of motivations, sidestepping the need for total ideological uniformity.

**6th principle: Disagreement is democratic – sabotage is not & 7th principle: Don't eliminate or ignore evil – harness it**

In regard to constituents, regularly updated MP data provided by the Open FWP Project's section enables them to express their disagreement with evidence-based arguments and hold representatives accountable without disrupting the parliamentary process. It also allows for alternative opinions to be maintained and articulated, ensuring that these can be revisited should the need arise, in line with the notion that dissent is a valuable component of democracy. Regarding the MPs, potentially harmful behaviors will be visible to the public. By holding representatives accountable, the platform potentially curtails self-serving actions by subjecting them to public scrutiny and evaluation, harnessing any destructive tendencies by exposing them to the electorate. On top of that, because constituents can voice their concerns and disagreements with public administration through Futurecommunity.co, the platform

embodies the notion that democratic engagement includes the expression of dissent along with potentially harmful opinions.

Likewise, the Lex Members feature of the Rousseau platform allows the FSM's members to propose legislation, thereby engaging in the democratic process. This feature supports the principle by providing a space for members to express their opinions and disagreements, including potentially harmful ones, through proposals. The special voting sessions for these proposals ensure that the majority's voice determines their viability, respecting the democratic process. Significantly, to properly manage individual inputs, the screening procedure to ensure alignment with party principles might be seen as a mechanism to prevent sabotage and potentially harmful opinions by filtering out proposals that could significantly deviate from the party's agenda or disrupt its unity. Yet, this may seem to impose a certain level of control at the expense of freedom of expression and direct participation of the people. Additionally, the Vote Functionality allows for collective decision-making, ensuring that diverse opinions contribute to the party's course of action. By offering these features, the Rousseau platform ensures that the democratic right to disagree is maintained, and decisions, once made, are not sabotaged but rather implemented with respect for their democratic legitimacy.

### 8<sup>th</sup> principle: Don't ask if you don't want an answer

The democratic efficacy of the Open FWP Project's section, in accordance with this principle, hinges on its capacity to scrutinize MPs through the dissemination of detailed records of their activities and involvement in parliamentary affairs. Although there are no obligatory regulations compelling MPs to act on the evaluations presented, the act of making such data public ostensibly serves purposes beyond mere display; it implies a commitment to utilize this information to enhance parliamentary performance. Beyond that, Futurecommunity.co operates as a forum for public input outside of formal parliamentary activities. By enabling constituents to lodge complaints and track their resolution, the platform indicates a commitment to using the information provided by the public to drive improvements in public administration. The analysis of complaint patterns and the responsiveness to these complaints demonstrate an intent to act on the feedback received, which is essential according to the principle that democratic input should lead to action.

Although the online platforms appear to uphold the principle that democratic input must be solicited with the intention of respecting and acting upon the outcomes, on the flip side, the absence of binding regulations for MPs to act on the evaluations can potentially undermine its democratic potential. The platform's effectiveness in driving actual change is contingent on the MPs' and the party's willingness to respond to the publicized information. If the data is not acted upon, the initiative risks becoming a symbolic gesture rather than a catalyst for improvement.

In the same vein, Lex Parliament, Lex Europe, and Lex Region lawmaking areas within the Rousseau platform also adhere to the principle by allowing elected representatives to upload bill drafts for member feedback. While the process may be limited in terms of threaded discussions, it still respects the contributions of members by integrating their feedback into the legislative process, even if the final decision rests with the elected officials. This can be seen as a balance between soliciting input and maintaining a manageable system that can act on that input. Regarding the vote functionality, the voting functionality allows for direct participation in key decisions within the FSM, like choosing electoral rolls or annulling positions. By enabling members to vote on significant issues, the platform respects the direct input of its members. Although direct input from its members significantly influences the party's actions, the actual impact of this input largely relies on the party's commitment to implementing these contributions. There are no stringent party regulations guaranteeing that the outcomes of member input will be faithfully executed, underscoring the dependency on the party's discretion to honor and act upon its members' feedback.

**9th principle: Experts are judged on their track record, not their qualifications**

The Open FWP Project section encourages a results-oriented approach to evaluating political experts—MPs in this case—where qualifications may open doors, but it is the track record that cements trust and credibility. The Open FWP Project's section does this by assessing MPs' parliamentary performance. The Open FWP Project's section likely results in a form of indirect pressure for MPs to perform, as their parliamentary activities and focus areas are transparently documented. On the other hand, Futurecommunity.co provides direct feedback on MPs' effectiveness in

public administration, with the potential for immediate action to resolve issues brought forth by the community.

In essence, both platforms adhere to the principle by providing constituents with the means to continually monitor and evaluate their elected representatives, thereby ensuring that the MPs' expertise and effectiveness—their track record—become the basis for public trust. This ongoing process of assessment stands in contrast to a reliance on qualifications or promises alone, aligning with the principle that effective democracy requires experts to be judged by the outcomes they produce over time.

On the other hand, the Lex Members feature of the Rousseau platform allows FSM members to propose legislation, emphasizing the value of direct democratic engagement over traditional reliance on expert qualifications. This feature supports the principle by allowing the track record of legislative initiatives proposed by members to be the basis of evaluation. The effectiveness and popularity of these proposals become a measure of the members' expertise, judged by their peers through special voting sessions. This process creates a living record of the member's contributions and effectiveness within the party's legislative framework. Additionally, Lex Parliament, Lex Europe, and Lex Region areas within the Rousseau platform provide a space for elected representatives to engage with the wider membership in the legislative process. By allowing members to provide feedback on bill drafts, the platform recognizes the value of practical contributions over formal qualifications. However, the limitation on threaded comments and collaboration could be a potential constraint in fully realizing the principle, as it might limit the opportunity for members to demonstrate their expertise through sustained, detailed discussions.

### 10th principle: Democracy is government of the middle-class

Inclusivity and accessibility are fundamental aspects of these platforms established by the FFP and FSM. By providing information and avenues for engagement online, they ensure that a wide range of individuals, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds and not exclusively targeting the middle class, can participate in the democratic process. This inclusivity reflects a commitment to political equality, allowing individuals from diverse classes to access information about their elected representatives and contribute to governance.

**4.4.4 Incorporating Fuller's analysis in the wider scope of digital democracy**

Analyzed by Fuller's model, the Open Government Initiative and the Rousseau platform both contribute to the empowerment of individuals within the governance framework, yet they implement this principle through different approaches and areas of focus. Fundamentally, this analysis delves into their significant contributions towards empowering transparent governance, prevention of external or group influence, providing a forum for thoughtful debate and collective decision-making, recognizing double-edged swords of ICT, redefining citizen-government relationship, and emphasizing Inclusiveness of online platforms for all socio-economic backgrounds.

**4.4.4.1 Empowering transparent governance**

As analyzed under the principles of *Channel – Don't Control,* the attempts of both the Open Government Initiative and Rousseau platform to democratize of information accessibility and facilitation of public participation are considered as key impacts of information and communication technology (ICT) on democracy (Congge et al., 2023). The Open FWP Project brings parliamentary accountability to the fore, allowing public assessment of MPs' performances, while Futurecommunity.co extends this transparency into public administration. Rousseau, in parallel, offers a platform for direct democratic action, empowering members to draft and vote on legislation. These initiatives collectively foster a well-informed electorate, vital for a robust democratic society.

**4.4.4.2 Prevention of external or group influence**

There is a caution against the potential for capitalism and elite groups to exert control over digital democratic processes (Congge et al., 2023). Fuch (2021) delves into the issues associated with digital capitalism, recognizing it as a form of capitalism focused on the concentration of power and wealth. He suggests that this leads to inequality and exploitation across different societal areas, including politics. Digital capitalism amplifies traditional capitalist issues through technology, with digital corporations having a substantial influence on power dynamics, social class struggles, and the impacts of globalization. Therefore, due to the fact that both platforms prioritize

direct human involvement in the political process individually, they are able to prevent the influences of digital capitalism to some certain extent.

In light of the concerns raised about the interference of capitalist and elite interests into digital democracy, the Open Government Initiative and the Rousseau platform exemplify a concerted effort to prioritize individual engagement over systemic biases. The Open Government Initiative facilitates this through tools that allow citizens to monitor parliamentary activities and engage with the political process via complaints and feedback. Similarly, the Rousseau platform is designed for direct involvement by allowing registered members to propose laws, engage in voting, and participate in party-related discussions. This openness also acts as a deterrent to potential corruption or manipulation by digital corporations and other non-human actors which is in line with the *Include Humans, Exclude Non-Humans* principle**.**

*Avoid the Iron Law of Oligarchy* principle's focus is addressed by both platforms through mechanisms that encourage individually direct political engagement, thereby diluting the potential for power concentration, a core concern highlighted by Congge et al. (2023) and Fuch (2021) regarding the dominance of capitalist and elite influences in digital democratic arenas. The Open Government Initiative achieves this by opening up political scrutiny to the wider public, while Rousseau engages its party members in legislative processes. However, Rousseau's internal screening may inadvertently narrow its legitimacy base, presenting a contrast to the Open Government Initiative's more inclusive, albeit shallower, approach.

### 4.4.4.3 Forum for thoughtful debate and collective decision-making

As elaborated by Dahlberg's interpretation of digital democracy (2011), the deliberative approach is described as viewing the internet as a forum for thoughtful debate and collective decision-making, key to forming well-informed public opinion and ensuring government accountability. This view supports the role of digital media in cultivating a space where rational discourse thrives and public opinion is critically formed. This perspective seeks to foster an online environment conducive to robust discussion and critical evaluation, which underpins a democratic society driven by consensus and inclusive deliberation.

The principles of *Collective Action Does Not Necessitate Being a Collective* and *Over-Alignment* are embodied by both platforms' commitment to individual participation in collective action. This resonates with Dahlberg's (2011) conceptualization of digital democracy. These platforms underscore the importance of individual contributions to collective endeavors, fostering environments where issue-based community engagement is facilitated through evaluative oversight and direct issue resolution. The Open Government Initiative encourages active citizen involvement in monitoring and engaging with political processes, while Rousseau promotes a participatory culture among its members. Rousseau, while fostering a participatory environment for its members, limits extensive commentary, which could be seen as a restriction on the depth of debate. However, this may also ensure that discourse remains focused and rational, avoiding the dissonance of opinions that sometimes leads to unproductive discussion.

Furthermore, both platforms embody the principle that *Disagreement is Democratic – Sabotage is Not*, by providing avenues for constructive disagreement. Through updated data access and mechanisms for proposing legislation, they empower citizens and members to express their views and participate in the democratic process, thereby enhancing democratic accountability. This facilitation of individual participation in collective action is in direct resonance with Dahlberg's conceptualization, where the internet serves as a forum for thoughtful debate and collective decision-making.

The Open Government Initiative and Rousseau platform, through the principle of *Experts are Judged on their Track Record, not their Qualifications*, demonstrate a commitment to valuing expertise based on actions and outcomes rather than formal qualifications. They encourage a participatory model of democracy where the electorate's voice and members' legislative proposals are sincerely considered, ensuring that expertise is recognized through demonstrated engagement and contributions to policy-making. In addition, these platforms foster an environment where rational discourse can flourish, which is central to Dahlberg's interpretation. This not only supports the formation of public opinion through critical engagement but also ensures that the voices of the electorate and the legislative proposals of members are given due consideration. Such a model promotes a more

inclusive and deliberative form of democracy, where the expertise is democratized, and the barriers to participation are lowered, allowing for a wider array of voices to contribute to the democratic process.

#### 4.4.4.4 Double-Edged swords of ICT

Natani (2021) describes in his work how the potential of ICT can shape democratic societies. Moreover, he emphasizes that the optimistic view of digital democracy as an empowering force for greater citizen involvement is tempered by recognition of its complexities. These technologies can be double-edged swords, enabling surveillance and control over public opinion. The distinction between public and private spheres is increasingly blurred as political engagement moves online.

In this context, the Open Government Initiative and Rousseau platform embody the optimistic view of digital democracy by fostering diverse participation and leveraging the collective wisdom that arises from broad-based engagement. However, they also recognize the existence of potentially harmful human behaviors, aligning with the principle of "*Don't Eliminate or Ignore Evil – Harness it.*" Alarmingly, these platforms, while promoting free participation, also hold the potential to implement surveillance measures that could control public opinion. The Rousseau platform's screening process, which aims to align individual input with the party's ideologies, is a clear example of how surveillance can be used to guide and potentially manipulate public discourse. The absence of explicit mechanisms within these platforms to channel and regulate potentially harmful tendencies of participants further highlights a critical concern in the digital democracy discourse. This creates a paradox regarding freedom of expression and the need to prevent surveillance and control over public opinion. Simply put, although the Open Government Initiative and Rousseau platform allow people to participate freely, the potential for surveillance and control over public opinion raises significant issues about the management and containment of potentially harmful human behaviors.

#### 4.4.4.5 Closer and more responsive citizen-government relationship

According to the principle of *Don't Ask if You Don't Want an Answer*, they operate at different stages and scopes within the democratic process. The Open FWP Project section focuses on the evaluation and accountability phase, facilitating a form of indirect action through public pressure and potential self-

correction by MPs. On the other hand, Futurecommunity.co is involved in the direct issue resolution phase, translating public concerns into actions and policy adjustments. Both platforms combat political apathy by ensuring that when the electorate speaks, their voice results in a tangible outcome. The Rousseau platform showcases direct democracy by enabling members to propose and vote on legislation. This empowers members to see their input potentially become part of the party's legislative agenda, fulfilling the principle by ensuring that the input solicited is sincerely intended for consideration and action. Similarly, the Lex Parliament, Lex Europe, and Lex Region features respect member contributions by incorporating their feedback into the legislative process, although the scope for dialogue is more limited. Additionally, the integration of ICT in these platforms, as discussed by Natani (2021), has been transformative, offering new pathways for engaging citizens and potentially resolving legitimacy crises in traditional democratic models. ICT enhances transparency and accountability while redefining the citizen-government relationship, leading to a paradigm where political representatives are expected to be closer and more responsive to the needs of their constituents who are increasingly demanding concrete outcomes from the input they provide to these platforms.

#### 4.4.4.6 Inclusive online platforms for all socio-economic backgrounds

According to Dahlberg (2011), the Liberal-Individualist perspective views digital media as a key to boosting individual engagement in the democratic process, highlighting the role of technology in facilitating the exchange of information and public opinion. This viewpoint positions digital media as a conduit for individuals to access necessary information for political decision-making and to express their preferences via digital channels like e-voting and online polls. Advocated through various e-democracy initiatives, this approach emphasizes the rights of individuals to freely communicate and make informed choices without undue interference, supporting a more direct connection between the electorate and their representatives. Integrating this perspective into the discussion of the *Democracy is Government of the Middle-Class* principle reveals a nuanced understanding of inclusivity within digital democracy platforms. While these platforms may not have been exclusively designed with the middle class in mind, their emphasis on inclusivity ensures that individuals from all socio-economic backgrounds, provided they have internet literacy, can participate in

the democratic process. This democratization of access aligns with the Liberal-Individualist view by supporting the premise that digital media can serve as a conduit for broader societal engagement in governance. As such, these platforms contribute to the formation of a government that is potentially reflective of the entire society, not just a single socio-economic class. This approach resonates with the core of the Liberal-Individualist perspective, which values the empowerment of individuals to actively contribute to the democratic dialogue, thereby ensuring that the democratic process is accessible to and inclusive of all segments of society, transcending socio-economic barriers.

In conclusion, through their innovative approaches, the Open Government Initiative and Rousseau not only empower individuals but also nurture a democratic environment where diverse voices can contribute to the policymaking process. As we move forward, the lessons learned from these platforms can guide further developments in digital democracy, highlighting the importance of technology in creating a more engaged, informed, and transparent society.
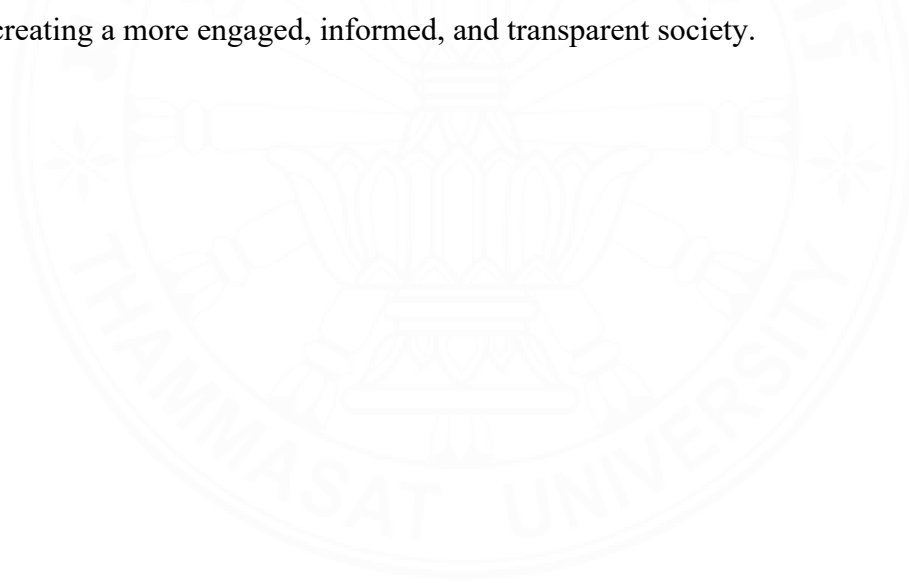
# CHAPTER 5
# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The FFP emerged as a response to Thailand's complex political, economic, and social dynamics between 2014 and 2019, reflecting the nation's pulse during the tumultuous post-coup period. FFP's commitment to addressing the political suppression and economic disparities under military rule highlighted its dedication to democratic values and socio-economic reforms, resonating especially with the youth and first-time voters. The party's embrace of progressive policies and adept use of digital platforms set it apart, positioning it as a beacon for change among younger Thais yearning for a democratic, equitable, and inclusive future.

Simultaneously, the FFP's approach can be distinguished through a populist lens, given its anti-establishment rhetoric and efforts to distinguish "the people" from "the elites." Emphasizing inclusivity and direct democracy, the FFP's strategies echoed populist themes while maintaining a liberal democratic ethos. This nuanced populism underlined the FFP's broader appeal, emphasizing participatory governance and challenging traditional power structures.

In the context of digital engagement, a comparative analysis with the Italy's FSM sheds light on how modern political entities are integrating technology to foster direct public engagement and transparency. The FFP's Open Government Initiative and the FSM's Rousseau platform illustrate each party's digital strategy to empower citizens and enhance democratic participation. While the FFP's platforms focus on transparency and accountability within the Thai political framework, the FSM's Rousseau champions a more radical approach to direct democracy, underscoring the diverse potentials of digital tools in reshaping political interaction and engagement. Through this lens, the comparative study offers insights into the evolving landscape of political participation in the digital era, highlighting the transformative power of technology in democratizing governance and engaging the populace in meaningful political discourse.

**5.1 The Future Forward Party's Response to Thailand's Political, Economic, and Social Dynamics (2014-2019)**

The FFP political discourse and proposed policies offer a vivid reflection of the political, economic, and social conditions in Thailand during the period, characterized by the aftermath of the 2014 coup.

Politically, the FFP focused on challenging the entrenched military influence and advocating for democratic reforms, a response to the years of governance under military rule which stifled democratic freedoms and perpetuated elite dominance. By critiquing the military-drafted 2017 Constitution and advocating for a more participatory constitution drafting process, the FFP aimed to resonate with the public's desire for genuine democratic governance and to empower those feeling marginalized in the political landscape, particularly the youth and first-time voters.

Economically, the FFP's stance against monopoly capitalism and its call for economic reforms were designed to address the disparities persisted during the military's tenure. The party's policies aimed at dismantling monopolistic practices and promoting small and medium enterprises were crafted to address the public's concerns over economic inequality and limited opportunities for upward mobility, reflecting the broader economic frustrations felt across Thailand during this period.

On the social front, the FFP advocated for progressive issues like decentralization, which struck a chord with Thais disillusioned by the central government's failure to address local needs and aspirations. The party's emphasis on empowering local governance resonated with the public's desire for more localized and responsive administration, aligning with the broader push for social and political reforms.

The FFP's particular appeal to younger Thais, through its progressive stances on issues like military conscription and digital rights, underscored its commitment to addressing the specific concerns of this demographic. The party's innovative use of digital platforms and focus on future-oriented policies differentiated it from traditional political entities, aligning it more closely with the aspirations and values of a new generation seeking change.

In essence, the FFP's political narrative and policy proposals during this critical period in Thailand's history were a direct response to the country's complex challenges. They represented an attempt to offer a new direction that contrasted sharply with the status quo, advocating for a Thailand that embraced democracy, fairness, and inclusivity, echoing the broader societal demand for change and reform.

## 5.2 The populist Dimensions of Future Forward Party's Discourses and Policies

The FFP can be analyzed within the spectrum of populist parties by closely examining its political rhetoric and policy propositions in the lead-up to Thailand's 2019 national election year. Populist parties typically rally against "the elites" while championing "the people," often adopting a flexible ideological framework to draw wide-ranging electoral support. The FFP's strategic positioning and policy advocacy reveal populist attributes.

Firstly, the FFP's narrative sharply delineated "the people" from "the elites," portraying itself as an advocate for the marginalized and a challenger of systemic injustices perpetuated by the elite. This was particularly evident in their opposition to entrenched military influence and monopoly capitalism, which they argued disproportionately favored a small elite segment to the detriment of the general populace.

Secondly, the FFP's pronounced anti-establishment rhetoric, especially critical of the military's political dominance post-2014 coup, underscores a populist penchant for contesting the established order. By taking a stand against military and conventional political elites, the FFP sought to align itself with democratic principles and the broader rights and interests of the people, echoing populist themes of subverting the status quo.

Thirdly, the party's inclusivity is a hallmark of its populism. The FFP aimed to represent a broad demographic spectrum, particularly targeting marginalized groups and the youth. Their policy orientation and political messaging were crafted to resonate across diverse societal segments, pushing for comprehensive reforms that serve varied social, economic, and political interests.

Moreover, the FFP's emphasis on direct democracy and public engagement, exemplified through their advocacy for decentralization and initiatives

like the Open Government Policy, resonates with populist strategies that seek to reduce the government-people divide. Such measures are intended to enhance citizen empowerment, transparency, and governmental accountability, reflecting populist ambitions to prioritize the populace's will.

Lastly, the FFP exhibited a degree of ideological cleverness, typical of many populist entities. While advocating for liberal democratic ideals, their broad-based policy platform and engagement with a spectrum of social issues demonstrate an adaptability meant to appeal to diverse societal factions.

In sum, the FFP's activities and discourses in the prelude to the 2019 election embody several populist characteristics, from their delineation of "the people" against "the elites" to their advocacy for direct democratic involvement. Though their approach is notably inclusionary and anchored in liberal democratic values, their overarching strategy and appeal align with common trends observed in populist movements worldwide.

## 5.3 Comparative Analysis of Digital Strategies: Future Forward Party and Five Star Movement

The comparison between the FFP and FSM reveals significant insights into how each party integrates digital platforms into their political processes, reflecting their commitment to enhancing public engagement and transparency. Both parties harness digital tools to establish a direct dialogue with their electorate, bypassing traditional media to foster a participatory political culture.

The FFP's Open Government Initiative and FSM's Rousseau platform serve as critical tools in their digital arsenals, each designed to encourage public involvement in governance. The FFP's approach, particularly through the Open FWP Project section and Futurecommunity.co, focuses on providing transparent access to parliamentary activities and creating a responsive forum for public discourse and grievance redressal. These platforms aim to empower Thai citizens to actively participate in the monitoring and evaluation of their representatives, fostering a culture of accountability and direct engagement.

Conversely, the Rousseau platform embodies the FSM's vision of direct democracy, enabling members to influence law-making and party decisions actively.

It represents a broader ambition to transform the political landscape by shifting the focus of power from traditional political elites to the general populace. Through various functionalities like Lex Members and vote mechanisms, Rousseau facilitates a more inclusive and direct form of democracy where members can propose, discuss, and vote on legislative initiatives.

While both parties leverage digital tools to enhance transparency and citizen engagement, their underlying ideologies and operational nuances highlight distinct approaches to digital democracy. The FFP's initiative aligns more with an evolutionary enhancement of existing democratic frameworks, focusing on transparency and incremental reform within the Thai political context. In contrast, the FSM's Rousseau platform is ideologically rooted in a more radical vision of democracy, emphasizing direct citizen participation and challenging the norms of representative governance.

The success of these digital strategies in fostering a new political culture underscores the transformative potential of technology in political engagement. By prioritizing direct interaction with their constituencies and emphasizing transparency and accountability, both the FFP and FSM demonstrate a forward-looking approach to political participation in the digital age. As digital platforms become increasingly integral to political processes, the experiences of the FFP and FSM offer valuable lessons on leveraging technology to democratize political engagement and empower citizens in shaping their governance structures.

**Table 5.1**

*Comparative Analysis of Digital Strategies: Future Forward Party (FFP) vs. Five Star Movement (FSM)*

| No. | Comparative Aspect | Future Forward Party (FFP) | Five Star Movement (FSM) |
|-----|--------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Digital Platform | • Open Government Initiative (Open FWP Project, Futurecommunity.co) | • Rousseau Platform |
| 2 | Primary Goal | • Enhance public engagement and transparency in governance | • Facilitate direct democracy and shift power to the general populace |
| 3 | Key Features | • Regularly updated reports on MPs' performance and parliamentary activities | • Influence law-making and party decisions by proposing, discussing, |

| No. | Comparative Aspect | Future Forward Party (FFP) | Five Star Movement (FSM) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | • Forum for public discourse and grievance redressal | and voting on legislative initiatives<br>• Vote to select representatives and administrators of the party |
| 4 | Approach to Democracy | • Evolutionary enhancement of existing frameworks | • Radical transformation towards direct democracy and challenging norms of Representative governance |
| 5 | Inclusivity and accessibility | • Encourage wide public participation | • Member-driven participation<br>• Open to observation by the public |
| 6 | Ideological Roots | • Focus on accountability and direct engagement | • Emphasis on shifting power from political elites to citizens |
| 7 | Success Metrics | • Empowering citizens in monitoring and evaluating representatives | • Inclusive and direct form of democracy |

## 5.4 Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations that potentially affect the findings.

### 5.4.1 Reliance on secondary data

Much of the analysis is based on secondary data, which may introduce biases or incomplete perspectives. The reliance on previously published academic research, news articles, and reports limits the ability to validate findings through primary data collection such as interviews and surveys. Moreover, the secondary sources used may have inherent biases, especially in politically charged contexts.

The interpretation of political discourses and digital strategies may vary based on the perspectives and affiliations of the authors of these sources.

### 5.4.2 Bias and subjectivity

The research could be influenced by the subjective interpretations of political discourse, particularly in the analysis of speeches, interviews, and party narratives. Additionally, potential bias in selecting sources, such as focusing on certain media outlets or interviews, might affect the representation of the FFP's populist strategies.

### 5.4.3 Methodological constraints

The qualitative nature of the analysis, while providing depth, may lack the quantitative rigor needed to substantiate certain claims or trends, particularly in measuring public sentiment and support. Furthermore, the reliance on secondary sources and existing literature may limit the originality of the findings, as primary data collection was not conducted.

### 5.4.4 The limitations in comparative study of the online platforms

A primary limitation is the inability to directly analyze the online platforms of the Future Forward Party (FFP) and the Five Star Movement (FSM), as these platforms are no longer accessible. Consequently, the research relies solely on secondary sources such as academic studies and articles, which may not provide a comprehensive view of the platforms' functionalities and user interactions.

The comparative analysis between the FFP and FSM, while insightful, may face challenges in drawing direct parallels due to different political, social, and economic contexts between Thailand and Italy. Moreover, the study does not delve deeply into quantitative metrics or user engagement statistics, which could provide a more nuanced understanding of the platforms' reach and impact.

## 5.5 Concluding Remarks

The research delves into the FFP's political narrative and policy propositions, tailoring them to Thailand's socio-political context from 2014 to 2019, and explores the FFP's inclination towards inclusionary populism. Furthermore, the comparative analysis with the FSM sheds light on the digital engagement strategies of the FFP. While both parties leverage online platforms to enhance public participation,

the FFP's approach is identified as moderate, focusing on transparency and civic engagement without radically altering the traditional political framework. In contrast, FSM's Rousseau platform adopts a more radical stance, challenging political intermediaries and empowering citizens with direct legislative influence.

While the dissolution of the FFP and the cessation of its online platforms pose challenges to direct study, the legacy and impact of the FFP's innovative strategies in Thai politics present rich avenues for future research. The examination of the long-term effects of the FFP's approach could offer valuable insights into the evolution of political engagement in Thailand. Domestically, successor parties like the Move Forward Party could benefit from an analysis of the FFP's strategies, potentially applying learned lessons to enhance their political impact. Internationally, comparative research could extend beyond the FSM to analyze how various global political entities leverage digital platforms for engagement and advocacy, enriching the discourse on digital democracy. Such studies would not only broaden the understanding of digital political engagement but also contribute to a nuanced comprehension of contemporary political movements' influence on national and global political landscapes.
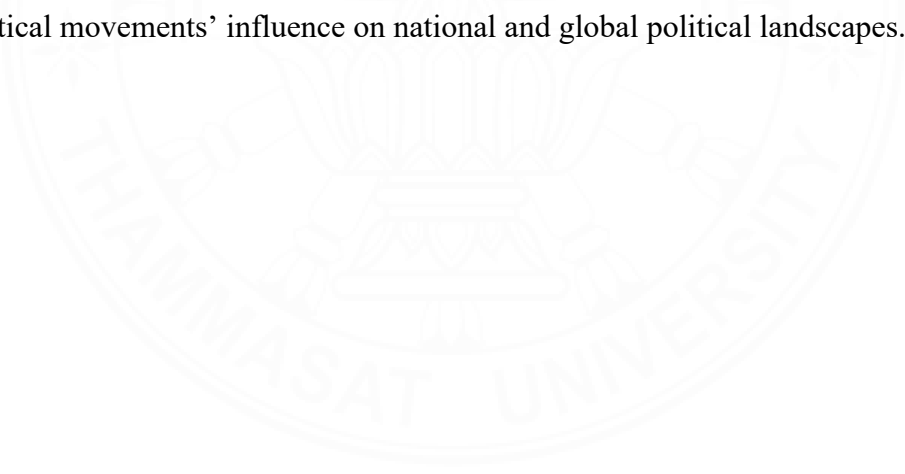
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