

The Backgrounds, Political Culture and Political Participation of Thai Youth Leaders

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Abstract

This research study is aimed at investigating 1) the relationship between Thai youth leaders' levels of knowledge and understanding of democracy, of attitudes toward democracy and of the political behaviors, and 2) how their backgrounds and political culture would influence their level of political participation in the future. The participants in this study consisted of 1,064 members of the National Youth Council, and included representatives from all 76 provinces of Thailand.

The result is that the majority of the participants had a) a high level of knowledge and understanding of democracy, b) a medium level of democratic political behaviors and culture, and c) a high level of interest in participating in politics in the future.

Keywords: Political Culture; Political Participation

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ปัจจัยภูมิหลัง วัฒนธรรมทางการเมือง และการมีส่วนร่วมทางการเมืองของผู้นำเยาวชนไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาวิจัยเรื่อง “ปัจจัยภูมิหลัง วัฒนธรรมทางการเมือง และการมีส่วนร่วมทางการเมืองของผู้นำเยาวชนไทย” มีวัตถุประสงค์สำคัญคือ การศึกษาความล้มเหลวที่ระบุว่า ระดับความรู้ความเข้าใจต่อระบบประชาธิปไตย ระดับทัศนคติทางการเมืองแบบประชาธิปไตย และพฤติกรรมทางการเมืองของผู้นำเยาวชนไทยและการศึกษาปัจจัยภูมิหลัง และวัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองที่มีผลต่อการมีส่วนร่วมทางการเมืองของผู้นำเยาวชนไทย โดยศึกษาจากการสำรวจภาคเด็กและเยาวชนแห่งชาติจาก 76 จังหวัดทั่วประเทศ จำนวน 1,064 คน ผลการวิจัยปรากฏดังนี้

ผู้นำเยาวชนไทยส่วนใหญ่มีความรู้ความเข้าใจต่อระบบประชาธิปไตยและมีทัศนคติทางการเมืองแบบประชาธิปไตยในระดับสูง มีพฤติกรรมทางการเมืองและวัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองแบบประชาธิปไตยในระดับปานกลาง และผู้นำเยาวชนไทยส่วนใหญ่สนใจที่จะมีบทบาททางการเมืองในอนาคตในระดับสูง

คำสำคัญ: วัฒนธรรมทางการเมือง การมีส่วนร่วมทางการเมือง

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Significance of the problem

Although democracy has replaced absolute monarchy in Thailand for over 76 years, since 1932, democracy has not made the concrete progress it should have. Most Thai people have not been taught the principles of democracy well enough to develop the knowledge and understanding necessary to have an enduring faith in it. In order to develop a sustainable and stable democracy in Thailand, people should know and understand what democracy is, as well as believe in the value of their democratic government, so that democracy can become their political culture. In the development of the democratic process, Thai people, especially the youths who are the future of the nation, are expected to learn directly and indirectly from families, schools, and general members of society (as the political socialization process) continuously, systematically, and efficiently.

In this study, the researcher has investigated the following: 1) whether and how the Thai youth leader participants' backgrounds consisting of sex, place of residence, field of study, family economic status, and family social status were related to their level of political culture and political participation; 2) the participants' levels of democratic political culture and political participation; and 3) whether and how their democratic political culture and political participation were related to each other. The results then are expected to help indicate a direction on democratic development in Thailand in the future.

The Objectives of the Research

This research study was conducted with four main objectives as shown below.

- 1) To study the relationship between the levels of knowledge and understanding of democracy, of the attitudes toward democracy, and of the political behaviors of Thai youth leaders, as part of the process of developing their democratic political culture.
- 2) To study the level of democratic political culture of the Thai youth leaders.
- 3) To study the level of political participation of the Thai youth leaders, particularly their interest in being positively active in the future.
- 4) To study the relationship between the backgrounds, the levels of democratic political culture and political participation of the Thai youth leaders.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, the researcher has developed and employed the conceptual framework below.

The concept of political culture

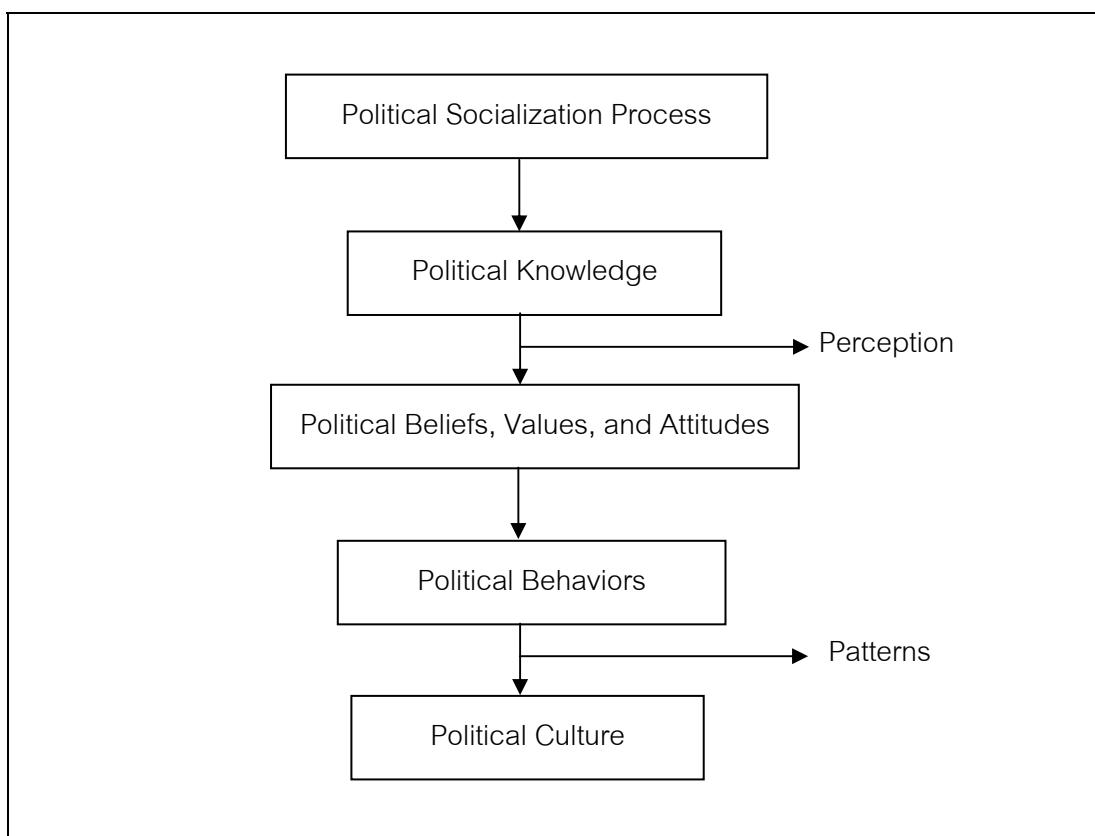
Political culture is part of social culture; therefore, the process of culture development is explained first. Culture is a social process which results from lifelong, direct and indirect socialization; in this process, members of society learn and accept

(perception) the ways of life (knowledge) as philosophies of life. The knowledge is learned and accepted to become collective beliefs, values, and attitudes of the members of society which influence individuals' behaviors. When they behave according to their beliefs, their behaviors become patterns and obvious identities of individuals and social groups form, and finally the culture of that society emerges.

Political culture then refers to patterns of political behaviors that result from the political beliefs, values, and attitudes of individuals (Almond, 1956; Beer and Ulam, 1958; Taylor, 1959; Yinger, 1962; Pye, 1966; and Bluhm, 1974). Also, Almond (1956, p.396) asserted that, in this process, there are three kinds of orientations, including 1) cognitive orientation, 2) affection orientation, and 3) evaluation orientation, by saying "Any orientation to politics involves three components: the first is perception or cognition; the second is preference, involvement, or affect; the third is evaluation or choice." Almond and Verba (1965, pp. 17-20) also identified three types of political culture: 1) parochial political culture, 2) subject political culture, and 3) participant political culture.

In sum, political culture is the end result of the process of political socialization involving political knowledge, beliefs, values, and attitudes. In this process, a set of political beliefs, values, and attitudes influences people's political behaviors, and their political behaviors then become a pattern and their political culture (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Process of Political Culture Development



The concept of political behavior and participation

Political behavior refers to political activities performed by individuals and collective groups such as political votings, political campaigns, political party assemblies, and political speeches (Thamrongthanyawong, 1996).

Political participation refers to particular political activities in which members of society voluntarily take part in directly or indirectly. These activities include

general elections, determination of public policies, news monitoring, political discussions, public opinions, and having political positions (Milbrath, 1965). Political participation also may refer to political actions taken for certain objectives such as to appoint/select administrators, to influence governmental decisions, to criticize the government, and to stage a political rally (Thamrongthanyawong, 1996).

Today, in Thailand, people have more political roles in limiting the authority of the state and conducting checks and balances with the state through the power of the civil society sector. People's politics monitors state agencies; participation is voluntary and the participants must share the same political goals (Srisant, 2002).

In addition, the 2007 Thai Constitution includes specific sections that clearly call for public participation in politics. For example, Section 63 states that people have rights to peaceful and unarmed assembly, and Section 87 requires the state to implement policies on public participation in politics, while Sections 163, 164, and 165 promote people's direct participation in politics.

Backgrounds, political culture, and political participation

It has been stated in several studies that the backgrounds of individuals are related to their levels of political culture and political participation.

1) Sex. There is not consensus in the existing body of research. Sex in general influences the level of democratic political culture. In Thailand, the level of democratic political culture among men, for example, is higher than that among women (Jirabut, 1987; and Pong-asawaranont, 1989) and men have greater understanding of and participation in politics (Ratanawarinchai, 2003, & Yawichaikaew, 2004). It has been taught in Thai society for long that men are supposed to protect and

defend the country and act as leaders. This belief remains in Thai society and consequently men are seen to participate in politics more than women are. On the other hand, some other studies revealed that sex does not influence the level of democratic political culture, saying that the level of democratic political culture of both sexes are similar (Jandaeng, 2001, and Noknoi, 2003).

2) *Family Socio-economic Status.* In several studies, people's higher social-economic status was reported as relating to an increase in political participation. Those with higher socio-economic status have been found to participate in politics more than those with lower socio-economic status are (Personen, 1960, Rokkan and Campbell, 1960, Scheuch, 1961, and Bureekul, 2000). However, some researchers (see Saensuk, 2000, and Jandaeng, 2001) state that people's family economic status has no influence on their political understanding, attitudes, or participation.

3) *Field of Study.* Higher education in Thailand is divided quite clearly into arts and sciences. Several studies indicated that people who study arts are likely to have better knowledge and understanding of social and political issues and be more politically active than those that study sciences are (Jirabut, 1977; lempraiwan, 1977). However, the results of some studies suggest that the field of study makes no difference in people's level of democratic political culture (Jirapornsirikul, 1998).

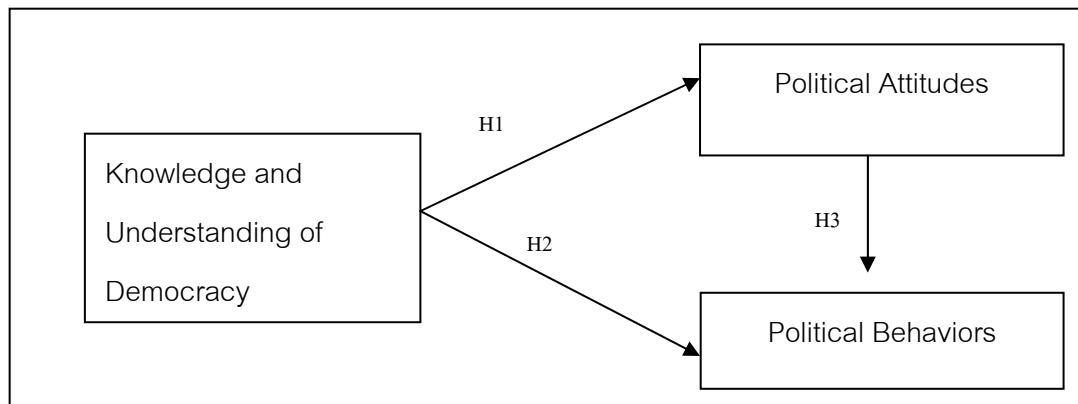
4) *Geographic Location of Residence.* Where an individual lives is reported to influence their political environments. Therefore, geographic location of residence is likely to influence people's democratic political culture and political participation. In other words, because those who live in Bangkok are likely to receive faster and wider coverage of political news, they are likely to have a higher level of democratic political culture than those who live elsewhere. However, Pinprachasan

(1987) and Sangkhakunchorn (1989) found no relationship between geographic location of residence and level of democratic political culture.

Based on the discussion on backgrounds, political culture and political participation given above, the researcher finally has developed the following two models.

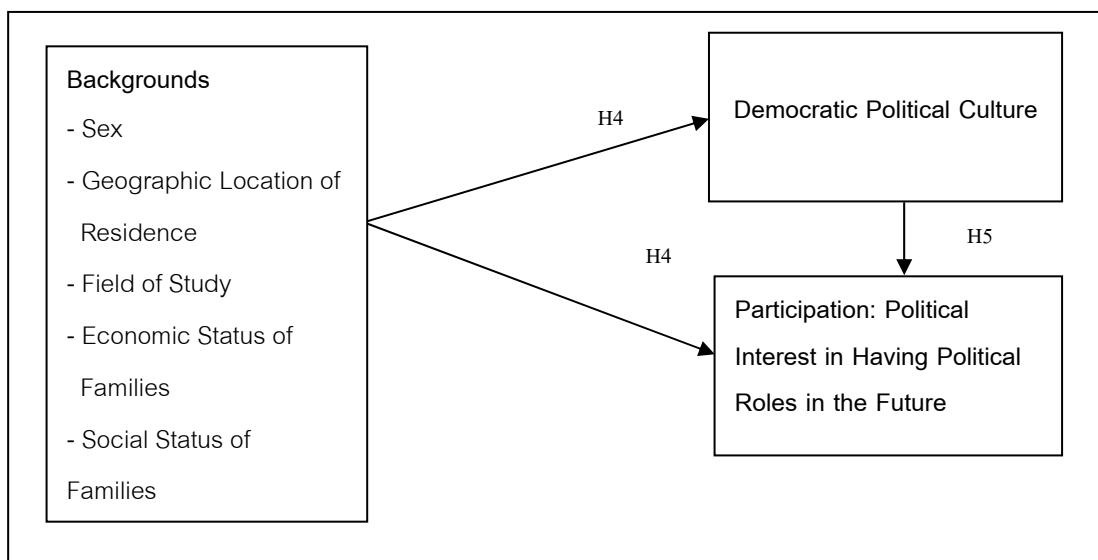
1) Based on the political culture development process discussed earlier, the researcher proposes the first model on (1) the relationship between the knowledge and understanding of democracy and the political attitude of Thai youth leaders, (2) the relationship between the knowledge and understanding of democracy and the political behaviors of Thai youth leaders, and (3) the relationship between the political attitude and the political behaviors of Thai youth leaders (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Relationship between Knowledge and Understanding of Democracy, Political Attitude, and Political Behaviors of Thai Youth Leaders (Model 1)



The second model illustrates the relationship between the backgrounds, political culture, and political participation of Thai youth leaders (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Relationship between Backgrounds, Political Culture, and Political Participation of Thai Youth Leaders (Model 2)



In verifying the workability of the two proposed models, the following hypotheses are given.

- H1: Thai youth leaders' level of knowledge and understanding of democracy positively influences their level of political attitude.
- H2: Thai youth leaders' level of knowledge and understanding of democracy positively influences their level of political behaviors.
- H3: Thai youth leaders' level of political attitudes positively influences their level of political behaviors.
- H4: Thai youth leaders' backgrounds influence their level of democratic political culture and of political participation.

H5: Thai youth leaders' level of democratic political culture influences their level of political participation.

Methodology

This study is a cross-sectional one, examining the nature of political culture formation. The unit of analysis was an individual. All of the provincial members of the National Youth Council without randomization were selected as participants. The research instruments were questionnaires obtaining information on backgrounds, level of knowledge and understanding about democracy, level of political attitudes, level of political behaviors, and level of political participation of Thai youth leaders. The researcher employed construct validity to test the validity of the scale employed to measure the participants' democratic political attitudes and employed factor analysis to test the scale. The researcher also employed alpha to test the reliability of the scale. For data collection, the researcher mailed questionnaires to the participants. All valid returned by prepaid mail questionnaires ($n=1,064$) were administered and the collected data from the questionnaires were then processed. A statistical processing software was employed for data analysis and statistical analyses, including 1) the frequency distributions which looked into frequencies, percentages, averages, and standard deviations, 2) the regression analysis which looked into the factors influencing dependent variables, and 3) the analysis of variance which looked into differences between independent and dependent variables. The Scheffe's method also was employed in order to identify contrasts.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study are presented below.

1) Regarding Thai youth leaders' level of knowledge and understanding of democracy, most Thai youth leader participants (80.4%) were reported to have a high level of knowledge and understanding of democracy. This indicates that teaching and training they received on democracy, both directly by schools and indirectly through the socialization process, resulted in good knowledge and understanding of democracy among Thai youth leaders.

2) Regarding Thai youth leaders' level of political attitudes, more than half of the participants (56.0%) were found to have a high level of democratic political attitudes. The rest (44.0%) were reported to have medium and fairly high levels, and none were reported to have relatively low or low levels of democratic political attitudes.

The results in items 1) and 2) indicate that the participants' level of knowledge and understanding of democracy is likely to influence their political attitudes and that those with a high level of knowledge and understanding of democracy are likely to have a high level of democratic political attitudes. H1 was confirmed.

3) Regarding the participants' political behaviors, the majority of the participants (70.1%), were reported to have a medium level of democratic political behaviors; some of them (28.2%), a low level; and a very few (1.1%), a high level. This result is not consistent with the result of H1, while H2, and H3 were not confirmed. It means that the participants with good knowledge and understanding of democracy are likely to have good political attitudes, but they are not likely to perform political behaviors.

4) Regarding the participants' level of the democratic political culture, most of the participants (84.1%) reportedly had a medium level, and a few of them (8.8%) reportedly had a high level.

5) Regarding the participants' level of political participation, almost half of them, (48.8%) were reported to have a high level of interest in future political participation; some of them (27.9%), a low level; and the rest (23.3%), a medium level.

6) Regarding how a) the participants' level of knowledge and understanding of democracy would influence b) that of democratic political attitudes and c) that of political behaviors, the results are presented below.

6.1) The majority of the participants (76.8%) reported that their level of knowledge and understanding of democracy positively influenced that of democratic political attitudes.

6.2) Some of the participants (18.7%) responded that their level of democratic political attitudes positively influenced that of political behaviors.

6.3) A few of the participants (10%) responded that their level of knowledge and understanding of democracy positively influenced that of political behavior.

This result indicates that having a good level of knowledge and understanding of democratic attitudes does not indicate an individual's level of political behaviors.

7) Regarding how the participants' level of knowledge and understanding of democracy, democratic political attitudes, and political behaviors would influence their level of political participation, the results are presented below.

1) The participants' level of knowledge and understanding of democracy, democratic political attitudes, and political behaviors reportedly influenced their level of political participation at the rate of 39.1%.

2) Their level of democratic political attitudes alone appear to influence that of political participation most, followed by that of knowledge and understanding of democracy and that of political behaviors, respectively.

3) The participants' level of knowledge and understanding of democracy was found to negatively influence that of political participation, while that of democratic political attitudes and that of political behaviors positively influenced that of political participation.

The results indicate that a) the participants with a high level of knowledge and understanding of democracy are likely to have a low level of political participation, b) those with a high level of democratic political attitudes and political behaviors are likely to have a high level of participation, c) having knowledge and understanding of democracy without belief and faith in democracy is not likely to cause political participation, and d) such participants are, therefore, not likely to be politically active.

8) Regarding how the participants' level of democratic political culture would influence that of their political participation, the result reveals that their level of democratic political culture reportedly influenced that of political participation at the rate of 30.9% and that both items were positively related. This implies that those with a high level of democratic political culture are likely to actively participate in politics, and that they should be encouraged to possess a high level of democratic political culture in order that Thai democracy be more secure. This result confirms H5.

9) With respect to how the participants' backgrounds influenced their level of democratic political culture, the results are given below.

a) The participants' sex difference was found to have no influence on their level of democratic political culture. This indicates that political teaching and training on politics, both directly by school and indirectly by society, is likely to be equally accessible to both sexes.

b) The results for the participants' geographical location of residence on their level of democratic political culture were positive. The results suggest that the level of democratic political culture of the participants from the Central Plain is lower than that of those in the Northeast and the South, but higher than that of those in the North. This suggests that education about politics, whether conducted directly by schools or indirectly by families and society, varies in different regions, and that it results in different levels of democratic political culture in the different regions of Thailand.

c) The participants' different fields of study reportedly influenced their level of democratic political culture. The level of democratic political culture of those in the arts was found to be higher than that of those in sciences.

d) The participants' family economic status reportedly influences their level of democratic political culture. The data indicates that the level of democratic political culture of those whose family earned less than 10,000 baht per month is lower than that of those whose family have a higher income. This means that those whose family is not economically well-off are likely to receive less education about politics, either directly or indirectly, than those from a better off family.

e) The participants' family social status (particularly that as signified by their father's occupation) appears to influence their level of democratic political culture. The level of democratic political culture of those whose father is a corporate employee or a business owner reportedly is higher than that of those whose father is a worker/laborer, a vendor, or a farmer. This indicates that an individual's family social status is likely to influence their level of democratic political culture.

10) The results of the study showing how the participants' backgrounds would influence their levels of political participation are given below.

a) Sex difference reportedly influenced their level of political participation. The participants' responses indicate the males expect to be more politically active than the females. This result is intriguing because there was no difference found in the level of democratic political culture of both sexes.

b) The participants' geographical location of residence was found to influence their level of political participation. Those in the Northeast are more interested in political participation in the future than those in the Central Plain and the North. This result is similar to that on political culture, which found that the level of the political culture of participants from the Northeast was higher than that of those in the Central Plain and the North. This result also indicates that economic and social environments of the participants in the Central Plain and the North are likely to cause them to be less interested in playing political roles in the future than those in other regions.

c) The participants' different fields of study appear to influence their level of political participation. Those in arts reportedly are more interested in political participation in the future than those in sciences. This result is similar to that on political culture.

d) The participants' family economic status was found to affect their level of political participation. Those with a family income lower than 10,000 baht per month reportedly are less interested in political participation in the future than those whose family income is greater. This result confirms that family economic status is likely to influence participation in politics. Therefore, in order to secure the development of democracy, the government needs to help their citizens improve their economic status.

e) The participants' family social status (particularly that as signified by their father's occupation) reportedly influenced their level of political participation. Those whose father is a government official or a state enterprise employee reportedly are more interested in playing political roles in the future than those whose father is a vendor. Respondents whose father was a vendor or workers/laborers indicated being less interested in playing political roles in the future than those whose father is in other occupations. Therefore, it seems probable that parents who are vendors and wage-earning workers/laborers are not likely to have time to discuss politics with their children when compared to those in other occupations, which implies that occupation can be a major constraint. Therefore, according to the results of items 9) and 10), H4 was confirmed except that sex difference appears to have no influence on the participants' level of democratic political culture.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Academia

In general, studies on political culture usually examine individuals' attitudes toward political systems (Almond, 1956), because individuals' political attitudes are expected to influence their political behaviors and their political behaviors

are patterns of their political culture. This study, the selected Thai youth leaders were found to have a high level of democratic political attitudes but a medium level of political behaviors. Therefore, future studies on Thai peoples' political culture should investigate their political behaviors rather than their political attitudes because their political behaviors reflect their political culture more accurately than their political attitudes do.

Recommendations for Policy Implication

- 1) The education of Thai citizens about democracy should be rigorously implemented so that young Thai adults can form and develop their knowledge, faith, and confidence in the democratic process sufficiently to put it into practice while the principles of democracy become a core part for their life. In addition, their knowledge, beliefs, and actions must be in parallel. Because this parallelism was not found in this study, it is recommended that Thai educational institutes place more emphasis on teaching and training youths the principles of democracy seriously.
- 2) Thai youths should be taught to be more aware of the importance of political participation because, although they are likely to have a high level of democratic political knowledge, understanding, and attitudes, they have little interest in being politically active in the future. An important indicator of the successful development or reform of a democratic government is the level of public participation, since a high level of public participation in politics reflects progress in democracy.
- 3) Special attention should be paid to the education of women so that they are more aware of the importance of political participation because the female Thai youths are likely to be less interested in playing political roles in the future than male Thai youths are, although the democratic political knowledge and attitudes of both

sexes is similar. This issue is thus highly important for the democratic political development of Thailand.

4) Educational institutes should work together to develop a national standard of teaching and training on democracy and politics because they need to educate and help young adults in different regions to share the same political culture and to participate in politics equally.

5) Economic and social development should be promoted for a better quality of life. This macro factor greatly influences the democratic political development of the nation. In this study, the participants' family's economic and social status was found to be related to their levels of political culture and political participation. Therefore, the better the economics and social development (in terms of more people becoming middle classes) of the nation is, the more advanced and stable the democratic political development will be. Thus, national economics and social development must immediately be encouraged in order to enable the majority of Thai citizens to join the middle classes, which will result in a more stable and firmer advancement of democratic political development.

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