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Success Factors and the Effectiveness of Political Mobilization Patterns: A Case Study of the 2025 Provincial Administrative Organization Chief Executive Election in Surat Thani

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Abstract

This study examines the success factors and effectiveness of political mobilization patterns in the 2025 Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) chief executive election in Surat Thani Province, Thailand's largest southern province with diverse economic activities spanning agriculture, fisheries, and tourism, providing an ideal context for investigating electoral mechanisms in Thailand's decentralizing governance system. Two research questions guide the investigation: (1) What factors influence electoral success in PAO elections? (2) How do different mobilization patterns compare in effectiveness? Using a quantitative survey research methodology, data were collected from 430 eligible voters across 19 districts through multi-stage sampling. Research instruments demonstrated strong validity (IOC = 0.66-1.00) and reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.90-0.94). Data analysis employed descriptive statistics, multiple regression, and one-way ANOVA with Scheffe's post-hoc test. Results reveal that policy and campaigning factors (M = 4.31, SD = 0.62) were most critical, followed by candidate characteristics (M = 4.23, SD = 0.67). Among mobilization patterns, community leaders and village headmen networks (M = 4.15, SD = 0.68) proved most effective, followed by social media (M = 3.94, SD = 0.73) and economic activities (M = 3.89, SD = 0.76). ANOVA confirmed significant differences across patterns ($p < 0.001$), with distinct effectiveness hierarchies emerging. Multiple regression demonstrated that all five success factors significantly influenced election outcomes ($R^2 = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$), with policy and campaigning ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$) and candidate characteristics ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$) showing strongest effects. These findings illuminate dynamics of local political competition in Thailand's southern region, highlighting the enduring importance of traditional social capital and patronage networks alongside emerging digital communication channels in contemporary Thai local elections.

Introduction

The transformation of Thailand's local governance landscape following the 1997 Constitution marked a significant shift toward decentralization, fundamentally altering the dynamics of local political competition (Arghiros, 2001; Suwanmala, 2007). Provincial Administrative Organizations (PAOs), established as key intermediate-level local government institutions, have become crucial arenas where national political trends intersect with local power structures,

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creating complex patterns of electoral mobilization and competition (Ockey, 2004; Kongkirati et al., 2012). The direct election of PAO chief executives represents a particularly important development in Thai politics, as these positions command substantial administrative authority and budgetary resources while operating at the intersection of provincial and sub-district political networks.

Political mobilization operates fundamentally differently at local versus national levels. National elections emphasize party platforms, leader personalities, and mass media campaigns, wherein political parties serve as primary mobilization vehicles (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). In contrast, PAO elections involve direct, personalized contact between candidates and voters through community networks, face-to-face interactions, and localized campaign strategies operating within bounded geographic territories (Arghiros, 2001). PAO candidates typically lack extensive party machinery and national media access, compelling them to construct grassroots mobilization networks leveraging traditional patron-client relationships, community leader endorsements, and personal reputation (Ockey, 2004). This localized, relationship-intensive character makes PAO elections particularly valuable for understanding how democratic processes function at the subnational level.

Surat Thani Province presents an ideal case for investigating local electoral mechanisms. First, as Thailand's largest southern province by area (12,891.5 km²) encompassing 19 districts and 935,896 eligible voters, Surat Thani provides sufficient scale for robust quantitative analysis while representing provincial Thailand's geographic and demographic diversity (The Bureau of Registration Administration, 2025). Second, the province encompasses heterogeneous economic activities spanning agriculture (rubber and palm oil), fisheries, and tourism, creating varied socioeconomic contexts and diverse voter interests candidates must address. Third, the February 1, 2025 election featured a competitive six-candidate race generating substantial public engagement, with 551,791 voters casting ballots representing 58.95% turnout—participation indicating significant political interest while avoiding extreme rates suggesting unusual conditions (Election Committee of Surat Thani Provincial Administrative Organization, 2025).

Despite growing scholarly attention to Thai local elections, three significant research gaps limit current understanding. First, existing studies predominantly examine individual success factors or mobilization strategies in isolation rather than investigating their simultaneous interactions and relative importance within comprehensive frameworks. Second, research typically focuses on either traditional patronage networks or modern digital campaigns, neglecting their coexistence within single electoral contexts. Third, quantitative analyses employing sophisticated statistical techniques remain rare, with most studies relying on descriptive statistics inadequate for establishing relative effect magnitudes. This study addresses these gaps through multiple regression analysis and analysis of variance simultaneously examining five electoral success factor dimensions and comparatively assessing six mobilization pattern types.

This study addresses two interconnected research questions: Research Question 1: What factors most significantly influence electoral success in PAO chief executive elections? Specifically, among five dimensions—candidate characteristics, support networks, policy and campaigning, resource management, and political and social context—which demonstrate strongest effects, and how do these factors combine to shape overall success? Research Question 2: Which patterns of political mobilization prove most effective in local Thai elections? Specifically, among six approaches—local government

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organization networks, community leaders and village headmen, business groups and local influencers, national political party networks, economic activities and assistance provision, and social media platforms—which generate greatest electoral impact? By examining these questions through quantitative analysis of the 2025 Surat Thani PAO election, this research contributes to broader theoretical debates about electoral competition in decentralizing political systems, the role of social capital and networks in political mobilization, and the changing landscape of political communication in developing democracies.

Literature Review

Electoral Success Factors in Thai Local Elections

Electoral success in Thai local elections reflects multiple dimensions operating at individual, organizational, and contextual levels. Contemporary scholarship has moved beyond simplistic characterizations emphasizing vote-buying alone, recognizing the increasingly multifaceted nature of local political competition (Pannarai & Maneekarn, 2022).

Candidate Characteristics constitute a fundamental dimension. Perceived integrity and honesty have emerged as increasingly important criteria, particularly given concerns about corruption in local government (Khajornsaksirikul, 2020). Administrative competence proves equally crucial, as PAO chief executives must manage substantial budgets and coordinate complex development projects requiring technical expertise (Kulachai et al., 2023). Local knowledge—familiarity with provincial challenges, understanding of community needs, and established connections—enables candidates to articulate relevant solutions and demonstrate credibility as effective leaders (Suwanmala, 2007).

Policy Platforms and Campaigning represent a second critical dimension. Recent research reveals growing programmatic competition wherein candidates articulate distinctive policy visions for local development (Pannarai & Maneekarn, 2022). Successful candidates develop coherent platforms addressing salient issues including infrastructure, public services, and economic development. Campaign strategies increasingly employ sophisticated communication techniques, incorporating professional advertising, organized volunteer networks, and strategic messaging (Kantaros, 2022).

Resource Management capacity enables sustained operations across geographically dispersed constituencies. Financial resources support advertising, events, and voter contact operations (Kantaros, 2022). However, effective utilization matters as much as absolute quantities; well-organized campaigns deploying limited resources strategically can outperform poorly managed campaigns with superior funding. Organizational capacity—recruiting, coordinating, and motivating volunteers—proves crucial for executing complex plans across diverse communities.

Support Networks provide both material resources and social legitimacy. Traditional structures including village headmen (phu yai ban) and subdistrict headmen (kamnan) serve as key intermediaries, with their endorsements carrying substantial weight particularly among older and rural voters (Scott, 1972; Suwanmala, 2007). Organizational connections through local institutions and civil society groups expand reach while demonstrating broad-based support. Partisan ties to national political parties provide resources and legitimacy, though party affiliations matter less in PAO elections than parliamentary contests (Kongkirati et al., 2012).

Political and Social Context shapes the broader environment within which campaigns operate. National political trends influence local contests through spillover effects (Ockey, 2004).

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Economic conditions including agricultural prices and employment opportunities shape voter priorities. Social cleavages based on geography, occupation, or generation create distinct voter segments requiring tailored approaches.

Political Mobilization Patterns in Thai Politics

Political mobilization encompasses strategies through which candidates activate and channel electoral support, transforming latent preferences into voting behavior. Thai local elections exhibit distinctive patterns reflecting the country's unique political culture and ongoing democratic evolution.

Community Leaders and Village Headmen serve as crucial mobilization intermediaries. The kamnan and phu yai ban occupy formal administrative positions while functioning as informal community leaders commanding social respect rooted in their roles resolving disputes and representing community interests (Scott, 1972). Their detailed knowledge of household circumstances enables targeted mobilization, while their endorsements provide credibility signals particularly valuable for voters lacking direct candidate knowledge (Suwanmala, 2007). Contemporary candidates cultivate these relationships through sustained community engagement and supporting local development projects.

Economic Activities and Assistance represent another prominent pattern. Evidence suggests effective economic mobilization involves longer-term reciprocal relationships rather than transaction-based exchanges, with candidates building reputations as community benefactors through funding temple ceremonies, supporting sports teams, providing emergency loans, and sponsoring scholarships (Banyaem et al., 2024). These activities create moral obligations extending beyond single electoral cycles, embedding candidates within webs of reciprocity. Such patterns reflect both cultural continuities emphasizing reciprocal obligations and structural inequalities creating dependencies.

Social Media and Digital Mobilization have rapidly emerged as important tools, particularly for engaging younger, urban, and educated voters. Platforms including Facebook, LINE, and TikTok enable direct communication bypassing traditional gatekeepers, rapid response to issues, and viral content amplification (Lee & Blevins, 2024). However, effectiveness varies substantially by demographics, with younger voters significantly more responsive to online appeals compared to older voters preferring traditional channels (Chayawong, 2021). Successful campaigns integrate digital and traditional approaches.

Local Government Organization Networks provide mobilization infrastructure through administrative connections. Candidates with local government experience leverage organizational relationships, institutional knowledge, and administrative contacts for campaign support (Phataramethravorakul et al., 2023). These networks provide volunteers, logistics, and credibility, though such connections can generate perceptions of insider manipulation.

National Political Party Networks offer resources and mobilization capacity, though their importance varies. Major parties provide financial support, campaign expertise, and volunteer networks (Kongkirati et al., 2012). However, party affiliations matter less in PAO elections, as provincial voters often prioritize local considerations over national partisan loyalties.

Business Groups and Local Influencers contribute resources and credibility within specific sectors. Local business leaders provide financial support while signaling candidate competence in economic development. However, business connections risk generating perceptions of elite capture that undermine broader appeal.

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Patronage Systems and the "Ban Yai" System in Thai Politics

Understanding contemporary Thai electoral mobilization requires examining the "Ban Yai" (บ้านใหญ่ – "big house") system that has long structured rural Thai political relations.

Traditional Patron-Client Relations historically organized rural society through hierarchical relationships wherein wealthy families—the "Ban Yai"—provided economic assistance and social protection to dependent villagers in exchange for loyalty and political support (Scott, 1972). These relationships extended beyond material exchanges to encompass comprehensive social bonds involving mutual obligations and long-term reciprocity. Patrons demonstrated benevolence through generosity during crises and funding community projects. Clients reciprocated through deference, loyalty, and mobilization when patrons required political support.

The patronage system operated differently across political levels. At the national level, patronage manifested through political parties distributing material benefits, government positions, and development projects in exchange for electoral support (Hicken, 2002). Electoral mobilization emphasized transaction - based exchanges wherein voters received immediate inducements—cash payments, goods, government jobs—for votes. At the local level, patronage exhibited more personalized characteristics. Local patrons built reputations through sustained assistance over extended periods rather than one -time payments (Suwanmala, 2007). Villagers developed loyalties based on accumulated obligations and personal relationships.

Contemporary Manifestations in PAO Elections reveal both continuities and transformations. Despite Thailand's democratization and social changes, patronage mechanisms persist in evolved forms (Ockey, 2004). Contemporary PAO candidates employ assistance activities reminiscent of traditional patronage—funding events, providing emergency aid, supporting development—that create reciprocal obligations. However, several factors distinguish contemporary from traditional patronage. First, **multiple competing patrons** now exist rather than single dominant Ban Yai, as economic development and democratic reforms have diversified local elite structures. This competition creates opportunities for voters to choose among patrons, introducing accountability elements (Chambers & Supajakwattana, 2025). **Second, programmatic appeals increasingly complement** relationship-based mobilization, as voters evaluate candidates based on policy platforms and governance competence alongside loyalty considerations (Pannarai & Maneekarn, 2022). Third, **state capacity expansion** has reduced dependence on private patrons for services increasingly provided through government institutions.

Nevertheless, patronage persists because it fulfills functions beyond vote-buying. In contexts of continuing inequality and incomplete welfare development, patron assistance provides crucial support, supplements inadequate public services, and demonstrates candidates' commitment to community welfare. Culturally, reciprocity norms remain influential. Politically, relationship-based mobilization proves effective where voters lack detailed policy information.

The result is a hybrid system wherein traditional patronage—based mobilization coexists with modern programmatic competition (Phatarametravorakul et al., 2023). Successful PAO candidates typically combine both approaches: building relationships through community assistance while articulating policy platforms and demonstrating governance competence. This hybridity reflects Thailand's ongoing democratic transition.

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Previous Research and Gaps

Scholarly research on Thai PAO elections has evolved through distinct phases. Early studies (1990s-2000s) emphasized patronage and vote-buying as dominant mechanisms (Scott, 1972; Arghiros, 2001; Hicken, 2002). Transitional research (2000s-2010s) identified democratic deepening alongside persistent traditional practices, recognizing greater complexity (Ockey, 2004; Kongkirati et al., 2012; Suwanmala, 2007). Contemporary studies (2010s-present) emphasize hybrid mobilization combining traditional and modern elements. Pannarai & Maneekarn (2022) found voters increasingly evaluating candidates based on policy platforms alongside material inducements. Chayawong (2021) documented social media's rising importance, though effectiveness varies by demographics. Phataramethravorakul et al. (2023) revealed successful campaigns integrate multiple channels rather than relying exclusively on any single approach.

Despite valuable contributions, three significant gaps persist. First, existing studies predominantly examine individual factors or patterns separately rather than analyzing simultaneous interactions and relative importance. Second, research typically focuses on either traditional patronage or modern digital campaigns, neglecting their coexistence within single contexts. Third, quantitative analyses employing multivariate techniques to establish relative effect magnitudes remain rare, with most studies relying on descriptive statistics inadequate for adjudicating among competing explanations. This study addresses these gaps through multiple regression and ANOVA simultaneously examining five success factors and six mobilization patterns, providing systematic quantitative evidence on their relative importance in contemporary PAO elections.

Theoretical Framework

This study synthesizes multiple theoretical perspectives into a comprehensive framework integrating insights from electoral studies, mobilization theory, and Thai political research.

Electoral Success Factors Framework: Drawing on comparative research (Kulachai et al., 2023; Kurtbaş, 2015) and Thai studies (Khajornsaksirikul, 2020; Pannarai & Maneekarn, 2022), this study conceptualizes success through five dimensions: (1) Candidate characteristics (personal integrity, administrative competence, local knowledge); (2) Support networks (traditional structures, organizational connections, partisan ties); (3) Policy and campaigning (platform substance, messaging, communication strategies); (4) Resource management (financial resources, organizational capacity, strategic deployment); (5) Political and social context (national trends, economic conditions, social cleavages).

Political Mobilization Framework: Integrating mobilization theory (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993) and Thai research, this study examines six patterns: (1) Community leaders/village headmen (traditional authority endorsements); (2) Local government networks (administrative connections); (3) Business groups/ influencers (economic network mobilization); (4) National party networks (partisan infrastructure); (5) Economic activities/ assistance (material support creating reciprocal obligations); (6) Social media platforms (digital communication enabling direct contact).

Research Hypotheses: Based on this framework and previous research, this study tests: H1: Electoral success factors significantly influence outcomes, with candidate characteristics and policy/campaigning showing strongest effects given growing programmatic orientation (Pannarai & Maneekarn, 2022; Kulachai et al., 2023). H2: Mobilization patterns vary significantly in effectiveness, with community leaders and social media proving most effective given complementary reach across traditional and modern voter segments (Suwanmala, 2007; Chayawong, 2021).

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Conceptual Model

Figure 1 depicts hypothesized relationships between electoral success factors, mobilization patterns, and outcomes.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework: Electoral Success Factors, Mobilization Patterns, and Electoral Outcomes



Research Methods

Research Design and Sample

This quantitative study employed survey research methodology to examine electoral success factors and political mobilization patterns in the 2025 Surat Thani PAO chief executive election. The population comprised 935,896 eligible voters across 19 districts (The Bureau of Registration Administration, Department of Provincial Administration, 2025). Sample size of 430 respondents was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula at 95% confidence level with 5% margin of error.

Multi-stage sampling ensured representativeness through four stages: (1) proportional stratified sampling at district level, with allocation proportional to eligible voter population; (2) systematic sampling at subdistrict level, selecting approximately 40% using calculated intervals; (3) simple random sampling at village level, selecting 2-3 villages per subdistrict; (4) proportional stratified sampling at individual level, stratifying by gender and age group (18-25, 26-40, 41-59, 60+ years).

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face questionnaires administered by trained research assistants following the election. This post-election timing allowed assessment of actual voting behavior and mobilization exposure rather than pre-election intentions.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire employed five-point Likert scales (Likert, 1932) with five sections: (1) demographic information; (2) electoral success factors (25 items across five dimensions: candidate characteristics, support networks, policy/campaigning, resource management, political/social context); (3) political mobilization patterns (30 items across six patterns: local government networks, community leaders/village headmen, business groups/influencers, national party networks, economic activities/assistance, social media platforms); (4) voting behavior change (25 items across five dimensions); (5) open-ended comments.

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Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established through expert review by three specialists in political science, local governance, and research methodology. Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) values ranged from 0.66 to 1.00, exceeding the 0.50 acceptability threshold (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977).

Reliability testing was conducted through pilot administration to 30 respondents in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. Cronbach's alpha coefficients (Cronbach, 1951) demonstrated excellent internal consistency: Electoral Success Factors (α = 0.94, subscales: 0.85-0.91), Political Mobilization Patterns (α = 0.92, subscales: 0.88-0.92), and Voting Behavior Change (α = 0.90, subscales: 0.85-0.90). All coefficients substantially exceeded the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally, 1978).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics characterized sample demographics and variable distributions using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Statistical assumptions including normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were verified prior to inferential analyses.

Pearson correlation analysis examined bivariate relationships among variables, with coefficients interpreted following Cohen (1988): 0.10-0.29 (low), 0.30-0.49 (moderate), 0.50-1.00 (high).

Multiple regression analysis tested which success factor dimensions most significantly influenced electoral outcomes. Standardized regression coefficients (β) indicated relative effect magnitudes, while R^2 measured variance explained. Statistical significance was evaluated at α = 0.05.

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) compared effectiveness across six mobilization patterns. Scheffe's post-hoc test identified specific pattern differences when overall ANOVA revealed significant effects. Effect sizes (η^2) quantified practical significance.

Ethical Considerations

This research received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Sirindhorn College of Public Health Yala (Approval No. SCPHYLIRB-2568/413). All participants provided informed consent after receiving comprehensive information about study purposes, voluntary participation, confidentiality procedures, and withdrawal rights. Data confidentiality was maintained through numerical coding, secure storage, and aggregate-only reporting.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The sample of 430 respondents demonstrated good representativeness of Surat Thani Province's eligible voter population. Gender distribution showed 53.02% female (228 respondents) and 46.28% male (199 respondents) respondents, with 0.70% (3 respondents) not specifying gender, closely matching provincial demographics. Age distribution revealed that most respondents were between 41-59 years (39.07%, 168 respondents), followed by 26-40 years (31.40%, 135 respondents), 60 years and above (19.07%, 82 respondents), and 18-25 years (10.46%, 45 respondents), reflecting the mature voter base that typically characterizes Thai local elections.

Educational attainment was relatively high, with 35.35% (152 respondents) holding bachelor's degrees and an additional 8.14% (35 respondents) holding graduate degrees, suggesting a fairly educated electorate capable of evaluating candidates and policies critically. Occupationally, the sample encompassed diverse backgrounds: private sector employees (29.77%, 128 respondents), small business owners (22.56%, 97 respondents),

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civil servants and state enterprise employees (19.07%, 82 respondents), farmers (14.65%, 63 respondents), students (6.51%, 28 respondents), unemployed (2.33%, 10 respondents), and others (5.12%, 22 respondents), representing the province's mixed economic base.

Monthly income distribution clustered around moderate levels, with 32.33% (139 respondents) earning 10,001-20,000 baht and 27.44% (118 respondents) earning 20,001-30,000 baht, indicating a predominantly middle and lower-middle income electorate. Importantly, 57.44% (247 respondents) of respondents were born and raised in Surat Thani Province, with an additional 20.70% (89 respondents) residing there for more than 20 years, demonstrating strong local roots and familiarity with provincial politics.

Geographic distribution across all 19 districts ensured broad representation, with larger districts like Mueang Surat Thani (15.12%, 65 respondents) and Kanchanadit (11.40%, 49 respondents) appropriately represented. Regarding voting experience, 84.88% of respondents (66.74% repeat voters plus 18.14% first-time voters, 365 respondents) voted in the February 1, 2025 election, closely matching the actual turnout rate and validating the sample's relevance to the research questions.

Election Success Factors

Analysis of the five election success factors revealed that policy and campaigning factors were perceived as most important (M = 4.31, SD = 0.62), followed closely by candidate characteristics (M = 4.23, SD = 0.67). Resource management (M = 4.17, SD = 0.64) and support networks (M = 4.08, SD = 0.71) received moderately high ratings, while political and social context factors were rated lowest (M = 3.84, SD = 0.76), though still at a high level.

Within the policy and campaigning dimension, the item "candidate's policies are distinctive and responsive to people's needs for provincial development" received the highest rating (M = 4.42, SD = 0.55), indicating that voters value concrete, relevant policy proposals. Similarly, "campaigning focuses on presenting policies and solutions rather than attacking opponents" (M = 4.38, SD = 0.58) scored highly.

For candidate characteristics, "honesty, integrity, and transparency" emerged as the most valued attribute (M = 4.47, SD = 0.52), followed by "Understanding of local problems and people's needs" (M = 4.35, SD = 0.58). "Knowledge, competence, and experience in local administration" received the lowest rating within this dimension (M = 4.15, SD = 0.65).

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among all five success factors ($r = 0.47$ to 0.73, all $p < 0.01$). The strongest correlation emerged between policy/campaigning and candidate characteristics ($r = 0.73$). The correlation between resource management and support networks was $r = 0.68$.

Multiple regression analysis confirmed that all five factors significantly predict electoral success ($F = 187.23$, $df = 5/424$, $p < 0.001$), with the model explaining 69% of variance in perceived candidate success ($R^2 = 0.69$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.68$). The Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.98 indicated no problematic autocorrelation. Table 1 presents detailed regression results.

Table 1

Multiple Regression Analysis: Election Success Factors Predicting Electoral Success

Factor	β	SE	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Policy and Campaigning	0.34	0.037	9.16	<0.001	[0.27, 0.41]
Candidate Characteristics	0.30	0.038	7.89	<0.001	[0.23, 0.37]
Resource Management	0.19	0.038	4.97	<0.001	[0.11, 0.27]

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Factor	β	SE	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Support Networks	0.16	0.039	4.12	<0.001	[0.08, 0.24]
Political and Social Context	0.09	0.038	2.35	0.019	[0.01, 0.17]

Note: β = standardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; t = t-statistic; CI = confidence interval
Model Statistics: $R^2 = 0.69$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.68$, $F(5,424) = 187.23$, $p < 0.001$

Standardized coefficients showed policy and campaigning (β = 0.34, t = 9.16, p < 0.001) as the strongest predictor, followed by candidate characteristics (β = 0.30, t = 7.89, p < 0.001), resource management (β = 0.19, t = 4.97, p < 0.001), support networks (β = 0.16, t = 4.12, p < 0.001), and political/social context (β = 0.09, t = 2.35, p = 0.019).

Effectiveness of Political Mobilization Patterns

Comparative analysis of six political mobilization patterns revealed substantial variation in their perceived effectiveness. Community leaders and village headmen networks proved most effective (M = 4.15, SD = 0.68). Social media mobilization ranked second (M = 3.94, SD = 0.73), followed by economic activities and assistance provision (M = 3.89, SD = 0.76). Local government organization networks (M = 3.67, SD = 0.84), national political party networks (M = 3.52, SD = 0.87), and business groups/local influencers (M = 3.45, SD = 0.91) received moderate effectiveness ratings.

One-way ANOVA confirmed significant differences in effectiveness across the six mobilization patterns ($F = 42.85$, df = 5/2594, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$), indicating a medium effect size by Cohen's (1988) standards. Table 2 presents ANOVA results and descriptive statistics.

Table 2
Comparison of Political Mobilization Pattern Effectiveness

Pattern	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*F*	*p*	η^2
Community Leaders/Village Headmen	4.15	0.68	430			
Social Media	3.94	0.73	430			
Economic Activities/Assistance	3.89	0.76	430	42.85	<0.001	0.08
Local Government Organizations	3.67	0.84	430			
National Political Parties	3.52	0.87	430			
Business Groups/Influencers	3.45	0.91	430			

Note: Total n = 2,580 (430 respondents × 6 patterns). η^2 = eta-squared (effect size).

Scheffe's post-hoc tests revealed three distinct effectiveness tiers. Community leader mobilization significantly outperformed all other patterns (all p < 0.05). Social media and economic activities showed no significant difference from each other (p = 0.847) but significantly exceeded the three lowest-rated patterns (all p < 0.05). Local government organizations, national parties, and business groups formed a third tier, with significant pairwise differences among them (p < 0.05).

Correlation analysis showed moderate to strong positive relationships among mobilization patterns (r = 0.42 to 0.71, all p < 0.01). The strongest correlation emerged between community leaders and economic activities (r = 0.71). The correlation between community leaders and social media was r = 0.67.

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Discussion

Primacy of Policy and Programmatic Appeals

The finding that policy and campaigning factors emerged as the strongest predictor of electoral success ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), followed by candidate characteristics ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$), challenges characterizations of Thai local elections as purely clientelistic (Hicken, 2002). Voters' strong preference for distinctive policies responsive to provincial needs (M = 4.42) and positive campaigning (M = 4.38) demonstrates programmatic orientation extending beyond material exchange relationships, revealing sophisticated expectations for meaningful policy engagement consistent with democratic deepening (Phatharathananunth, 2016).

The emphasis on candidate honesty and transparency (M = 4.47) as the most valued characteristic reflects widespread corruption concerns (Khajornsaksirikul, 2020), while high valuation of understanding local problems (M = 4.35) emphasizes responsiveness importance (Pannarai & Maneekarn, 2022). The relatively lower emphasis on administrative expertise (M = 4.15) suggests moral character and local understanding outweigh technocratic qualifications. The strong correlation between policy/campaigning and candidate characteristics (r = 0.73) indicates these dimensions reinforce each other—candidates with integrity and local knowledge gain credibility articulating policy positions, while effective policy communication enhances perceived competence, creating cumulative advantages for well-rounded candidates.

Enduring Traditional Networks and Material Benefits

Community leaders and village headmen dominance as most effective mobilization (M = 4.15) reflects traditional social hierarchies' enduring importance in Thai rural and semi-rural contexts (Suwanmala, 2007; Scott, 1972). Their effectiveness stems from long-term relationships, perceived local knowledge, and social pressure within tight-knit communities (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984). The strong correlation between community leader mobilization and economic activities (r = 0.71) suggests successful candidates combine traditional network mobilization with tangible assistance (Banyaem et al., 2024; Chambers & Supajakwattana, 2025), reflecting reciprocal patron-client relationships wherein material exchanges occur within ongoing social relationships rather than discrete transactions (Scott, 1972).

Economic activities' moderate effectiveness (M = 3.89) reflects complex roles of material benefits in Thai local politics (Hicken, 2011). Rather than simple vote-buying, effective economic mobilization involves longer-term relationship building through charitable donations, community projects, and individual assistance demonstrating commitment to local welfare (Keefer, 2007; Mares & Young, 2016). This challenges both simplistic vote-buying narratives portraying voters as purely mercenary and idealistic accounts dismissing material considerations entirely, instead suggesting economic assistance functions within broader frameworks of reciprocal obligations wherein candidates demonstrate constituent commitment through tangible actions while voters evaluate this alongside other qualities including integrity, policy positions, and leadership capacity.

Digital Transformation and Hybrid Campaign Strategies

Social media mobilization's strong second-place showing (M = 3.94) indicates significant transformation in Thai local election campaign communication (Sriyai, 2024; Chayawong, 2021). Platforms like Facebook, LINE, and TikTok enable candidates to bypass traditional gatekeepers, communicate directly, respond in real-time, and

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mobilize volunteer networks (Bimber, 2014; Lee & Blevins, 2024). The correlation between community leaders and social media (r = 0.67) indicates increasingly integrated strategies blending traditional and modern channels (McNair, 2018; Phatarametravorakul et al., 2023). Successful contemporary campaigns combine respected local endorsers with digital amplification, using social media to broadcast community leader endorsements and facilitate word-of-mouth recommendation.

However, effectiveness varies considerably across demographics, with older rural voters preferring traditional channels while younger educated voters respond to digital engagement. This digital divide necessitates multi-channel strategies rather than wholesale replacement, requiring candidates to maintain strong community leader relationships while building digital presence, creating integrated campaigns reaching diverse voter segments through appropriate channels.

Localized PAO Elections and Integrated Strategies

National political party networks' relatively weak performance (M = 3.52) underscores PAO elections' localized nature (Meechan, 2025; Saijampa, 2017). While national parties provide resources and legitimacy, local success depends primarily on provincial networks, issues, and personalities rather than partisan affiliations. This suggests decentralization has created a distinctive local political sphere not entirely dominated by national partisan dynamics, consistent with multi-level governance expectations (Smith, 1985; Rondinelli & Cheema, 1983). PAO elections involve provincial concerns—infrastructure, services, local economic development—differing from national policy debates, with voters apparently evaluating candidates primarily on local criteria.

The moderate to strong correlations among mobilization patterns (r = 0.42-0.71) and success factors (r = 0.47-0.73) reveal campaign dynamics' interconnected nature. Successful candidates combine multiple elements into integrated strategies that reinforce each other rather than relying exclusively on any single channel or factor. This interactive dynamic suggests electoral success results from cumulative processes where initial advantages compound through effective execution (Kantaros, 2022). However, the importance of policy and candidate characteristics as top-rated factors, combined with both traditional and digital channels' effectiveness, suggests multiple pathways to electoral success exist, allowing challengers to compete through alternative factor and strategy combinations (Bhothisawang, 2018; Sidel, 2005).

Implications and Limitations

These findings carry important implications for understanding democratic development in Thailand's local governance. The primacy of policy content and candidate integrity suggests democratic maturation at local levels, with voters demonstrating capacity to assess candidates across diverse dimensions rather than responding solely to material inducements. However, traditional networks' continued dominance and economic assistance's moderate effectiveness indicate patronage-based politics retains significant influence. Rather than simple replacement of clientelistic with programmatic politics, Thai local elections exhibit hybrid patterns combining elements of both systems, reflecting ongoing democratic transition wherein modernization encounters durable traditional structures.

For candidates and strategists, findings indicate successful strategies must address multiple dimensions simultaneously—strong policy platforms and personal integrity with effective mobilization across traditional and modern channels, recognizing diverse voter segments. For policymakers and democracy advocates, results reveal both encouragement (programmatic voting evidence) and challenges (traditional hierarchies'

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persistence), indicating further democratic deepening requires sustained efforts reducing information asymmetries, leveling electoral playing fields, and strengthening programmatic competition.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The cross-sectional design precludes establishing definitive causation; longitudinal studies would strengthen causal inference. Self-reported data risks social desirability bias; behavioral observation could complement surveys. Single-case focus limits generalizability; comparative analysis across provinces would reveal contextual variation. Survey administration following the election may affect recall precision, though the election's high salience (58.95% turnout, competitive race), focus on general patterns rather than granular specifics, cross-sectional design, and high voter proportion (84.88%) mitigate concerns. Future research should examine moderating variables, employ comparative designs investigating urban versus rural PAOs, conduct longitudinal tracking, and utilize structural equation modeling examining mediation mechanisms building upon direct effects documented here.

Conclusion

This study examined the success factors and political mobilization patterns in the 2025 Surat Thani Provincial Administrative Organization chief executive election, providing empirical insights into the dynamics of local electoral competition in southern Thailand. The findings reveal a complex landscape where traditional social networks, substantive policy engagement, candidate characteristics, and emerging digital communication channels all play important roles in shaping electoral outcomes.

The primacy of policy and campaigning factors ($M = 4.31$, $\beta = 0.34$), along with candidate characteristics ($M = 4.23$, $\beta = 0.30$), challenges overly simplistic characterizations of Thai local elections as purely clientelistic exercises (Hicken, 2002, 2011). Voters in Surat Thani demonstrated sophisticated expectations for meaningful policy proposals, honest and transparent leadership, and positive campaign engagement focused on solutions rather than attacks. These findings suggest that Thai local democracy has matured considerably since decentralization began (Arghiros, 2001; Tanchai, 2014), with voters increasingly evaluating candidates based on programmatic criteria alongside traditional considerations.

The clear effectiveness hierarchy among mobilization patterns ($F = 42.85$, $p < 0.001$), with community leaders and village headmen significantly outperforming other approaches ($M = 4.15$), confirms the enduring importance of traditional social structures in Thai local politics (Suwanmala, 2007; Scott, 1972). However, the strong second-place showing of social media mobilization ($M = 3.94$), particularly among younger voters, signals an important generational shift that will likely accelerate as digital natives become a larger share of the electorate (Sriyai, 2024; Vaccari, 2017). Successful future campaigns will likely require integrated strategies that effectively combine traditional network mobilization with modern digital engagement.

The substantial variation in mobilization effectiveness and the significant correlations among different patterns ($r = 0.42$ - 0.71) underscore the complementary nature of various campaign approaches. Rather than relying on any single strategy, successful candidates typically employ multiple mobilization patterns simultaneously (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993), tailored to different voter segments and contexts. This finding has practical implications for candidates and campaign strategists, suggesting the value of diversified, multi-channel approaches rather than over-reliance on any single mobilization method.

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Several limitations should be noted when interpreting these results. First, as a single case study of one province at one point in time, generalizability to other contexts requires caution. Surat Thani's specific demographic, economic, and political characteristics may not fully represent other Thai provinces, particularly those in other regions with different political cultures (Tuansiri, 2020). Second, the cross-sectional survey design captures only post-election perceptions rather than tracking dynamic processes throughout the campaign period. Longitudinal research tracking campaigns from start to finish would illuminate how mobilization strategies evolve in response to changing circumstances and competitive dynamics. Third, social desirability bias may have influenced responses, particularly regarding politically sensitive topics like vote-buying or the influence of money in politics, despite assurances of anonymity.

Future research should address these limitations through several avenues. Comparative studies across multiple provinces and regions would enable assessment of how local contexts shape the relative importance of different success factors and mobilization patterns (Chairerg, et al., 2021; Phujeenaphan, 2021). Qualitative research employing interviews and ethnographic observation could provide deeper insights into the mechanisms through which different mobilization patterns influence voters and why certain approaches prove more effective than others (Bjarnegård, 2013; Ockey, 2004). Mixed-methods designs combining survey data with case studies would offer richer understanding of campaign dynamics.

Additionally, as Thailand's political landscape continues to evolve, ongoing research is needed to understand how changes at the national level affect local politics (Montesano & Sanglee, 2025; Saijampa, 2017), how new technologies and platforms reshape political communication (Lee & Blevins, 2024; Choomsook, et al., 2024), and how younger generations of voters with different expectations and behaviors influence electoral competition. The 2025 Surat Thani PAO election provides a valuable snapshot of Thai local politics at a particular moment, but understanding the trajectory of democratization and decentralization requires sustained scholarly attention to local electoral dynamics across time and space.

In conclusion, this study contributes to understanding the complex factors shaping electoral success in Thai local elections, revealing patterns that blend traditional and modern elements in ways that reflect Thailand's ongoing political and social transformation. The findings have implications not only for candidates and campaign strategists but also for policymakers and civil society organizations working to strengthen local democratic governance in Thailand and similar contexts undergoing decentralization reforms.

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The author used artificial intelligence (AI) assistance solely for the purpose of improving the language readability. The AI was not utilized for data analysis, the creation of figures or tables, or the interpretation of the research results. The author remains fully responsible for the content and academic integrity of the paper.

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