



Citizen Attitudes and Priorities for Strengthening Democracy

Findings from focus group discussions with citizens conducted across
the Kingdom of Thailand between October and December 2022

Conducted by



สถาบันพระปกเกล้า
King Prajadhipok's Institute

With assistance from Joshua Starr

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10A/2 PIYA PLACE Langsuan. 10th floor
29/1 Soi Langsuan Ploenchit Road
Lumphini Pathumwan Bangkok 10330
Tel: 66 2 015 6661-2 Fax: 66 2 015 6660
<http://www.ndi.org>

455 Massachusetts Ave., NW
8th Floor, Washington, DC., 20001-2621 USA
Tel: (202) 728 5500 Fax: (202) 875 2887
<http://www.ndi.org>

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Foreword

This report seeks to assist the new government ministries, relevant independent organizations, parliament, political parties and civil society organizations as they determine their policy priorities and form stances on how to further the democratic process in Thailand. The report presents findings and recommendations stemming from public opinion research, which looked at how citizens perceive the status of democracy in the country and their attitudes toward the government, election commission, political parties, parliament, and elected representatives.

Whether these citizen perceptions are positive or negative, accurate or inaccurate, they still hold value because they provide insights on areas relevant institutions need to focus on to further development of democratic processes in Thailand. Parliamentarians can learn more about the public's expectations of their elected representatives. Political parties can see what citizens like and dislike about political parties in Thailand. Although some of these perceptions concern the institutions before the May 2023 elections, they may also benefit the newly established institutions that have started afresh and will work to address the grievances and concerns of Thai citizens. Finally, the new government and parliamentarians might be interested to hear about the ten priority issues that citizens believe the newly elected institutions should focus on.

The report is the product of a collaborative effort between the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and King Prajadhipok's Institute (KPI). The two institutes worked jointly on a nation-wide focus group research project, facilitating 32 focus group discussions with randomly recruited citizens in Bangkok and 11 other provinces across Thailand. A second report, which will detail results of a second round of focus group research on constitutional reform and political polarization, will follow in the coming months.

Edi Efendija
Country Director
NDI Thailand

Dr. Stithorn Thananithichot
Director, The Office of Innovation for Democracy
King Prajadhipok's Institute

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Chapter 1 : INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Objectives

Support citizen-informed dialogue. The broad purpose of this research is to support public and political will to strengthen Thailand's democracy, informed by and responsive to citizen concerns.

Accessible. The research findings will be shared with civil society, political parties, and policy makers in an effort to support strengthened dialogue – especially with the upcoming May 2023 election - based on evidence of citizen priorities.

Research objectives included:

- **Democracy Today.** Assess, and better understand the underlying context, of citizen perceptions of democracy in Thailand today;
- **Perceptions of Stakeholders.** Understand public attitudes toward Parliament, national institutions, elections, political parties and elected representatives;
 - Include perceptions among groups of citizens and residents not enjoying an equal role in the areas of governance; and,
- **Priorities.** Identify citizen priorities for strengthening their democracy.

1.2 Methodology and Sampling

Conducted 32 focus group discussions across Thailand:

- Between October 25 and December 20, 2022;
- With 8 to 15 randomly recruited participants in each (an average of 12);
- Moderated in standardized formats, each lasting approximately 2 hours;
- Audio recorded and transcribed; and,
- With anonymity assured for all participants.

Held 27 focus group discussions with **regular citizens**, segmented by:

Regions

- ✓ 7 in Central
- ✓ 3 in Eastern
- ✓ 5 in Northeastern

- ✓ 5 in Northern
- ✓ 4 in Southern
- ✓ 3 in Western

Gender x Age

- ✓ 7 with younger women (ages 18 to 39)
- ✓ 7 with older women (ages 40 and above)
- ✓ 7 with younger men
- ✓ 6 with older men

Held three focus group discussions with **Ethnic Minorities**, such as, Pakhyo, Lue and Lisu communities with mixes of genders and ages, in the Northern Region, and two focus group discussions with **Thai Muslims**, one with men, one with women, of all ages, in the Southern Region.

Teams of recruiters and moderators were enlisted, provided professional training and supervised by KPI.

To ensure active participation, focused on conventional Thai perspectives, and with minimal social influences, the focus group discussants included:

- A mix of employment backgrounds, education, household makeup and income, excluding citizens with income extremes (no income and very high incomes);
- Citizens attentive to the news, and communicative;



- Stable residents in their communities;
- Residents of a mixture of locations, with no more than two in each group from the same tambon; and,
- Typical citizens, no journalists, high ranking military, police, or government officials, elected officials, or professional politicians.

Note on Methodology: This research was qualitative rather than quantitative.

Based on open-ended conversations with small and non-random samples, qualitative research allows us to understand and describe attitudes rather than to measure them. Qualitative research provides insight into perceptions and attitudes, the reasons for those attitudes, and how people respond to information and messages.

Because this research is qualitative rather than quantitative, results cannot be reliably projected onto broader populations. Thus, it cannot be used to confidently estimate how many people share a certain perception or belief or what proportion are likely to act in a certain way.

1.3 Political Context

The follow major events occurred before and during the time period of conducting the focus group discussions (October 25 to December 20, 2022):

October 6	Massacre of schoolchildren in Nong Bua Lamphu province
November 3	Defeat of Progressive Liquor Bill
November 24	Pheu Thai launched 2023 election campaign
December 2	Constitutional Court ruled new electoral laws in the Political Parties Act to be used in the 2023 general election were constitutional
Mid-December	Many MPs changed parties in anticipation of 2023 elections

Chapter 2 : KEY INSIGHTS

1. **Value Selflessness.** Thai citizens express a sincere love for country and pride in culture. Their views are shaped by a belief in self-sufficiency, and working to care for their family, which can extend to their village. Ideal characteristics include generosity, kindness, honesty, and compliance with society's rules. In democracy, they emphasize respect for others, their rights, and the importance of being heard.
2. **Broad No-confidence.** Citizens have lost trust in their elected officials and government institutions. No one believes democracy is healthy in Thailand under the current government. Few believe the House of Representatives acts in the public interest, and almost none believe the Senate does so.
3. **Economic Pleas.** Financial woes are the top immediate concern for many citizens, and they want the government to step in to reduce costs or raise agricultural prices, extend more welfare for vulnerable groups, or to increase economic development.
4. **Lack of Confidence in Electoral Commission.** The legitimacy of a democratically elected government begins with confidence the results are based on fair elections. Citizens feel the system is corrupt and devalues their contributions to the country; they expressed concerns with the Election Commission of Thailand, including partisanship, nepotism, cronyism, lack of transparency (often in ballot counting), and inadequate laws and disparity in enforcement, as well as a culture of vote buying by politicians, often preying on vulnerable low socioeconomic segments of citizens.
5. **Media Role Missing.** Citizens do not consider the media to be an important part of democratic institutions. Though the broader media are somewhat trusted, many are wary of privately-owned outlets.
6. **Progress was halted.** There is a concern that the stunting of democracy also stalled the country's development. This has discouraged citizens who are motivated by concern for fellow citizens and not by politics.



7. **The only path to a trusted Senate is with elections.** Given a choice, many citizens prefer a disbanded Senate over a Senate that is not fully elected. They value their right to vote and, despite concerns about the fairness of elections, prefer a veneer of accountability.
8. **There is hope.** Knowing that elections are coming has provided an expectation of change. There are a few who would argue for radical reforms, but given economic challenges, most might be satisfied with a return to a fair election system and more responsive elected officials.
9. **Paths to trust.** Some citizens feel abandoned by their elected officials. However, going forward, citizens are interested in seeing elected officials follow through on promises. They want to feel like they are being heard: they want sincerity.
10. **Trusted organizations.** In democracy in Thailand, two sectors admired by citizens include **Civil Society Organizations** (more so among older citizens) and **educational institutions** -- cherished and considered a key to a healthy democracy as well as the economic and political development of Thailand.

Chapter 3 : FINDINGS

3.1 Current Perceptions of Democracy in Thailand

3.1.1 Context for Citizens of Thailand

Love and pride in home. Citizens are quick to share the many things they enjoy in their province, especially the natural wonders and fresh produce, the culture, historic centers of learning and religion, and sights that attract tourists. The cities have economic opportunities, a variety of diversions, and traffic congestion that everyone can complain about.

Responsibility and acceptance. Understanding the values and expectations of Thai people can partially explain their disappointment and frustration with the recent challenges to the political system. Citizens are expected to gain an education, find work, preferably a career, and contribute to the needs of the family and possibly help the country's development. The lessons passed from parents to children are an important part of being raised Thai. Children are raised to be honest, kind, and caring. There is an informal social contract in which the citizens comply and in return the government provides something worthy in return. The country has immense pride in its unity, history and place in the region.

"We must accept the existence of karma and a social order."

- Male, 18-39, Northern Region

"What the government expects from its citizens, first of all, is to comply with the framework of the law, rights, freedoms of a democratic system. And what people expect from the government is honesty, transparent work, and development of the country towards the right direction."

- Male, 40+, Northeast Region

"I think that the government expects the people to live in honest way, bring the money, pay taxes,.. and the government has more expectation that the people are not burdensome, do not harm society."

- Male, 40+, Northeast Region



Working together, in the past, citizens have seen improvements in their democracy and economy.

3.1.2 Current Health of Democracy

No one is content. Simply put, almost all citizens indicated the current government is not doing well in supporting democracy.

A strong majority of citizens feel democracy in Thailand is headed in the wrong direction.

The social contract is out of alignment. Citizens feel they do not have proper representation with the government. Many, especially women, feel their government has not been listening to their concerns. Corruption has impeded progress. They complied with health-related demands throughout the pandemic. But, in the past year, inflation has painfully increased costs and raised anxiety.

“We have never lost a war; we are a unique country; there are complete resources... but why is the quality of life like this right now? This is because our government does not try to do anything. This is why the democracy is important for our life.”

- Male, 40+, Northeast Region

“What I expect is that the government’s actions should be carried out in accordance with the principle of equality because the government has a duty to provide public services to the people. Therefore, the government should operate according to the principle of equality, and honestly and transparently.”

- Male, Age 18-39, Northern Region

“The better quality of life is an indicator that the government is the father who looks after the people. If the government did not look after the children very well... price of fuel, electricity, gas that we use is too expensive, reflects... the father is not looking after the children well.”

- Male, 40+, Northeast Region

“I was born in the days of growing democracy, but now, even though we’re still under a democratic system, I don’t feel the same. This is the age that we have to develop Thailand further.”

- Male, Thai Muslim

“He (Prime Minister) has said a lot, and now he hasn’t done anything... there is the matter of corruption in the civil service sector. Regarding police reform, he didn’t do it. There are many more cases that have set up a lot of committees. In the end, nothing happened, everything melted away with the wind”

- Male, 18-39, Western Region

“I accept that the COVID situation has affected (people) all around the world. If we have smart leaders, the problems will ease up. I notice many people are unemployed. The trades, individual businesses, or office workers, too many are early retired. We notice that people live desperately... I think Thais live desperately and have no future. The cause is from the past several years past... We planted, it was flooded, the rice is derogatory... we have desponded for 8 years...”

- Male, 40+, Northeast Region

Call to action? Almost all said felt it is *very important* to take action to advance democracy in Thailand. At a minimum, citizens believe they must participate, starting with voting. However, any discussion of aggressive pursuit of reforms is limited, as the obvious way forward for the country is through an election to bring in a change in government.

“The right path of the government is considered (having) the election. The elections must be returned to the people in order to be on the right path...”

- Female, 40+, Northern Region

3.2 Perceptions of Key Stakeholders in Thai Democracy

3.2.1 Institutions Associated as Influential in Democratic Systems

Given the proud legacy of democratic movements in Thailand, citizens are able to cite the many institutions that are critical to its continuation. The most prominent institutions that are essential to democracy in Thailand include the:

- Judiciary (courts) ;
- Electoral Commission;
- Parliament; and,
- Political parties.

There is also heavy emphasis on the **educational** and **family** institutions, connecting the generations and providing touchpoints between Thai culture and the development of democracy. There is a sense that the education system is necessary to properly explain to the upcoming generation about the concepts of democracy and rights.

"I focus on the smallest unit, family. Because it will go upward... family is the starting point. If the family succeeds, the success will be passed on and expands."

- Male 40+, Central Region

"[I trust] the university. The university... makes students knowledgeable, and able to distinguish right and wrong."

- Male, 40+, Eastern Region

To a lesser degree, citizens cited the roles of the non-governmental organizations, media, and religion. Local administrators, including elected village headmen, are important at the local level.

3.2.2 Attitudes Based on Trust

Among the mainstream Thai citizens, there is currently a significant lack of trust with many of the institutions that underlie their democracy.

“I think I don’t believe in anyone at all now.”

- Female, 40+, Western Region

Elected representatives. Few respondents, typically one person in five, participants trust Members of Parliament. Citizens bemoan their failures to keep promises, voting in ways that do not help the people they are supposed to represent, often benefiting from vote buying, and not listening to or responding to the concerns of their constituents.

Many of these complaints contrast these concerns against the ideal attributes they expect of themselves, to respect and assist others with kindness, honesty, and sincerity, in addition to their hard work and minimal compensation in order to fulfill their obligations to care for their families and neighbors.

“... When it’s time to vote for them, there are only deceptions, they promise to do things for the people... and all they do is fight with each other for power...”

- Female, 40+, Northern Region

Elected officials do have remaining trust from about half of older men who participated.

Legislative bodies. When asked more directly about whether the House of Representatives and Senate work in the interest of citizens, most felt the House generally did not (about two in three) and almost all (nine in ten) felt the Senate did not. There was a general understanding that the role of a Senate is necessary, to check the power of the House of Representatives. However, when asked about a variety of ways to nominate citizens to fill Senate seats – from a range of options and combinations of appointments and election – the only acceptable approach was through an election. Approximately half indicated disbanding the Senate would make them *more* confident in being represented, the second most popular option after requiring Senators to be elected (which four in five said would make them more confident).

Election Commission of Thailand. Again, most participants do not trust the Election Commission. While one group of older women did trust the commission, they explained that, from their perspective, since elections are the path for a new government to emerge, they must have faith in the Election Commission.

System of Political Parties. The dynamic emergence of political parties in Thailand have been a force in the development of Thai democracy and the country. Currently, almost all mainstream citizens do not trust them, except older men – with about half trusting them, with some expressing faith in the foundational institutions.

“I agreed with the (political party) system, but do not believe in politicians.”

- Male, 40+, Northeast Region

Advantages of Parties. Some participants respect the party system for bringing together citizens with common ideals, providing access for people who want to participate in democracy, working together, developing good policies, and their methods of selecting candidates.

Weaknesses of Parties. However, to leverage the strength of a party, parties require their legislators to vote in a certain way, which can feel un-democratic. Political parties can shield their legislators, stripping away the citizens’ ability to hold their elected representative accountable. Citizens have seen the selfishness and unwillingness of parties to help other regions of the country – again, characteristics that are counter to traditional Thai values.

SUMMARY TABLE OF THE RANGE OF COMMENTS ABOUT THE POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM IN THAILAND

Like about Parties	Dislike about Parties	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Gateway/access to participate in democracy ✓ Bring together citizens with common ideals ✓ Outreach to people ✓ Sincere ✓ Develop many good policies and alternative ideas ✓ Methods of selecting candidates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Too many ✓ Party switching ✓ Dishonesty (of some) ✓ System has divided the country ✓ Not keeping campaign promises ✓ Too focused on getting votes from segments ✓ Rigid discipline (feels undemocratic, counters wishes of home supporters, unaccountable) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Selfishness and unwillingness to help other parts of the country ✓ Expensive to be competitive and lack of financial controls allows business interests of senior leaders in some parties to have too much power ✓ Nepotism

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). A strong majority of participants trust the CSOs. Younger men and participants in the Southern Region were less trusting.

“At least this [INGOs] is one factor that makes us more careful when we do something. This also makes relevant agencies more careful.”

- Male, 40+, Central Region

The Media. Few trusted the media, with a focus on the privately-owned media. Many cited these media outlets as far from profiting controversies without regard for the truth, and are not held accountable. After competing media outlets create confusion, citizens are left to conduct their own research to find the truth. Again, these types of media stunts are in stark contrast to the Thai values of honesty and kindness. Some indicated the media had been intimidated by the government following the coup, which led to a cascading silence of expression.

“We need to look after ourselves and search for information... before coming to a conclusion.”

- Female, 40+, Western Region

“There are capitalists and oligarchs behind these people, so we don’t trust them to be sincere to their people.”

- Male, 18-39, Western Region

“Now, anyone can buy the media.”

- Female, 40+, Western Region

3.2.3 Building Trust

In the current environment, citizens project their own ideal values onto the type of person (or organization) they would be likely to trust. They include characteristics such as:

Listens. Honesty. Sincerity. Generosity. Modest.

Approachable. Follows through. Means what you say.

“In trusting somebody, we must first know how he treats the people, how sincere he acts and how much sacrifice he has [made] to help the people.”

- Female, 40+, Northern Region

“It’s someone who is virtuous and ethical. I teach children about this as well. If you are good, good things will come to you. It’s like waves. People will trust you. Everything starts from self. The morality and ethics are the most important things. Whoever you are, whatever you do, if you have these 2 things, even though you don’t know them, they will know you.”

- Male 40+, Central Region

Some younger men in the Northern region expressed they trusted officials who accept responsibility and accountability through checks and balance. In addition, some older men in the Northeast were more likely to trust organizations and individuals who actively solve problems, especially if it is in service of the lower socioeconomic classes. An example they provided was negotiating with pharmaceutical companies for lower prices. Similarly, they expressed concerns about income gaps and resolving citizenship issues for stateless residents and protecting citizens from environmental concerns (such as toxic waste and flooding).

Interestingly, there was minimal discussion of experience, expertise, international credibility, or other similar characteristics.

There are also characteristics that would indicate the person was not to be trusted:

Promising things but not following through. Fidgeting.

3.2.4 Levels of Trust – By Segments

Trust, broken out by age and gender. These tables indicate with a color scale the level of trust expressed by the participants from various segments. Blues indicates a higher level of trust and reds show less trust.

INSTITUTIONS	All (Mainstream)	Younger Men	Younger Women	Older Men	Older Women	Key to Colors	
						More trust ↑	Less trust ↓
Members of Parliament	Few	Very few	Very few	About half	Almost none	All	
Electoral Commission of Thailand	Few	Very few	Very few	Few	More than half	Almost all	
System of Political Parties	Few	Very few	Few	About half	Almost none	Most	
Civil Society Organizations	Strong majority	About half	Majority	Most	Most	Strong majority	
The Media	Few	Few	Minority	Minority	Few	A majority	

Trust, broken out by regions.

INSTITUTIONS	All (Mainstream)	Central	Northern	North-eastern	Eastern	Western	Southern
Members of Parliament	Few	Very few	Very few	Minority	Slight minority	None	Very few
Electoral Commission of Thailand	Few	Very few	Few	Slight minority	Slight minority	None	Slight minority
System of Political Parties	Few	Few	Few	About half	Almost none	None	None
Civil Society Organizations	Strong majority	Strong majority	Strong Majority	Strong Majority	Most	Majority	Minority
The Media	Few	Few	Minority	Few	Slight majority	None	Very few

3.3 Elections System

3.3.1 Confidence in Elections

As discussions focused on elections, the participants showed a heightened animation. Whereas the discussions had been orderly and dry, this topic inspired participants to share stories and very specific concerns and possible solutions.

Fair elections are the way forward to strengthening democracy in Thailand. A few believe there are sufficient regulations and management systems in place to ensure the will of the people is reflected in the results. However, most lack confidence in the Election Commission to deliver a fair elections or fear it will not.

“Elections are the only way to end various problems. Whether it is right or wrong, that depends on the design and planning. But an election is a democracy, it’s a point we have to reach. There is no other way. It reflects the voice of the majority which we have to respect.”

- Male, 40+, Central Region, who expressed confidence in the election systems

“Are there any institutions, that have the intention to let the people from... the community have knowledge and understanding of what democracy is, what the Constitution is, what politics is, for grassroots people to understand? Therefore, there will not be any change at all, because most of the people do not understand. Whoever gives money away, they will take it all. It has always been like this.”

- Female, 40+, Western Region

“There’s no clear rule on how the ballots should be marked. Who decides if it’s right or wrong when someone puts a tick instead of a cross or when someone marks a cross twice. There’s no central rule saying if a cross marked twice is wrong. It was different for each station... It also depended on who they wanted to win.”

- Male, 40+, Central Region

Participants listed concerns with the election system that are likely well known in Thailand and would need to be comprehensively examined by anyone looking to reform it.

- Partisanship, cronyism
- Inadequate laws

- Civil registry not updated
- Intimidation of witnesses, possibly preying on vulnerable low socioeconomic segments
- Untrained polling officials
- Lack of enforcement or consistent enforcement
- Ballots moved and counted without transparency
- Vote buying, also possibly taking advantage of low socioeconomic segments

“Another thing is election campaigners would stand by at a polling station to monitor, it’s like a form of intimidation. They would stare at them, like threatening them from afar. This is what actually happened in different communities. Because I was there at the polling station, I saw this happen.”

- Male, 40+, Central Region

3.3.2 Paths to Building Confidence in Elections

Participants also were quickly able to share a variety of ways to build confidence in the election system.

The range of suggestions for improving the system are categorized across these areas (the list below is generally in the order of ideas mentioned most to least):

- Increase transparency – use technology (online voting, enhanced monitoring), open the vote counting process, report results without delay
- Improve civil education and media reporting (and leverage media as a channel for the education)
- Improve the selection of election managers (some supported a system of using partisans from all sides to operate elections, others wanted non-partisan officials to operate them)
- Use civil society partnerships and independent auditing
- Review and improve laws
- Prevent vote buying/selling
- Recruit better (undefined what is meant by better) candidates
- Enforce election laws
- Improve identity verification at election places
- Election personnel need to take initiative to report problems

“I think, the solution should be putting it [election results] up on the screen. Like when they are counting the votes, it should be shown on the big screen like this. And normally when they’re done counting, only the officers will be responsible for the transportation of the ballots. It would be good if the people or the civil society can be a part of this to inspect the whole process. I think this should make it more transparent and fair.”

- Male, 40+, Central Region

3.4 Priorities for Strengthening Democracy

3.4.1 Priorities Tested

Participants reviewed a series of pre-written possible broad actions that could be considered for improving democracy in Thailand and rated them based on how important they felt each was to improving the country.

LIST OF POSSIBLE ACTIONS FOR IMPROVING DEMOCRACY IN THAILAND

Title	Text
Decentralization	Increase the responsibilities of elected officials at the local level
Educate on party platforms	Increase knowledge of voters about political party platforms
Fair elections	Increase confidence that elections are free and fair
Fight corruption	Increase efforts to fight corruption
Improve citizen decision-making	Increase ability of citizens to make well-informed decisions
Independent and quality judiciary	Increase the independence and quality of the Judiciary Branch
More experts	Increase the role of experts and bureaucrats, or other appointed officials, in making important decisions in our government
More issue-based campaigning	Election campaigns should focus more on debating important issues rather than personalities of politicians

Title	Text
Opportunities for minorities	Increase the opportunity for ethnic and religious minorities to elect and be elected
Representation	Improve how the National Assembly represents the people
Stable election rules	Require more fairness in politics through stable rules that do not favor some parties
Unrestricted information	Increase the flow of unrestricted information, such as the media, internet, and education system
Voting access	Remove barriers that make it hard for some citizens to vote
Women	Increase the number of women running for office

3.4.2 Citizen Priorities

Three areas of activity emerged as the highest tier of priorities:

Fight Corruption. Among almost all segments, the strongest interest was in fighting corruption in Thailand. Participants raised many concerns about corruption that has thrown many government systems out of balance, blocking opportunities and the state’s ability to fulfill obligations. Corruption involves the misuse of taxpayer’s contributions, which undermines the foundation of trust between government and citizens as well as reversing the development built over time and with great expense.

“For me, the most important topic is eradication of corruption, because I believe this is the start of progress. If we can eliminate corruption, the country will develop much more quickly.”

- Male, 18-39, Southern Region

Independent and quality judiciary. Across all ages and genders, are half of the regions (Central, Northeastern and Southern), citizens were enthusiastic about efforts to allow the judiciary to hold a more independent status from the legislature – as well as improvements in their capacity.

Fair Elections. Focusing specifically on electoral systems was a top tier priority for many, overall, including among younger citizens and older men.

Top Tier of Priorities, overall result and broken out by segments based on age and gender.
 #1 indicates a top choice of the group,
 ✓ indicates it is a top 3 or 4 choices,
 and * indicates the segment rated this as a lower priority compared to others

	All (Mainstream)	Younger Men	Younger Women	Older Men	Older Women
Fight corruption	#1	#1	#1	#1	#1
Independent and quality judiciary	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fair elections	✓	✓	#1	✓	
Voting access	✓	*		✓	✓
Stable election rules		*		✓	✓
Improve citizen decision-making		*	✓		
Educate on party platforms		*	✓		
More issue-based campaigning		*			✓
Unrestricted information			*		
Decentralization		*			

Top Tier of Priorities, overall result and broken out by segments based on region.

	All (Main stream)	Central	Northern	North- eastern	Eastern	Western	Southern
Fight corruption	#1	#1	#1		✓	#1	
Independent and quality judiciary	✓	✓		#1			#1
Fair elections	✓	✓		#1			
Voting access	✓			#1	✓	*	✓
Stable election rules			✓		#1	*	
Improve citizen decision-making		✓		✓			
Educate on party platforms			✓				✓
More issue-based campaigning					✓		
Unrestricted information			✓	1#			
Decentralization			✓		*	✓	*

**Significantly lower priority compared to others*

3.5 Traditionally Marginalized Populations

Perception from Majority Thai. Almost all mainstream Thai participants indicated it is important for their government to make extra effort to include perspectives from people from backgrounds that are not mainstream when it is making decisions. Similarly, the whole country does not move forward if some people are left behind.

Some expressed sympathy with minorities who have been neglected in the past, in the belief that integrating them will be beneficial to Thai society in the future.

This perspective aligns with values for respecting others.

"I believe that all Thai people are equal, and that we have one vote in a democratic system. All perspectives are valuable and should be considered."

- Female, 18-39, Central Region

"They have the same rights as us. So, the government should listen to them, too, to develop the country; the whole country needs to be developed, not just some city people. So, they have to listen to the opinions of the whole country."

- Female, 18-39, Western Region

However, in the discussion, to some there are limits to this inclusion. There are complex and unreconciled feelings about the identity and role of residents and citizens with an ethnic or genetic lineage from areas outside of Thailand, and the reality that many have resided in Thailand for generations.

A few expressed beliefs that ethnic minorities are involved in cross-border criminality, narcotics trade, and might seek to weaken the borders or sovereignty of Thailand. Some are concerned that they will make poor decisions in elections (which participants kindly identified as opportunities to develop their citizenship skills).

"We are already helping them... we value them, but we don't have to pay [too much] attention to them, because if you pay too much attention to them, Thailand will all belong to them. We have to focus on our Thai people the most. We can give them the right to vote, but they shouldn't have the right to be elected."

- Female, 40+, Northern Region

3.5.1 Women

Most regular Thai participants indicated they feel that women citizens are not treated equally with men. This opinion was held by more younger Thai participants than older ones.

Younger women were more animated in discussing this topic. In Thai society, they explained, there remain conservative, patriarchal, cultural expectations, in everyday life. Women shared that they are pressured to dress conservatively, overlooked for career opportunities, and pushed to take on responsibilities that were expected of women in past eras.

“If there are male and female children in the house, people will give more importance to male than female. They would praise male over female.”

- Female, 18-39, Northern Region

“Well, there is no equality. For men, they can go out having a night-out, and women can’t go out for a night-out. Why is that? It’s like people would assume that such outgoing women have bad behavior, or that such women aren’t nice and won’t focus on school. Furthermore, the sanitary napkins, which are now classified as luxury products. I mean, if given a choice, women would not want to bleed by choice.”

- Female, 18-39, Northern Region

“Women are excluded from some jobs, which sometimes we can do better than men.”

- Female, 18-39, Central Region

“Discrimination by race, bull[ied] about appearance, division of work, monks, and nuns are ancient beliefs in Thai society that are not acceptable to be a nun. In fact, every religion teaches everyone to be a good person. Likewise, why can’t women be ordained as monks?”

- Female, 18-39, Western Region

“I think that Thai citizens are led ... by the past generations, which discourages us to think outside the box, such as equality. They try to keep us in the box of tradition, in which they want us to stay, with the old perspective.”

- Female, 18-39, Lower Northern Region

3.5.2 LGBTQI+

More than 20 participants from the 27 focus groups with regular Thai participants were identified as LGBTQI+. In general, participants consistently expressed a belief that LGBTQI+ were to be respected, as equals, and to be consistent, deserved the same rights from their government. Some expressed pride knowing that in Thailand, LGBTQI+ are often treated much better than in other countries and have been afforded places in society. Others mentioned that awareness of LGBTQI+ have increased, too. Moreover, many indicated they were aware that LGBTQI+ do not yet have equal marriage rights and believe this should be treated equally by the government.

“Actually, we should be more open about the third gender (LGBTQI) or whatever. The society nowadays has changed a lot, in terms of family acceptance too. Some women are with women, some men are with men. If we give them the rights like how they do it overseas where they are more open, society will change gradually and there will be more acceptance. In some cases, people commit suicide because they don’t know what to do. This will be an on-going problem. Once we give them some room to breathe, we can figure out what to do to make it suitable in the Thai context. In other countries, they only have laws.”

- Male 40+, Central Region

“LGBTQI expressions, which are now more open than before. There were only male or female hosts, but now, the TV is more open to transgender women to participate in activities or other beauty contests to compete with female contestants. Now there is a ladyboy contest.”

- Female, 18-39, Western Region

3.5.3 Ethnic Minorities

Village-based perspective. Participants, from the Pakhyo, Lue and Lisu communities, shared that they are expected to play a role in their village, helping others and keeping an eye out for trouble. Their lives are spent maneuvering with an identity that is not regular Thai, but living in Thailand.

Also concerned. Ethnic minorities are concerned with the state of democracy in Thailand, with all participants indicating things are heading in the wrong direction.

Hoping for good governance. Some community members explained that they would like to see the government succeed, as it also helps them succeed; it has been hard for them to watch some of the problems in the country, such as the challenges created by legalizing marijuana without new regulations in place.

OK with Political Parties. Unlike mainstream communities, more members of the community trust the political party system, believing the party's problems stemmed from a small number of people, but the system does a good job of developing policies. This community trusts the media and CSOs, too.

Average. The community rated the government's efforts to protect ethnic minority groups from discrimination as neither good nor bad or slightly poorer.

Economic Concerns, Decentralization. Similar to focus group discussions with regular Thais, Ethnic Minority respondents would like the government to focus on economic issues, both in development and creating jobs as well as controlling costs and extending welfare to vulnerable groups. There was notable mention of education, especially in creating opportunity, as well as efforts to control drug trafficking. Their top priorities are to reduce corruption and increase local governance including their rights to run for office.

3.5.4 Thai Muslims

Democracy in wrong direction. There are concerns among Thai Muslims with the democracy challenges in Thailand. There was a consistent concern that democracy in Thailand has been headed in the wrong direction, and the government was not advancing democratic ideals. Some noted with concern the rise in drugs, including the newly legalized marijuana.

Trust! Some Thai Muslims participants said they trust their elected representatives, the party system, electoral commission (along with many criticisms or concerns, especially with individuals but not institutions) and CSOs, but are not inclined to trust the media.

Peaceful expectations. After efforts to reduce conflicts between the Thai Muslim communities and Thailand, some feel their expectations are to comply, be peaceful and model citizens.

Good treatment. They feel they are being treated equally and feel the government has been average or better in protecting them from discrimination.

Looking to expand their responsibilities. Though there are economic concerns in this community, their priorities for the next government are to release the emergency rules, increase their self-governance, have fair elections, reduce corruption, and have a free flow of information.

3.6 Priorities for the Next Government

Context

After the robust discussion, participants shared in writing up to three areas in which they would like the next government to pay special attention.

Economy. In alignment with the earlier discussions in the groups, requests directed towards relief from economic anxieties dominated. More specifically, suggestions fell equally into three categories:

Government controls. Participants expressed hope the government would intervene in ways that would help them and their families survive the increase in the cost of living, though not in the form of direct support, such as by controlling prices for necessities, raising agricultural prices, increasing the minimum wage, and reducing their tax obligations.

Welfare for the vulnerable. Many requested more direct forms of relief for the elderly, sick, and impoverished families.

Economic Development. Other participants wanted to see more development, including injections of international capital and trade, to spur on more and better paying jobs.

Strengthen Democracy. The second largest basket of priorities were in building out principles of equality and citizen-driven government. The main themes included equality and human rights for all Thai citizens, reduce corruption, decentralization (more local control), and increase the connection between citizens and their elected leaders for better communication and action.

In a second tier of concerns, many participants were interested in education. One stream of comments focused on proving more access to **education** to remote or rural areas or areas with poorer citizens. Another stream of comments had a general interest in improving education. Another category was to **reform** in some way, the Constitution and other traditional powers in the country, such as the bureaucracy, police and military. Another category focused on reducing illegal drugs.

Chapter 4 : RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholders in Thailand who are interested in strengthening democracy should consider setting an **initial goal of rebuilding trust** with citizens. This would reduce fears that elected officials do not respect the voice of their citizens and are only building power to satisfy their personal interests.

These are some ways to achieve this goal:

1. **Follow through on promises.** Find opportunities to communicate successes, big or small, in fulfilling promises made in campaigns.
2. **Compromise.** The majority coalitions should find opportunities to negotiate compromises with the opposition, to demonstrate respect for *all* citizens and avoid cycles of subjugation. Compromise helps rebuild a reservoir of goodwill and national unity, which will be needed in the future.
3. **Look forward.** In announcing unpopular but necessary changes, communicate the importance of moving the country forward. Discuss the outcome that is desired so there is a purpose to be achieved through sacrifices asked of citizens. In discussions, few citizens were set on retribution, with most looking to changes and solutions.
4. **Return to elected Senate.** Citizens will only trust the efforts of the Senate once all of the body's members are chosen by the electorate, so they can represent their concerns and be held accountable.
5. **Equality of voice and representation.** Widen the circle of citizens who are invested in the future of Thailand, especially through inclusion in voting, wider access to voting and running for office, in support of a shared value of mutual respect and equality.
6. **Leverage the media while strengthening civic infrastructure.** As an example, engage privately-owned media in partnerships and possibly mandates to support efforts to build civic knowledge and common purpose as well as encourage further public discussion.

7. **Expand opportunities for participation.** As an example, identify ways at local and provincial levels in which citizens can shape decision-making, such as in community planning and budgeting, to provide more outlets for government to improve welfare in line with citizen-driven needs.

Align with three top imperatives for strengthening democracy that citizens across ages, gender and region identified:

8. **Increase efforts to fight corruption.**

9. **Increase the independence and quality of the Judiciary Branch.**

10. **Increase confidence that elections are free and fair.** Citizens identified needs to revise the laws, modernize hiring guidelines (remove cronyism and nepotism), increase enforcement including a system to remove intimidation of voters and poll workers (increase feeling of safety to do their job), eliminate vote buying, and revise balloting processes to include transparency and accountability. Explore the entry funnel for candidates to identify any systemic issues that encourage or reward new politicians who have personal values and integrity. *Older citizens* are especially interested in stable electoral laws and making it easier for some citizens to cast their ballots.

