

# Thaksin the Populist?

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## Abstract

*Purpose* To evaluate the accuracy of the populist label applied to former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra by both political opponents and past scholarly observers.

*Methods* We distinguish more colloquial uses of the term that refer to a leader's policies or political strategies and instead turn to an ideational definition of populism. We then use content analysis, an empirical methodology used extensively in cross-national work on populism, to identify populist discourse in Thaksin's speeches across his two terms.

*Results* We find that Thaksin has very low levels of populism in his first, but that this jumps to just below the middle of the scale in his second term. We then compare Thaksin's discourse to various other leaders from around the world. His trajectory is most similar to that of Recep Erdoğan of Turkey, and we compare the two leaders to highlight both the similarities and differences in policies, ideology, and authoritarian tendencies in order to emphasize the populist parts of their leadership as a distinct concept.

*Conclusion* Using an ideational approach and a systematic empirical strategy, we are able to divorce our evaluation of Thaksin's populism from normative agendas and colloquial uses, which enables us to better understand Thaksin's leadership tenure.

**Keywords** Thaksin Shinawatra · Populism · Populist · Speeches · Content analysis · Manichean

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## 1 Introduction

Thaksin Shinawatra has cemented his place in Thailand's history, for good or bad. As the first Prime Minister to win a majority in parliament in the democratic era,<sup>1</sup> the first to serve a full term, and the first to be re-elected, Thaksin reinvigorated Thai politics with his neatly marketed policies and a strong leadership style. But Thaksin was and remains a controversial figure. Eventually toppled in a coup in 2006, Thaksin has been accused of selling out the nation (a reference to the sale of his ShinCorp telecoms company to the Singaporean government-owned Temasek), widespread corruption (beginning with the NCCC case against him during the 2001 election campaign through to the sale of ShinCorp), anti-monarchism, and, since his deposition, of seeking to divide the nation (through orchestrating protests and inciting violence). But one label seems almost enduring: Thaksin the populist.

By using this label, most commentators focus on his policies as reckless monetary promises to uneducated rural masses (Thitinan 2003; McCargo and Ukrit 2005). But others dismiss this label, showing how his policies reached numerous social groups across Thailand (Pasuk and Baker 2002; Selway 2011, 2015). In this paper, we turn to the academic definition of populism, which has less to do with policy or ideological leanings, and more to do with the underlying rhetoric or attitudes of a leader. Specifically, a populist is one who claims to represent the will of the people and pits him- or herself against an elite conspiring to subvert the people's will. Using a content analysis of four categories of speeches—campaign, ribbon-cutting, international, and famous—we assess the extent to which Thaksin fits this academic definition. In his first term we find that Thaksin adopts very mild, almost imperceptible, populist rhetoric. While this increases in his second term, it is still much lower than the likes of Hugo Chávez (Venezuela) to whom Thaksin has been compared, and more similar to moderate populists, such as Silvio Berlusconi (Italy). Additionally, comparing Thaksin's score to other leaders that have been coded using the same method, we observe that the trajectory of Thaksin's populism is most similar to that of Recep Erdoğan of Turkey.

We also argue that the looseness with which the term populism has been applied to Thaksin prevents scholars from understanding the true nature of Thaksin's political missteps and the reasons his supporters were attracted to him. While his populist language may have bolstered support from voters at the end of his government, it could not have played a strong role in the beginning. As even the harshest critics of Thaksin reluctantly admit, most of his electoral success must be attributed to the fact that his policies were successful and sustainable. But Thaksin did undoubtedly demonstrate strong-man tendencies during his tenure. These attacks on democracy and the independent institutions set up in the 1997 constitution, rather than his alleged corruption or anti-monarchism and certainly more than his mostly misnomered populism, should have been the focus of his opponents. A less populist Thaksin might have avoided controversy and hewed more closely to liberal democratic institutions to legitimize his rule. The result is

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<sup>1</sup> The Serimanangkasila Party won a majority in 1957, but this was tainted by accusations of cheating in a less-than-democratic era.

that today we are left with a country bereft of commitment to basic democratic processes and a military dictatorship that appears more populist than Thaksin ever was even at his peak.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we trace the use of the populist label for Thaksin by both political commenters and academics. We then describe the academic definition of populism used in this paper. In the third section, we describe our methodology for measuring populist rhetoric across a selection of Thaksin's public addresses. We then present the results, providing examples of his populist and non-populist speeches, and follow with a comparison to various leaders across the globe. The final section concludes.

## 2 Thaksin and the Populist Label

In common usage and for many social scientists, the term “populism” or “populist” has traditionally had at least two meanings. One is that the leader is making policy promises, especially economic ones, in order to garner wide political support; however, while these policies are appealing to voters in the short term, they are unworkable in the long term. The target of these alleged populist policies is often the lower classes, the ostensibly most populous segment of the citizenry (Acemoglu et al. 2011; Dornbusch and Edwards 1991). The implication is that the leader has no real plan for the country, is reckless with finances, or does not care about other segments of society (especially the upper classes).

The second meaning is a more political one that focuses on how the leader and followers are organized. This sees populism as a type of political strategy, one in which there is a strong, personalistic leader using demagoguery to attract a large movement (Barr 2009; Weyland 2001). While the movement may be attracted by the leaders' specific policies, the attraction is more to the leader himself, who offers himself as a messianic figure capable of saving the people by virtue of his superior skills, and hence someone who is worthy of popular devotion and unconstrained power. If elected, the result is likely to be undemocratic, as the leader and followers undermine the checks and balances and minority rights necessary for liberal democracy.

Both definitions are used to categorize Thaksin's government. The economic concept was the first one applied. Thaksin's party machine, the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT, translated as Thais Love Thais Party), attracted levels of support never before seen in Thailand, partly on the back of a slew of policies aimed at reviving the provincial (mostly rural) economy.<sup>2</sup> In 2001, the first elections in which TRT competed, Thaksin led the party to win 40.6% of the vote and was just three seats

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<sup>2</sup> Pasuk and Baker (2002) attribute the first reference to Thaksin as a populist to a foreign media outlet, the Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER, 18 January 2001). They attributed Thaksin's election victory to “embracing populism on a grand scale”. The article labeled his “policies”, “spending programmes”, “pledges”, “election campaign”, “brand of government” and even “sheen” all as populist. The term was new to Thailand and two days later, when Kasian Tejapira used it for the first time in Thai, he used the transliteration, *poppiwilit*. Two academics then translated it as *phrachaniyom*, which Kasian began using in his writings (Pasuk and Baker 2008).

shy of a majority, which he orchestrated soon after the elections with defections from minor parties. The second election in 2005 saw TRT take 60.7% of the vote and 75% of seats. TRT was undeniably popular; in contrast, the largest party in any of the previous five elections won around 31% of the vote and seats, with the largest party in most elections being just over the 20% mark. But scholars and commentators took to calling the TRT populist. Thaksin's policies included microfinance loans of one million baht per village, debt moratorium for farmers, and a landmark universal healthcare bill, known as the 30-baht scheme (McCargo and Ukrit 2005; Selway 2011, 2015). Never before had a political party run on such ambitious and innovative policies. Prior parties, and TRT's opponents in 2001, were largely policy-free, relying on platitudes from the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) five-year plans.<sup>3</sup>

Thaksin's critics regularly cited their concerns with his policies' "apparent profligacy and incoherence" warning of "revenue shortfalls and an unmanageable public debt, which stood at 53% of GDP as of end-2002, having trebled since 1997" (Thitinan 2003, p. 278). His primary opposition in the form of the Yellow Shirt movement was led by Sondhi Limthongkul, who charged that Thaksin's populist policies bought off the rural poor who had insufficient education to "truly understand how populist politicians can abuse power".<sup>4</sup> Head of another opposition party, Anek Laothamatas of the Mahachon Party, went further. He branded Thaksin's policies as "irresponsible" and "dishonest", accusing the rural masses of lacking not just the education, but the ethical beliefs to withstand populism (Anek 2006, p. 178–179). The media (both national and international) also frequently labeled Thaksin as populist, simply because TRT "directed its major campaign promises to rural and poor voters" (Hewison 2004, p. 503–504).

Academics also applied the economic meaning of populism to Thaksin. Pasuk and Baker (2005) compare Thaksin explicitly to the recent left-populist regimes of Latin America, "appeal[ing] to the 'disorganized' mass in the rural economy and urban informal sector by launching redistributive policies, distancing itself from old leaders, and simultaneously undermining democratic institutions and liberal values" (p. 58). Here, the definition of populism involves a "raft of redistributive schemes, loud public antagonism toward everything said to be associated with 'old politics', and the de facto diminution of the scope of the democratic process" (p. 59). Pasuk and Baker date his "full-tilt" populism to between 1998 and 2001 (p. 62). They include Thaksin as part of what they call "neopopulism", appropriating a term from

<sup>3</sup> So successful were TRT policies that the Democrat Party sought to mimic them in the subsequent elections. It was the Democrat Party, long thought to be the most programmatic of all prior parties, that lost out the most in the 2001 elections. Seen as a source of stability and policy acumen in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, the Democrats were in power when the new constitution was passed and had the structure in place to best capitalize on the new election laws, which saw a national PR tier added for the first time. The PR tier was designed precisely to encourage the nationally oriented types of policies for which TRT became renowned. It was parochial policies that had been seen as a major cause of the financial crisis, but even so, the extent of TRT policies and their success in implementation exceeded all expectations.

<sup>4</sup> As cited in an email report of Sondhi's talk in Seattle in November 2006 by Charles F. Keyes to Pasuk and Baker, who cite it in their article on Thaksin and populism (2008, p. 63).

the study of Latin America, “appealing to the ‘disorganized’ population of small peasants and urban informal-sector workers, in contrast to earlier Latin American populism, which was based more on ‘organized’ groups connected to trade unions, social movements, or party machines” (p. 68).

Other scholars add the short-term material benefits of his policies as essential to their definition of populism in addition to the nature of the constituency to whom Thaksin appealed. Somchai (2008) argue, “farmers refused to join the anti-Thaksin protest because they were unable to look beyond the short-term material benefits of the populist policies” (p. 119).

In contrast, some scholars apply the term populism to Thaksin’s policies, but also incorporate the political-strategy use of the term. For example, Thitinan (2012) states: “While Thaksin’s populism was winning at the polls, his abuses were... inextricably entangled with his self-dealing, his penchant for corruption, and his habit of abusing the powers of his office. Thaksin Incorporated went hand-in-hand with Thailand Incorporated” (p. 48, 59). Likewise, McCargo (2002) argues: “Accordingly, the verdict is still out on the success of the party’s “populist” programs. The leadership of the government is far more centered on the person of the prime minister than ever before, and the single party from which that leadership is overwhelmingly drawn now dominates the national legislature in a way never previously seen” (p. 124).

In one of the most detailed essays on Thaksin’s populism, Pasuk and Baker (2004a) posited that all of Thaksin’s other objectives were to prop up his business enterprise. They coined a new term for him, pluto-populist. This referred to Thaksin’s unique combination of electoral support: rich provincial businessmen and the poor rural masses. As they state, “Thailand’s pluto-populism was government of the people, by the rich, for the rich—and a little bit for the people too” (p. 2). Pasuk and Baker argued that the populist policies helped Thaksin achieve his two wider goals of putting political parties at the center of policymaking (which in turn could be dominated by the rich) and suppressing civil society using authoritarian methods. The populist policies did this by providing a new link between party and electorate, thus enabling Thaksin to bypass the old bosses, and by serving as a “cushion” against protest and dissent.

Other scholars are clearer on the political-strategy meaning of populism. Jayasuriya and Hewison (2004) distinguished Thaksin’s populism from “classical” (Latin American, e.g., Peronism) populism, which “depends on broad mass and multiclass movements organized around political programs of state-directed industrialization and social reform”, ultimately focusing on the way in which Thaksin sought “to bypass and supplement existing representative institutions and practices through forms of illiberal politics. The main effect of these new patterns of populist representation is to cancel out the mediating structures of liberal democratic politics” (p. 573–574). Case (2007) also explicitly invokes the strategy meaning of populism. He states: “But in terms of some additional indicators that might be collated under the responsiveness heading, he at the same time eroded democracy’s quality. His conflicts of interest diminished the rule of law. His suppression of critical media outlets weakened political freedoms. And his campaigns against alleged drug traffickers and southern insurgents grossly violated

human rights” (p. 632).<sup>5</sup> And finally Thitinan (2008): “The dark side to all this was the lengthening trail of corruption accusations and alleged abuses of power that Thaksin’s government was leaving behind. Critics charged the premier and his party with instituting authoritarian rule behind the cover provided by the democratic legitimacy that flows from winning elections” (p. 143).

In borrowing from these definitions, scholars of Thai politics have drawn on recognized traditions. However, more recent work on populism has highlighted a number of challenges of using these two approaches, and these critiques apply here as well. Today many social scientists are reluctant to apply economic definitions because they seem to exclude populists who are friendly to market-oriented economic policy. A number of radical right populists in Europe, the United States, and even a few in Latin America defy the leftist categorization by seeming to employ familiar populist rhetoric while endorsing market reforms and pursuing the support of middle class voters and entrepreneurs. In fact, while left (economic) populists are the most common form in Latin America, a spate of market-friendly populists in this region during the 1990s encouraged scholars in this region to adopt the term neopopulism precisely to capture this tendency (Roberts 1995; Weyland 1999); it was not a term to describe the more recent wave of populists allied with Hugo Chávez and the resurgent left. In Western Europe and the United States, market-oriented populists appealing to the middle class have been a common variety, embodied in movements such as Ross Perot’s United We Stand and the Tea Party in the United States (Lowndes 2017). Current radical right parties and movements, such as the Front National in France, UKIP in the United Kingdom, and Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign in the United States are friendlier to welfare statism and more hostile to free trade, but even they do not call for wholesale appropriations, income redistribution, or state-led economic development.

Indeed, it is not so clear that Thaksin’s policies were all that unsound or unfriendly to the market, as much as they were unfriendly to traditional economic interests in the country’s urban center. Early on, Pasuk and Baker (2001) did not see Thaksin’s policies as particularly populist. They write: “There is nothing especially populist about this program. Thaksin simply took the unprecedented step of asking the largest element in the electorate what they wanted from government, and then offered it as an electoral platform. All successful politicians do something like this.

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<sup>5</sup> Case seems to provide a lot of rhetorical evidence for Thaksin as a populist that are in line with the academic definition we use in this paper: “However, Thaksin made even his contempt for formal procedures and liberties integral to his responsiveness and personalist appeal. Early in his tenure, he outlandishly depicted himself as a ‘Genghis Khan type of manager’. He dismissed media outlets and civil society organisations as irritants, hampering his swift implementation of policies ‘for the people’. He ridiculed the opposition, while rarely attending the National Assembly. And he denounced the Constitutional Court for having dared to hold proceedings against him, arguing that ‘a mere handful of people should not have the right to oust a politician elected by the masses’. Indeed, while the court was in session, thousands of demonstrators showed their agreement, gathering outside on his behalf. His brutal campaign against alleged criminals and insurgents equally gained approval, offering assurance to constituents over public safety and national unity. Thaksin’s scorn thus seemed to resonate with many citizens at this juncture, valuing the standing of institutions far less than the substantive delivery of benefits” (p. 632). These quotes come from early on in Thaksin’s first tenure.

What made it so revolutionary in Thailand was that no-one had done it before, largely because rural society did not have the means to express its opinion and make its demands” (p. 8). Case (2007) goes one step further, stating: “Thaksin’s populist programmes—astutely researched and promoted, competently implemented, and adequately funded—fulfilled to perhaps an unexpected extent the campaign promises through which his government had gained its mandate” (p. 630). Thitinan (2008) provides perhaps the most glowing assessment: “He had put Thailand on the world’s emerging-markets map with impressive rates of economic growth, bold leadership, clear policy directions, and apparent democratic consolidation that seemed to promise a future in which Thailand would be politically stable, effectively governed, and highly attractive to investors” (p. 142–143).

Another set of scholars put Thaksin’s policies in the camp of Keynesian supply-side or leftist distributive policies. Thitinan (2003) describes the efforts Thaksin took to make them viable, and argued they were consistent with an American-style, demand-side economic policies of boosting domestic spending. Pasuk and Baker (2004a) also recognize the role these policies had in Thaksin’s broader economic ideology: more than just a Keynesian demand-side approach, they were designed to integrate the rural masses into the capitalist economy by proliferating new sources of small-scale credit. Indeed, Hewison (2004) in his famous essay “Crafting Thailand’s New Social Contract”, pays little attention to the term populism, identifying the policies as a natural response to the social safety net gap exposed during the Financial Crisis.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Choi (2005) argues that Thaksin’s populism was in direct contrast to the neoliberalism of the previous Democrat-led government.<sup>7</sup>

A final set of scholars categorizes Thaksin’s policies as more pro-capitalism. Jayasuriya and Hewison (2004) noted that Thaksin’s populist policies sat alongside neoliberal market reforms, and thus categorize TRT as more like “British New Labour’s Third Way program... market reform is married to a conservative understanding of community that attenuates conflict and accentuates membership in an amorphous nation or community made competitive within a globalized economic order” (p. 574). Pye and Schaffer (2008) also argued that Thaksin was not “a pro-poor, populist premier supported by the mass of the rural poor (a kind of Asian Hugo Chávez)” (p. 39). Indeed, they use the term “post-neoliberal restructuring”, rather than populism, referring to similar social programs in combination with a commitment to capitalism as Jayasuriya and Hewison noted (p. 40). Pye and Schaffer analyze in some detail the comparisons between Thaksin and Chavez, dismissing them all. Yes, they could both mobilize mass support, but Thaksin’s supporters had “good arguments for their position” (p. 45); Yes, Chavez also had a healthcare programme, but Thaksin’s did not threaten the huge private sector within

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<sup>6</sup> Hewison’s writings on Thaksin and populism demonstrate the two meanings. He is clearly uncomfortable with the policy meaning. In 2004, with Jayasuriya, however, leaning on the strategy term, he clearly refers to Thaksin as a populist. But again in 2010 (Hewison 2010) he seems to go back on his 2004 essay, labeling Thaksin a “so-called populist” (p. 122). However, it should be noted that this is in reference to the policy-meaning of populism.

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, he did not put Thaksin’s populism in the same camp as Latin American populism because it lacked “political deinstitutionalization and personalization of authority” (p. 58).

healthcare; Yes, they were both anti-IMF, but Thaksin was only “mildly Keynesian” compared to Chavez’s economic nationalism (p. 47). Whether Keynesian, leftist, or neoliberal, the stronger consensus seems to be that the policies were not as reckless or short-sighted as the term populist, in its policy meaning, invokes.

In contrast, Thaksin clearly hews closer to the political-strategic definition. Most scholars, while not necessarily labeling these actions populist, describe a Thaksin that was personalistic and showed anti-democratic tendencies during his time in office. However, what many studies using the political-strategic definition lack is a clear argument about why the leader and his followers act this way. Identifying and labeling a complex of behavior or organization is not the same as explaining why the leader and his followers made these choices. After all, voters have much to lose from a politician asking for their wholesale devotion and a blank check on institutional and policy reforms, and many politicians in other countries have been able to pursue policy reforms without trampling on democratic liberties. The few attempts at causal theorizing by scholars working within this approach have tended to suggest that voters become less rational and more risk-acceptant in environments of crisis (Weyland 1998, 2008), and that politicians are more likely to engage in undemocratic behavior when they are political outsiders because of the costs of doing business with insider networks (Levitsky and Loxton 2013). But it is not clear that Thailand was still in an economic or social crisis at the time of Thaksin’s first election—the country had experienced two consecutive years of positive economic growth making up for the year of negative economic growth during the 1997 Financial Crisis. And while Thaksin at times presented himself as a political outsider (as we see later in our analysis), he had previously served in government as Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister and was connected to elite circles through his business interests and family. Without a clearer and more robust causal argument, scholars of Thai politics risk using the label “populist” as a pejorative instead of a scientific concept.

### 3 The Ideational Approach to Thaksin

Because traditional definitions of populism fail to capture some of the leaders we intuitively think of as populist (such as a pro-market Thaksin), a growing number of scholars have opted to define populism primarily in terms of its ideational content. This approach parts from the observation that most of the leaders and movements we historically consider populist use a similar rhetoric, one expressing a worldview that sees politics as a cosmic struggle between a unified will of the common people and a selfish, conspiring elite (Hawkins 2009; Mudde 2007). Scholars who take this approach use a number of terms to get at this type of ideas—a discourse, a “thin-centered” ideology, a frame—but all of them capture the notion that populists are distinguished by a unique understanding of democracy, one that is expressly not pluralist but still believes in popular sovereignty.

As a discourse, populism stands somewhat apart from traditional ideologies of conservatism, liberalism, or socialism. It is a partially empty vessel that must be



filled or combined with other ideologies to acquire programmatic specificity; hence, there are populists of the left and right. But it does have important political consequences. The most important is not economic mismanagement (although this can be a symptom of left-populists) but democratic illiberalism (Pappas 2016). To be fair, populists highlight forgotten issues and are often instrumental at incorporating excluded sectors; these are important functions in liberal democracies, where institutions can protect incumbent politicians from competitive pressures (Canovan 1999). But because populists see opponents as powerful, diabolical conspirators against the popular will, they aim for radical institutional reform (to restore power to the people) and are willing to curtail civil liberties, especially for minorities associated with their elite opponents (Abts and Rummens 2007; Arditi 2004; Muller 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Urbinati 1998). Furthermore, because supporters of populist movements share some of these ideas and are distrustful of professional politicians or the give and take that is normally required in legislatures, they may be willing to support a strong leader they see as embodying their popular will (Levitsky and Loxton 2013). The stronger the discourse, the more likely it is that populists will have these negative effects on liberal democracy (Hawkins and Ruth 2015; Houle and Kenny 2016; Huber and Schimpf 2016).

As it turns out, few if any scholars of Thai politics have assessed Thaksin's populism using the ideational approach, either in terms of measuring it systematically or connecting it to his behavior. The exception is Pasuk and Baker in their 2008 assessment of Thaksin as a populist. Although they start out with something closer to a political-institutional definition, citing Roberts (Roberts 2006) who gives "the essential core of populism" as "the political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge established elites", most of their data emphasizes Thaksin's ideas, as embodied in the content of his spoken language and the style of his performance (Pasuk and Baker 2008, p. 63).

According to Pasuk and Baker, Thaksin dropped shades of populist rhetoric prior to the first election in 2001. Pasuk and Baker identify the National Counter-Corruption Committee's (NCCC) active case against him as pushing him in that direction. If removed by the NCCC, it would be a case of Thailand's old elite removing someone who had been elected "by the people" and dedicated to work "for the people". They write: "In rhetoric, over the nine months of the asset case, Thaksin went from modernist reformer championing businessmen in the face of economic crisis, to populist championing the poor against an old elite" (p. 66).

But they argue that Thaksin's populism really took off in March 2004, after coming under "increasing attack in the press and on public platforms, especially over his management of the upsurge of violence in the far south, but more generally over a range of issues including corruption, government aid for Shinawatra businesses, the privatisation of state enterprises, and the government's handling of avian influenza" (p. 66). They categorize his speeches at hitting on three main themes: "I give to all of you", "I belong to you", and "I am the mechanism which can translate the will of the people into state action" (p. 68–69).

What evidence do they give of Thaksin's populism, however? First, much of it is generalized descriptions of Thaksin's rhetoric over time: "He stopped littering his speeches with English to denote internationalism and modernity, and instead used

dialect and earthy humour. He stopped quoting Bill Gates, and instead often mentioned his own family and sex life. The format of his weekly radio show underwent a subtle change: instead of commenting on current issues, Thaksin related the events of his week like a diary, allowing listeners into his life” (p. 67–68). This is accompanied by a detailed description of his carefully managed outward appearance over time: “In this period, Thaksin changed his public appearance and speech. He shed his business suit in favour of shirtsleeves with buttons open at the neck, sometimes all down to his waist, and his hair lightly tousled” (p. 67). They also describe how he visited rural locations all over the country, making sure “to be photographed in homely situations—emerging from a village bath-house in a pakoma (common man’s lower cloth); transported on a village tractor (i-taen); riding a motorbike down a dusty village street; accepting flowers from toothless old ladies” (p. 67).

The evidence, however, does not go as far as providing specific quotes making clear linkages between a conspiring elite and the masses whom he represents. The change in TRT’s slogan from the 2001 election’s “Think new, act new” to the 2005 election’s “The heart of TRT is the people” is suggestive, but not definitive (p. 67). Other quotes put him clearly on the side of the people: “These past four years, this kind of change was not by chance, but because of the power of your belief in me. I work hard, don’t I? If I work hard, but you don’t believe in me, there could be no trust. But when you believe in me, then people listen when I speak, and bureaucrats are not stubborn, because they listen to the people” (p. 69). There is perhaps a hint here that the bureaucrats are the conspiring elite, but not enough to independently assess that. They also quote this part of the same speech: “We want politics with meaning, don’t we? We want politics which have something for the people, don’t we? And this politics which is just destructive, can we get rid of it yet?” but without saying what makes current politics so destructive or if any purposive intent lies behind it (p. 70).

Probably a bigger deal here is their lack of any comparative perspective. Thaksin may have said or done these things once or twice in a few isolated moments. How does he compare to leaders seen globally as strongly populist, such as Chávez, or even moderately populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Berlusconi? Even if we find that he is populist, this will give us the ability to say how populist, and thus a better sense of how this might have mattered for his behavior in office.

#### 4 Our Measure of Populism

To gauge the level of populism in Thaksin’s rhetoric more precisely, we perform a content analysis of Thaksin’s speeches. Similar methods have been used to evaluate the rhetoric of dozens of leaders spanning from Latin America to Eastern Europe (e.g., Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Hawkins 2009; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011).

For our study, we apply a form of textual analysis that the educational psychology literature calls holistic grading (White 1985). Rather than measure

rhetorical form or content at the level of words or sentences, holistic grading asks the coders to read the text in its entirety, then assign a grade based on their overall impression. Holistic grading was developed by Educational Testing Services for its grading of Advanced Placement essay exams in the United States and is best suited for measuring diffuse, latent attributes in a text. Although it looks at broad attributes of a text, holistic grading is a quantitative measure that seeks to determine how much of an idea is present. It requires pairing a coding rubric with a set of anchor texts that match each type or level of ideas so that coders can have a consistent set of reference points. The trick is to have a simple scale, one with no more codes/types than there are distinguishable anchor texts.

Our application of holistic grading for the measurement of populism was developed in previous rounds of coding (Hawkins 2009, 2010). Coding is based on a rubric that captures the main elements of populism: a Manichaeic cosmology, a reified will of the people, a diabolical elite, systemic change, and an “anything goes” attitude. The concept of the “will of the people” is the sine-qua-non of populist discourse; if a speech refers to a reified will of the people fairly clearly in at least part of the speech, it earns at least a moderate score. Yet some populist speeches do a much clearer job of developing the tone that we associate with a Manichaeic cosmology, as well as ancillary elements mentioned earlier such as the mention of a diabolical enemy. This results in a three-point scale in which 0 = no clear reference to the “will of the people”; 1 = some clear populist elements, including the “will of the people”, but lacking consistency or intensity across the text; and 2 = most elements of populism present and intense, without any strong, countervailing outlook. Each of these scores is paired with one or more anchor texts—political speeches—that are used in the training. To provide a measure of intercoder reliability, we use two coders for each speech, each of which is a native speaker of the original language of the speech (in this case, Thai, although two of Thaksin’s speeches in the sample were originally given in English). As additional checks on reliability and validity, we have coders fill out a detailed response for each speech that includes illustrative quotes and a short explanation for their judgment; we draw on these qualitative measures in the discussion that follows. Coders were not allowed to share their results until the end of each round of coding. Where there was disagreement, we have opted not to change any of their scores and we simply report the average.

In terms of sampling, we follow the same steps used in our previous studies. This allows us to fully compare Thaksin’s score with other contemporary and historical leaders. The unit of analysis is the leader-term, with four speeches selected nonrandomly for each term: a campaign speech (typically the opening or closing speech of the campaign, where available), a ribbon-cutting speech (always given to a local audience), an international speech (given to an international audience outside the country, such as the Council on Foreign Relations or the United Nations General Assembly), and a famous speech (chosen after consulting with the president’s press office or party headquarters). The final score for each term is the average across the two coders for all four speeches, although we also report individual scores for each speech.

**Table 1** Content analysis of Thaksin Shinawatra speeches in First and second terms

	Coder 1	Coder 2	Average score	Final score
First term				
Campaign				
Press release: Respected Thai brothers and sisters	0	0.4	0.2	
Ribbon cutting				
Opening speech for the Golden Garuda award ceremony for outstanding civil service executives	0	0	0	
International				
Opening speech at the opening ceremony of the XV International AIDS Conference	0	0	0	
Famous				
Speech on the policy for prevention and suppression of drugs	0.1	0	0.05	0.1
Second term				
Campaign				
Campaign speech at Sanam Luang	0.9	1	0.95	
Ribbon cutting				
Speech to celebrate Thai inventors on “Inventors Day”	0	0	0	
International				
A conversation with Thaksin Shinawatra, Prime Minister of Thailand (Council on Foreign Relations)	0.5	0.6	0.55	
Famous				
Wongwian Yai speech	1.9	1.4	1.65	0.8

## 5 Results

Table 1 displays the results from the content analysis. We see that, similar to arguments made by Pasuk and Baker (2008), Thaksin’s populism does increase between his first and second terms. The average score for Thaksin’s first term is a miniscule 0.1. This increases quite dramatically to 0.8 in his second term. We note that the intercoder reliability for Thaksin’s speeches is very high, with a Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.92 (for interval-level data).<sup>8</sup> This gives us a high degree of confidence in the results. Following, we provide details on the Thaksin’s speeches.

### 5.1 First Term

The level of his populism in term 1 is very low, almost imperceptible. There is also very little variance among the speeches, with the only real hint of populism found in

<sup>8</sup> Calculated using the ReCal software at <http://dfreelon.org/utills/recalfront/> with the values from Table 1.

his campaign address. This seems to contradict many observers of Thaksin during his first term. Most of these contradictions are easy to deal with based on definitional differences. However, the charges by Pasuk and Baker and Case must be addressed more directly. In short, we are not saying that Thaksin did not say some of those things which would clearly count as populist; however, what this method allows us to say is that Thaksin did not say those things frequently. Unlike some other political leaders with higher levels of populism, he is not taking every single public speaking opportunity as a chance to forward a populist narrative of politics. A Chávez-like figure would have used a Golden Garuda award event to do this, and, yes, even an International AIDS conference—any public appearance would have been seen as an opportunity to promote a populist agenda. Thaksin just is not doing this in his first term.

The one speech that appears as slightly more populist is his campaign speech. The speech is built around a narrative of Thaksin's life, from his youth in the countryside to his current position as a business leader. The narrative basically conveys two messages: first, that he has been made wise and good-hearted through his life experiences (“we come up against things that are difficult and things that are easy... I believe these experiences are great teachers and good lessons for the future”); and second, that he identifies with ordinary Thai people and seeks to serve them (“as someone born in the countryside, I'd like farmers to have a life that can be self-reliant... as someone who was once an NPL bad debtor, I'd like to see all bad loans cleared from the banks”). It is this latter message that gives the speech its most populist feel. Thaksin makes multiple references to the plights of ordinary Thais from all walks of life, his “brothers and sisters”, and makes it clear that he is one of them. That said, the “Thai people” is a very broad category that includes not only rural farmers, but small entrepreneurs, big business owners, parents raising their children, children facing a difficult future, debtors, and even government bureaucrats (who, he says, deserve “good and fitting welfare provision”); thus, there is little if any attempt to distinguish a morally pure majority. Indeed, what keeps the speech from feeling fully populist is the fact that he largely avoids singling out a corrupt elite, providing only general mentions of the nation's problems (the recent economic crisis looms large, as do the ordinary challenges of competing in a modern, globalized world). In one paragraph Thaksin mentions the problem of corruption and of overweening government bureaucrats, and he goes so far as to single out politicians who are “so protective of their political careers and positions that they forget the overriding importance of the nation and people”, but he otherwise avoids identifying culprits. The speech does offer a hint of big reforms, but without any specificity and while striking a positive, upbeat tone. In short, while there is a clear reference to Thai people, there is almost no Manichaean view or bellicose language.

Because this was the most populist speech in the sample, we feel confident saying that Thaksin's first term speeches show only incomplete instances of populist ideas. Could we find other examples from Thaksin's first term that might be better examples of populism? We do not doubt that other speeches might contain some populist rhetoric (we see clear hints in the campaign speech), but our sample leads us to believe that it would be hard to find a speech littered with populism, or that one

could find a sustained series of speeches of this nature. Thaksin may also have answered questions or commented in issues in one-off remarks that came across as populist, but these did not really constitute a populist politician.

## 5.2 Second Term

The overall score for Thaksin's second term is considerably higher than for his first, indicating a clear uptick in his use of populist rhetoric. There is also more variance amongst the speeches. Thaksin makes no attempt to include any populist rhetoric in his speech on Thai Inventors Day, but his campaign speech in the second term is moderately populist, and the famous speech we selected, the Wongwian Yai speech, was almost coded at the maximum by one coder. Even in his conversation with the Council on Foreign Relations, Thaksin drops in populist rhetoric.

To understand this shift more clearly, we examine the two most populist speeches, his campaign speech and the Wongwian Yai (famous) speech. In his campaign speech, Thaksin talks specifically and repeatedly about “the people”, referencing the people as “the majority”, “the poor”, “the villagers”, and “all Thai people”. He describes himself and his party as the forces that represent the people: “victory for me and victory for the Thai Rak Thai Party will be victory for the people”. The speech has numerous references to the people: “We want politics which have something for the people, don't we?”; “help the majority of its people”; “Where do strong politics come from? From the faith of the people.”; “Where does power come from? Power comes from the people, doesn't it?”; “I will perform the duty of opening up opportunities, first for all Thai people to escape from the poverty line, then in future creating other opportunities for people”; “We want politics which have something for the people, don't we?”

Not only are the people referenced more clearly and frequently, but there is now somewhat more talk about a conspiring elite. Thaksin denounces corruption, which is “squeezing villagers until they die”, and he talks a lot about rescuing the poor from poverty, and how we must protect the poor from politics. For example, he claims that: “Whenever politics needs a lot of money, the cost must fall on the people for sure”. Although Thaksin still avoids identifying groups who are responsible for the general problem, he now mentions specific examples of corruption by different parties (for example the major opposition party, the Democrats) and by public servants.

Other aspects of his campaign speech are less clearly populist. He spends considerable time discussing specific scenarios and policies that he wants to put into place (fix the education system, eradicate drugs, give newborns and their parents a present, etc.). There is mostly a respect for democracy and the rule of law in his speech, although he demonstrates some disdain when referencing critics of his War on Drugs: “Do you know that when I was cracking down on drugs, they made a fuss because they were worried about the drug traders themselves. They were not worried about the people getting addicted to drugs, but worried about the drug traders”. He also discusses the need for his supporters to get out and vote to ensure that he wins. This indicates his respect for the political system and his acknowledgement that there are other people that may not agree with him. He

stresses the need for everyone to vote and the importance of not having any cheating (no vote buying/violence). However, the adjectives he uses to describe politics begin to take on adversarial shades. Politics is again described as “destructive”, for example, though he refrains from contrasting good and evil forces, or ascribing cosmic proportions to the issues he raises.

The Wongwian Yai speech requires some context before describing it. This speech was given near the end of his second term, which came to an end with a military coup in September 2006. The speech followed months of mass protests from the Yellow Shirt movement, which had partial support from the Democrat Party. Thaksin was aware of very serious threats to his power over the course of these months. One of the main charges of the Yellow Shirts was that Thaksin was an anti-monarchist. They referenced an April 2015 event in which Thaksin presided over a “secret” and “private” merit-making ceremony at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Thai Buddhism’s holiest site. In response, they began adorning themselves in yellow shirts and using the slogans “We Love the King”, “We Will Fight for the King”, and “Return Power to the King” to rally public sentiment against him. Planning for the coup began in February 2006, but rumors had surfaced earlier. Thus, when Thaksin refers to a conspiring elite trying to undermine elections, this is not paranoid talk. The coding rules do not instruct the coders to take such a context into consideration, and the very high score in this speech reflects these very real threats.

From the get-go, this talk references thugs and evil people trying to undermine democracy. Thaksin names the protestors (Yellow Shirts) and the Democrat Party by name as destroying democracy and therefore the will of the people. But he also references “a silent force” that wants me to keep working am I right? These are the “influential people”:

If there were things in the way of these new roads, they moved them. In Thailand? Not so much. They see a tree that some people worship, they have to make the road go around it. Even worse, they go around homes of influential people and yet they tear down regular people’s homes. That’s their “rule”. That’s not really a rule.

He also calls these people “losers”, “vulgar”, “bullies”, and even “outlaws”. He states: “Whoever doesn’t respect the decision of the people are outlaws! The law is clear on that.” Juxtaposed to this elite is frequent reference to “the people”. He even invokes the King and remarks made by him to bureaucrats to respect the people. Underlying all this is the general idea that those conspiring to bring down the people are those who have lost out (economically) because they are unskilled, like the Democrat Party: “the skill of the Democrat Party is what got us into 1.4 trillion debt”.

Thaksin also talks about the need for reform to the political system. It is not entirely clear what reforms he is talking about, but they are “laws that oppress the people, the laws that go against the constitution, and the laws that make people poor and not have an opportunity to grow”. He also tempers his talk by constantly referring to the legitimacy of democracy and elections. There are some conciliatory remarks too, as he forgives the protestors and asks for everyone to help build the

country up. He says his government will be the “government for reconciliation”. Even in this talk, he acknowledges his willingness to surrender the seat if that was how the voting ended up. He also offers to listen to all sides and to include those of his opposition in governmental councils, saying multiple times that they (all parties) need to “come together” to fix the country’s issues.

Thus, in Thaksin’s second term we see clear instances of populism. As has generally been argued by other scholars, his brand of populism identifies the poor, especially the rural poor, as the Thai people, while targeting the traditional politicians as the conspiring elite. This populism is not always consistent, and he tempers even his strongest speeches with conciliatory pluralist language, while coming just shy of a call for revolutionary change; indeed, he remains openly respectful of the monarchy and appeals to it. But the shift is clear and seems tied to his mounting political challenges.

### 5.3 Comparison to Leaders of Other Countries

While the shift in Thaksin’s discourse is real, it is not clear if this relative shift implies an absolutely high level of populism. Scholars have compared Thaksin to a variety of populist leaders around the world, including Chávez, Perón, and other Latin American leaders (some saying the comparison fits, others not), as well as Berlusconi, the latter being a media favorite perhaps because he was also a wealthy businessman.<sup>9</sup> However, it is not evident that these comparisons are accurate, nor should we assume that these other so-called populists are all of the same stripe.

To make this comparison, Table 2 shows a selection of scores for leaders from around the world in countries at a similar level of economic development to Thailand (except Italy). We see that in Thaksin’s first term, he scored similarly to Chile’s Michelle Bachelet, hardly known for her populism. Lula of Brazil is an interesting comparison; he is also often referred to as a populist, but mostly based on the economic definition. Here, we see that he is on the lower end of the populist scale. Vladimir Putin of Russia also scores fairly low (at least in his second term), showing that even authoritarian tendencies do not necessarily equate with high scores in terms of populist ideas. Lastly, we show the score for Gloria Arroyo from neighboring Philippines. Arroyo was hardly ever referred to as a populist; indeed, she replaced a person labeled as a populist based on a policy meaning (Joseph Estrada). These comparisons are helpful because they help demonstrate the different definition of the term we use in this paper, and the fact that Thaksin in his first term is on the low end of the scale.

In his second term, however, Thaksin shoots up to just below the middle of the scale, although this is in the upper quartile of all politicians scored thus far. He is not as strongly or as consistently populist as recent Latin American leaders such as Chávez or Evo Morales. Amongst the politicians that score in this range are several figures commonly referred to as populists, including Berlusconi, Morales (in his second term), and Erdoğan (also in his second term). Note that, of these figures, two

<sup>9</sup> “Under Suspicion in Thailand,” *Business Week Online*, 15 April 2003. Available online at [www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/02\\_15/b3778129.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/02_15/b3778129.htm), downloaded 13 December 2003.



**Table 2** Scores for Select Global Leader using our content analysis method

Country	Chief executive	Average score
Chile	Michelle Bachelet (1st term, 2006–2010)	0.0
Turkey	Recep Erdoğan (1st cabinet, 2003–2007)	0.1
Thailand	Thaksin Shinawatra (1st cabinet, 2001–2005)	0.1
Brazil	Lula da Silva (1st and 2nd terms, 2003–2011)	0.3
Russia	Vladimir Putin (2nd presidential term, 2004–2008)	0.4
Philippines	Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (1st full presidential term, 2004–2010)	0.5
Italy	Silvio Berlusconi (2nd cabinet, 2001–2006)	0.8
Thailand	Thaksin Shinawatra (2nd cabinet, 2005–2006)	0.8
Bolivia	Evo Morales (2nd term, 2009–2014)	0.8
Italy	Silvio Berlusconi (1st cabinet, 1994–1995)	0.9
Turkey	Recep Erdoğan (3rd term, 2011–2014)	0.9
Ukraine	Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010)	1.1
Bolivia	Evo Morales (1st term, 2006–2009)	1.6
Venezuela	Hugo Chávez (1st and 2nd terms, 1999–2006)	1.9

are economically right-leaning. Berlusconi, for example, was often criticized for his electoral coalitions with right-wing parties, the Lega Nord and the National Alliance. What unites these three with Thaksin in his second term is the underlying populist ideas that come through in their discourse.

Interestingly, Thaksin's trajectory of populism more closely resembles that of Erdoğan. Neither politician relied on populist discourse in the election in which they came to power, but in response to opposition forces, both increased their levels of populist rhetoric. In Erdoğan's case, it was opposition to the religious bent of his policies. Turkey had for decades been a secular state, and Erdoğan's Islamism put him at direct odds with those established elites, especially the Turkish military. In response to an attempted coup against him in 2016, Erdoğan stepped up the imprisonment of opponents, seized newspapers, and threatened to dissolve the constitutional court. Like Thaksin, however, he initially remained committed to the democratic process, especially elections, since both remained extremely popular at the polls. All of this was accompanied by a significant ratcheting up of his discourse.

Comparing any two leaders inevitably raises questions of what we might be implying with the comparison. Hence, it is useful to note their similarities and differences along other lines of analysis. Like Thaksin, Erdoğan was supported by a large electoral majority, but in terms of their policies, Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) did not come to power on the back of redistributive policies aimed at the rural poor. Thus, in Erdoğan's first election we do not see similar labels in the popular press painting him as a populist. Ideologically, the two leaders differ also. The AKP is categorized as a conservative party developed from the tradition of moderate Islam. We have already covered the different categorizations of Thaksin as Keynesian, leftist redistributivist, or Third-Way neoliberal.

One interpretation of either case is that neither leader started out as populist and that the populist rhetoric we see emerge over time is in response to very real threats

to democracy. Neither leader wholly abandoned democratic institutions, especially popular elections because of their obvious success at the polls. Other democratic institutions, however, were less favored. Both leaders showed less commitment to the judicial system, especially independent institutions such as constitutional courts. They were also both accused of suppressing media freedom. Thus, as opposition intensified, some of their responses pitted their favored democratic institutions—elections, and thus the will of the people—against nominated, numerically small (and thus possibly elite dominated) institutions.

These later transitions to moderate populism beg the question of whether either leader were either subconsciously populist, or simply concealing their real populist worldview. This has especially been suggested of Erdoğan in the wake of the alleged coup attempt in 2016 and his heavy-handed response, including the jailing of political opponents and the repression of academics. Neither leader is free of populism in their first term. Thus, the manner in which they responded to opposition forces may have simply revealed their true selves. We obviously have had more time to observe this of Erdoğan. Thaksin did not jail his opponents, though his War on Drugs was alleged to have eliminated some provincial political opponents. And even in his most fire-brand speech, Thaksin offers hints at reconciliation and inclusion of the opposition. If the coup had not stopped his tenure short, we might have seen a Thaksin more similar to current-day Erdoğan. To be clear, our suggestion that Thaksin was at most a moderate populist does not automatically imply that he was a good, non-corrupt, or wholly democratic politician.

Another useful comparison is Viktor Yushchenko of the Ukraine. This one-term president came to power on the tail of the Orange Revolution, which protested against the fraudulent results of the November 2004 elections. Yushchenko responded to this crisis with high levels of populist discourse (scores were highest for his campaign and famous speech, which both took place during the revolution), but his discourse subsided once the revolution was over and he was in power (hence the average of 1.1). Yushchenko soon ran into problems of his own, ranging from accusations of campaign funding by a Russian tycoon, the dismissal of his government, the dissolution of parliament and an early call for elections. Parliament challenged the dissolution in the Constitutional Court, which culminated in Yushchenko dismissing three members before they could rule on the case. The clash with members of his own party makes this case a little less similar to that of Thaksin, who enjoyed strong support from his party throughout, but it does underscore the point that highly contentious domestic political environments where there is a threat of constitutional flouting seem to drive politicians to use populist language.

How real were the threats to democracy that Thaksin faced? Opposition to Thaksin came early. He was indicted in December 2000 by the National Counter-Corruption Commission (NCCC), a month before the 2001 elections, where he was accused of hiding around \$US100 million in assets while deputy prime minister in 1997. Thaksin turned to some classic populist tactics in response to the initial indictment. He collected 1.4 million signatures in his support and staged protests such that observers posited that the judges had been torn between the rule of law and the will of the people. However, 6 months following Thaksin's landslide election,

the 15-member court voted 8–7 in favor of acquitting him. It is telling that in reaction to the favorable ruling, Thaksin commented that it was “strange” that a leader who won 11 million votes should be constrained by “appointed commissioners and judges”. That said, Thaksin did not dismiss members of the court as Yushchenko had (Pasuk and Baker 2004b, p. 5).

As Thaksin’s initial backing by the military and bureaucracy disappeared, he came under increasing pressure from opposition forces, including mass street protests by those claiming to support the monarchy. He was accused of widespread corruption, especially for failing to pay taxes on the sale of his telecoms company, ShinCorp, to the Singaporean government. The sale was also billed as selling out the nation. State enterprise workers who opposed privatization were also Thaksin opponents, alongside those who opposed his appointment of Somdet Phra Buddhacharya as acting Supreme Patriarch. Pressure continued to mount with more frequent protests and petitions calling for Thaksin’s impeachment. The major opposition party then boycotted the April 2006 elections as rumors of a coup began to surface. It is in the context of all this Thaksin gave his famous Wongwian Yai speech. Given the aftermath of an actual coup, Thaksin’s rhetoric of forces trying to subvert democracy cannot be dismissed as paranoid. Erdoğan has, allegedly, repeatedly foiled attempted coups, but none to date have been successful. In response, Erdoğan has taken much more extreme measures that press the rule of law, human rights, and democracy to the very limits. It is possible that, had any of the coup attempts in Turkey been successful, we might be equally as ambivalent about Erdoğan commitment to democracy as we are Thaksin’s.

## 6 Conclusion

Thaksin’s populism ends up being a somewhat complicated story. While it seems safe to argue that he was not economically populist, and his leadership and political organization might fit with political-strategic definitions of populist movements, we find that he clearly manifested some populist discourse. A content analysis of his speeches using an ideational definition of populism shows that populism was largely absent from his first term, but showed up clearly in his second term, especially in the moment immediately preceding his downfall in 2006. While this partially confirms the depiction in at least one other careful study of Thaksin’s populist ideas (Pasuk and Baker 2008), it adds important details. Thaksin was not as populist as some well-known, contemporary populist leaders, and he frequently tempered his populist rhetoric with pluralist appeals to conciliation and respect for liberal democratic rules. He also lacked clear calls for radical reform until the very end. Thaksin was not consistently or radically populist.

Our purpose in conducting this analysis was more than just descriptive, however. One of the claims of the ideational approach to populism is that an awareness of someone’s populism allows us to explain their behavior and even predict it. The ideational definition especially speaks to leaders’ democratic behavior. Because of how they understand democratic competition and the intentions of their competitors, populists are more likely to undermine civil liberties, eliminate checks and balances,

and create an unlevel playing field for their electoral opponents. The comparison with other populists from around the globe fleshes out this argument by showing us the trajectories of similar and dissimilar leaders.

While Thaksin does not seem to have created an unfair electoral competition for his opponents, he did curtail civil liberties, including media freedom, sought to weaken judicial checks on his behavior, and questioned the legitimacy of his opponents. These behaviors fueled protests such as the Yellow Shirt movement and eventually provoked a military coup as traditional political elites responded to what they perceived as a threat to democracy. To what extent could we have predicted these outcomes based on a knowledge of his moderate, if increasingly populist discourse?

At first glance, the comparison with Erdoğan paints Thaksin in a fairly sinister tone. It suggests Thaksin was a closet populist, someone with the underlying worldview who only needed the right sort of crisis to bring out his populist tendencies. With Erdoğan, this interpretation is often seen in a very dark tone, with critics arguing that his true tendencies were hidden in a strategic, calculating way to avoid confrontations with a secular establishment while he plotted against them; hence, populist ideas may have really precipitated the crisis, even if they were initially invisible.

Yet in Thaksin's case we feel less confident making this type of conspiratorial argument, and we think this is not the way most of his critics interpret his behavior in office. The comparison with leaders such as Yushchenko permits a more charitable assessment of Thaksin's democratic performance. Yushchenko's populism was also closely tied to a democratic crisis, and while the fact that he expressed these views says something about his underlying worldview, he was at least moderately supportive of democratic institutions once in office and did not return to a populist discourse even as he responded, perhaps somewhat questionably, to conflicts with his opponents and competitors within his own party.

In the case of Thaksin as well, the appearance of populism in a moment of crisis, and the glimmers of the discourse earlier in his first term, suggest that he at least harbored moderately populist views. While we do not think he secretly plotted the overthrow of Thai democracy, we do think these views made him prone to adopt a confrontational stance once problems emerged. It may have even led him to justify the initial undemocratic behaviors that first prompted judicial actions against him. Thaksin did not have to respond to his opponents or to political challenges by assuming a confrontational stance, and a willingness to be more conciliatory might have led to a different outcome. According to this softer view, Thaksin harbored populist views that made governing difficult, especially in an environment such as that in Thailand where elite corruption was a real problem that would have challenged any would-be reformer.

An ideational approach to populism also lends insight to Thailand's recent history. A second coup in 2014 sought to completely rid Thailand of Thaksin's influence, which the coupmakers claimed he continued to project from abroad (Thaksin has been in exile since the 2006 coup). The various successor parties to Thaksin's TRT have all had resounding success at the polls, but his detractors continue to claim that he remains the real puppet master. If such a depiction is true,

it suggests that Thaksin is more strongly populist than even his second-term level of populist rhetoric manifested: democracy is not about a disciplined political party with sound policies, but about him as a person. The threat of Thaksin returning to subvert democracy, then, is fodder for the generals continued military rule. But our analysis suggests that this extreme version of Thaksin has little ground. The most recent incarnation of TRT, the Pheu Thai party, continues to win soundly at the polls, and thus Thaksin, if he were indeed secretly heading the party, would have little need to refute democracy.

The fact that the current military leaders felt the need to write a constitution (in 2016), one that includes an unelected Senate with veto power over the House and the ability to appoint a prime minister from outside either chamber, suggests that it is not so much Thaksin's commitment to democracy we should be worried about. Prayut Chanocha, head of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the military junta, and concurrently serving as Prime Minister of Thailand seems to have used populist rhetoric to a much larger extent than Thaksin ever did. The major opposition party to TRT and its successor parties, the Democrat Party, has also demonstrated shaky commitment to democracy. Future content analysis of Thai leaders, then, might reveal that the populist term has been applied to the wrong side of the political aisle. Such an endeavor would not only allow us to provide a more complete picture of Thai populism, but would enable us to think about its underlying causes.

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