



# **Political Study of Thailand's Lower North (A Preliminary Review): Current Status, Focus Areas, Gaps, and Overlooked Local, Social, and Economic Power Dynamics**

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Received: 2 March 2025; Revised: 22 September 2025; Accepted: 25 September 2025; Available Online: 18 December 2025

## **Abstract**

Thai political science scholarship has traditionally concentrated on democracy, national politics, and electoral dynamics, focusing predominantly on regions such as the metropolitan periphery, the Northeast, the Upper North. Conversely, the Lower North remains significantly understudied and is frequently misclassified within adjacent regions, resulting in a fragmented understanding of its distinct political landscape. Consequently, there is lack of a systematic analytical framework to comprehensively analyze political developments specific to this area.

This study systematically reviews 695 publications from 1997 to 2024, retrieved from Scopus, Sage Journals, ThaiJo, and the King Prajadhipok's Institute database, to examine how the Lower North has been analyzed in political research. The study identifies two main objectives: 1) to map the development of political research on the Lower North over the past 27 years, and 2) to highlight key gaps and underexplored themes that constrain understanding of the region's politics.

Findings reveal that since 2006, scholarly attention has largely concentrated on political behavior, particularly electoral patterns and voting strategies. Concurrently, research on political institutions, public administration, sociopolitical movements, and resistance groups has expanded significantly. However, foundational issues—such as economic structures, capital flows, historical influences, local power dynamics, and capitalist networks—remain notably understudied. This imbalance has produced a fragmented understanding of the region, privileging event-driven analyses over structural explanations of power and capital networks. The study contributes by proposing an agenda for future research that emphasizes structural political economy, balanced provincial representation, methodological diversity, and policy-relevant institutional analysis, positioning the Lower North as a crucial site for understanding Thailand's evolving political landscape.

**Keywords:** Political Science Research Trends/Status, Lower Northern Thailand, Overlooked Locality

## **Introduction**

The Lower North of Thailand, comprising nine provinces—Uttaradit, Phitsanulok, Sukhothai, Tak, Phichit, Nakhon Sawan, Kamphaeng Phet, Uthai Thani, and Phetchabun—occupies a unique position as a transitional zone between the Upper North and Central regions. This geographical positioning has not only shaped the region's topography but has also influenced its economic structures, cultural identity, and political evolution. The northernmost provinces feature dense forests and high mountain ranges, forming a natural border with the Upper North, while the southern parts open into fertile lowland plains and expansive river basins, connecting seamlessly with the Central region. These distinct environmental features have historically dictated settlement patterns, economic activities, and governance structures, making the Lower North a region of both continuity and transition.

The economic foundation of the Lower North reflects a delicate balance between agriculture and non-agricultural sectors. As in much of Thailand, agriculture remains the backbone of the regional economy, with rice, tobacco, and cotton as dominant cash crops. These economic patterns, however, are not merely products of



geographical suitability; they are deeply rooted in Thailand's historical governance reforms. During the reign of King Rama V, the introduction of bureaucratic modernization significantly altered the region's economic trajectory, as infrastructure, transportation networks, and administrative structures were expanded to integrate the Lower North into the emerging national economic framework. The construction of railways and roads, for instance, not only facilitated economic expansion but also forged stronger political and administrative linkages between the Lower North and the Central region (Panyavuttrakul, 2017; Satapanawatana, 2003).

Beyond economic integration, the Lower North possesses a complex and layered cultural identity, shaped by historical movements and sociopolitical interactions. The northernmost provinces, particularly Sukhothai, Tak, and Uttaradit maintain deep cultural ties to the Lanna Kingdom, reflected in their linguistic patterns, traditions, and religious practices. These provinces exhibit a cultural landscape reminiscent of the Upper North, with distinct rituals, architectural styles, and local governance traditions that align with Lanna heritage. Conversely, Nakhon Sawan, Kamphaeng Phet, and Uthai Thani demonstrate greater cultural alignment with the Central region, where Thai nationalism and state-building efforts have played a more prominent role in shaping local identities (Sankom, 2011). This interweaving of northern and central influences places the Lower North in a cultural liminality, reinforcing both its importance as a bridge between regions and the challenges in defining its distinctiveness.

Despite its economic and cultural significance, the Lower North remains ambiguously defined in both historical narratives and academic discourse. Scholars attempting to categorize the region frequently encounter contradictory classifications, leading to ongoing debates about whether it represents a distinct political and cultural entity or merely an extension of the Central region. This ambiguity is particularly evident in political and electoral studies, where voting behaviors in key provinces—such as Phitsanulok, Phetchabun, and Sukhothai—are often mischaracterized as extensions of Bangkok-centric electoral trends. Such misconceptions stem from the tendency to generalize regional political patterns, overlooking localized influences, historical legacies, and grassroots political structures (Dansamanchanchai, 2023).

This conceptual oversight has led to a fragmented and inconsistent body of academic knowledge about the Lower North. Many studies have either grouped the region within the Central region or examined it in isolation, failing to account for its unique intersection between northern and central Thai politics. The prevailing assumption that research on the Central region or the Upper North sufficiently explains the Lower North has resulted in critical gaps in political science literature. Specifically, key areas such as local power structures, economic capital flows, and the region's historical influence on national politics remain largely unexamined. As a result, political studies on the Lower North remain disjointed and disproportionately underrepresented.

Given these challenges, this study seeks to answer the question: *How has political science scholarship conceptualized and analyzed the Lower North from 1997 to 2024, and what critical gaps remain in understanding its political economy and governance structures?*

By systematically reviewing 695 publications and classifying them through Goodin and Klingemann's nine-subfield framework, this paper not only maps the trajectory of political studies in the region but also exposes its thematic blind spots. In doing so, we propose a future research agenda that calls for integrating structural and theoretical approaches, including political economy and comparative governance, to achieve a more holistic and analytically robust understanding of the Lower North's role in Thailand's political development.



### Research Objectives

1. To analyze the development of research and scholarship on politics in the Lower North of Thailand during the period 2540 to 2567 (1997–2024).
2. To identify the primary focus areas and existing research gaps in political studies pertaining to the Lower North during the period 2540 to 2567 (1997–2024).

### Literature Review

Political science systematically examines power—its use, organization, and legitimation—within the contexts of governance, social coordination, and identity (Goodin & Klingemann, 1996; Porta & Keating, 2008), with particular attention to how actors negotiate structures to shape policy and outcomes (Lowndes et al., 2017). The discipline has evolved to address complex governance challenges by incorporating critical perspectives that foreground embodied experience and normative assumptions (Shapiro, 1999), while simultaneously striving to systematize political knowledge, particularly within Western academic traditions (Laitin, 1995).

It has been theorized in political scholarship that two dominant perspectives shape the classification of political studies. One emphasizes core subfields—such as political theory, institutions, behavior, and comparative politics—highlighting the institutional and societal dimensions of power (Goodin & Klingemann, 1996; Laitin, 1995; Roskin et al., 2016). This approach, institutionalized by bodies such as the American Political Science Association (APSA), offers a structured disciplinary framework. The second perspective prioritizes methodological pluralism, viewing political science as inherently interdisciplinary (Bevir & Rhodes, 2008; Lowndes et al., 2017), and encourages theoretical diversity and analytical flexibility to explore power, governance, and political meaning in more nuanced ways.

Arguably, this American-rooted sub-disciplinary classification has significantly influenced Thai political science since the 1960s, shaping academic structures and research trajectories (Sawasdee, 2016). This study adopts the framework proposed by Goodin and Klingemann (1996) and Laitin (1995), which are a seminal reference in political science, offering a systematic and widely recognized classification of the discipline. Its comprehensiveness and disciplinary authority make it an appropriate tool for mapping research developments in the Lower North, by providing standardized categories, the framework ensures analytical rigor and enables meaningful comparison with national and international trends. Most importantly, it aligns with the study's objectives by identifying thematic strengths and gaps—revealing, for instance, the dominance of electoral studies alongside the neglect of political economy and comparative politics—thereby guiding future research directions in a theoretically grounded way. The framework divides political science into nine subfields—including political theory, institutions, behavior, public policy, comparative politics, international relations, political economy, methodology, and political sociology—as the primary lens for classifying and analyzing the reviewed literature.

### Methods and Materials

This study employs a survey-based approach to systematically examine research trends and gaps in political studies related to Thailand's Lower North. The analysis focuses on studies that use the Lower North and its provinces as case studies, covering domestic and international publications from 1997 to 2024.



To ensure a comprehensive and systematic review, this study purposefully selected four major academic databases — Scopus, Sage Journals, ThaiJo, and the King Prajadhipok's Institute (KPI) database — based on their coverage, relevance, and accessibility:

1. Scopus was chosen as it is one of the most extensive international indexing databases, ensuring global visibility and enabling identification of peer-reviewed political science publications related to Thailand's Lower North.

2. Sage Journals was included because of its strong focus on political science, public administration, and governance studies, offering access to internationally recognized journals that frequently publish regional and comparative politics research.

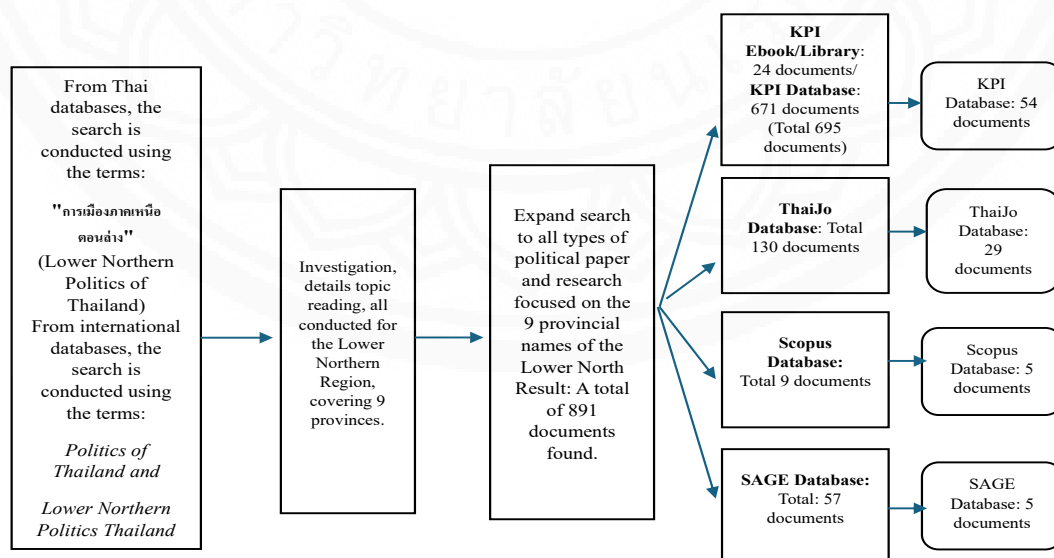
3. ThaiJo (Thai Journals Online) was selected as the most comprehensive repository of peer-reviewed Thai-language academic publications, crucial for capturing local scholarship that may not be indexed internationally but provides rich context for subnational political studies.

4. KPI Database (King Prajadhipok's Institute Political Database) was prioritized because it is the most specialized repository of Thai political science research, particularly case studies, reports, and analyses of provincial and regional politics — including many “gray literature” research reports that would otherwise be inaccessible.

The combination of these four databases thus ensured breadth (international and domestic coverage), depth (specialized focus on political studies), and inclusiveness (capturing both English and Thai scholarship). Together, they provide a representative foundation for mapping the state of political research on Thailand's Lower North.

The study employs keyword searches using terms such as ‘politics’ combined with individual province names to identify relevant studies across the nine provinces: Tak, Phichit, Nakhon Sawan, Uttaradit, Kamphaeng Phet, Uthai Thani, Phetchabun, Phitsanulok, and Sukhothai.

The collected literature undergoes a rigorous review process, with three independent researchers — specializing in political science and public administration — classifying and analyzing the content. This structured approach ensures methodological rigor, consistency, and accuracy in identifying research trends and gaps. The methodological framework is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Research Selection Process of Political Publications Regarding Thailand Lower North.

## Results

### The Development of Political Studies in the Lower North Over 27 Years (1997–2024)

The analysis of publications from the Lower North across four major academic databases identified a total of 695 works. However, a closer examination reveals that only 95 of these publications (13.67%) specifically focus on politics or political science. This relatively small proportion highlights the significant underrepresentation of political studies within the broader academic discourse on the region, underscoring the limited scholarly engagement with political issues in the Lower North over the study period.

### Distribution of Political Studies Across Databases

The distribution of political studies across the four databases reveals a dominance of domestic academic platforms. The KPI database accounts for the largest share of political studies, comprising 54.74% (52 articles). This is followed by ThaiJo, which includes 30.53% (29 articles). In contrast, international platforms are significantly underrepresented, with Scopus containing only 9.47% (9 articles) and Sage Journals hosting a mere 5.26% (5 articles). These findings indicate that political research on the Lower North remains largely confined to national academic discourse, with limited visibility in international publications.

### Trends and Fluctuations in Political Research Output

The growth of political studies in the Lower North has exhibited fluctuations over time, closely correlating with major political circumstances and shifts in Thailand. The analysis suggests that research output tends to increase in response to significant political events, particularly coups d'état, constitutional reforms, and national elections.

The highest concentration of political studies was recorded during 2014–2015, with 18 publications, coinciding with the period of heightened political activity following the 2014 coup. This was followed by 2022–2024, with 11 publications, and 2016–2017, which saw 10 publications. The periods of 2018–2019 and 2006–2007 each accounted for 9 published works. These trends suggest that political research in the Lower North is largely reactive, with scholars producing more studies in response to national political upheavals and transitions.

### Thematic Concentration of Political Studies

The analysis further reveals that political studies in Thailand's Lower North are heavily concentrated in a few thematic areas, with a predominant focus on political behavior. Nearly 49.5% of studies (47 papers) examine voter behavior, electoral movements, and national-level politicians, reflecting strong scholarly interest in voting patterns and democratic participation at the regional level.

The second most studied area is institutional politics (16.9%, or 16 papers), focusing on Thai political institutions, referendums, constitutional amendments, and independent bodies such as the Election Commission and Office of the Ombudsman. This reflects sustained academic attention to formal governance mechanisms in the region.

The third major category is public administration and policy implementation (14.7%, or 14 papers), analyzing local governance structures and policy execution at the provincial and municipal levels.

Additionally, political sociology (11.6%, or 11 papers) explores ethnic politics, community conflicts, and environmental issues, offering insights into the intersection of social dynamics and political structures in the Lower North.





However, significant research gaps persist. Only 3.2% (3 papers) focus on political economy, while comparative politics, international relations, and political methodologies remain severely underrepresented, each accounting for only one publication. This imbalance underscores the need for broader engagement with diverse political subfields to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the region's political landscape.

#### **Provincial Disparities in Political Research**

An analysis of political research in Lower North reveals notable disparities in the selection of case studies. Phitsanulok (24.21%) and Phetchabun (20.00%) are the most frequently studied provinces, likely due to their strategic location, historical significance, and political influence.

In the second tier, Tak (13.66%), Nakhon Sawan (12.63%), and Sukhothai (8.42%) receive moderate attention. However, several provinces remain understudied. Kamphaeng Phet (1.05%) has the fewest studies, while Uthai Thani (6.32%), Uttaradit (6.32%), and Phichit (7.32%) also receive limited academic focus.

This disproportionate emphasis on Phitsanulok and Phetchabun constrains the comprehensiveness of political research in the region.

### **Discussion**

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that existing scholarship on the Lower North has been disproportionately influenced by event-driven electoral studies. Such an orientation has resulted in a fragmented portrayal of the region's political dynamics and has left the structural dimensions of power insufficiently explored, as elaborated in the following discussion.

#### **Intensive Focus on Political Behavior: A Non-Relational Approach to Politics, Capital, Political Economy, and Local Dynamics**

The study of political dynamics in Thailand's Lower North has traditionally focused on provincial elections, voting behavior, and the broader socio-political factors influencing electoral outcomes. Scholars have primarily sought to explain voter motivations, mechanisms of political participation, and the impact of cultural and economic factors on electoral politics (Sawasdee, 2016). This sustained academic interest highlights the intricate relationship between local and national elections, as well as the strategic behavior of political actors navigating this evolving political landscape.

One major area of research investigates voter behavior, including decision-making processes and the socio-political contexts that influence electoral participation. This scholarship has highlighted the importance of local political networks, economic considerations, and historical voting patterns in shaping electoral outcomes. In parallel, another body of literature examines the strategies employed by politicians and political parties to secure electoral success. These studies explore campaign networks, resource mobilization, and alliance-building as key determinants of political competitiveness. Together, these strands of research contribute to a deeper understanding of both the electorate's behavior and the tactical maneuvering of political actors.

The significance of these studies extends beyond academic circles, informing policymakers, political analysts, and local administrators. By shedding light on the dynamics of political engagement, these studies provide valuable insights into governance and electoral strategy, particularly at the provincial level. This research can be categorized into two main groups: studies on electoral behavior and political movements, and analyses of local political elites and their networks.

The first group, largely supported by funding from the KPI, focuses on voting behavior and electoral movements. These studies aim to identify patterns of political participation, investigate the role of political parties, and analyze the key events that shape election outcomes. Notable works include Sangwijit (2005) and Moondech (2007) analyzed voting behavior in Phetchabun. While Yathale (2015) contributed insights into general elections in Tak, and Suwansantisuk (2007) explored referendum campaigns in Uttaradit. These studies collectively offer a comprehensive account of voter behavior and the evolving political landscape of the Lower North.

While the second major research category emphasizes local political elites, examining their backgrounds, political networks, and strategies employed to maintain political influence. Pioneering this approach, Chairaksa (2006) offered detailed insights into the careers and networks of influential politicians in Phitsanulok, while Rukhamate (2009) explored intersections between national political trends and ethnic minority influences in Tak Province. Subsequent scholarship by Wongsuwan (2015); Mhantarat (2015) and Soithong (2016) provided extensive analyses of shifting alliances and long-term strategies of elite families across Nakhon Sawan, Uthai Thani, and Phetchabun.

Beyond these two primary research categories, additional studies have examined localized political participation and power structures. For instance, Suksawas and Mayer (2016) analyzed the impact of economic and social factors—including gender and aging—on political engagement in Tak and Phichit. Lertritsirikul (2007) investigated the electoral defeat of the Khajornprasat family in Phichit's third constituency in 2005, attributing the loss to the government's strategic use of state power. Kedprathum (2009) and Boonsornand and Wongwatthanaphong (2021) explored the construction of local power bases and voter decision-making in Sukhothai.

#### **Identified Gaps in Behavioral Political Studies**

Despite extensive scholarship on political behavior in Thailand's Lower North, critical analytical gaps remain, limiting comprehensive insights into regional electoral dynamics and broader political transformations. First, existing research overly relies on descriptive case studies of electoral events, campaign strategies, and outcomes, without adequately integrating theoretical frameworks that link these events to larger socio-political and economic processes. This approach isolates elections, preventing identification of long-term structural patterns.

Second, studies frequently neglect systematic analysis of underlying forces—such as economic shifts, capital flows, and governance reforms—that fundamentally shape electoral behavior. Addressing these limitations requires a holistic framework, placing electoral politics within the broader political economy context. Such an approach will yield deeper theoretical understanding and illuminate the intricate relationships between elections, structural socio-economic changes, and governance dynamics in the Lower North.

#### **Examining Political Institutions in the Lower North: Interpersonal Dynamics and Gaps in Explanatory Frameworks**

Beyond electoral studies, research on institutional politics in Thailand's Lower North has increasingly emphasized governance structures, constitutional reform, and decentralization, driven by frequent political transitions since 2002. Scholars have explored public attitudes toward institutional reforms and analyzed shifting expectations in response to constitutional changes. Prominent studies have addressed electoral system challenges under the 1997 Constitution (Mohprasit, 2000), the roles of MPs and citizens during political reforms



(Phonphutthiphan, 2002), and institutional transformations between 2006 and 2013. While these contributions illustrate the evolving character of regional political institutions, significant gaps remain.

Firstly, existing research lacks in-depth institutional analyses that systematically examine the design and effectiveness of governance structures. Few studies offer actionable frameworks or comparative evaluations of Thailand's democratic reforms. Secondly, the literature remains predominantly descriptive, heavily relying on public opinion surveys that capture stakeholder perspectives (Klungphet & Bungchan, 2015; Phonphutthiphan, 2002) but lack critical assessments of institutional weaknesses or structural deficiencies. Thirdly, the methodological dominance of quantitative approaches has constrained analytical depth, emphasizing trend description over transformative critiques of governance and constitutional frameworks.

To address these limitations, future research must adopt broader methodological frameworks, incorporating comparative, qualitative, and theoretical analyses. Moving beyond quantitative descriptions toward critical evaluations of institutional effectiveness and democratic processes will enhance understanding of governance challenges. A holistic research approach that connects institutional reforms to broader socio-political transformations will provide more nuanced insights into the Lower North's political landscape, ultimately informing more robust governance models for the region.

#### **Public Administration and Policy Studies: Contemporary Political Research Lacking In-Depth Explanations**

Consistent with earlier findings, political research in Thailand's Lower North has increasingly emphasized empirical methodologies (Khianthongkul, 2016; Limmanee, 2000), with administrative studies emerging prominently since 1997, now constituting approximately 14.74% of all research. These studies primarily explore leadership dynamics, governance efficiency, and administrative challenges at local and provincial levels. For example, Phattraprasit (2001) analyzed decentralization strategies in Huadong Municipality, Phichit, whereas Hanyuth (2016) investigated knowledge management processes in Sukhothai Municipality, highlighting personal factors influencing organizational development. Promtao et al. (2015) assessed the preparedness of Subdistrict Administrative Organizations (SAOs) in Phetchabun for ASEAN integration, emphasizing administrative capacity and responsiveness.

Despite their empirical strengths, these studies exhibit significant analytical limitations. Most research remains descriptive, emphasizing policy implementation outcomes without sufficiently addressing causal mechanisms, institutional effectiveness, or policymaking processes. Quantitative methods dominate, capturing trends in governance and leadership structures (Sawetwan & Praneet, 2023; Promtao et al., 2015), yet frequently neglect deeper theoretical engagement or critical evaluations of administrative performance. Research questions commonly focus on administrative efficiency, policy readiness, and community participation (Kumpee, 2011), rarely integrating broader social and political contexts.

Addressing these constraints requires expanding analytical approaches beyond purely quantitative, descriptive frameworks. Future studies should incorporate causal analyses, qualitative comparative methods, and interdisciplinary perspectives. Integrating social and political dynamics with administrative practices will facilitate more comprehensive understandings of governance processes and outcomes, strengthening the theoretical and practical contributions of political scholarship in the Lower North.





### **Provincial Political Sociology: A Singular Effort to Understand Ethnic Politics and the Dynamics of Dam Conflicts**

Political sociology has emerged as a vibrant research field in Thailand's Lower North, spurred by the transformative political context following the 1997 Constitution, which broadened citizen rights and political engagement. Scholars have increasingly shifted beyond traditional electoral analyses toward broader socio-political dynamics, such as social movements, community activism, ethnic identity struggles, and environmental issues. Prominent themes include environmental resistance, illustrated by Chalermklarp's (2014) research on community opposition to the Mae Wong Dam, and Montha and Anuttarangoon's (2020) exploration of state-private sector tensions over environmental exploitation. Ethnic and minority politics represent another major focus: Piakhun (2017) examined hill tribes' adaptive strategies under socio-political pressures, while Srirak (2017) analyzed symbolic political spaces utilized by border groups, notably the Hmong, in asserting identity and agency.

Moreover, symbolic spaces related to gender, leadership, and historical legacies have garnered attention. Suebsakwong and Baird (2020) explored how Hmong communities navigate symbolic spaces shaped by the Communist Party of Thailand's historical influence and contemporary state-led development. Extending this, Baird and Yangcheepsutjarit (2022) investigated Hmong women's leadership and advocacy within these historical-political contexts. Significantly interdisciplinary, this research incorporates anthropology, sociology, geography, and advanced theoretical frameworks—including Lefebvre's political space theory, Soja's spatial trialectics, feminist geography, and social memory theory—deepening and enriching our understanding of political dynamics across the Lower North region.

#### **Phitsanulok and Phetchabun: Do They Still Represent the Political Landscape of the Lower North?**

This study reaffirms that Phitsanulok and Phetchabun remain the most significant provinces for political research in the Lower North due to their geographical, historical, and political prominence. Their higher number of constituencies and MPs, strong national political networks, diverse demographic composition, and presence of academic institutions specializing in political science make them focal points for political case studies.

Research in these provinces primarily centers on electoral behavior and political participation, with studies analyzing voter behavior, electoral strategies, and election competition since 2002. Notable contributions include Phonphutthiphan (2002); Sangwijit (2005) and Wongsatjachock (2023) focused on electoral participation behavior, while Thasunthorn (2024) explored citizenship and political engagement. These works provide critical insights into the region's electoral dynamics.

Another key research area involves the political history of national leaders. Chairaksa (2006); Soithong (2016) and Jarernpanit (2020) traced the trajectories of prominent politicians, illustrating how local leadership influences national politics. Additionally, studies on community conflicts and spatial politics have emerged, with Anurot et al. (2016) examining land and environmental conflict resolution, while Piakhun (2017) analyzed the political economy of hill tribe communities' adaptation strategies.

Despite this rich scholarship, critical gaps remain. Research on local political influence, ideological shifts, and grassroots movements is still limited, leaving key questions about how local politics shapes broader political transformations and intersects with everyday life largely unexplored.



## **Movement and Transition: State Shifts, Electoral Landscapes, and Skepticism Toward Local Politicians' Behavior**

The political landscape of Thailand's Lower North is deeply intertwined with broader national developments, reflecting and often shaping significant political transitions. Both the region's electorate and its political elites have actively influenced national trajectories, rendering it pivotal to understanding Thailand's political evolution. A review of political scholarship reveals three distinct periods of intensified academic interest, each aligning closely with major national political events.

The first and most prolific period (2015–2019) produced 28 studies, corresponding with the National Council for Peace and Order's (NCPO) governance under General Prayut Chan-o-cha. During this era, characterized by the implementation of the 2017 Constitution and restricted political activity, research predominantly examined constitutional reforms, authoritarian governance practices, and constrained electoral processes, culminating in the crucial 2019 general election—the first electoral contest following the 2014 military coup.

The second surge in political scholarship emerged between 2006 and 2009, following the coup that ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Under General Sonthi Boonyaratglin's Council for Democratic Reform, the subsequent introduction of the 2007 Constitution intensified Thailand's red–yellow political polarization. Seventeen studies from this period analyzed the impact of the coup, heightened political divisions, and evolving electoral strategies leading to the significant 2011 general election.

Most recently, between 2021 and 2023, the transition from military dominance to democratic contestation spurred renewed academic focus. Eleven studies explored increasing tensions between democratic and conservative factions, voter behavior, and the resurgence of progressive movements, setting the stage for Thailand's evolving post–authoritarian political dynamics and the highly consequential 2023 general election.

### **The Lower North: A Political Battleground**

A deeper examination of political scholarship on Thailand's Lower North also highlights two key insights, both underscoring the region's significant influence on national politics. First, there is a strong correlation between major national political events—such as constitutional reforms, referenda, and elections in 2007, 2011, 2019, and 2023—and increased academic interest in the region. Research during these periods primarily focuses on voter behavior, electoral strategies, and local political dynamics, demonstrating the Lower North's integral role within Thailand's broader political landscape.

Second, the Lower North has emerged as a pivotal electoral battleground, with its constituencies frequently influencing national government formation. Over the past two decades, shifting political allegiances and evolving voter preferences in the region have become critical indicators of national electoral trends. Prominent research institutions, particularly the King Prajadhipok's Institute (KPI), have significantly advanced scholarship on regional political behavior and local leadership, underscoring the strategic importance of the Lower North. Consequently, this region has transitioned from being merely a regional stronghold to a critical arena actively shaping Thailand's political trajectory, a role likely to intensify as the national political landscape continues to evolve.

### **Observations and Interpretations of Political Studies in the Lower North**

Analysis of related publications reveals that nearly half of all political research on the Lower North has concentrated on electoral studies. This dominance reflects a broader structural bias within Thai political science,

where funding bodies such as the King Prajadhipok's Institute have historically prioritized voter surveys and electoral behavior research. While such work has contributed valuable empirical insights, it has also encouraged an event-driven conception of regional politics that neglects deeper structural determinants of power. Local capital accumulation, bureaucratic networks, and the historical legacies of state centralization remain insufficiently theorized within this literature.

The comparative coding of thematic concentrations further underscores both quantitative imbalance and epistemological narrowness. Subfields such as political economy and comparative politics are notably underrepresented, despite their potential to illuminate how national development plans, capital flows, and global economic integration shape the Lower North's political trajectory. This relative absence has limited the capacity of existing scholarship to explain the enduring configurations of power and governance in the region. Recognizing these blind spots is therefore essential. Redirecting future research toward a broader set of subfields would help produce a more holistic and theoretically robust understanding of political change in the Lower North.

### Conclusion and Suggestions

This article analyzed the development of political science research on Thailand's Lower North between 1997 and 2024 and identified critical gaps constraining the field. The review of 695 publications confirms that despite the region's historical and strategic significance, it remains comparatively understudied and its scholarship disproportionately shaped by electoralism. Nearly half of all studies focus on voting behavior, candidate strategies, and electoral competition. While these contributions offer useful insights, their event-driven and descriptive nature has limited theoretical engagement with structural dynamics such as political economy, governance capacity, and long-term institutional transformation.

Research on political institutions and governance has expanded in response to constitutional reforms and political transitions but continues to rely heavily on surveys and public opinion data. Such approaches provide little critical evaluation of institutional effectiveness or policy outcomes. Similarly, administrative studies emphasize local bureaucratic processes but rarely examine accountability, reform, or systemic weaknesses. By contrast, emerging fields such as environmental struggles, social movements, and ethnic politics highlight valuable new perspectives, yet these are often shaped by international or NGO-driven agendas rather than fully integrated into Thai political science debates.

The review also reveals striking geographic imbalance. Phitsanulok and Phetchabun dominate case studies due to political prominence and research infrastructure, while provinces such as Kamphaeng Phet, Uthai Thani, and Uttaradit remain marginal. This imbalance reproduces center-periphery dynamics within knowledge production and narrows the evidentiary base for theorizing subnational politics.

The contribution of this study lies in diagnosing these epistemological biases, showing how Thai political science privileges electoral and descriptive approaches while neglecting political economy, comparative perspectives, and methodological pluralism. Addressing these limitations requires future research that 1) incorporates political economy and capital network analysis, 2) broadens provincial coverage through comparative designs, 3) diversifies methodologies with interpretive and historical approaches, and 4) develops policy-oriented institutional critiques. Advancing along these lines will reposition the Lower North from



a marginal electoral battleground to a critical site for theory-building on subnational governance, state-society relations, and political economy in Thailand and beyond.

### Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a grant from the NSRF via the Program Management Unit for Human Resources & Institutional Development, Research and Innovation (Grant Number B40G680013).

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