

Public Trust in Political Leadership During COVID-19 Pandemic in Thailand

Sakda Nasongsi

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University, Thailand

E-mail: sakda.n@nrru.ac.th

(Received: 9 August 2024, Revised: 12 November 2025, Accepted: 18 November 2025)

<https://doi.org/10.57260/csdj.2025.273182>

Abstract

This research aims to 1) study the desirable political leadership attributes that enable effective leaders to manage COVID-19 crises in Thailand, 2) survey and identify the level of public trust in 2 Thai political leaders. The prime minister and the minister of public health. The data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand between march – may 2021. The qualitative data was collected via semi-structured interviews with 20 persons; including university professors, politician, official servants, and analyzed by domain analysis and taxonomy. The quantitative data was collected by the online questionnaire distributed to 200 samplings; measured by means and standard deviation analysis. The research instrument was statistical analysis consisted of percentage, mean, standard deviation, t-test, One-way anova, least significance difference test and pearson product–moment correlation coefficient. The level of significance for statistical testing was 0.05. The reliability test was cronbach's alpha at 0.70. The research findings suggest that, to be an effective leader during a crisis, political leaders need to be: visionary; courageous; calm; inspirational; ethical; empathetic; authentic; integrity; decision maker and resilient. For aspect of levels of public trust in political leadership, the average of public trust in the prime minister (PM) was at moderate level, visionary, clam and inspirational characteristics were at the lowest level. The minister of public health was at the lowest level, political leader's integrity and visionary were slightly low. The implication of findings led to political policy-making about the public communication of politicians.

Keywords: Public trust, Political leadership, COVID-19

Introduction

The initial responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand was crucial to generate trust in the COVID-19 restrictions. The aim was to investigate the extent to which there was trust in the handling of the pandemic by Thai governments and public health authorities in the country. On 22 january 2020, the world health organization (WHO) briefed reporters about the emerging outbreak of a novel coronavirus, COVID-19, that had originated in China's Wuhan province in december of 2019. On january 30, WHO declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), and on march 11, a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health crisis without precedent in living memory, which is testing our collective capacity to respond" (OECD, 2020). It spreads across the globe. At the time of writing, the pandemic is ongoing and has affected over 227 countries and territories (Chen et al., 2020). The impact of COVID-19 in different countries has varied significantly due to factors including but not limited to governmental response, demographics,

and healthcare infrastructure. In February, the WHO released a strategic response plan for the coronavirus that aimed to limit transmission, care for patients, stop transmission from animals, learn how to fight the virus, communicate facts, counter misinformation, and minimize the social and economic consequences.

Thailand has been affected by COVID-19, like other countries in the Asian region at an early stage, and the first case was reported as early as mid-January 2020. Thailand's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been guided by the "Integrated Plan for Multilateral Cooperation for Safety and Mitigation of COVID-19", which was drafted by the Ministry of Public Health for the following objectives: 1) Reducing the chances of the virus transmission into Thailand, 2) Everyone in Thailand and Thai people abroad are safe from COVID-19, 3) Mitigating the health, economic, social impacts and increasing national security.

The Thai government provided daily updates on COVID-19 infections in Thailand via television and used the media to inform the citizens of new restrictions, safety precautions, and any other official news regarding the pandemic. Throughout the world warnings to "New Normal" have been issued. A number of countries (including Thailand) closed their borders; many airlines made a considerable reduction in their national and international flights; almost all sports events and competitions were cancelled or suspended; educational institutions were closed and applied the online-teaching and learning methods. The businesses and official government agencies deemed unessential were required to close and work from home. At the first stage of COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand, the complication of political communication, leadership of politicians and the vaccination distribution are the main problems which lead to the public trust of government.

The topic of public trust in government has become increasingly important as the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged many countries in the world, including Thailand. Until and unless the public trust the way their governments tackle the pandemic, the infections and deaths will stay high and continue to increase. If the public trust their governments, they will be more willing to support and comply with government's policy and regulation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Otherwise, noncompliance could result in serious consequences for the society such as the collapse of the healthcare system and social security. A lack of trust has serious consequences for the country. When people don't trust their government, they are more likely to opt out of voting and other types of civic participation. People who distrust the government are less likely to follow public health guidelines.

The outbreak of the pandemic is a challenge to both public healthcare capacity and trust in government. It is, therefore, extremely important to explore public trust and political leadership in the government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Public trust in government is a critical element for the successful functions of any level of government, whether it be local or state. Trust is the foundation upon which government organizations build legitimacy and credibility, and it is crucial for fostering effective governance. The study aims to answer the following questions: Do the Thais public trust their government during the COVID-19 pandemic? If so, what are the desirable political leadership attributes that enable effective leaders to manage COVID-19 crises in Thailand? Moreover, this aims to survey and identify the level of public trust in 2 Thai political leaders; The Prime Minister and The Minister of Public Health. These research findings were useful for general people, scholars and students, moreover, the research results can be beneficial for politicians, political parties or political leaders to perceive the levels of political trust and apply these to the political policy.

Theoretical background

Political leadership in crisis

Political leadership is necessary either because people are not capable of self-rule or necessary because they are capable of self-rule. The political leader must balance their values and political beliefs with their duty to fulfill the will of the people. Political leaders' actions will reflect that, ultimately, people will have an opportunity to reject their sovereignty through the ballot box. Political leaders have a moral duty to serve their constituents through upholding values, enacting legislation, and ensuring public safety (Kearns et al., 2019). Scholars have advanced different types of political leadership. For example, democratic political leadership honors the pure democratic traditions of collaborative decision-making and policymaking (Sørensen & Torfing, 2019). Vanguard political leadership refers to fringe political groups, usually consisting of intellectuals and activists, that work to overthrow the dominant groups (Marcy, 2020).

As the COVID-19 continues to spread, political leaders need to evaluate their disaster recovery and pandemic plans. This will help them more in preparing for and responding to challenges. Overall, leading through a crisis requires taking the long view, as opposed to manage the present. However, leaders need to recognize that the return to work should happen in stages, and pandemic management protocols should be reviewed and refined. To help turn disruptions into productive and proactive business operations, and to maximize the odds of success, a set of steps were suggested (EY Americas, 2020). These include:

1. Create a coronavirus crisis management plan, recognize the difference between traditional disruption and pandemic-related disruption.
2. Appoint a crisis management team with representatives from each business function with direct line to the CEO.
3. Establish communication plan for employees, customers, vendors, and the public.
4. Determine the potential impact of COVID-19 on disrupting your operations.

The main streams of research on political leadership in crisis focuses on empirically investigating four key aspects of political leaders' managing a crisis: 1) their abilities to prioritize needs, select a team of qualified crisis-management experts, and execute a crisis-management plan; 2) their willingness to coordinate international partners to assemble a collective crisis response; 3) their ability to sustain domestic political support during a crisis period; and 4) their use of charismatic language to help others cope with a crisis.

Public trust

Public trust in government during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a issued topic since 2020. Different dimensions of public trust in government during the pandemic have been explored. Trust in government is important to the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic because it enhances public cooperation with government's measures and pointed out that during crisis such as war and pandemic, trust and support for government increase as the result of the rally-around-the-flag effects. (Esaiaasson et al.,2021)

While the word "trust" can have many definitions and meanings, for this report, trust in government is defined as the public's perception of government based on expectations of how it should operate. Trust is the public's belief that the federal system and the politicians who lead or oversee it are "responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of scrutiny. Trust is a multidimensional concept, which is approached from different disciplines and perspectives (Stern & Baird, 2015). Trust is also viewed as social capital, which is crucial in personal, occupational, and social domains (Szkudlarek & Biglieri, 2016). Trust is associated with distrust, risks, and vulnerabilities. Hawley (2012) argued that trust is closely related to "reliability, predictability, expectation, cooperation, goodwill" and at the same time "distrust, insincerity, conspiracy, betrayal, and incompetence."

Trust and confidence in government are important for the capacity of a society to organise an effective collective response to an epidemic. Trust in government is pivotal to the implementation of policies against the COVID-19 pandemic. Bavel et al. (2020) stated that higher level of trust in government results in more compliance with health policies such as ban on gatherings. Public trust in government during the COVID-19 pandemic is required for “obtaining successful results of economic and social stimulus policies and providing full effect to slow down the rate of outbreaks.” It is, therefore, worthwhile to explore how much the public trust the government and whether public trust is translated into support and compliance with government’s policy and regulations.

Research Objective

1. To explore the Critical Political Leadership Qualities for Managing the COVID-19 Crisis in Thailand
2. To assess and recognize the extent of public trust of two Thai political leaders ; The Prime Minister and The Minister of Public Health.

Methodology

The qualitative data was collected via semi-structured interviews with 20 persons; including 10 university professors, 5 politicians and 5 official servants. The sample question ; “In your point of views, what are the effective political leadership in COVID-19 crisis?” The gathered data was analyzed by domain analysis and taxonomy methods. The content validity was measured by the Content Validity Index: CVI method.

The quantitative data was collected by the online questionnaire distributed to 200 samples using Stratified Random Sampling technique. To measure the level of public trust of 2 political leaders in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the respondents were requested to identify their level of trust in political leaders by the questionnaire of a 5-point Likert scale with 1 as “very low” and 5 as “very high”.

4.50 – 5.00 Highest

3.50 – 4.49 High

2.50 – 3.49 Moderate

1.50 – 2.49 Low

1.00 – 1.49 Lowest

The 10 aspects of political leadership are in visionary; courageous; calm; inspirational; ethical; empathetic; authentic; integrity; decision maker and resilient. The data was measured by means and standard deviation analysis. and the reliability of questionnaires was tested by Cronbach’s Alpha at 0.70.

Results

Political leadership

Based on the analysis of semi-structure interview, the political leadership characteristics are shown in Figure 1.



Figure1 Political leadership characteristics

In Figure 1, to sum up, the 10 effective political leadership characteristics of political leaders (PM and MPH) are visionary; courageous; calm; inspirational; ethical; empathetic; authentic; integrity; decision maker and resilient. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a country's performance was closely tied to the level of political trust among its citizens. Areas with higher trust experienced lower rates of infection and fatalities before vaccines became available. However, the crisis also led to a decline in trust towards leaders.

Level of Public Trust in Political Leadership

Table 1 Level of Political Trust in Political Leaders in COVID-19 Pandemic

Characteristics of Political leadership	Prime Minister (PM)			Minister of Public Health (MPH)		
	Mean	S.D.	Level	Mean	S.D.	Level
Visionary (Setting a common goal or purpose through innovation and collaboration.)	1.39	0.91	Lowest	1.42	0.39	Lowest
Courageous (Strength, creativity, intellect and embracing uncertainty.)	3.50	1.20	Moderate	2.12	1.01	Low
Calm (Fueled by emotions but not controlled by them. Under pressure, calm leadership is focused and present, it does not panic.)	1.31	0.87	Lowest	1.49	0.93	Lowest
Inspirational (The ability to be a positive influence on those around you and motivate others toward success.)	1.44	0.92	Lowest	1.37	1.07	Lowest
Ethical (Solving problems in a way that is fair to everyone.)	2.91	1.03	Low	1.39	0.98	Lowest
Empathetic (Genuine interest in his/her team members' lives.)	2.73	1.10	Low	1.41	0.69	Lowest
Integrity (Having strong moral principles.)	3.51	1.37	High	1.35	0.91	Lowest
Decision maker (Ability to assess a situation and determine how the organization may proceed.)	2.94	0.98	Moderate	2.10	1.24	Low
Resilient (Ability to see failures as minor setbacks.)	3.02	1.04	Moderate	1.70	1.03	Low
Total	2.82	1.73	Moderate	1.46	1.34	Lowest

Table 1 shows that the level of public trust in The Prime Minister (PM) was at moderate level (mean = 2.82, S.D.=1.73), visionary, clam and inspirational characteristics were at the lowest level. The aspect of integrity was the only aspect which considered high. The Minister of Public Health (MPH) was at the average lowest level (mean = 1.46, S.D.=1.34). The aspect of courageous, decision making and resilient were measured as low level.

Discussions

The world was hit by the historic COVID-19 epidemic in early 2020. One notable aspect of this pandemic is the rise in popular confidence in political leaders in many democracies. At least in the early stages of the epidemic, trust in the government, democracy, and political figures like presidents and prime ministers rose, according to a number of study groups. Based on the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand, this research aimed to analyse the importance of citizens' evaluations of the executive's performance in explaining the increase in trust in the political leaders the emergence of the pandemic. In particular, investigated the importance of cognitive factors, such as citizens' assessments of the economic performance and of the policy response to the crisis, compared to psychological factors, such as concern and fear regarding the COVID-19 disease.

Public trust in government is important in time of crisis, especially in the current COVID-19 pandemic the worst health crisis in the twenty-first century. Trust in government is the driver for public support and compliance with government's policy and regulation, which is essential for successful pandemic management. Effective policy communication and implementation lead to public trust in government meanwhile trust in government results in citizens' support for and compliance with government's policy. Studies show that higher political trust is associated with more compliance in general (VanDeth 2017), and higher effectiveness of stringency policies in the case of COVID-19 (Chen et al. 2020). Our study provides an overview of the perception of government actions during the COVID-19 pandemic in March and April 2020 around the world. The results show a large heterogeneity between countries, found that, on average, stronger and faster stringency of anti-pandemic measures and a smaller number of deaths are positively associated with trust in the governments' handling of the pandemic. The findings of public trust in this study shows that in period of pandemic the public trust in main political leaders (PM and MPH) slightly low-lowest. That situation leads Thailand's response to COVID-19 has been quite ineffective in limiting the spread of the disease, it falls short at being able to address the multiple dimensions of the crisis, such as the economic and social impacts.

Conclusion and suggestions

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the need for effective leadership in all sectors, particularly in politics. Politicians at different levels of government have a significant role in leading their communities, particularly during a crisis. Crisis leadership is essential, particularly given the implications on public wellbeing. Lack of trust in government can be a circular, self-reinforcing phenomenon: poor performance leads to deeper distrust, in turn leaving government in the hands of those with the least respect for it. Despite extensive research on leadership, there is limited research on what it takes to be a political leader during a crisis.

Suggestions for the further study

The pandemic of COVID-19 has barred Thailand from developing growth and resulted Thailand in its inefficient development in many areas. The public trust is a key factor of problem-solving. According to the research findings, the suggestion about other supplementary or further research to study about the public trust and political leadership are ;

1. The researcher conducted this research during the two months of a global pandemic in Thailand (March – May 2021). Extending the time horizon to include the entirety of the pandemic could help refine lessons learned. It will be possible to map some leaders' behaviors to outcomes such as flattening the curve, hospitalization rates, peak contraction rates, and mortality rates.

2. More studies are needed to investigate the extent to which this result can be generalised to different crisis scenarios and study the public trust in the Post-COVID-19 pandemic. The findings should be analyzed and compared in order to find out the best practice of the politicians.

3. This study found that a single leadership theory is unlikely to capture all the attributes necessary to lead during a crisis – instead, the essential attributes are likely to be associated with different leadership theories. This suggests the need for complementary leadership theories to understand crisis leadership.

Suggestions for the Proposed policy

1. Government should promote public of conscience and social value of public trust
2. Government should urge to build accountability, transparency and political participation for people to participate in COVID-19 solving.

New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

This study also revealed that the political leader-role significantly influenced their political trust. Furthermore, political trust had significant, positive influences on both internal and external political efficacies. Trust in the government (political leaders) inspired the approval and confidence in their own ability to engage more in political participation; trust in government led to recognize government's responses to public demands more. Trust and confidence in government play a crucial role in how effectively a society can respond collectively to an epidemic. However, facing such a crisis can also undermine individuals' trust in political institutions and leaders, which can have negative consequences for this collective effort. Our research indicates that this detrimental effect is significant and lasting.

References

- Bavel, J. J. V., Baicker, K., Boggio, P. S., Capraro, V., Cichocka, A., Cikara, M., Crockett, M. J., Crum, A. J., Douglas, K. M., Druckman, J. N., Drury, J., Dube, O., Ellemers, N., Finkel, E. J., Fowler, J. H., Gelfand, M., Han, S., Haslam, S. A., Jetten, J., Kitayama, S., Mobbs, D., Napper, L. E., Packer, D. J., Pennycook, G., Peters, E., . Petty, R. E., Rand, D. G., Reicher, S. D., Schnall, S., Shariff, A., Skitka, L. J., Smith, S. S., Sunstein, C. R., Tabri, N., Tucker, J. A., Linden, S. V. D., Lange, P. V., Weeden, K. A., Wohl, M. J. A., Zaki, J., Zion, S. R., & Wille, R. (2020). Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4, 460–471. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0884-z>
- Chen, D., Rieger, M. O., Peng, D., & Wang, M. (2020), Institutional and cultural determinants of proactivity and speed of government responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Humanities and social sciences communications*, 8(1), 1-9. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-021-00844-4>
- Esaiasson, P., Sohlberg, J., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2021). How the coronavirus crisis effects citizen trust in institutions and in unknown others: Evidence from 'the Swedish experiment.' *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(3), 748–760. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12419>
- EY Americas. (2020). *COVID-19 and the pandemic planning: How companies should respond*. <https://www.mcguinnessinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/EY-2020.pdf>
- Hawley, K. (2012). *Trust: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

- Kearns, K., Alexander, C., Duane, M., Gardner, E., Morse, E., & McShane, L. (2019). Leadership in a crisis. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 25(4), 542–557.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2019.1606623>
- Marcy, R. T. (2020). Leadership of socio-political vanguards: A review and future directions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 31(1), 101372.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101372>
- OECD Coronavirus (COVID-19). (2020). *Joint Actions to Win the War*.
<https://www.oecd.org/about/secretarygeneral/Coronavirus-COVID-19-Joint-actions-to-win-the-war.pdf>
- Sørensen, E., & Torfing, J. (2019). Designing institutional platforms and arenas for interactive political leadership. *Public Management Review*, 21(10), 1443– 1463.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2018.1559342>
- Stern, M. J., & Baird, T. D. (2015). Trust ecology and the resilience of natural resource management institutions. *Ecology and Society*, 20(2).
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26270214>
- Szkudlarek, P., & Biglieri, J. (2016). Trust as an element of social capital: Evidence from a survey of Polish and Spanish students. *Journal of International Studies*, 9(1), 252–264. <https://doi.org/10.14254/2071-8330.2016/9-1/19>
- VanDeth, J. W. (2017). *Compliance, trust and norms of citizenship*. In Zmerli, S., & van der Meer, T. W. G. (eds.), *Handbook on Political Trust*. Edward Elgar Publishing, chapter 13 (pp. 212–227).
- WHO. (2020). *Statement on the second meeting of the international health regulations (2005) emergency committee regarding the outbreak of novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV)*. World Health Organization: Press briefing.