

The Covid-19 Digital Vote-Canvassing Networks in The 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election

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Abstract

The 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign was the first Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign in nine years for Bangkok to hold a local election, in which candidates have to contest for Bangkok governorship under the global COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election campaign, the COVID-19 measures included the restriction of mass gatherings, the imposing of social distancing, the wearing of surgical masks in indoor and outdoor areas while campaigning and having to quarantine once infected with COVID-19. The objective of this research is to explore the various ways in which COVID-19 measures have impacted the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election. The methodology used in this research includes semi-structured interviews with authorities, candidates and campaign staff of the election, observation of candidates' images and video clips posted on candidates' social networking and candidates' printed election campaign materials. This paper argues that COVID-19 measures disrupted the democratic practice in the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election and the COVID-19 measures have been significantly integrated into candidate's digital vote-canvassing network, offering a hybrid election campaign where candidates seek various ways to establish and develop their relationship with followers.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Digital Vote-Canvassing Network, Political Public Relations, 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election Campaign

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Introduction

The 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign was the first Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign where candidates contested for Bangkok governorship under the global COVID-19 pandemic measures. Ever since Thailand declared its first COVID-19 case at the beginning of January 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020), various COVID-19 measures, such as social distancing, wearing of surgical masks in indoor and outdoor areas and hand hygiene were applied (Rajatanavin, Tuangratananon, Suphanchaimat, & Tangcharoensathien, 2021). Moreover, restrictions in mass gatherings, quarantine and self-isolation have been imposed on Thai people's lifestyle, creating a "new normal" life, which many activities have to adapt from onsite to online communication platforms to reduce face-to-face contact and safeguard people from being infected with COVID-19. There was no exception for the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign to follow the COVID-19 measures, which significantly influenced the candidate's digital vote-canvassing network (*hua khanaen bam di ci thal*) and political public relations work on candidates' campaigns, limiting candidates' election campaign operation. On the other hand, it could be said that with the developmental use of social networking sites, they have been an alternative and additional platform of communication for candidates to operate their election campaigns during COVID-19. To comprehend the consequences of COVID-19 measures, the objective of this research is to explore how COVID-19 measures have impacted the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election.

Concerning the question of whether it was possible to hold elections safely and democratically during the COVID-19 pandemic, Birch et al. (2020) concluded that it was possible to have "safe and fair" elections in most contexts. With reference to other democratic countries, the COVID-19 pandemic affected democratic activities in various ways. According to Landman and Splendore (2020), the COVID-19 virus could be an obstacle for eligible voters to come to the poll to cast their votes, affecting the overall voter turnout, which is a significant issue as voter turnout is considered a prominent factor supporting the legitimacy of an election. Also, voter turnout also provides electoral orders to leaders and acts as an indicator that reflects the strength of the democracy of a country in general. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic might lead to postponing election activities, depending on the regime type, which could increase political uncertainty and undermine the rule of law. Lastly, Landman and Splendore (2020) mention that the different elements in the electoral cycle may be affected, and the voting operations on election day and campaigns in the run-up to an election can be disrupted during to COVID-19 pandemic. As for countries that held elections during the COVID-19 pandemic, Habibi (2021) concluded with a slogan: 'Safe society, safe political life', meaning that the COVID-19 pandemic could be seen as a severe threat to the organisers of democracy as the process of leadership succession in a country or the process of filling in parliamentary institutions in elections has the potential to be hampered by a pandemic (Habibi, 2021, pp. 16-23). Having conducted 32 interviews with leading scholars working on different aspects of democracy, Afsahi, Beausoleil, Dean, Ercan, and Gagnon (2020) found

that COVID-19 had weaken effects on already endangered democratic institutions, shown other possibilities for democratic countries in the state of emergency, has amplified the inequalities and injustices within democracies, demonstrated the need for institutional infrastructure for prolonged solidarity and COVID-19 had highlighted the predominance of the nation-state and its limitation. Thus, as for the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign, it is very likely that COVID-19 has impacted democratic activities in one way or another.

Limited research has been done on how COVID-19 measures impacted the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election. Being the first Bangkok Gubernatorial election where candidates campaigned under the COVID-19 measures, the objective of this research is to explore the various ways in which COVID-19 measures had impacted the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election, with a particular focus on candidate's campaign image, internal management and operation of campaign, and voter turnout. The findings in this research contribute to the growing literature on the digital vote-canvassing network and political public relations work on social network sites in the context of the Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign.

Background knowledge of the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election

Bangkok is the capital of Thailand. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) is the local government of Bangkok, composed of two branches, i.e. the executive or the Governor of Bangkok

and the legislative or Bangkok Metropolitan Council. The Bangkok Governor is the head of the local government of Bangkok and is also the chief of the BMA. The roles of BMA include formulating and implementing policies to solve various problems in Bangkok, which tend to include transportation, waste management, security and environmental issues. Before the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election, Chalempalanupap (2022) mentioned, 'the upcoming elections in Bangkok will have significant implications on national politics, and vice versa' (Chalempalanupap, 2022, p. 8). In forecasting the result of the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election, Chlempalanupap also mentioned that every Bangkok Governor needs the backing of the prime minister and the interior minister to proceed with their work, which such support is significant when dealing with issues such as public security and seeking extra funding to handle with emergency issues like COVID-19 pandemic or improving Bangkok traffic issues. The latter requires the cooperation between the Bangkok governor and the traffic police, which the prime minister was supervising at the time of the election. Thus, the prime minister and Bangkok governor must be able to collaborate and cooperate.

The first Bangkok Gubernatorial election occurred in the year 1975. From 1975 until 2022, there have been 10 Bangkok Gubernatorial elections. Out of the past 16 Bangkok Governors, seven were elected and nine were appointed, with the Democrat Party being the political party that won the most Bangkok Gubernatorial elections (BBC News Thai, 2022b). Moreover, the 2013 Bangkok Gubernatorial election ended with 63.98% voter turnout, the highest among the past Bangkok Gubernatorial elections (BBC News

Thai, 2022b). According to Nukulwatanavichai (2017), in the 2013 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign, both the Democrat Party and Phue Thai Party applied political marketing concepts significantly. Still, the political communication process was different, which means that the Democrat Party was using more of a negative campaign strategy to discredit the opponents in the final phase of the election campaign. The Phue Thai Party avoided such an approach as it may incur against its party. Hence, the emphasis of the Phue Thai Party campaign was more towards the policies. However, since the Bangkok Gubernatorial election in 2013, there has not been a Bangkok Gubernatorial election until 2022.

A full term for a Bangkok Governor to perform his/her duties is supposed to be four years from the last election date (*Phraratchabanyat Rabiap Borihan Ratchakan Krungthepmahanakhon Phoso 2518 (In Thai) [Bangkok Metropolitan Administration Act A.D. 1975], 1975*), which means that there should be a Bangkok Gubernatorial election every four years. The Bangkok Gubernatorial election on 22 May 2022 was the first gubernatorial election in nine years since the 2014 *coup* had “halted” the election (Phoborisut, 2022). However, no source has confirmed that part of the cause for the nine-year gap (from 2013 to 2022) of not having the Bangkok Gubernatorial election was due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The delay was more towards the decision of the Prime Minister of Thailand, General Prayut Chan-ocha.

According to Chalempalanupap (2022), due to suspicion of corruption, the two-term winning Bangkok Governor, Mom Rajawongse Sukhumbhand Paribatra from the Democrat Party, was suspended by the National

Council for Peace and Order by the Prime Minister in 2016. The Prime Minister appointed Police General Asawin Kwanmuang to succeed Mom Rajawongse Sukhumbhand. However, with the 2014 *coup d'état*, the regular Bangkok Gubernatorial election was delayed. Then, in late 2021, the Prime Minister announced that the next Bangkok Gubernatorial election would be held when ready and should be held by mid-2022, assuring that he did not intend to buy time (Prachachat, 2021). Then, on 25 March 2022, the Election Commission of Thailand announced a Bangkok Gubernatorial election to be held on 22 May 2022 (BBC News Thai, 2022c). Candidates were allowed to register from 31 March to 4 April 2022, giving them slightly less than two months to proceed with their official election campaign.

Limited research has been done about the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election campaign. In Wongsuwan, Jemsittiparsert, Tokeaw, and Boonsiri (2022) study on the news consumption behaviour of voters in the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election, the primary source of information for voters to follow relevant news and information is social media, which was strategic and effective channel of communication to reach the candidate's target group, while radio and print media were the lowest popularity. In another research about Bangkok people's opinions towards the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election and Councilors, the polls conducted by Chatburanontachai, Suksermsongchai, Yongvongphaiboon, Meerak, and Yodkeeree (2022) and colleagues found that in terms of the factors affecting the voting behaviour in the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election, political stream at the national politics and the policies that candidates offered, had an impact on which candidate the sample voted for. In addition, in

the study on developing the legal measures for the Bangkok gubernatorial election for disable people, analysed in the context of the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election, Sarnnoi and Phonrattanikkun (2022) argues that the Local Election Act or the Local Election Council B.E. 2019 did not support or facilitate disable people with physical challenges with come to the poll. As there were different types of disabled voters, requiring different kinds of support, the researchers suggest improving the legal measures and taking into consideration of disable people with physical challenges coming to the polls. For example, there could be fingerprint scanner for registration, training provided to poll staff in understanding disable people's needs, and transportation arrangements provided for disabled people to come to the poll. Thus, to date, not much has been written to date about the impact of COVID-19 measures on digital vote-canvassing networks in the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election.

Conceptualizing the impact of COVID-19 on political public relations work and digital vote-canvassing network.

Regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic, the period of the election campaign has always been a fundamental part of political culture in Thai elections as candidates and political parties have the opportunity to develop their image, introduce themselves, including their background and profile, their policies and establish relationships with voters through different methods of election campaign (Chantomvong, 1993; Nanthawarophat, 2006; Sotanasathien, 2002). Specifically,

the long-awaited 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election was another significant election in Thai local politics for Bangkokians to choose their Bangkok Governor, making political public relations work matters in the election campaign.

Political public relations, by definition, is the management of political organisations in disseminating political messages and constructing political images through 'free media', which comprises four activities: image management, information management, internal management and media management (McNair, 2011). In a classic study of news coverage of presidential elections in the United States from 1992-2004, Grabe and Bucy (2009) identified three types of visual images of candidates that media would frame candidate's campaign: ideal candidate, populist campaigners, sure losers.

According to Grabe and Bucy (2009), the **ideal candidate** image constitutes an image that reflects the quality of the candidate, which could be further identified as statesmanship and compassion. An image of statesmanship shows the candidate's 'authority, power, and control' (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 213) and such an image could be a juxtaposition of the candidate to a flag and intellectual peers endorsing a candidate. On the other hand, a compassionate image represents the candidate's sympathy or kindness while interacting with voters. Regarding the **populist campaigner** image, such image frames candidates as 'ordinary people', which further consists of mass appeal and ordinariness. Mass appeal reflects the candidate's popularity by having large crowds supporting or surrounding the candidate. At the same time, the ordinariness theme portrays the candidate as having a casual look, for example, wearing casual

clothes and participating in easy-going activities. Lastly, the **sure loser** image shows a candidate having the chance to lose in the election, which could be seen from candidates' facial expressions or having a significant number of empty seats in the audience while the candidate is delivering a campaign speech or having voters showing negative messages to attack candidates' campaign.

When applying Grabe and Bucy's framework to analyse a candidate's campaign on social networking sites, Pratheepwatanawong's findings from the multimodal discourse analysis of candidates' Facebook page in the 2013 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign supports Goodnow's conclusions that the 'ideal candidate' and 'populist campaigner' frames were important as candidates attempted to show different positive images and signs having the potential to win the election (Pratheepwatanawong, 2017). However, candidates would not select the 'sure loser' images to post on their social networking accounts to prevent any weak image from disrupting their campaign. However, concerning COVID-19 measures imposed during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign, there might be further limitations in conceptualising visual images according to how previous research had been done.

The digital vote-canvassing network was developed from literature on traditional vote-canvassing networks in Thai political culture (Chattharakul, 2010; Laothamatas, 1996), spreadable media (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) and the two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), which were also based on social networking sites features that Baym (2010) and Kent (2010) identified. The digital vote-canvassing network is an advancement in

understanding political public relations work in Thai election campaigns ever since the 2013 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign (Pratheepwatanawong, 2017), where vote-canvassing systems convert to be 'digital' when a candidate's public relations personnel's roles become core vote-canvassers of the network, who played a fundamental role in managing and transmitting campaign messages on the candidate's social networking page on behalf of the candidate, while candidate's followers acted as the outer layer of the digital vote-canvassers by interacting and spreading the candidate's campaign content to their networks, which enable more users of the social networking sites, who are connected to candidates' social networking sites page directly or indirectly, to engage and share campaign message to the outer layer of the digital vote-canvassing network.

Consequently, the management of political public relations work on a candidate's digital vote-canvassing network through information management, image management, internal management and media management, adapted from McNair (2011), established and developed a direct, informal, individualistic and close relationship between the candidate and followers to the extent that followers could engage with the candidate's campaign throughout the election campaign. In the Thai political culture of the election campaign, the candidate's image is fundamental for the follower to recognise and distinguish the candidate from another competitor (Chantomvong, 1993; Nanthawarophat, 2006; Sotanasathien, 2002). Thus, concerning COVID-19 pandemic and measures, it is likely that candidates of the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign might have limitations in establishing and developing their image according to the three types of visual image that Grabe and Bucy (2009) outlined and

Pratheepwatanawong (2017) studied. Thus, it is essential to analyse how the COVID-19 measures impacted candidates' image management on the digital vote-canvassing network during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign.

Data Collection

This research used semi-structured interviews to explore the impact that COVID-19 had on the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election. With reference to the research objectives, this research used purposive sampling (Sharma, 2017) to select and contact potential informants who would be interested and willing to share knowledge and information about the issues relating to COVID-19 and the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election. Interviewees in this research include authorities associated with this issue, candidates of the election, campaign staff, campaign managers and politicians related to candidates' campaigns. The researcher directly contacted all the candidates of the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election via email, Facebook messenger direct message or post mail, by attaching an invitation letter to invite potential interviewees to participate in this study, the detailed research information that the potential interviewees need to know about this research, consent form and an outline of the semi-structured interview questions.

In addition, this research used observation study to randomly observed candidates' images and video clips posted on candidates' social networking pages throughout the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election campaign to do a deeper analysis of candidates' image management and internal management. Moreover, this research randomly observed candidates' printed election campaign materials, such as brochures, billboards, and

name cards, distributed during the election campaign. The observation of candidates' images on digital media and hardcopy printouts was done throughout the election campaign, based on how the COVID-19 measures affect candidates' images and candidates' interaction with voters of the election.

In terms of research ethics, the Office of the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects: The Second Allied Academic Group in Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine and Applied Arts approved this research before it was conducted. The research project number is 650107, and the COA number is 131/66.

Based on the interviews conducted in this research and the observation study done on candidates' images during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election campaign, this research coded the interview transcripts based on how the different COVID-19 measures affect the way in which candidates' election campaign portray their images and operate their election campaign. In addition, there were additional findings on how COVID-19 could have affected the election campaign rules and which authorities were responsible in regulation the election campaign with issues related to COVID-19.

Results and analysis: Operating the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election campaign under COVID-19 measures

The 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election campaign occurred two and a half years after the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization, n.d). By the time candidates of the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election

registered with Election Commission for the election, there were a total of 174,291 people infected with COVID-19 in Thailand for that week, making an accumulation of 1,279,830 people in Thailand infected with COVID-19, while the mortality rate was 553 people for that week, causing an accumulation of 24,715 people passing away due to COVID-19 in Thailand (Ministry of Public Health Thailand, 2022).

Based on the data collected in this research, this section discusses the authorities' responsibilities in regulating and monitoring COVID-19 during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign in Bangkok. Then, this section assesses how the COVID-19 measures impacted candidates' political public relations work including the way in which social distancing measure was a challenge to developing mass appeal images, the way in which the wearing of surgical masks affected candidates' campaign identity, the way in which COVID-19 infection challenged candidates' internal campaign management, and finally, the way in which voters being infected with COVID-19 during the election campaign could impact voter turnout and the mandatory voting law.

Authorities' responsibilities' in regulating and monitoring COVID-19 and the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election campaign

On 12 March 2020, Thailand established the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA), which managed the issues of national COVID-19 response. CCSA constitutes of top-level administrators from all ministries and CCSA was established and chaired by the Prime Minister of Thailand (Tangcharoensathien, 2020). However, one of the missions of the Election Commission of Thailand is to “manage an election and

referendum as well as conduct investigation and prosecution to proceed in an honest, transparent, and fair manner” (Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, n.d). Thus, it could be said that CCSA and the Election Commission played a different role in the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign under the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the interviews conducted with representatives from the Ministry of Public Health and Election Commission of Thailand about whether the monitoring of COVID-19 was part of regulating the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign, it was found that before the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign, the Election Commission had discussed with the Ministry of Public Health about the COVID-19 measures that should be imposed during the election campaign. In terms of regulating and monitoring COVID-19, the representative from the Ministry of Public Health said:

‘The Ministry of Public Health was accountable for regulating and monitoring COVID-19 in Thailand, except for Bangkok, which was responsible by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration. During the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign, Police General Asawin Kwanmuang was still the Bangkok Governor. He was also the incumbent in the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign. The Ministry of Public Health provided Bangkok Metropolitan Administration with the guidelines and directions on monitoring COVID-19 in Bangkok, in which the Ministry of Public Health gained positive co-operation from the Bangkok

Metropolitan Administration in regulating and monitoring COVID-19.'

Dr. Rungrueng Kitphati, MD, FETP,
Ministry of Public Health

Moreover, the representative from Election Commission of Thailand said:

'The Election Commission ever considered having election campaign laws that constitute COVID-19 regulation as part of monitoring COVID-19 during the election campaign. However, as the Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration already has its law to monitor COVID-19 in the country, election campaign rules for the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign did not constitute of regulations related to COVID-19.'

A representative from the Election Commission of Thailand

The Ministry of Public Health and the Election Commission had defined their roles and responsibilities in monitoring and regulating COVID-19 and the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign, respectively. Although the duties of monitoring and regulating COVID-19 and the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign had overlapped, there was not much evidence showing that the two authorities collaborated. Still, they were more independent with the issues for which they were responsible.

Social distancing measure as a challenge to developing mass appeal images

Social distancing rules have been imposed in Thailand during the COVID-19 pandemic to minimise the chance of people being infected by COVID-19 through close contact. However, concerning the Thai political culture of election campaigns, mass appeal images that Grabe and Bucy (2009) outlined, the gathering of voters to meet a candidate during the election campaign is a familiar image, especially for candidates who were famous and managed to gain a significant amount of support during the election campaign (Chantornvong, 1993; Nanthawarophat, 2006; Sotanasathien, 2002). Consequently, it was very likely to see crowds of people surrounding the candidates during onsite campaigning with candidate greetings, interacting or having close contact with their supporters, which can lead to a more infectious rate of COVID-19. With reference to the boundaries of social distancing rules imposed during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign, this raises the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic affects a candidate's mass appeal image.

The representative from the Ministry of Public Health said:

'The Ministry of Public Health had asked the election candidates to collaborate to reduce mass gatherings during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign.'

Dr. Rungrueng Kitphati, MD, FETP,
Ministry of Public Health

The social distancing rule contradicts with mass appeal images, which means that social distancing could hardly exist in developing a candidate's mass appeal image. With reference to the Ministry of Public Health, for social distancing rules to work, collaboration from people is required to avoid close contact. However, it was unclear how many people were allowed to be together in one place and at a particular time during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign. Furthermore, there were still continuous images of candidates and supporters taking photographs with each other using selfie shots, greeting and establishing relationships through handshakes and *wai*, without social distancing. Thus, images of physical closeness between candidates and supporters could still be seen during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign.

The construction of mass appeal images as part of the Thai political culture of election campaigns remains fundamental regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering that it was the first Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign operated under the COVID-19 pandemic, the election campaign rules remain significant in regulating and monitoring the election campaign. At the same time, COVID-19 measures of social distancing did impact political public relations work and mass appeal images, which were all fundamental in safeguarding candidates and voters from being infected with COVID-19. The Ministry of Public Health has done its role to ask candidates of the election for collaboration to reduce mass gatherings during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign. With further reference to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic had remained in Bangkok people's

lives for the past 2.5 years before the election, social distancing seems more of a personal choice for supporters to choose whether to attend a candidate's campaign speech or get close to the candidate for photo-taking.

Alternatively, with digital vote-canvassing networks on social networking sites that allow supporters to regularly develop their networks of disseminating political information or opinion and storing campaign information, supporters can consume the information at their convenience during the election campaign and the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, election campaigns on social networking sites have also been an alternative platform that allowed candidates to do live broadcasts of their campaign on their social networking pages, to which supporters can subscribe and get regular updates on the candidate's campaign. By doing so, supporters were informed about the candidate's campaign via social networking sites, which could further establish and develop the relationship between the candidate and followers throughout the election campaign. Thus, it could be said that the image management of political public relations that McNair (2011) analysed and particularly Grabe and Bucy's analysis of the candidate's mass appeal image, remains significant during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign. Regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'social distancing' mindset was somehow integrated into the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign to a certain extent, attempting to control the COVID-19 infectious rate. However, it was a personal choice for people to consider how they would prefer to engage with the candidate's campaign.

The wearing of surgical masks and its impact on candidates' campaign identity

During the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign, when candidates were on-field campaigning or associating with supporters, they would wear surgical masks most of the time, which covered the bottom half of their face, putting limitations on their facial expression and restricting candidates from developing ideal candidate image and populist campaigners that Grabe and Bucy conceptualised. When asked whether COVID-19 measures such as candidates wearing surgical masks had any impact on candidates' facial identity, Wiroj Lakkhanaadisom, a candidate from Move Forward Party, who came 3rd place in the election, commented:

'The wearing of a surgical mask prevented a candidate from revealing their complete facial identity to the voters. It prevented them from seeing or recognising the candidate's facial expression while interacting with voters. As a result, eye contact and body language were other significant elements that the candidate must use to communicate with voters.'

Wiroj Lakkhanaadisom,
candidate from Move Forward Party

According to Wiroj, it could be said that although the wearing of a surgical mask covered his at lower half of his facial identity and facial expression while interacting with voters during the field campaign, he still strived ways to use eye contact and body language to communicate with voters. Wearing a surgical mask is challenging to reveal a candidate's

facial identity entirely, but the election campaign had to consider safeguarding people from being infected with COVID-19.

Prab Laoharajanaphan, Campaign Manager for Chartchat Sittipunt campaign, winner of the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election, said:

'The wearing of surgical masks is a minor issue. Recognising the candidate's facial identity was not a problem because other media, such as billboards and brochures, showed the candidate's face without wearing surgical masks. Also, our team started our fieldwork two years before the election.'

Prab said that the official election campaign period for the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election lasted slightly less than 60 days. However, Chadchart's team had done long-term fieldwork and onsite visits throughout Bangkok for about two years before the election, which was a long period for the candidate to have the opportunity to introduce himself to Bangkok people, establish his relationship with Bangkok people and thoroughly engage with the problems in Bangkok. Thus, for Chadchart to wear a surgical mask during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign was not a significant issue for facial recognition purposes.

As for other mediums, such as billboards, brochures, or name cards that candidates use for their election campaign, the candidates' selected portrait shows their full facial image without wearing a surgical mask. In addition, a candidate's campaign also consists of other identities such as the political party logo,

combination of campaign colours, text font, campaign slogan, the candidate electoral identity number, their approach and policies to solve problems for Bangkok people. All these identities also play a significant role in distinguishing the candidate and the identity of the candidate's campaign. Thus, it could be said that facial recognition is an integral part of a candidate's campaign. However, it is not the only prominent part, as candidates can use other elements of election campaign content and images to characterise their campaign and support face-to-face communication with voters while wearing surgical masks.

Furthermore, Prab said Chadchart used hand-drawn cartoon images to symbolise his page campaign regarding facial recognition. According to Prab, the cartoon is universal and helps to target communication to new voters. The use of cartoons reduces people's judgement about a candidate's facial identity and minimises the bias that voters might have on a candidate's facial expression or how the candidate looks. The use of cartoons on visual images for election campaigns makes the content and sensation of the content more conspicuous than how the candidate looks. Thus, using cartoons reduced voters' judgement of the candidate.

Sirimon Na Nagara (Campaign Manager of Sakoltee Phattiyakul, Candidate of 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election who came 4th place in the election), explains that wearing a surgical mask during field campaign is not a problem for Sakoltee's campaign recognition because Sakoltee's campaign attempted to use word twists and slogans that integrated part of his Thai name (Tee) into the word twists and slogans to communicate with voters and develop his recognition

and campaign, which was a more meaningful approach to develop his recognition and campaign during a competitive and short period of time.

To summarise, it is undeniable that the surgical masks covering the bottom half of candidates' faces limit their facial expressions, their image and facial identity to a large extent. However, the candidate's campaign identity also constitutes other factors such as the colours they use in their campaign, the candidate's election number and the campaign slogan that play a significant role in identifying and distinguishing one candidate from another. Furthermore, candidates had other platforms for communicating their campaign, e.g., billboards, brochures or name cards, showing their complete facial identity and expression. Thus, it could be said that the image management of political public relations work that McNair (2011) analysed, particularly on Grab and Bucy analysis of the candidate's ideal candidate image and populist campaigners' image, remained significant during the election campaign but had been challenged by COVID-19 measures which candidates strived their ways to develop using alternative media and methods to campaign to their full potential.

COVID-19 infection as a challenge to candidate's internal campaign management

With the COVID-19 measures imposed during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign, the internal management of the digital vote-canvassing network might be affected if campaign staff and political public relations personnel were infected with COVID-19 during the election campaign. This part of the research reviews the candidate's campaign staff's response

about the extent to which the COVID-19 measures affect the internal management of the candidate's campaign and how the candidate's campaign team deals with such challenges.

Prab mentioned:

'COVID-19 somehow did not allow a candidate's campaign to run smoothly. A candidate has limited human resources to help in operating the election campaign. By law, amendments cannot be made to the election campaign staff name under a candidate's campaign. If a campaign staff member is infected with COVID-19, the staff member has to be quarantined.'

Sirimon said:

'The candidate and the team of campaign staff took care of one another very well. Although COVID-19 was a challenge to operate the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign, we were working in a small team, so it reduced the risk of being infected with COVID-19, and we were ready to support each other if any of us was infected with COVID-19.'

From the above two quotes, it could be said that although COVID-19 might have been integrated into Thai people's lives during the election campaign, COVID-19 was still a disruption to the operating candidate's campaign. Certainly, campaign staff infected with COVID-19 had to be quarantined to safeguard other staff from being infected with COVID-19. Being infected with COVID-19 during the 2022

Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign was a disruption that campaign staff could not plan for. Campaign staff would not know how severe the COVID-19 symptoms would be. Furthermore, the strict election law did not allow election campaign staff names to be changed during the election campaign, putting limitations on replacing human resources to be replaced and to continue operating the candidate's election campaign at full potential. This implies that the imposing of COVID-19 measures had affected the internal management of the digital vote-canvassing network during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign as campaign staff infected with COVID-19 during the election campaign had to be quarantined, which might restrict them from operating in the candidate's campaign. Thus, it could be said that Election Commission were not flexible in making amendments to election campaign staff names during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign.

Voters being infected with COVID-19 during election campaign and its impact on voter turnout and mandatory voting law

With reference to the 1997 Constitution of Thailand, a mandatory voting law was imposed in Thailand in 1997, making voting a duty for eligible voters (AsianLI, n.d). Birch (2016) states that mandatory voting law can improve democratic quality and avoid political abuse. Moreover, according to Murray (1998), such a law signifies political reformation, enhancing the qualities of parliamentarians and the nation's management.

For the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election, the voter turnout was 60.73% (BBC News Thai, 2022a), which was slightly lower than the voter turnout in the

year 2013 Bangkok gubernatorial election, which was 63.98% (BBC News Thai, 2022b). As for people who intend not to cast their vote or did not cast their vote in the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election campaign, they could submit a report to the Election Commission stating the reason for not turning up to the poll on election day (Thairath Newspaper, 2022).

During the interview conducted in this research, Dr Rungrueng Kittphati said that someone infected with COVID-19 could still wear a surgical mask, ensure social distancing, and come to the poll to vote on election day. This means that there was no rule to prevent voters who were infected with COVID-19 on the day of the election to cast their vote. In addition, if voters were worried that the shared use of pen provided by the Election Commission at the poll for signing off their attendance and casting their votes might later lead to infectious COVID-19, voters can bring their pen to use at the poll.

Interestingly, it could hardly be concluded whether the COVID-19 pandemic or voters infected with COVID-19 during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign or on election day had any impact on the voter turnout for the election. This means that people who came to the poll to cast their votes were not identified if they were infected with COVID-19 on election day, which might be a positive sign to prevent any discrimination about people being infected with COVID-19 who came to the poll. As for people who did not vote, they might be infected with COVID-19 on election day or might be worried about being at risk of being infected with COVID-19 if they come to the poll. Therefore, although there were flexibilities for people infected with COVID-19 on election day to go to the

poll to cast their vote, it was difficult to conclude if COVID-19 had impacted the voter turnout of the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election.

Conclusion

This article sets out to explore the various ways in which the COVID-19 measures had impacted the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election that occurred two and a half years after imposing COVID-19 measures in Thailand and Thai people were still at risk of being infected by COVID-19 during the election campaign. Firstly, it was found that regulating and monitoring COVID-19 and the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign occurred under two different sets of rules and laws, having the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration regulating and monitoring the COVID-19 issues in Thailand and the Election Commission regulating and monitoring the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign. Secondly, the political public relations work on candidate's digital vote-canvassing network, particularly image management of mass appeal, ideal candidate image and populist campaigners, and the internal management of candidates' campaigns have been challenged by COVID-19 measures, which candidates strived to find ways to operate their campaign and use other media and methods to develop their image for recognition. Lastly, there was not much information about whether eligible voters infected with COVID-19, were not allowed to come to the poll to cast their votes on election day. Moreover, little evidence was found when the number of COVID-19 cases reported on election day was related to voter turnout. Thus, with the COVID-19 measures imposed since 2020 to safeguard people from being infected by COVID-19,

political public relations work on candidates' digital vote-canvassing networks has been challenged during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign.

This paper argues that COVID-19 measures disrupted the democratic practice in the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election, and the COVID-19 measures had been significantly integrated into candidate's digital vote-canvassing network, offering a hybrid election campaign where candidates seek various ways to establish and develop their relationship with followers. COVID-19 was an external factor that was a new challenge and a disruption for candidates to operate political public relations work during the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial Election campaign. It was the first Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign with COVID-19 measures that candidates had to obey. These measures were significant in safeguarding candidates, campaign staff and voters from being infected by COVID-19 during the election campaign. Moreover, it could be said that Bangkok people might have been used to living with COVID-19 measures such as wearing surgical masks, social distancing and avoiding mass gatherings to safeguard themselves from being infected by COVID-19. Also, many Bangkok people have been vaccinated, which is believed to increase their immune system. Lastly, as many activities had been adapted from onsite to online communication platforms, following candidates' campaigns or watching candidates' live broadcasts about their election campaign had been part of voters' new normal life.

Like other democratic countries, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted Bangkok's political activities. The COVID-19 pandemic made the digital vote-canvassing network and political public relations work in the 2022 Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaign unique and distinctive from previous Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaigns. Consequently, digital vote-canvassing networks and political public relations work are still developing notions for the Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaigns. Thus, this research adds to the growing literature on the impact that COVID-19 had on digital vote-canvassing networks and political public relations work.

The argument in this paper is significant as it implies that to develop digital vote-canvassing networking, the future Bangkok Gubernatorial election campaigns should be prepared to increase the use of social networking sites for election campaigns to store and centralise candidates' campaigns and safeguard people from being infected with developing viruses. Because voters are diverse, candidates should also prepare various ways to communicate with voters to introduce themselves and build their relationships with voters throughout the election campaign. Thus, social networking sites evolved as an alternative and additional channel of campaign communication. However, with COVID-19, social networking sites have played a more constructive role in bringing onsite activities to live broadcasts online and storing the activities for voters to watch after the live event ended.

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