I have written elsewhere: “Where there exists a critical mass of scholars working on similar sets of questions—critiquing and building on one another’s work—knowledge accumulation is more likely to occur.”1 It is with this statement in mind that I proceed with my response to Michael Nelson’s thoughtful critique. Rather than a point-by-point rebuttal, I will focus on three of the most interesting and challenging of Nelson’s theoretical critiques. The first substantive issue concerns the charge of omitted variable bias—specifically, in reference to the omission of local political groups from a macro institutional account. The second and third criticisms are more methodological. First, can we or should we ascribe motives to political actors? Second, how can we use counterfactuals to solve problems of observational equivalence?

Omitted Variables—What About “X”?

The charge of omitted variable bias is arguably the most common in social science. The demands of parsimony, combined with the natural limits of time, resources, and imagination, mean that our theories and explanations are always abstractions from reality. If in the pursuit of parsimony, however, we omit important factors, that is, factors with sizable impact on the outcome, and those omitted factors correlate with our included ones, then the omission will bias our conclusions and therefore be problematic.

Nelson claims that I neglected to take into account “long-established informal political structures in provincial Thailand,” namely, local political groups or phuak. He is certainly correct that I do not discuss the role phuak play in relation to Thai politics or in relation to the
changes to the party system. The core question is whether excluding *phuak* from my analysis introduces bias. I contend it does not. Why?

My focus is the effects of changes in the Thai party system—specifically, fewer parties, greater party cohesion and reliance on the party label, and more programmatic campaigning. If the aim is to explain change or variation, one is forced to focus on potential explanatory factors that have also varied. A “variable” that does not vary cannot account for change in the dependent variable.

In the case of *phuak* and local vote-canvassing networks, one of the points that comes across most strongly in Nelson’s work and in his critique of my article is the remarkable continuity and constancy of these factors in the years since 1997. Such constancy is taken as evidence by Nelson of the negligible impact of such institutional changes such as a switch from multi-member constituencies (MMCs) to single-member constituencies (SMCs). If we accept Nelson’s contention that these groups continue to play fundamental roles in Thai electoral politics, that they continue to be the building blocks of electoral alliances, and that one of the most valuable assets to a party is “constituency candidates who [have] strong local *phuak* to support them,” then we are forced to conclude that not much has changed in this regard. Indeed, Nelson’s description of the role and impact of *phuak* in the past few years reads very much like descriptions of *phuak* in the pre-reform era, as Nelson’s own work has shown.

Thus, the central role of *phuak* in party formation and campaigning appears relatively constant, whether we’re talking about elections in 1986, 1996, or 2006.

In short, the omitted variable in my analysis—*phuak*—(admittedly a variable with explanatory power for a variety of other questions) *does not vary* and so cannot account for the changes to the party system with which I am interested. Therefore its omission is not only permissible and, in fact, optimal, but also logically necessary. To account for party system change one must look instead to factors that have also changed, and that includes changes to the institutional environment due to constitutional reform.

To completely dismiss the role of *phuak* would be unwise and disingenuous. Nelson’s focus on *phuak* raises two broader questions. The first is whether the changes that I attribute to national-level electoral system factors are in fact better explained by the enduring features of these *phuak*. As I stated earlier, to the extent my focus is on changes to the party system, it is hard to see how constancy in one variable can cause change in another. However, I do not give sufficient attention in the article to the way in which local informal institutions such as *phuak* might interact
with the reforms to produce some of the changes I describe. The prime example is Nelson’s discussion of the decline in the number of parties with the move to SMCs. He alerts us to the fact that this decline may just as much reflect the fact that with that the shift to SMCs there is often now only one phuak in each constituency. This is an intriguing alternative hypothesis that deserves more study. In particular, we could compare the decline in the number of candidates in those SMCs with a single phuak to those SMCs that still contain more than one group. If I am correct, we should see a decline in both cases. If Nelson is right, there should be no decline in the multi-phuak districts. More generally, we know that the social structure and electoral institutions interact to determine the number of parties. Nelson has suggested a useful way to try to capture an element of that structure in each constituency.

The second broader question that Nelson raises is whether the presence and persistence of phuak affected the speed, breadth, depth, and limits of the constitutional reforms. The answer is undoubtedly yes, particularly when we are talking about the persistence of candidate-centered electoral strategies (something I allude to in the article but do not explore in any detail). However, note that the persistence of some aspects of the old system is not unexpected (even if we focus solely on formal institutions), nor does it preclude a recognition that other parts of party system have changed. In 2001 and 2005, constituency candidates still relied on phuak personal vote networks, but in a departure from the past many candidates also prominently displayed the party’s symbol on their campaign posters, urged voters to vote for their party in the party-list election, and talked about their party’s policy promises.

In summary, an attention to the local factors Nelson identifies is essential if we want to get a complete picture of the Thai party system. However, to account for change in the party system since 1997 (given that the role and influence of phuak are relatively constant) we must also look to factors that have changed. There are three obvious candidates: the economic crisis, constitutional reform, and Thaksin. Nelson and I draw different conclusions, or more accurately, place somewhat different emphasis, on the influence of constitutional reforms versus the Thaksin effect. It is to this issue I now turn.

The Empirics of Intent

Nelson criticizes me for too freely ascribing specific political motives to the drafters of the constitution without sufficient supporting documenta-
tion. He singles out phrases such as “attempts by drafters” and “reformer intended.” I confess I did not intend such statements to carry the weight Nelson gives them, but that fault is mine, not his. In addition to being rhetorically careless, these statements as they stand are problematic in two respects. First, they imply a degree of unity of thought and intent among the members of the CDA that is certainly inappropriate. Second, they suggest that the reforms I discuss were adopted with the ends I examine in mind. While this is true in some cases, it is not true in others.  

I think Nelson would agree that there is abundant evidence from the minutes of the CDA, newspaper accounts of the drafting process, and interviews with members of the CDA that reforming the party system was a priority. He would also probably agree that many of the CDA drafters saw the move to SMCs as a way to reduce vote-buying while maintaining links between MPs and their constituents. The dispute centers on whether they also recognized this as a way to reduce the number of political parties as a particular means for achieving other reform objectives. There is less ready evidence of this. Drafters most often referred to the 5 percent threshold and party organizational/membership requirements when talking about reducing the number of parties. Two of the constitutional drafters I interviewed (Suchit Bunbongkarn and Kramol Thongthamachart) did make a connection between constituency size and the number of parties, but others did not.

More fundamentally, Nelson is correct when he notes that it is “not necessary to refer to the motives of historically identifiable actors” given my task in the article. The key distinction is between explanations of reform process (e.g., why certain reforms were adopted, why others were scrapped, how compromises unfolded) and analyses about the effects of those reforms on specific outcomes. If our focus is the former, then attention to actors’ attitudes, motives, and intent is paramount—there is no way, in other words, to avoid combing through the 10,000 pages of CDA minutes. If, however, our goal is explaining the effects of reforms, it seems sensible to avoid references to reformers’ motives except when (1) those motives are clear and can be well documented, and (2) discussion of those motives serves a distinct purpose.

Counterfactuals and Observational Equivalence

Nelson’s sharpest criticism is that in my enthusiasm for an institutionalist account I have essentially pushed Thaksin out of the picture. References to the “Thaksin” factor have been “systematically replaced by
references to Thai Rak Thai (TRT)” as I seek to show that Thaksin is “unimportant.” In fact, what I say is:

What accounts for the dramatic reduction in the number of political parties in 2001 that gave Thaksin his majority or the ability of Thaksin to keep party factions in check and in-house? Certainly Thaksin’s assets, both personal and financial, cannot be ignored. Thaksin’s possession and strategic deployment of these assets has been a key to Thai Rak Thai’s development.

I continue,

Thaksin and his advisors deserve credit for designing an electoral strategy that combined promises of protection and political power to domestic business interests (in dire straits after the crisis) with a populist campaign that promised the government would now take an active role in eliminating poverty and increasing social welfare.

In short, I do not argue that Thaksin was “unimportant.” The question I pose is whether Thaksin is a sufficient explanation for all the changes that have occurred since 1997. Was he a necessary factor? Most likely. Were his existence, assets, and character sufficient to produce all of the changes we see? I believe not.

The challenge to parsing out the reasons for party system changes in Thailand since 1997 is one that is common to social science. Namely, how do we separate structural and institutional influences from the actions and attitudes of specific individuals? This is essentially a problem of observational equivalence. The outcomes we observe may be consistent with both arguments rooted in structural or institutional factors and in accounts that focus on the unique characteristics of a particular leader. One approach is to look for opportunities to alter either the institutional environment or the leader in question. Unfortunately, nature does not often offer such convenient natural experiments. The fact that the implementation of many of the constitutional reforms corresponds exactly with Thaksin’s tenure in office makes such comparative statics impossible. Another strategy is to derive implications of our theory that we can use to differentiate one theory from the other. For example, theory 1 and 2 both may predict A (the outcome of primary interest), but 1 also predicts outcome B while 2 does not. My discussion of Thaksin’s failed stint as leader of the PDP is an attempt to do this, as is my discussion of Sanoh. (I will respond to Nelson’s critiques of these shortly).
A third approach to dealing with observational equivalence is to employ a counterfactual. The use of counterfactuals plays an important and fundamental role in helping political scientists assess the validity of our causal arguments—especially where it is difficult to separate the causal effect of one variable from another. The key is to make the counterfactual argument as explicit and defensible as possible. The counterfactual question I pose is a simple one: would Thaksin have been able to hold together Thai Rak Thai without the new leverage the constitution granted him? I argue that logic and available evidence suggests he would not. The aim once again is to make the case that institutional reforms had an effect, independent of all that Thaksin brought to the table.

Nelson’s quarrel does not appear to be with my use of a counterfactual in support of my hypotheses. Indeed, he employs one himself when he argues, “had Thaksin started his party before the constitution came into effect, his overpowering leadership appeal probably would have had a similar effect, though without the additional benefit of party-list votes, and perhaps with the need to spend even more money.” Nor do I think that he would disagree with my claim that the new constitution gave Thaksin tools that none of his elected predecessors possessed. The disagreement is about whether my counterfactual argument helps establish the substantive impact of these tools distinct from the “Thaksin effect.” Specifically, Nelson asserts that the evidence I supply in support of my counterfactual argument is wanting. First, Nelson dismisses my claim that if Thaksin’s character and assets are a sufficient explanation for the stability of the Thai Rak Thai party alliance, then we should observe similar success in Thaksin’s earlier efforts as head of the PDP. My theory predicts that absent the tools Thaksin enjoyed under the 1997 constitution, we would expect the PDP to be less cohesive, less stable than TRT. This is in fact what we observe. Nelson contends that I have mischaracterized Thaksin’s experience as head of the PDP. In effect, he argues that the division between the two major factions within the PDP makes the case sui generis. I disagree. Were the divisions within the PDP more intractable than those within TRT? They were certainly different—the PDP temple faction’s aversion to Thaksin’s wealth had no clear corollary within TRT. But, as Nelson notes, TRT was built by cobbling together various phuak—the pattern followed by most Thai parties in the past. The fact that Thaksin was more successful at attracting strong phuak/candidates to his party than any of his predecessors reflects both his vast resources and the weakened position of TRT’s party competitors (the Democrat Party and New Aspiration). But it also means
that subparty factions were more numerous in Thai Rak Thai than in his previous party, and this presented a different set of challenges.

As PDP head, Thaksin had to deal with conflict between two factions with different visions of the party. As head of TRT, Thaksin had to manage a much larger number of factions that, while closer ideologically than the two PDP factions, nonetheless possessed distinct competing preferences about the distribution of government portfolios and resources. The nature of the coordination problem facing Thaksin as leader of PDP and leader of TRT was different, and to be sure, neither was easy. But I do not think it obvious that the coordination problem within the PDP was more difficult than what existed within TRT. What did vary between the two cases were the tools Thaksin could bring to bear to resolve coordination problems.

Nelson also argues that the case of Sanoh is unconvincing and, more generally, that I overstate the leverage the prime minister gains from the combination of the ninety-day rule and the prime minister’s power to call new elections. First, let’s be clear about what would constitute unquestionable evidence that my leverage hypothesis is wrong—namely, large numbers of MPs leaving TRT with impunity. This clearly did not happen. However, the fact that most MPs stayed put, even those who were disgruntled, while consistent with my hypothesis, is not sufficient evidence in support of my hypothesis. This is because for most MPs, staying with TRT was “an act of rational adaptation” given the popularity of Thaksin and his policies, the resources that the ruling party could bring to bear in support of its candidates, and the weakness of the opposition.

In short, then, the lack of movement from TRT is overdetermined. The fact that most MPs stayed put is consistent both with my story and with the relative attractiveness of Thaksin/TRT. Once again we have an observational equivalence problem. Looking at the decision of an average MP who has few other electoral options or who stands to lose a lot if he bolts the party is not going to help us much. Instead, to try and parse out the strategic incentives of the ninety-day rule from the benefits of being associated with the ruling party, I chose to focus on a faction leader who had the means, motive, and opportunity to switch and yet remained part of the party through the 2005 election (Sanoh). Throughout his tenure as part of TRT, Sanoh frequently and publicly expressed his unhappiness with his and his faction’s waning influence within the party. He and his faction were gradually marginalized within the party as other groups joined TRT. Sanoh complained about the distribution of portfolios, the replacement of candidates from his faction.
by candidates from rival TRT factions in the run-up to the 2005 election, and the centralized nature of decisionmaking within the party. From very early on, he campaigned to have the constitution amended to change the ninety-day rule, and he famously compared being a member of Thai Rak Thai to being in prison.

As important as Sanoh’s reasons for wanting to leave the party was his ability to do so. Nelson notes that “Sanoh Thienthong could leave TRT with some of his family-member MPs from Sakaew province. In their province, this informal local group is so powerful that voters will always elect them, no matter under which party label they chose to run.” In short, Sanoh did not have anything to lose electorally if he left TRT. Why, then, didn’t he move before the 2005 election? Nelson’s position is that the inevitability of a TRT victory was enough to keep a disgruntled Sanoh in the party. However, over time the advantages to Sanoh by staying in the party had dwindled as members of his faction defected to other factions and he found himself on the outs with Thaksin and other party leaders. It is not clear, in other words, that he stood to lose a lot by formally cutting his ties with the party—apart from having to step down from politics for a time and the risk that he could find himself ineligible to run for reelection if the prime minister called new elections.

Conclusion

The years 2001–2006 may have represented a perfect storm of a rich, charismatic leader with new ideas, crisis-weakened challengers, and new rules that generated new incentives and gave actors new tools. Nevertheless, it was a storm in which constitutional reforms played a part. The reforms do not explain the rise of Thaksin, or the formation of TRT—nor do I claim they do. Institutions also cannot explain why Thaksin and his advisers picked the particular package of policy promises they did. However, a focus on political institutions can alert us to changes in the political environment that presented new opportunities and incentives that Thaksin and TRT were able to take advantage of.

I hope my response to Nelson’s critique has furthered the scholarly debate about the causes of party system change in Thailand and the impact of institutional reform more generally. Nelson and I do different things. Nelson is producing exciting and innovative research about the character and evolution of local political groups and about the nature and consequences of decentralization and local elections. To date my research has focused on formal political institutions, party system de-
velopment, and public policy. It has greatly benefited from interactions with Nelson and his work in the past, and I expect it will continue to do so in the future.

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Notes


2. Nelson cites confusion with the fact that I argue that MMCs undermined the value of party label while simultaneously stating that incentives for establishing personal networks still exist under SMCs. However, my argument that the elimination of MMCs reduces incentives to put person before party does not assume that MMCs were the “root” cause of such incentives, nor do I argue that such incentives have completely disappeared. Instead, mine is a ceteris paribus argument. For a discussion of the way in which MMCs exacerbated preexisting weaknesses in the Thai party system and combined with them to help prevent the emergence of stronger, more meaningful political parties, see Allen Hicken, “Parties, Pork, and Policy: Policymaking in Developing Democracies” (PhD diss., University of California–San Diego, 2002).


4. More technically, because it does not vary, it covaries with neither the dependent nor the included independent variables. As a result, its omission does not introduce bias.

5. Assuming that the pre-reform MMC contained the same number of phuak.

6. Personal incentives still exist under SMCs, and these were exacerbated in Thailand given the small district size and small number of votes needed to win elections. Allen Hicken, “How Effective Are Institutional Reforms?” in Frederic C. Schaffer, ed., Democracy for Sale: The Causes, Consequences, and Reform of Vote Buying (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, forthcoming).

7. Note too that phuak not only mediate the impact of macro variables such as institutional reform or the rise of a charismatic leader, they are also shaped by them.

9. I do note in the article that the effects of greater powers for the prime minister on the number of parties seems not to have been anticipated by the drafters.

10. An example of the latter would be identifying a puzzle to be explored (e.g., the drafters expected reforms to lead to X, but we observe Y. What happened?).


12. Note that in arguing that without the reforms Thaksin would not have had the “additional benefit” of party list-votes and would have needed to “spend even more money,” Nelson acknowledges that the reforms had some effect on actors’ strategies and behavior, though not as strong an effect as I claim.


18. While I have been unable to locate any statements directly from Sanoh on why he did not leave TRT earlier, we do have statements from other members of his faction that tend to support my argument. For example, faction member Burin Hiranaburanam, speaking of the faction’s support of a constitution amendment to loosen party switching restrictions, stated “the 90-day membership requirement is like a lock, preventing them from choosing a party more suited to their views.” Quoted in Vatikiotis and Tasker, 2002.