

Patronage Politics and Rice Policies in the Philippines and Thailand

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The Philippines and Thailand both made controversial decisions with regard to the global rice market in recent years amid price fluctuations. Despite relatively high levels of wealth disparities in both countries, this study explores why it was Thailand, not the Philippines, that offered lavish price support to its rice farmers, and why the latter spent its public money instead on voluminous levels of rice imports. Policy characteristics were explained through the different approaches taken in patronizing rural voters, as a result of the respective development of social cleavages and political systems in the two countries. In the Philippines, traditional patronage dominated politics after re-democratization in 1986. As particularistic gains were distributed to communities and individuals, the political need for price incentives offered to rice farmers became less imminent. Pork barrel projects, however, did not reliably provide the infrastructure needed to improve rice productivity. Self-sufficiency dwindled, and a policy of state rice imports prevailed as a result. In Thailand, increased rural–urban wealth disparities generated new social demands and new electoral rules after the Asian financial crisis. The situation instead favored a variant form of patronage: mass parties that competed through a policy platform that appealed to the masses. Programs that provided generous price support to rice farmers emerged as a result. Controversial measures of the two countries, including the mega imports of the Philippines between 2008 and 2010 and the high levels of price subsidies in Thailand between 2011 and 2013, were coherent with preexisting trends in rice politics as well as patterns of patronage.