

PERSPECTIVE

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Elections in November: A Profile of Supporters of Myanmar's Ruling NLD

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Partisanship is on the rise in the run-up to Myanmar's 8 November 2020 general election. In this context, the typical supporter of the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) party is often denigrated by critics and opposition forces as irrationally partisan.
- Lumping together all NLD supporters as an irrational, partisan community overlooks the diversity among them. There are at least three types of NLD supporters:
 - the individually expressive supporters are partisans of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD;
 - the socially expressive supporters consider voting a social or civic duty; and
 - the instrumental voters point to the continued dominance of the military in Myanmar's politics and the potential return of its proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) as reasons for supporting for the NLD.
- These three types of voters are not necessarily mutually exclusive; an expressive voter can at the same time be an instrumental voter.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past five years, the image of the supporter of Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD) party and its chairwoman State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has become rather tarnished. International media featured news and images of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's supporters fervently expressing support for their leader in December 2019, when she appeared at the International Court of Justice in December 2019 to refute charges that her country had committed 'genocide' against its Rohingya minority.¹

At home, derisive terms such as *ni-paw* and the less frequently used *ni-pane* (meaning 'silly red' and 'stupid red') are increasingly seen on Facebook, the most popular social media platform in Myanmar. The use of "red" in these terms is a reference to the colour background of the NLD's flag. The terms describe people who constantly express unreserved loyalty to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD, or both.

General elections in Myanmar are set for 8 November 2020. The rise of the *ni-paw* is now more visible than ever, and derisive comments on that partisan type echo across Facebook. They assert or imply that supporters of the NLD are all *ni-paw* who voted for the party in the November 2015 general elections out of hyper-partisanship alone and will do so again in November 2020. The NLD voter is, therefore, considered to not be a rational voter, but an irrational partisan.

However, seeing NLD supporters as a homogenous group of *ni-paw* and interpreting their voting preferences and behaviour on the basis of that view conceal heterogeneity among millions of voters. This paper argues that there are three broad categories of NLD voters: the individually expressive voter, the socially expressive voter and the instrumental voter. The three categories are not always mutually exclusive, and many voters show a mix of two or all of these tendencies.

EXPRESSIVE VOTING AND INSTRUMENTAL VOTING

Expressive Voting and Social Voting

Through expressive or sincere voting, voters exhibit partisanship² in favour of a candidate or a political party over other candidates and parties. Expressive voting is often emotional.³ Many voters who supported the NLD on 8 November 2015 might be considered expressive or sincere voters. They were clearly partisans of the NLD and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Even if voting is not compulsory, many citizens still cast ballots as a form of social voting or socially expressive voting. They consider voting a civic duty,⁴ a matter of altruism⁵ and ethical behaviour.⁶ Many people also vote out of fear of suffering social alienation from, or shame in the eyes of, their families, friends, peers and fellow citizens, should they fail to vote. Or they may vote in order to be able proudly to tell others that they have done so.⁷ People with strong informal social networks may also have a strong propensity to turn out to cast their ballots.⁸ Voting is thus socially considered or expressed. Photographs of Myanmar voters proudly showing their fingers stained with indelible ink abounded on Facebook on 8 November 2015 and for several days afterwards,⁹ and voters that had already voted encouraged their families, friends, and acquaintances to follow their example.¹⁰

Rational or Instrumental Voting

Voting is rational too. Voting has costs—in time spent to seek information about parties and candidates and to queue on election day.¹¹ Voters also know that their individual votes cannot change the outcome of an election in which millions vote.¹² Therefore, voters weigh costs and benefits not just from an individual perspective but from a social perspective, and they “vote if the expected benefit of voting is greater than the cost.”¹³

That calculus of voting is easier in two-candidate races because the rational voter has only to choose one candidate over the other. But in electoral contexts where three or more candidates or parties contest for a single seat and voters’ first preference has no chance of winning, voters often strategically cast ballots for their second preference to prevent their least preferred candidate or party from winning.¹⁴

Myanmar uses a majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system that favours major parties such as the NLD. Many non-Bamar voters in Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin and Mon states voted for the NLD in November 2015. In their eyes,¹⁵ the NLD was apparently the only party that could beat the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). For ethnic voters — and for Bamar voters as well — the USDP is the proxy party of the military, which came to power via a rigged election in November 2010. Hence, ethnic voters tactically cast ballots for the NLD, just to prevent the USDP from winning again.¹⁶

The Theoretical Middle Ground

In practice, voters display a mix of individually expressive voting, socially expressive voting and instrumental voting, and many voters show two or all of the three behaviours in making their electoral decisions.¹⁷ Keith Dowding thus succinctly summarizes, “People vote in order to express their preference for their preferred candidate, increase his or her chances of winning and because they feel they ought to.”¹⁸

THE INDIVIDUALLY AND SOCIALLY EXPRESSIVE NLD VOTER

What Type of a Political Party is the NLD?

Established in September 1988, the NLD has been the party at the helm of Myanmar’s democratic forces for 32 years. It suffered severe repression at the hands of the military regime until it re-entered the electoral realm in 2012,¹⁹ and it is greatly admired for that reason. It has been the ruling party since March 2016, and the party and its hundreds of offices across the country have become more visible on the ground in that time. But power in the party is largely in the hands of the NLD central office.²⁰ In the eyes of the expressive partisan, the NLD is first and foremost the party of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Simply put, the NLD is Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, or vice versa.

The Individually Expressive Voter

The individually expressive voter is easier to identify, and that partisan’s reason for voting for the NLD is also easy to understand. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s persona, as national hero Bogyoke Aung San’s daughter and long-time leader of Myanmar’s democratic opposition, is the most important factor. Her supporters call her *Amay Suu* (Mother Suu). In early July,

the famous composer Ko Nay Win said, “Her grandfather [her father’s great uncle] is Bo Min Yaung [an anti-British patriot] and her father Bogyoke Aung San. As long as that generation that loves the people lives, we must support the NLD.”²¹ Another voter in Yangon remarked, “I voted for the NLD in 2015. Whatever happens, I plan to vote for the NLD because of the face of our Mother Suu.”²²

Admiration of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and by extension the NLD, also stems from a binary view of the country’s politics as a matter of the NLD versus the USDP. NLD supporters are expressly allergic to the Myanmar military or Tatmadaw. They regard the generals and former generals of the military regime—who in 1993 founded the Union Solidarity and Development Association as a pseudo-non-governmental organization which was transformed into the USDP just in time for it to contest the rigged November 2010 elections—as corrupt dictators. The USDP is, likewise, the planned reincarnation of the Tatmadaw in power. Expressive NLD supporters subscribe to a binary worldview: Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are the liberators and the Tatmadaw and the USDP the oppressors.

Well-known writer Nyi Pu Lay, the president of the non-governmental organization for freedom of expression and the promotion of literature PEN Myanmar, said, “I don’t want to live under the military boots again. I want to sleep peacefully. I want to eat well.”²³ Top movie star Daung is more expressive. “I only believe in one thing. It is that Mother Suu is sacrificing [herself] for the people and for her belief [in democracy]. Mother Suu is standing strong [for us]. It is the undeniable truth.”²⁴ Similar and often stronger partisanism of Amay Suu is now on the rise on Facebook.

The Socially Expressive Voter

Voting is not compulsory in Myanmar. But election laws prohibit nonvoters from discouraging others against voting.²⁵

As noted above, NLD supporters encouraged people to go vote in November 2015. For those supporters, that election was akin to a ‘revolution’ or ‘democratization by elections’²⁶ to free the country from the military and the USDP. Voting was not yet widely considered a social responsibility or form of expression. However, in recent months, NLD supporters have explicitly and loudly called upon citizens to vote and argued that voting is a social responsibility or form of expression.

This argument stressing social responsibility or civic duty emerged largely as a response to calls from some social media users to not vote. The NLD supporter is now expressive not just individually but socially. Min Han Htet, chairman of the Dagon University Students’ Union, argues, “Many people fought and died so that we can hold elections and vote. We have to look in their faces.”²⁷ Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself joined in and responded to the call against voting. “Saying that they don’t like this system, this thing, or that thing without voting is sheer irresponsibility. All citizens must fulfil their duty by voting one day in five years.”²⁸ Not only the NLD but also many other parties have expressed concern over the campaign for abstention, and have responded to it by urging people to vote.²⁹ However, the disproportionately large number of supporters of the NLD relative to other parties means that the voice of the former group has been loudest.

The Myanmar government, the Union Election Commission (UEC), civil society organizations, individual citizens, celebrities, and political parties are now engaged in offline and online campaigns to promote voting as a civic duty. In addition to those ‘positive’ campaigns that motivate citizens to vote, many NLD supporters go so far as to exert a form of social pressure by saying that nonvoters fail to fulfil their civic or social duty.³⁰

Many expressive nonvoters contend that they are abstaining *conscientiously*, because the NLD, which they once supported, has failed to fulfil its promises of constitutional reform and peace.³¹ But NLD supporters, and political observers as well, are suspicious. Mya Aye, prominent leader of the 88 Generation student protesters, warns, “I see people doing things to make others disappointed with and indifferent to voting. Some are doing so honestly. But some are not. I see dishonest motives involved.”³² UEC member U Myint Naing ups the ante. “To vote or not to vote is the right of an individual, but encouraging others not to vote violates those articles [in elections laws that prohibit such action].”³³

As of mid-August 2020, the time of writing, the official campaign period for the November elections has not yet begun. While NLD supporters are concerned with potential large-scale abstention, they also concern themselves with voter lists and encourage their fellow citizens to check the lists, to ask for inclusion on those lists if their names are missing, and to have any errors corrected. In other words, ‘go check voter lists’ and ‘go vote’ have become two sides of the campaign carried on by the socially expressive NLD supporter. The preliminary voter lists on display for public viewing for the first time from 25 July to 14 August contained many errors, and NLD government officials and party supporters launched a public campaign across Myanmar to get voters to check the lists.³⁴ The corrected lists will be available for a second viewing in October. Therefore, the expressive NLD supporter will be busy in the next few months encouraging fellow citizens to check the voter lists again in October, and then actually to go to the polls and vote in November.

THE INSTRUMENTAL OR RATIONAL NLD VOTER

Instrumental NLD supporters display more sophisticated reasoning than their individually and socially expressive counterparts. They argue that they have no options but to vote for the NLD in order to continue to liberate Myanmar from the rule of Tatmadaw.

The people of Myanmar enjoy political and civil rights to a significant degree, especially since the NLD came to power in March 2016. But the nature of the parliament remains a huge structural impediment to the full return of power to the people. The 664-seat Myanmar parliament is a three-quarter legislature, in which only three quarters of the seats are occupied by elected or people’s representatives. There are 440 seats in the lower house and 224 seats in the upper house, of which 330 seats and 168 seats, respectively, are filled by elected members. The other quarter of the seats in both houses are reserved for the military. Since constitutional amendment requires the support of more than three quarters of the members of parliament, both elected and military, the unelected military bloc has effective veto power over attempts to change the charter. The NLD and its supporters witnessed the power of that khaki bloc in parliament when the party failed to reform the constitution in 2019 despite occupying more than 79 percent of all elected seats.

NLD supporters give two instrumental reasons in calling for a majority win in November 2020. First, the red NLD bloc in parliament was able to cast a decisive vote via simple majoritarian voting on legislative matters in the past four years. For example, during its first year the NLD-dominated parliament repealed two internal security acts, the Law Safeguarding the State from the Danger of Subversive Elements (1975)³⁵ and the Emergency Provisions Act (1950),³⁶ which were used by the military regime in previous decades to repress dissent. Most recently, throughout 2019 the red bloc was again able to dominate the constitutional reform process, despite eventual failure to secure amendment. Therefore, the NLD must retain its domination of the legislature.

Second, the NLD must also dominate the next parliament in order to be able to nominate two presidential candidates and see one of them chosen president; the other will become one of the two vice-presidents, as in 2016. The president of Myanmar has extensive powers to nominate members of the entire executive branch. This is true not just at the Union level but at the regional and state levels, even if the party that wins at the Union level does not have a majority of the seats in the regional or state parliament. Therefore, the NLD must win at least 330 seats out of about 490 elected seats³⁷ in the Union parliament in November 2020 in order to be able to nominate two presidential candidates on its own. If not, it will need to form a coalition government with one or more opposition parties such as the USDP or ethnic parties.

In 2020, with the NLD facing intense competition from mergers among ethnic parties in Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, and Mon States, the probability that the party will win in a landslide in those five ethnic states is low. The NLD and its supporters remain convinced that the party will win most seats in the seven Bamar-dominated regions again. But the electoral field in the regions is also more crowded than in the past, with parties such as the USDP, the Union Betterment Party, the People's Party, and the People's Pioneer Party competing for seats. Therefore, the NLD finds itself challenged not only by ethnic parties in seven states but also by non-ethnic or Bamar-dominated parties in the regions. As a whole, this situation encourages the instrumental NLD supporter to give stronger support to the party. He or she will consequently turn expressively partisan, both individually and socially.

CONCLUSION

Elections are prone to partisanship. Myanmar is no exception, and partisanship is on the rise in the run-up to the country's November 2020 elections. Hence, *ni-paw* are now a common sight in the Myanmar Facebook sphere. The highly personalist nature of the NLD and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's persona account for that partisanship and for the likely expressive voting behaviour, individual or social, of the NLD supporter. But NLD supporters and voters are no less instrumental and rational than they are expressive.

Myanmar's 2020 elections are different from those of 2015. The NLD has been in power for five years, and it now has its own record both of good governance and of questionable performance. Even diehard supporters of the party have witnessed their idol's inability to deliver on electoral promises made in 2015 such as constitutional reform and peace. Therefore, individually expressive voting may decline, but socially expressive voting may fill the gap. Structurally, there is still a long way ahead for Myanmar's further democratization and constitutional reform to reduce the continued power of the Tatmadaw

in politics. Hence, the instrumental or rational motivations of the NLD voter remain as relevant as ever, and they will become even more important than their expressive motivations in November 2020.

¹ For example, see Shoon Naing and Thu Thu Aung, “Suu Kyi’s Loyalists Rally for Myanmar Leader before Genocide Trial”, *Reuters*, 2 December 2019 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-justice/suu-kyis-loyalists-rally-for-myanmar-leader-before-genocide-trial-idUSKBN1Y61AA>, downloaded 8 August 2020);

Thu Thu Aung and Sam Aung Moon, “In Myanmar Park, Crowds Gather to Support Suu Kyi in Rohingya Genocide Hearings”, *Reuters*, 12 December 2019 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-worldcourt/in-myanmar-park-crowds-gather-to-support-suu-kyi-in-rohingya-genocide-hearings-idUSKBN1YG1IB>, downloaded 8 August 2020); and BBC, “Myanmar Rohingya: The Supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi”, 11 December 2019 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-50731550>, downloaded 10 August 2020).

² Alan Hamlin and Colin Jennings, “Expressive Political Behaviour: Foundations, Scope and Implications”, *British Journal of Political Science* 41, 3 (2011): 645–670; Leoni Huddy, Lilliana Mason and Lene Aarøe, “Expressive Partisanship: Campaign Involvement, Political Emotion, and Partisan Identity”, *American Political Science Review* 109, 1 (2015): 1–17; and Andrea Robbett and Peter Hans Matthews, “Partisan Bias and Expressive Voting”, *Journal of Public Economics* 157 (2018): 107–120.

³ George E. Marcus and Michael B. Mackuen, “Anxiety, Enthusiasm, and the Vote: The Emotional Underpinnings of Learning and Involvement During Presidential Campaigns”, *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 672–685; Jonathan McDonald Ladd and Gabriel S. Lenz, “Reassessing the Role of Anxiety in Vote Choice”, *Political Psychology* 29, 2 (2008): 275–296; Ted Brader, “Striking a Responsive Chord: How Political Ads Motivate and Persuade Voters by Appealing to Emotions”, *American Journal of Political Science* 49, 2 (2005): 388–405; Pavlos Vasilopoulos, George E. Marcus, Nicholas A. Valentino, and Martial Foucault, “Fear, Anger, and Voting for the Far Right: Evidence From the November 13, 2015 Paris Terror Attacks”, *Political Psychology* 40, 4 (2019): 679–704; and Tessa Ditonto, “The Mediating Role of Information Search in the Relationship Between Prejudice and Voting Behavior”, *Political Psychology* 41, 1 (2020): 71–88..

⁴ André Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote?* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

⁵ James H. Fowler, “Altruism and Turnout”, *The Journal of Politics* 68, 3 (2006): 674–683.

⁶ S. Nageeb Ali and Charles Lin, “Why People Vote: Ethical Motives and Social Incentives”, *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 5, 2 (2013): 73–98, and Timothy Feddersen and Alvaro Sandroni, “A Theory of Participation in Elections”, *The American Economic Review* 96, 4 (2006): 1271–1282.

⁷ Stephen Knack, “Civic Norms, Social Sanctions, and Voter Turnout”, *Rationality and Society* 4, 2 (1992): 133–156; Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green and Christopher W. Larimer, “Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment”, *The American Political Science Review* 102, 1 (2008): 33–48; Costas Panagopoulos, “Affect, Social Pressure and Prosocial Motivation: Field Experimental Evidence of the Mobilizing Effects of Pride, Shame and Publicizing Voting Behavior”, *Political Behavior* 32, 3 (2010): 369–386; and Stefano Dellavigna, John A. List, Ulrike Malmendier and Gautam Rao, “Voting to Tell Others”, *The Review of Economic Studies* 84, 1 (2017): 143–181.

⁸ Samuel Abrams, Torben Iversen and David Soskice, “Informal Social Networks and Rational Voting”, *British Journal of Political Science* 41, 2 (2011): 229–257.

⁹ This point draws on the author’s observation of hundreds of Facebook posts in November 2015.

¹⁰ Author’s observation, Yangon and Mandalay, before and on 8 November 2015.

¹¹ Andrés Santana and Susana Aguilar, “How Costly is Voting? Explaining

Individual Differences in the Costs of Voting”, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, published online 28 August 2019 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2019.1658196>, downloaded 9 August 2020).

¹² William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook, “A Theory of the Calculus of Voting”, *The American Political Science Review* 62, 1 (1968): 25–42.

¹³ John Duffy and Margit Tavits, “Beliefs and Voting Decisions: A Test of the Pivotal Voter Model”, *American Journal of Political Science* 52, 3 (2008): 603–618, p. 603.

¹⁴ David P. Myatt, “On the Theory of Strategic Voting”, *The Review of Economic Studies* 74, 1 (2007): 255–281, and Laura B. Stephenson, John H. Aldrich, and André Blais, eds., *The Many Faces of Strategic Voting: Tactical Behavior in Electoral Systems Around the World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018). Strategic voting behaviour may be found in both majoritarian and proportional electoral systems, but it is more common in the latter. See Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich, André Blais, Matthew Diamond, Abraham Diskin, Indridi H. Indridason, Daniel J. Lee and Renan Levine, “Comparing Strategic Voting Under FPTP and PR”, *Comparative Political Studies* 43, 1 (2010): 61–90.

¹⁵ Even if ethnic voters wanted to vote for their own ethnic parties, several Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, and Mon parties contested the same constituencies in the five ethnic states, making it difficult for these voters to select one; this condition effectively divided their vote. See Ardeth Thawngmung, “The Myanmar Elections 2015: Why the National League for Democracy Won a Landslide Victory”, *Critical Asian Studies* 48, 1 (2016): 132–142.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Morris P. Fiorina, “The Voting Decision: Instrumental and Expressive Aspects”, *The Journal of Politics* 38, 2 (1976): 390–413; Alexander A. Schuessler, “Expressive Voting”, *Rationality and Society* 12, 1 (2000): 87–119; Jörg L. Spenkuch, “Expressive Vs. Strategic Voters: An Empirical Assessment”, *Journal of Public Economics* 165 (September 2018): 73–81; Roger B. Myerson and Robert J. Weber, “A Theory of Voting Equilibria”, *The American Political Science Review* 87, 1 (1993): 102–114; Brad R. Taylor, “Strategic and Expressive Voting”, *Constitutional Political Economy* 26, 2 (2015): 159–170; and Geoffrey Brennan and Alan Hamlin, “Expressive Voting and Electoral Equilibrium”, *Public Choice* 95, 1–2 (1998): 149–175.

¹⁸ Keith Dowding, “Is it Rational to Vote? Five Types of Answer and a Suggestion”, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 7, 3 (2005): 442–459, p. 442.

¹⁹ The NLD faced deregistration when it decided not to contest the November 2010 elections. The party only registered again in 2011 to enter by-elections in April 2012, after the USDP regime promised political reforms.

²⁰ Richard Roewer, “Three Faces of Party Organisation in the National League for Democracy”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38, 3 (2020): 286–306.

²¹ Thadar Htet (Hledan), “NLD ကို မဲပေးစဉ် ဝေးကွာနေသည့် ဝန်ထမ်းများက အားပေးပေးရမည်” [Writer Hnin Pann Ein and Composer Ko Nay Will Vote and Support the NLD], *News Watch*, 4 July 2020, p. 16.

²² Ko Nyan Win Aung, “NLD ကို မဲပေးခဲ့သူတွေ ၂၀၂၀ မှာ မဲထပ်ပေးဖန်တီးမလား” [Will Those Who Voted for the NLD Vote for it in 2020 Again?], *Voice of America (Burmese)*, 11 July 2020 (<https://burmese.voanews.com/a/will-people-continue-vote-for-nld-in-2020-/5498666.html>, downloaded 10 August 2020).

²³ Khin Maung Soe, “မဲပေးတတ္တိတာ ဒီမိုကရေစီအခြေခံအားပေးပုံလိုက် ဝန်ထမ်းရေးသမားတွေ ဝေပူတတ်ကား” [Politicians, Voting is a Democratic Right], *Radio Free Asia (Burmese)*, 29 July 2020 (https://www.rfa.org/burmese/program_2/2020-election-07292020190228.html, downloaded 7 August 2020).

²⁴ Zwe Nyan, “ကြံဖန်တော့ပျစုစေခံစားကတော့ အားလုံးကို မဲပေးစေခံစားပေ” [I Want All to Vote], *7 Day News*, 25 July 2020 (<https://7day.news/193400>, downloaded 15 August 2020).

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