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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Research Report: Factors Guiding Voter Preference in Elections in Sri Lanka



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# Research Report: Factors Guiding Voter Preference in Elections in Sri Lanka

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**Dr. Mahesh Senanayake (Ph.D.)**

Senior Lecturer

Department of Political Science and Public Policy  
University of Colombo

**Ms. N. C. R. Silva**

Senior Lecturer

Department of Political Science and Public Policy  
University of Colombo

## **Disclaimer**

**This publication was funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of National Peace Council of Sri Lanka and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.**

## Foreword

The findings of this study on Factors Guiding Voter Preference in Elections in Sri Lanka serve as a critical resource in understanding the evolving priorities of the electorate. Commissioned by the National Peace Council (NPC) with funding from the European Union, and authored by Dr. Mahesh Senanayake and Ms. Crishni Silva of the University of Colombo, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of voter motivations at a time when Sri Lanka stands at a crossroads in its political trajectory.

The Active Citizens for Elections and Democracy (ACED) project, through which this research was conducted, is a collaborative initiative led by NPC in partnership with People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), the Association of War Affected Women (AWAW), the Centre for Communication Training (CCT), and Women and Democracy (W&D) in the Maldives. With funding from the European Union, the project seeks to enhance electoral integrity, strengthen civic engagement, and improve democratic processes in Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Given the major political shift the country has already undergone, the study's findings hold immense value for policymakers, political parties, and voters alike.

The research, conducted in August 2024 with a sample size of 1,350 respondents across diverse ethnic, age, and socioeconomic backgrounds, highlights a notable transformation in voter behavior and preferences which was reflected in the results of the presidential and general elections that took place thereafter. The study underscores the shifting expectations of the electorate, emphasizing a move away from patronage-based politics toward more policy-driven decision-making.

## Key Findings and Their Implications

### Political Interest and Engagement

The report reveals that 37% of men expressed a high level of interest in politics, compared to just 17% of women. This gender difference points to ongoing challenges in achieving equitable political engagement. The study also suggests that educational attainment plays a key role, as university graduates demonstrated higher levels of political interest and engagement compared to those with lower educational backgrounds. These findings indicate the need for targeted civic education programs, especially among underrepresented groups, to foster more inclusive political participation.

### Political Literacy and Decision-Making

Encouragingly, 83% of respondents considered themselves politically literate enough to make informed electoral choices. However, 12% admitted that their voting decisions were influenced by external factors such as family, religious leaders, or media narratives, rather than independent analysis. This highlights the ongoing impact of social structures on electoral decisions and the importance of promoting critical thinking and media literacy to ensure truly independent voter choice.

## Political Participation and Media Influence

While voting remains the predominant form of political participation, the study highlights the increasing influence of digital media. Television continued to be the dominant source of political information, particularly among older generations. However, social media has emerged as a critical player, particularly among younger and more educated voters. This shift has significant implications for political campaigning, as digital platforms become an increasingly powerful tool for voter mobilization.

## Impact of the Aragalaya Movement

The 2022 Aragalaya protests played a defining role in shaping political consciousness, with 53% of respondents believing the movement had a positive impact on the country's political landscape, compared to just 13% who viewed it negatively. The protests not only amplified calls for accountability and governance reforms but also mobilized first-time voters and politically disengaged citizens. The enduring effects of this movement suggest that electoral campaigns rooted in economic recovery, governance reform, and anti-corruption efforts will resonate more strongly with voters.

## Decline of Patronage Politics

A significant finding from the report is the declining influence of patronage-based electoral strategies. Nearly 50% of respondents rejected traditional political tactics such as vote-buying, food aid distributions, and job promises, instead prioritizing policy-driven leadership. This trend signals an opportunity for candidates who focus on transparent governance, sustainable economic policies, and institutional reform to gain public trust.

## Candidate Preferences and Policy Priorities

The study found that voters are increasingly prioritizing candidates based on their ability to address economic challenges, fight corruption, and demonstrate strong educational credentials. The data underscores this shift:

- 92.9% of respondents identified economic crisis resolution as their top priority.
- 83.3% highlighted anti-corruption efforts as a key factor in candidate selection.
- 85.6% valued educational background, suggesting a growing demand for knowledgeable and competent leadership.

Notably, traditional identity markers such as ethnicity, religion, and age showed less significant in voter decision-making. While male candidates still enjoy slightly higher popularity, gender is no longer a decisive factor for most voters. This trend represents a departure from identity-based voting and signals a broader political maturity among the electorate.

## Political Realignment and Public Dissatisfaction

A critical takeaway from the research is the widespread dissatisfaction with established political parties. Nearly 50% of respondents indicated that a new political force was necessary to resolve Sri Lanka's crisis, and an overwhelming 90% called for a complete political system change.

This growing demand for systemic transformation underscores the urgency for political leaders to rebuild public trust, promote transparency, and introduce structural reforms.

The findings of this study are particularly relevant as Sri Lanka charts a new political course. The outcomes of the last three elections indicate that candidates and political parties will need to adapt to the electorate's evolving expectations, moving away from traditional patronage politics and instead prioritizing policy-driven, accountable leadership.

The survey results align with broader electoral trends witnessed in the presidential and general elections that soon followed the study. These outcomes further confirm that voters are demanding change, reinforcing the importance of engaging with this research to inform campaign strategies and governance approaches.

## **Acknowledgments and Looking Ahead**

We extend our deepest gratitude to the European Union for its generous support in funding this research. We also express our sincere appreciation to Dr. Mahesh Senanayake and Ms. Crishni Silva of the University of Colombo for their rigorous scholarship and academic contributions to this study.

As Sri Lanka navigates its complex political landscape, the insights from this report serve as an essential guide for political leaders, civil society organizations, and the electorate. The country stands at a pivotal moment where informed, engaged, and policy-conscious voters have the power to shape the country's future.

It is imperative that all stakeholders-government institutions, political actors, and civil society-work collectively to strengthen democratic governance, electoral integrity, and public accountability.

**Jehan Perera**  
Executive Director



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## **Acronyms**

GCE (O/L) - General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level)

GCE (A/L) - General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level)

LTTE - Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

SPSS - Statistical Product and Service Solution

RC - Reference Category

***Special note.*** The survey experiment was conducted in August 2024 and the report was drafted in September 2024 ahead of the 2024 presidential election. Accordingly, the findings, predictions and suggestions correspond to the pre-election situation. Therefore, consider this fact when you read the report

## Summary

This document presents the findings of the data generated from the survey experiment on “Factors Guiding Voter Preference in Elections,” conducted in August 2024 in Sri Lanka. The findings presented in this document attempt to capture indications of voter behavior in the upcoming elections in Sri Lanka. This report highlights the following key points, which are discussed in the upcoming chapters based on the data gathered from the survey.

1. A large number of people showed a keen interest in politics and related topics. However, the level of political interest differs based on factors such as age, gender, and educational attainment among the survey participants.
2. Men are more inclined toward politics compared to women. This implies that even today, the deliberate disengagement of women from politics remains a significant social constraint.
3. A clear correlation exists between education level and political interest, with graduates showing significantly higher interest compared to respondents from other levels of education.
4. A person's employment sector significantly influences their political engagement. The agricultural and public sectors show the highest political interest, while the private sector and self-employed individuals exhibit similar levels of political engagement. The remaining groups are not much politically active.
5. The differences in age and ethnicity show no significant effect on political interest.
6. The majority of respondents believe they are politically literate enough to choose their political representatives.
7. Approximately 6% of respondents admitted that they were not knowledgeable enough to select their political representative, while 11% were unsure about their knowledge to make such a decision.
8. The majority of respondents indicated that their decision was made independently in an election. A higher proportion of dependent voters are females compared to males. Very few respondents are influenced by media or religious leaders.
9. The majority of respondents primarily engage in electoral politics by casting their votes. Therefore, most respondents are often passive voters rather than active citizens.
10. Television is popular among respondents of all age categories and is the most preferred source of information irrespective of subgroup differences of respondents. Social media is the most preferred source of information (90%) among young and educated

respondents. However, social media usage dramatically declines among respondents over the age of 60.

11. *Aragalaya* has led to heightened political interest across all segments of Sri Lankan society, regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, or occupation. Further, a majority of respondents believe that the *Aragalaya* had a positive impact on the political landscape in Sri Lanka.
12. Interestingly, approximately 90% of the respondents are in favor of a political system change, while less than 5% oppose it. Over 65% of the respondents expressed confidence that this change will occur in the upcoming elections.
13. The influence of patronage politics is diminishing, and new powerful slogans are emerging in the upcoming elections.
14. The study identified three critical attributes: 1) a plan to resolve the crisis, 2) holding corrupt politicians accountable, and 3) the educational background of politicians. In addition to these attributes, party labels were also somewhat considered. Interestingly, the general findings of the survey suggest that ethnic and religious identities, age, and patronage politics do not feature prominently among the respondents.
15. There are three main objectives for casting votes in the upcoming election; 1) Reducing living costs, 2) System change, and 3) Holding corrupt politicians accountable.
16. According to the conjoint experiment, it can be identified three levels of attributes;

Attribute	Popular	Unpopular	Neutral
<b>Gender</b>	Male		Female
<b>Age</b>	35-60	Above 60	Below 35
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Sinhala	Muslim	Tamil
<b>Education</b>	A/L, Graduate	Primary education	O/L
<b>Religiosity</b>	Equally treated all religions, Secular		Anti-Muslim sentiment, Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism
<b>Governance</b>	Non corrupted	Corrupted	Support corruptions
<b>Endorsement</b>	Social media		Electronic media, religious leaders, inner circles
<b>Solution to ethnic conflict</b>	Unitary	Secession, Federal	13 <sup>th</sup> Amendment to the constitution
<b>Tax policy</b>	Increase direct taxes, Inclusive tax policy, stop all taxes		Increase the tax ceiling

<b>Solution for economic crisis</b>	Export economy, Develop small scale industries	Privatisation	Foreign remittance, Restrict import
<b>Priority area</b>	Economy		Welfare, Good governance, National security, international relations
<b>Patronage politics</b>	National issues	Maintain closer relationship with voters	Infra-structure development, Distribute gifts and money

## **1. Introduction**

The local political environment of a country plays a crucial role in shaping the political cues for upcoming elections, especially when there is growing dissatisfaction with elected leaders. In this context, two key questions arise: How do voters choose which candidate to vote for? And what is the connection between specific local conditions and political cues in influencing voter decisions that ultimately determine election results? This study aims to address these claims on decisive political cues coupled with contextual saliences through a survey experiment. Further, the study is based on the actual behavior of the political actors in Sri Lanka which is experiencing its most severe social, economic, and political crises in history.

## **2. Rationale**

Contemporary voters are constantly exposed to the election campaigns carried out by spending a lot of money. At the same time, a myriad of information about the policies of their political candidates is transmitted to voters through conventional, electronic, and social media. Voters must take a great deal of effort and time to keep track of all relevant campaign messages and process all available facts on candidates and their policies. Importantly, voters do not support all policy positions of the parties and candidates (Horiuchi et al., 2018). There might be unknown factors that are influential on political candidate selection. Sometimes these factors can influence the voter independently, while sometimes they couple with party labels and personal attributes. The existing literature emphasizes that voters are often attracted to one or more salient attributes of their political candidates. In light of this context, this research was conducted to gain a precise understanding of political signals and trends in voter preferences. The aim is to inform all other project activities, preserve democratic space, and foster collaboration among different stakeholders to address the overlapping and specific pluralistic needs of the country.

## **3. Objectives**

1. Examining how the effects of salient attributes of political candidates vary across subgroups including geo-economic, gender, and ethno-religious clusters.
2. Provide views on the active states of vote buying and other undemocratic practices in electoral politics.
3. Identifying the effect of different types of endorsements on candidate choice.

4. Identifying less sophisticated voters who are more likely to be low on information and need guidance on their voting behavior.
5. Examining the causal effects of multiple traits on candidate favorability, reducing problems with social desirability bias, and approximating real-life effects.
6. Provide recommendations and information to develop training and awareness materials by the doner.
7. Provide a better understanding of the factors that influence voter decisions, especially in times of heightened frustration with elected representatives.

#### **4. Critical engagement of research on voter preferences at elections**

According to the prevailing literature, most of the empirical research has been conducted using traditional survey methods to measure voters' behavior (Andersen & Heath, 2002; Ansolacehere et al., 2006; Brookman et al., 2017; Campbell & Cowley, 2013; Kao & Bested, 2020). Traditional survey experiments usually create an artificial environment where respondents are given a single piece of information in common and let respondents use the information that they think is most relevant. (Hainmuller et al., 2015). However, the salient critique against the design of the classical surveys is that it prevents identifying which component of a multidimensional treatment is influential. To overcome this challenge, developed countries use a survey experiment method called conjoint experiment. Therefore, we proposed to employ the same method in this study too. However, if the NPC wishes to continue with the traditional survey, researchers are flexible.

#### **5. Research design**

The research has two components.

1. Conjoint experiment (Core research)
2. General information survey - direct items for subgroup analysis

##### **5.1 Conjoint experiment**

In this experiment, we (researchers) generate hypothetical summaries of candidates' profiles<sup>1</sup>, each of which includes positions for selected political cues, including ethno-nationalistic

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<sup>1</sup> Profile summaries are generated by orthogonal array using SPSS. It is usually the starting point of a conjoint experiment.



position, good governance, welfare policy, tax policy, economic growth strategy, orientation to the mainstream, education qualifications, gender, age, patron-client relationship, endorsement, issue specialization, party affiliation (optional)<sup>2</sup> (See attachment 1). Thereafter, the respondents were asked to choose a profile between two candidate profiles based on their preferences. Hence the dependent variable is the choice of respondents. The usefulness of this method for causal inference is in the choice of descriptions consisting of randomly assigned elements. More precisely, researchers choose several dimensions on which the alternatives are characterized. In each dimension, the alternatives are described by different politicized cues that vary randomly (Marx and Schumacher, 2018). This multidimensional treatment allows us to compare the influence of different attributes on candidate choice on a common scale. Hence, the choice variable simply is regressed on a set of dummy variables taking the values if the attribute is included in the chosen candidate profile (Marx and Schumacher, 2018).

We included a round fixed effect to prevent respondents from making different choices in subsequent rounds. The treatment takes the form of a table in which attributes are organized in rows and the two candidates in columns (Marx and Schumacher, 2018; Horiuchi et al. 2016) (See attachment 2).

We randomized the order of the rows in which the attribute labels are presented across respondents. But we did not change the order of rows across rounds within respondents, to avoid confusion. Therefore, the relative influence of the dimensions on candidate selection - cannot be a function of the order in which they appear in the treatment table.

Further, we did not impose any restrictions on how the attributes of those dimensions are combined. A Summary of all dimensions and statements is provided in Table 1. Thereby letting our candidates differ (randomly) on all dimensions that could make them more or less attractive to voters who represent different ethnic, economic geographical, and biographic characteristics.

## **5.2 General information survey - direct items for subgroup analysis**

The sample was drowned to accommodate diversities of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, educational levels, and geo-economic locations as much as possible. We included the following variables in the general information survey.

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<sup>2</sup> This list of attributes can be revised based on the donor's interest.

- a. Demographic data (Gender, age, education, ethnicity, religion, occupation, geographical locations, etc.)
- b. Political literacy
- c. Political interest
- d. Political exposure
- e. Partisanship
- f. Media usage
- g. Impact of *Aragalaya* on Voters
- h. Contemporary political behavior of voters
- i. Nexus between patronage politics and voters

The general information survey was conducted simultaneously with core research, using common samples and locations for both the conjoint experiment and the general information survey. In the analysis section, both datasets were combined to interpret voter preferences.

### **Step 1 - Identify the potential attributes**

The research attributes were chosen based on the research objectives and the environmental factors of the country that may affect decisions. These selected attributes were used in the pilot research. After assessing the interest of the respondents in the pilot, we identified 14 potential attributes for the main research.

- 1. Gender/sex** - In the current discourse of electoral politics increasing women's political participation is a major concern. For gender, we entailed a distinction between male and female. This was expected to understand how this male and female difference affects the voters while choosing their political candidate. We avoided other gender identities to avoid unnecessary confusion among the respondents.
- 2. Age** - For age, instead of three alternative ages we offered three values including young, middle-aged, and old. After the people's struggle, there is a revival of youth leadership and a tendency to reject the old politicians. The purpose of this attribute was to measure the people's will for youth leadership on the real ground.
- 3. Ethnicity** - During the last few decades ethnicity has played a crucial role in candidate preferences. Due to the civil war and Easter Sunday attack the tension among the three major ethnic groups increased significantly. The purpose of this attribute was to understand how ethnicity works in eliciting voter preferences. Only major ethnic groups

such as Muslims, Sinhalese, and Tamils were included as values to avoid the complexity of treatment methods.

4. **Educational level** - In the recent past, people have been criticizing the education qualifications of the members of the Parliament as well as other representative bodies. In that context, this attribute will measure the people's interest in the education qualification of their candidate in the upcoming elections. For education, we offered four values; passed grade 8, qualified G.C.E O/L, qualified G.C.E A/L, and Graduates.
5. **Nationalistic religious position** - The nationalistic religious position is the most crucial dimension in the list and our priority is to find out the effect of this cue in shaping the voters' preferences. With this dimension, we attempted to find out whether nationalistic and religious labels influence voter choice in a newly emerged local political context. Further, we also attempted to find out to what extent the Easter Sunday terrorist attack affects voter choice and whether it affects them as a positive or negative component. Therefore, we allowed the participant to be exposed to only one of four statements. The first value represents the Sinhala Buddhist nationalistic line. However, the next value contributes to measuring anti-Muslim sentiment. The third sentence is a moderate stance on the nationalistic religious cues. Respondents will be allowed to signal their moderate and neutral policy preferences regarding the above matter. A third value helps us identify individuals who rely on religious minority labels.
6. **Governance** - From this attribute, we expected to examine the effectiveness and validity of good governance for voter choice. Since 2015 good governance has been a popular demand on the political ground. During the people's struggle eliminating the corruptions and corrupted politicians was a popular slogan. Here we presented three values for this attribute. Two of them were given in favor of corruption with two capacities (corrupted, non-corrupted but support corruption) and one against corruption (non-corrupted).
7. **Tax policy** - Increasing government revenue is crucial for Sri Lanka to recover from the current economic crisis and create a more sustainable economic environment. However, people are frustrated that they have to bear this burden. Therefore, voters are more likely to be interested in their candidate's tax policy in the next election. We offered four values to trap this attribute; stop tax increase and reduce the existing tax,

increase direct tax and reduce indirect tax, Increase the ceiling point of direct tax, and establish a horizontal tax policy to include all high-income segments of the society.

8. **Economic growth strategy for settling foreign loans** - Sri Lanka is currently facing a critical choice in its economic strategy due to the severe economic crisis that Sri Lanka experienced after independence. A competition is emerging between political parties and leaders to propose strategies to overcome the ongoing economic crisis. This attribute aimed to get an understanding of the strategies that attract more voters among them. For that, we have selected five popular strategies in the current political arena; Privatization as much as possible, encouraging remittances, enabling growth in rural areas and small businesses, and establishing industries for export.
9. **Orientation to mainstream and party affiliation** - The prevailing political uncertainty has created an unprecedented political battleground. According to some commentators, election results may be unpredictable or complicated. Against this backdrop, this attribute aimed to measure the direction/s of public support on orientation to mainstream and party affiliation of political candidates. For this attribute, we offered four values; Support the current government/ parliament, Support only the president, try to bring the existing opposition to power, and represent an alternative force.
10. **Patron-client relationship/patronage politics** - Clientelism involves an asymmetric relationship between groups of political actors described as patrons or brokers with voters described as clients. There are strong interactions between these parties and the patron-client relationship reaches its climax during an election campaign. Candidates employ these strategies to mobilize and expand their vote bases. Further, gifts and bribes can be given directly, as money, and indirectly, as services. Some candidates may even reach out to their voters long before an election is announced. This attribute attempted to trap the voters' preferences on clientelism. For patronage politics, we offered four values; Help voters with their requirements, Develop the infrastructure of the electorate, Be interested in national and international issues, and maintain close relationships with voters.
11. **Endorsement** - For endorsements, we included four different values; Endorse by social media, endorse by electronic media, endorse by experts and advocates, endorse

by religious leaders, and endorse by inner circle (family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, etc.). This attribute aims to trap the types of media endorsements that voters rely on for the upcoming elections. It is also expected to understand the influence of media patronage on the selection of a political candidate.

**12. Issue specialisation** - People are nowadays very interested in the vision and expertise of the future leadership in the country. Saving the country from the current crisis depends on the capacity and commitment of the future leadership. Therefore, this attribute allowed us to identify the future leadership that voters prefer. For this attribute we offered five potential values; national security, good governance and corruption, welfare, economy, and international relations.

**13. Position on ethnic conflict** - This dimension captures the influence of the ethnic conflict which can be considered as having been a salient issue in Sri Lankan politics during the last 40 years. Even though the civil war ended in 2009 after defeating LTTE, the ethnic conflict still seems to continue despite the absence of war. In current political discourse, four major positions have come up with different political groups and activists. The first position seems to be the most popular among the Sinhala majority focuses on the priority of a unitary state. In contrast, some Tamil extremist groups rely on the opposite position of acceptance by the majority, which is seen to be achieved through a separate state and the right to self-determination. The Second and Third statements are the positions (which can also be considered as solutions) in between these two extremist adaptations. These two statements which represent the power-sharing idea in a unitary state and a federal solution to safeguard multi-culturalism, also serve as positive solutions for the first and fourth statements. However, we expected the majority of Sinhalese respondents will be more likely to choose one option from the first two sentences and people who belong to minority groups are more likely to choose one of the last two sentences.

## **Step 2 - Generate the hypothetical profiles**

In this stage, we generate hypothetical profiles of the candidates by combining values of selected attributes. Practically this value combination has generated more than 100 hypothetical profiles. However, too many profiles are unmanageable as many profiles create complications among respondents, which also challenges analysis. To remedy this situation, profiles were

generated through an orthogonal array design. Using a statistical program (SPSS) this orthogonal generated 81 profiles (see attachment 2).

### **Step 3 - Pilot research**

The pilot research was conducted in the last week of July. The pilot research was conducted by principal researchers in Gampaha District. The field location was the Negombo polling division. The pilot survey took place in 03 Grama Nildhari Divisions; Dalupotha, Wellaweediya, and Periyamulla. The sample size is 30 and respondents from all three major ethnicities (Muslim, Sinhala, and Tamil) participated in the pilot survey. Based on the findings, observations, experience, and challenges of the pilot survey, we amended some aspects of the questionnaire and changed some field locations and sampling strategies.

### **Step 4 - Conduct field work**

This survey was fielded in August 2024. Our experiment was embedded in an onsite survey that is representative of the Sri Lankan citizens who have the right to vote. The onsite survey was chosen despite difficulties due to avoid biases in the research sample since a significant proportion of the elderly population in Sri Lanka does not use internet facilities and social media.

At this stage, well-trained 30 enumerators experimented with selected respondents from the sample. To run the experiment respondents were asked to choose a profile between two candidate profiles based on their preferences. We included a round fixed effect to prevent respondents from making different choices in subsequent rounds. The treatment takes the form of a table in which attributes are organized in rows and the two candidates in columns (See attachment 3).

We randomized the order of the rows in which the attribute labels are presented across respondents. But we did not change the order of rows across rounds within respondents, to avoid confusion. Therefore, the relative influence of the dimensions on candidate selection - cannot be a function of the order in which they appear in the treatment table.

### **Step 5 - Data analysis**

Now we are in the process of data processing and analysis. A total of 1,350 respondents with the right to vote participated in the experiment. Each respondent chose between two

hypothetical candidate profiles in four rounds. Therefore, we obtained 10,800<sup>3</sup> observations. The dependent variable is the candidate choice of the respondent. The dataset is organized in a long format so that the unit of analysis is the respondent candidate evaluation. In the analyses, we cluster standard errors by respondents to reflect that the evaluations are not independent. Moreover, we include the round fixed effect to account for the fact that respondents might choose differently in later rounds.

Our dependent variable is binary and takes the value of 1 if a candidate is chosen, and 0 if a candidate is not chosen. Following the recommendations in the literature, we estimate linear probability models (Hainmueller et al. 2014). This multidimensional treatment allows us to compare the influence of different attributes on candidate choice on a common scale. To this end, the choice variable simply has to be regressed on a set of dummy variables taking the value of 1 if the attribute was included in the description of a candidate.

Our main analysis will be based on calculating the marginal mean for each level. However, we are particularly interested in how the predictive power of the attributes differs based on the sub-group differences of the respondents. Therefore, we estimate the marginal mean to mitigate concerns about differences in reference categories when comparing the results of conjoint analyses between sub-samples (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020). We will calculate a 95% confidence interval for each marginal mean and differences in marginal means with 95% confidence intervals to grasp sub-group differences.

### **5.3 Research locations**

The location of the research has been selected on the following criteria.

- 1) Geo-economic clusters
- 2) Ethno-religious composition

### **5.4 Sample**

A total of 1,350 eligible voters took part in the survey. The sample was chosen to reflect the actual demographic composition of the country, with a focus on representing different

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<sup>3</sup>  $N = 1350 * 4 \text{ rounds} = 5400$  (each round has two responses as “yes” or “no”. Therefore  $5400 * 2 = 10,800$  observations).

ethnicities. Approximately 70% of the sample identified as Sinhalese, 11% as Tamil, and 9% as Muslim. The chosen sample was representative of the registered voters in the respective districts. When selecting research locations within the districts, we aimed to find a polling division that reflects all the key social, economic, and geographical characteristics of the respective district as closely as possible. If all the characteristics could not be met in a single polling division, two or more polling divisions were selected.

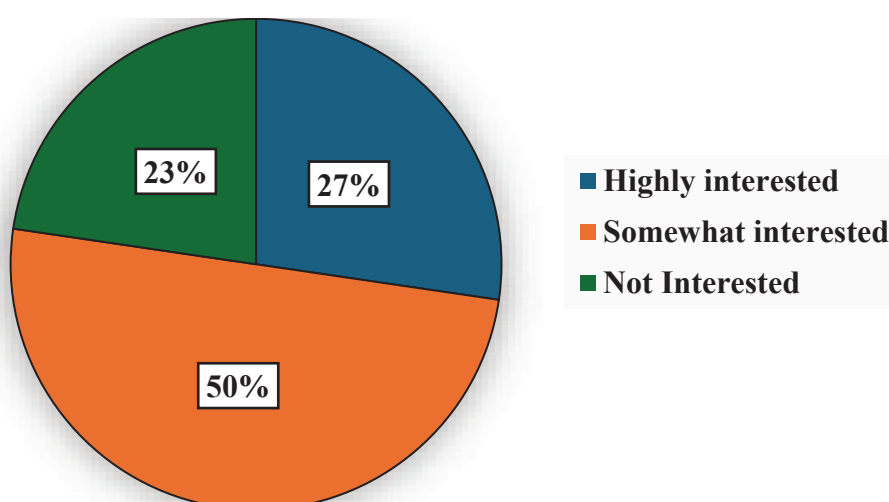


## 6. Results and findings

This document provides a preliminary analysis of data generated from the survey experiment on ‘Factors Guiding Voter Preference in Elections’, conducted in August 2024 in Sri Lanka. The findings presented here aim to capture indications of voter behavior in the upcoming elections in Sri Lanka. The results are organized according to the following aspects:

### 6.1 Political interest

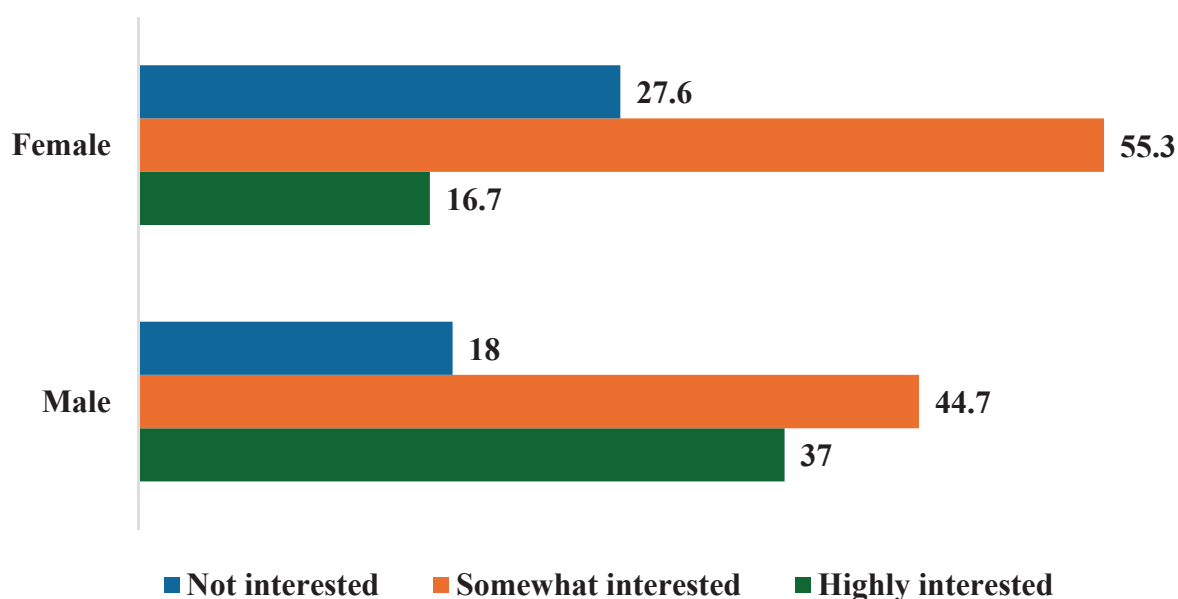
*Graph 1: Political interest of the respondents*



Overall, a significant number of respondents expressed an interest in politics and related matters. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they are interested in politics, with 27% being highly interested and 50% somewhat interested (see Graph 1).

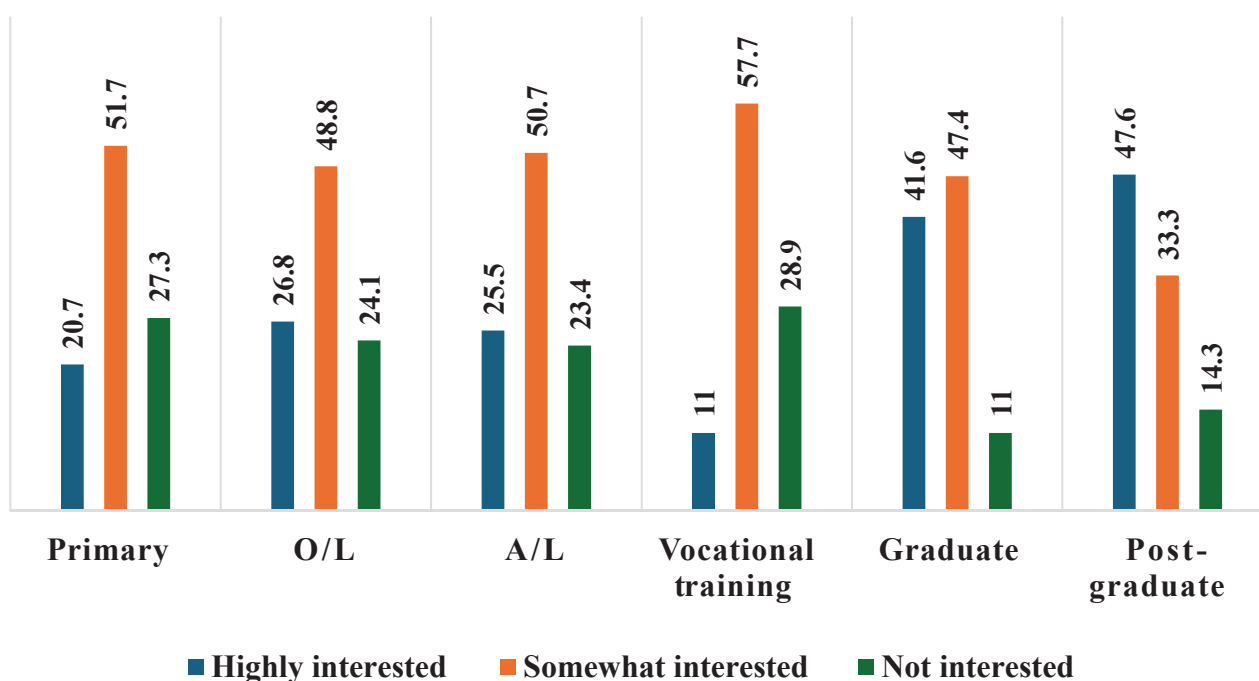
The degree of political interest among respondents varies by age, gender, and level of education. Men are more inclined toward politics compared to women, with 37% of men reporting a strong interest in politics. In contrast, only 17% of women share this high level of interest, which is less than half the percentage of men. However, 55% of women are somewhat interested in politics, which represents a positive trend. On the other hand, nearly 30% of women are not interested in politics, compared to only 18% of men who hold a similar opinion. This suggests that the voluntary or intentional disengagement of women from politics remains a valid social constraint even today (see Graph 2).

**Graph 2: Political interest of the respondents by gender**

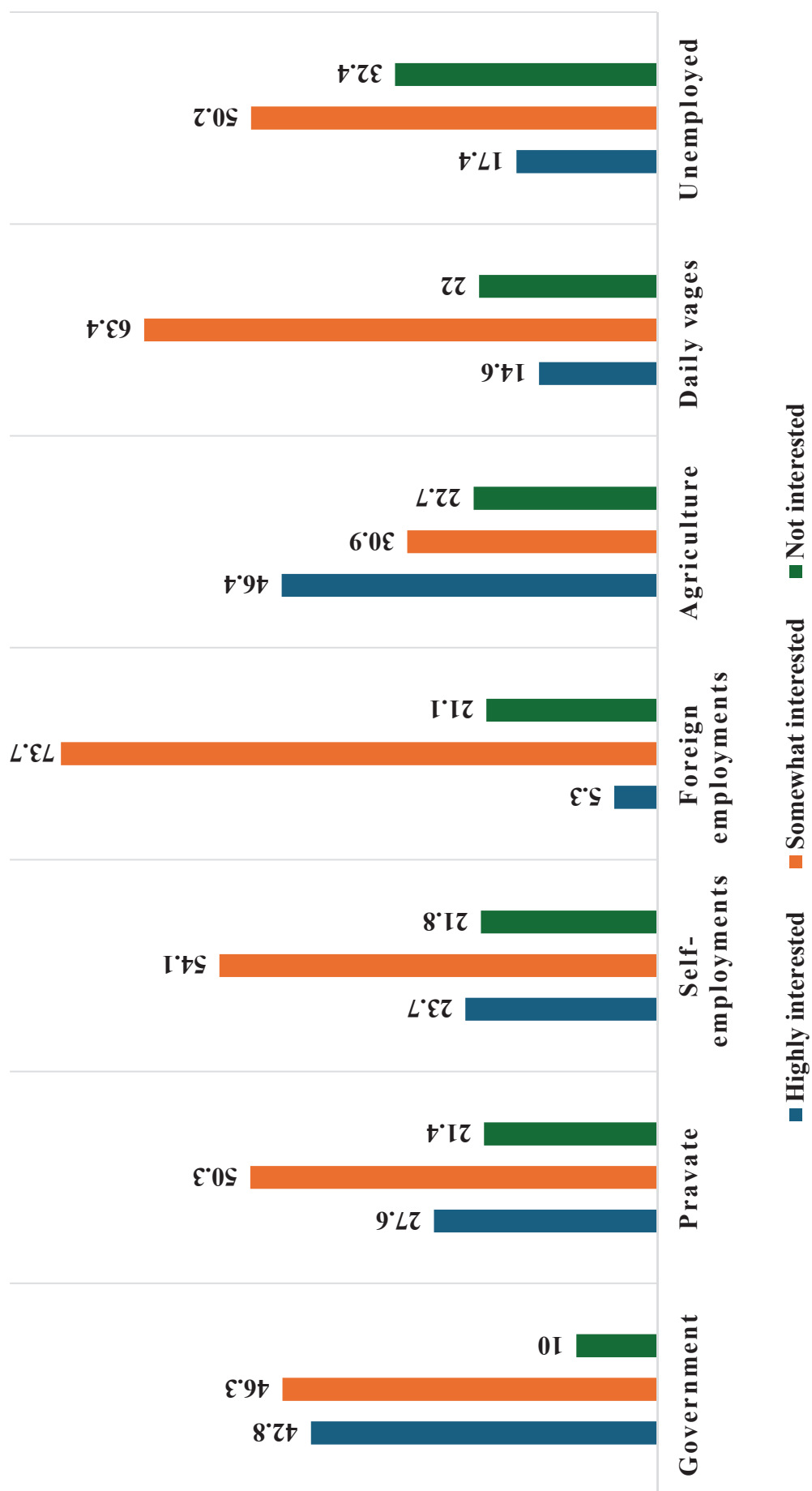


There is a clear correlation between the level of education and political interest, with a notable distinction between the political interest of graduates and that of respondents from other levels of education. Interestingly, an inverse relationship exists between the level of education and political interest (see Graph 3).

**Graph 3: Political interest of the respondents by education level**



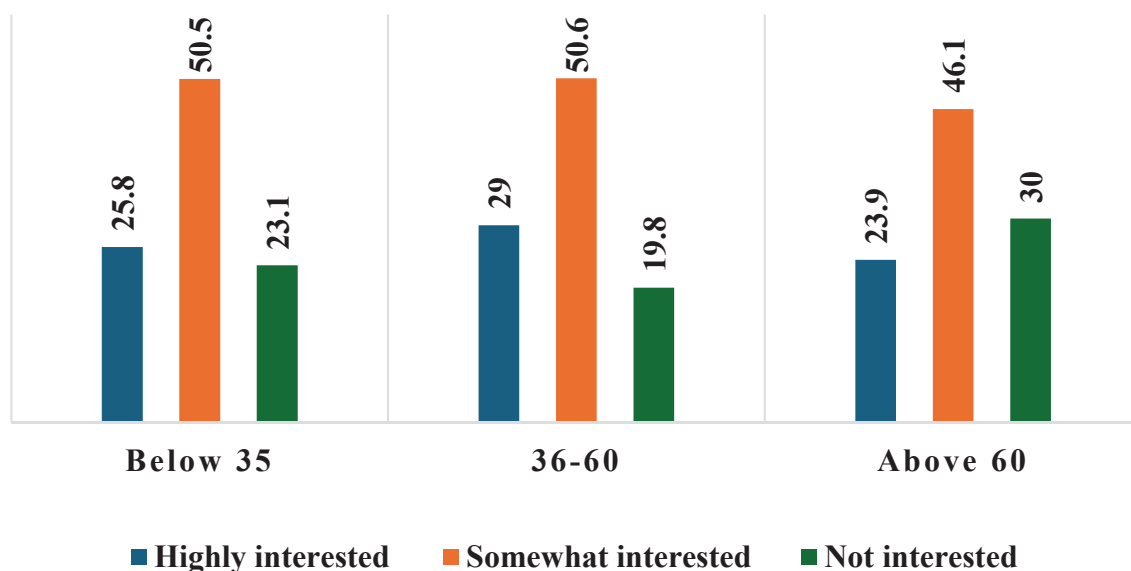
Graph 4: Political interest of the respondents by employment



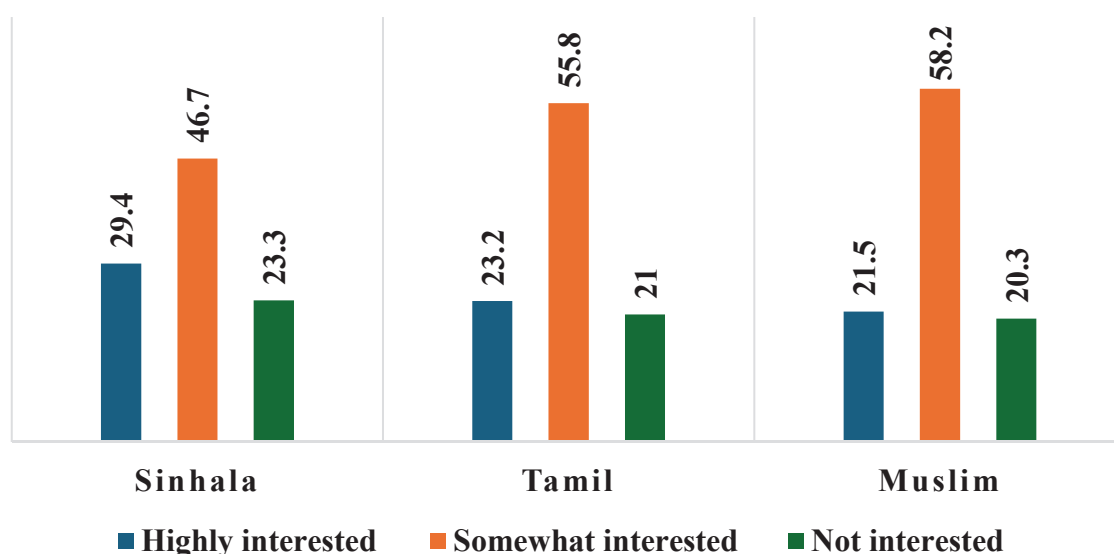
A person's employment sector appears to have a greater influence on their political interests. Among the respondents, the highest political interest is observed in the agricultural and public sectors. The political interests of those in the private sector and the self-employed are nearly identical, while the remaining groups cannot be considered politically active (see Graph 4).

The differences in age and ethnicity show no significant effect on political interest. Approximately 50% of all age groups maintain some level of political interest, with another 25% of all age groups being highly interested in politics, while the rest express no interest (see Graphs 5 & 6).

**Graph 5: Political interest of the respondents by age**



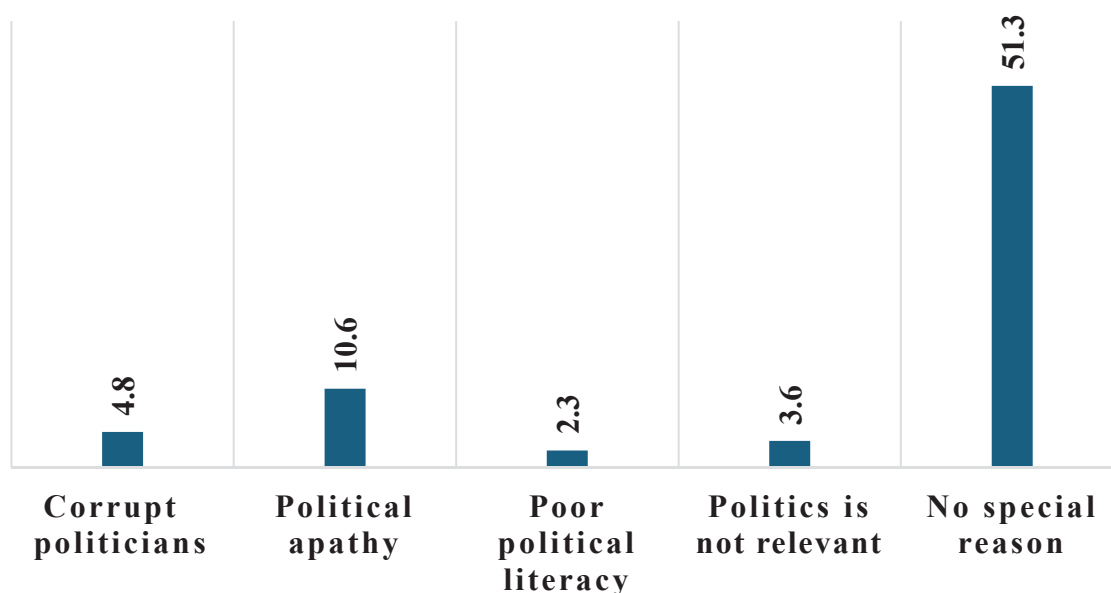
**Graph 6: Political interest of the respondents by ethnicity**



Regardless of ethnic differences, all three groups exhibit similar patterns of political interest, akin to the relationship between age and political interest.

In total, 27% of the sample reported no interest in politics (See Graph 1). When asked why they were not interested in politics, a significant portion of 51.3% did not provide a specific reason. Nearly 10% expressed apathy, while around 5% said that they had lost their political interest due to corrupt politicians. Interestingly, 3.6% stated that politics is not a part of their life (see Graph 7).

**Graph 7: Reasons for poor interest in politics**

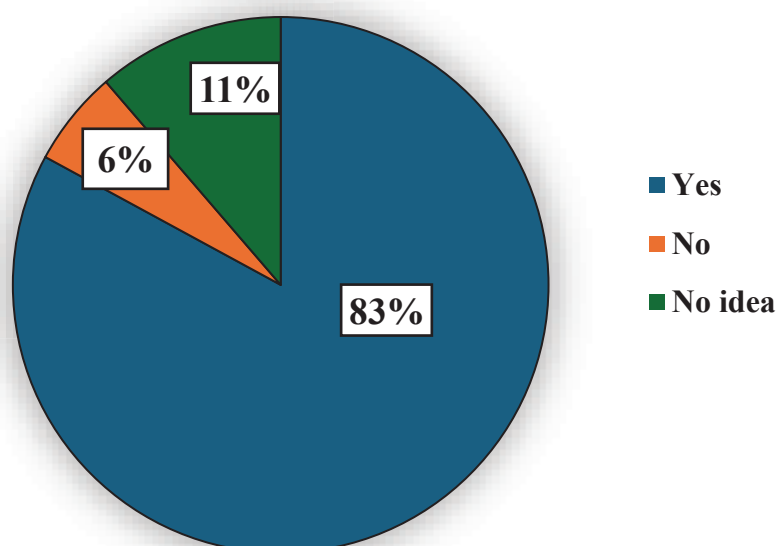


## **6.2 Political literacy**

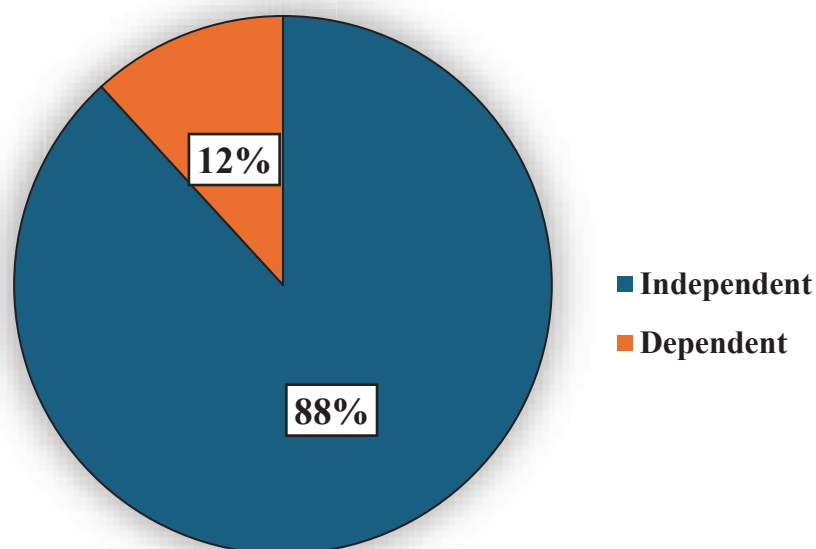
In assessing the political literacy of the respondents, the survey relied on self-evaluation which is showed in Graph 8. The survey posed the question, “Do you think your knowledge is sufficient to choose your political representative in an election?” to which the majority (83%) responded “Yes”. Approximately 6% of respondents admitted that they were not knowledgeable enough to select their political representative, while, interestingly, 11% indicated they were not sure whether they had sufficient knowledge to make such a decision.

To gauge respondents' ability to make political decisions, the survey also asked, "Do you vote independently, or does your decision depend on the advice of others?" More than four-fifths that is 88% stated that their decision was independent.

**Graph 8: Respondents' evaluation of their political literacy**



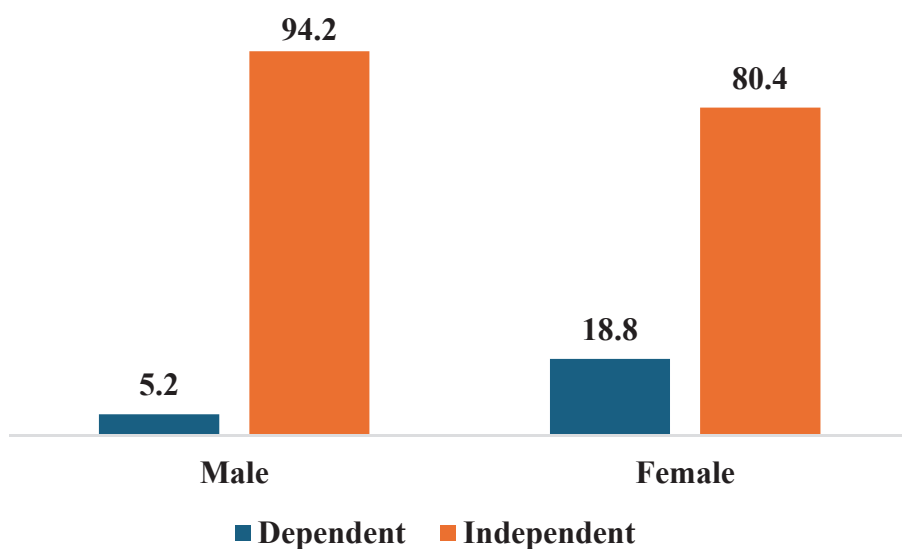
**Graph 9: Decision-making in an election**



According to Graph 9, 12% of respondents make their voting decisions with the intervention of a third party, with most being influenced by their spouse or parents. A higher proportion of

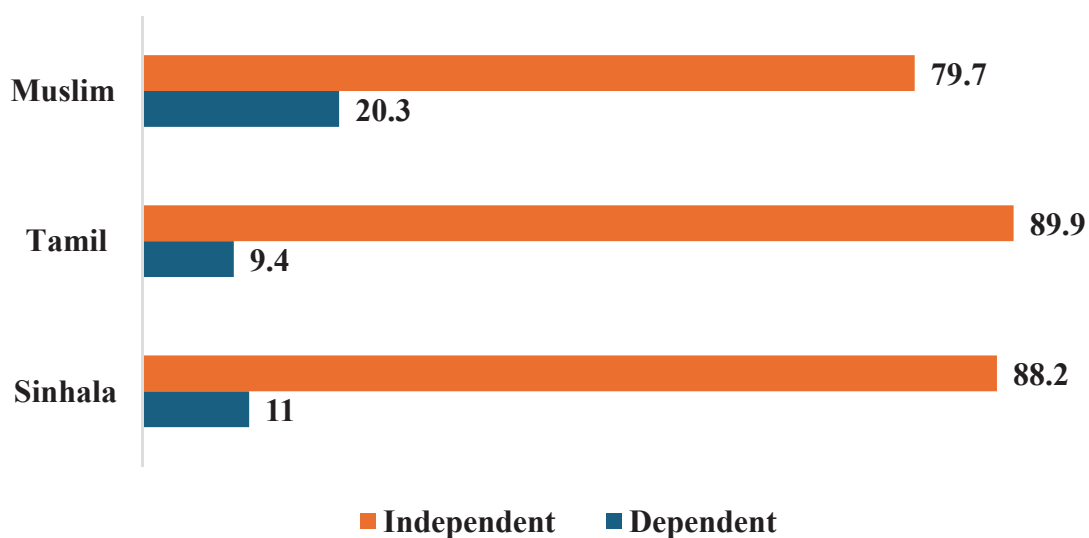
dependent voters are females compared to males. Very few respondents are influenced by media or religious leaders (see Graph 10).

**Graph 10: Independence of the voting by gender**



Compared to the other two ethnic groups, Muslims are somewhat more likely to depend on others when making their voting decisions. According to the survey data, most of these dependents are female. Married women tend to rely on their spouses, while unmarried women often rely on family members, such as brothers or fathers (see Graph 11).

**Graph 11: Independence of the voting by ethnicity**

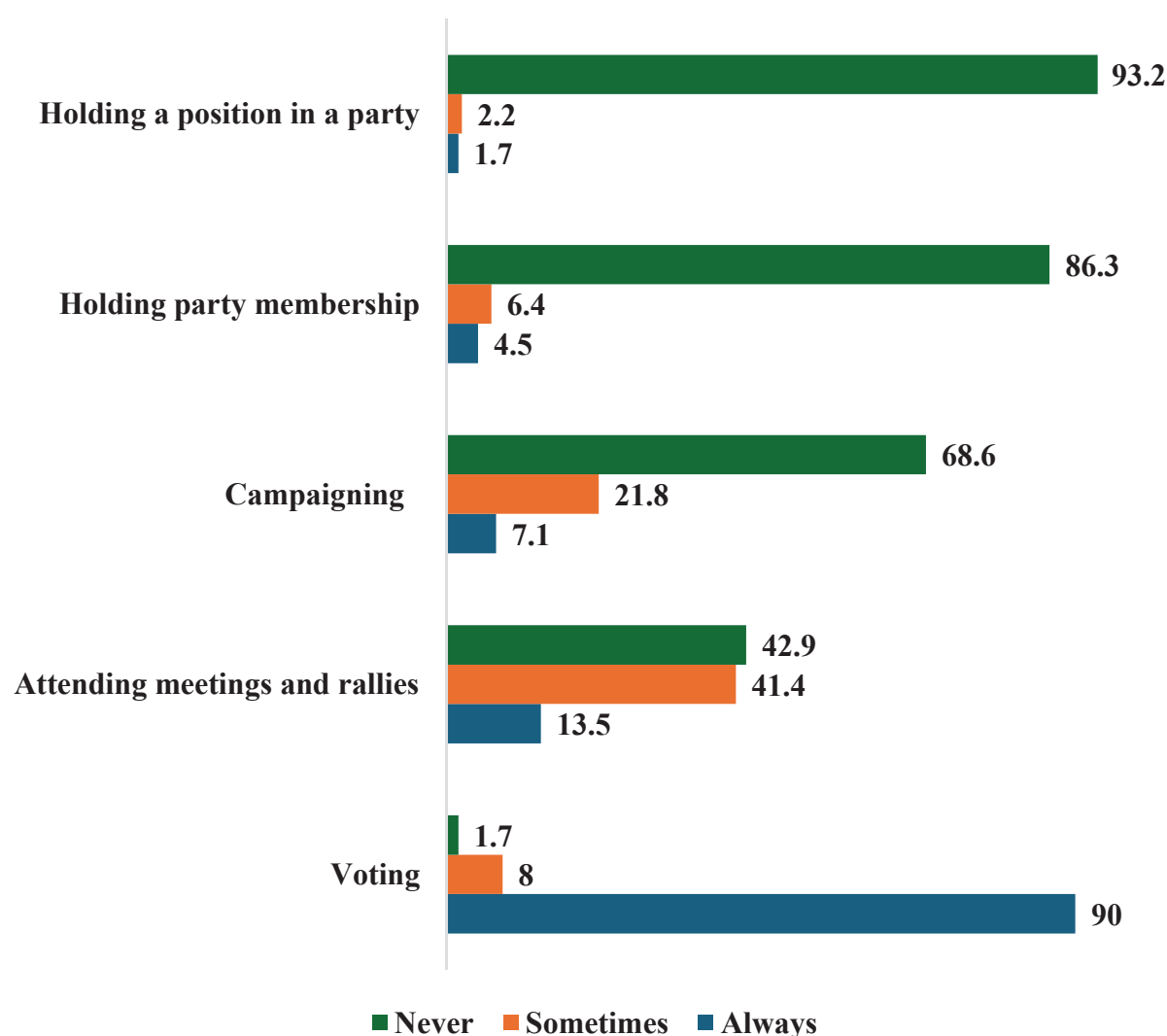


### 6.3 Political participation

To assess the respondents' degree of participation in politics, the survey posed six questions ranging from voting to contesting in an election. These questions allowed for an identification of the varying degrees of political engagement among the respondents (see Graph 12).

The majority of respondents engage in electoral politics primarily by casting their vote. Notably, 90% of respondents exercise their right to vote in every election. In addition, a considerable number of respondents attend meetings and rallies organized by political parties. One-fourth (25%) of the respondents participate in canvassing and other campaign activities, while the majority remain reluctant to publicly campaign for their political candidates.

*Graph 12: Political participation of the respondents*



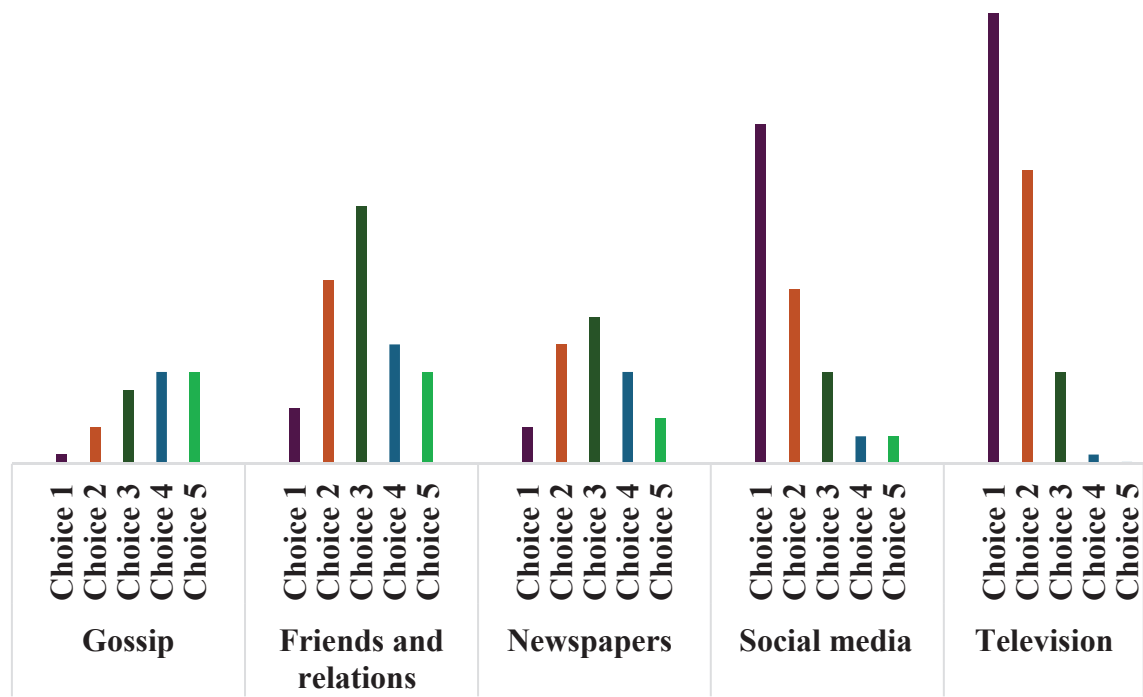


6.4 Media impact on voters

Political awareness of the public often depends on their sources of information. The survey, therefore, asked respondents to rank their sources of political information from most important to least important, including both formal and informal media currently disseminating information in Sri Lanka. Television emerged as the most popular source of information, with more than 90% of respondents relying on it. Over 70% of respondents also gather political information from social media. Newspapers, however, are less popular compared to other formal media. Information received from inner circles, such as friends and relatives, remains somewhat influential, while 15% of respondents rely on gossip for their political information (see Graph 13).

Television is popular among respondents of all age categories and is the most preferred source of information for middle-aged and elderly respondents. Its popularity slightly decreases among younger respondents.

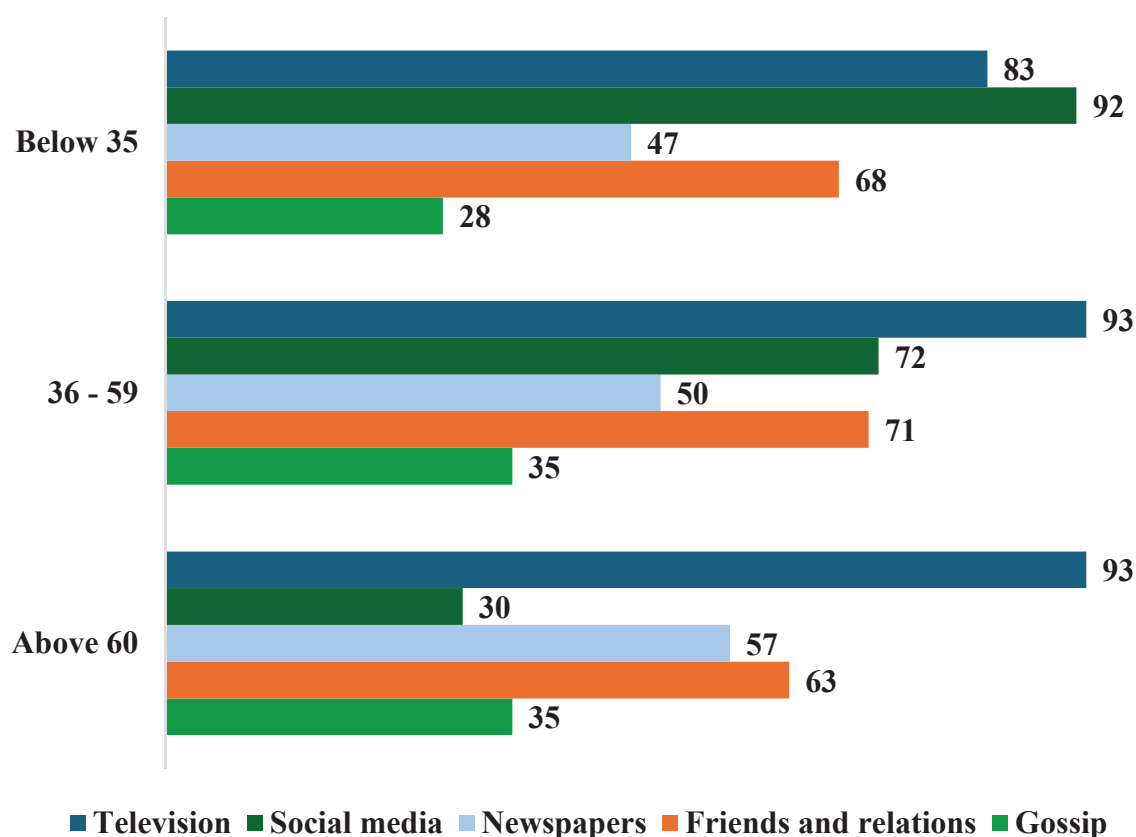
Graph 13: Political participation of the respondents



Social media is the most preferred source of information (90%) among young respondents. More than two-thirds (71.5%) of middle-aged respondents use social media. However, social media usage dramatically declines among respondents over the age of 60. Almost half of the

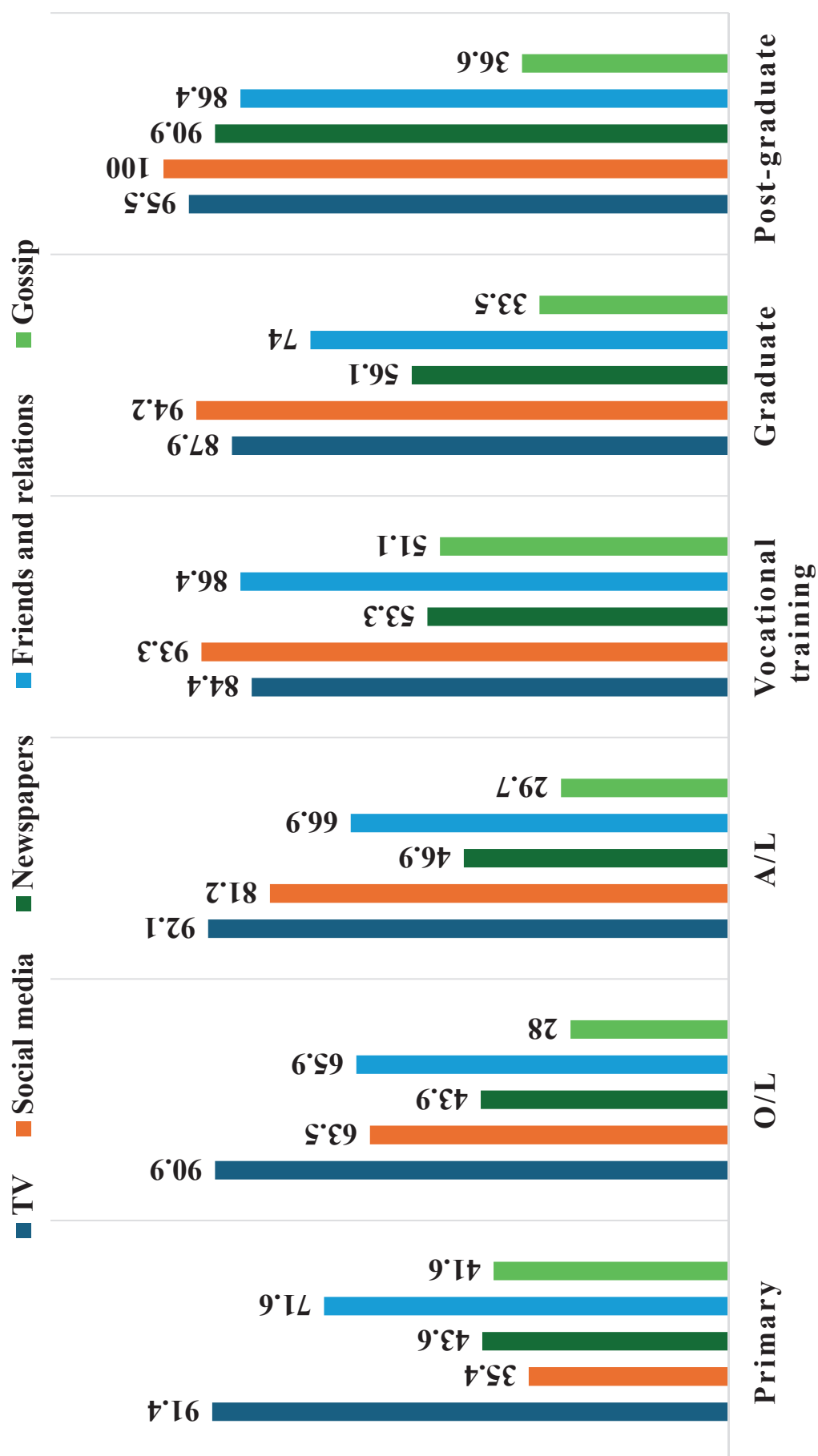
respondents across all age groups read newspapers, although close circles sometimes appear more appealing than newspapers. In general, gossip is not considered a reliable source, yet nearly 30% of respondents across all age categories accept information from gossip (see Graph 14).

**Graph 14: Information sources by age**



Trends in media use vary somewhat depending on the level of education. Television is popular among respondents of all education levels, while social media is more prevalent among those with higher education levels (see Graph 15).

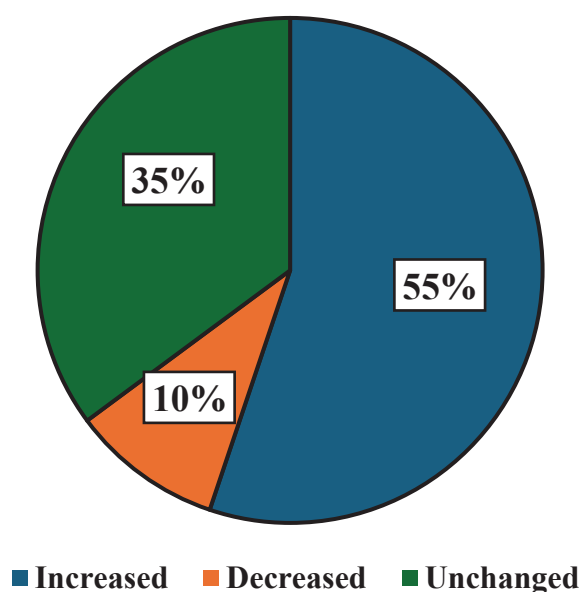
Graph 15: Sources of information by education level



### 6.5 Political impact of *Aragalaya*

In order to understand the contribution of *Aragalaya* in shaping the current political landscape, respondents were asked two questions. Specifically, the survey asked, “What happened to your political interest after the struggle?” Responses are showed in Graph 16.

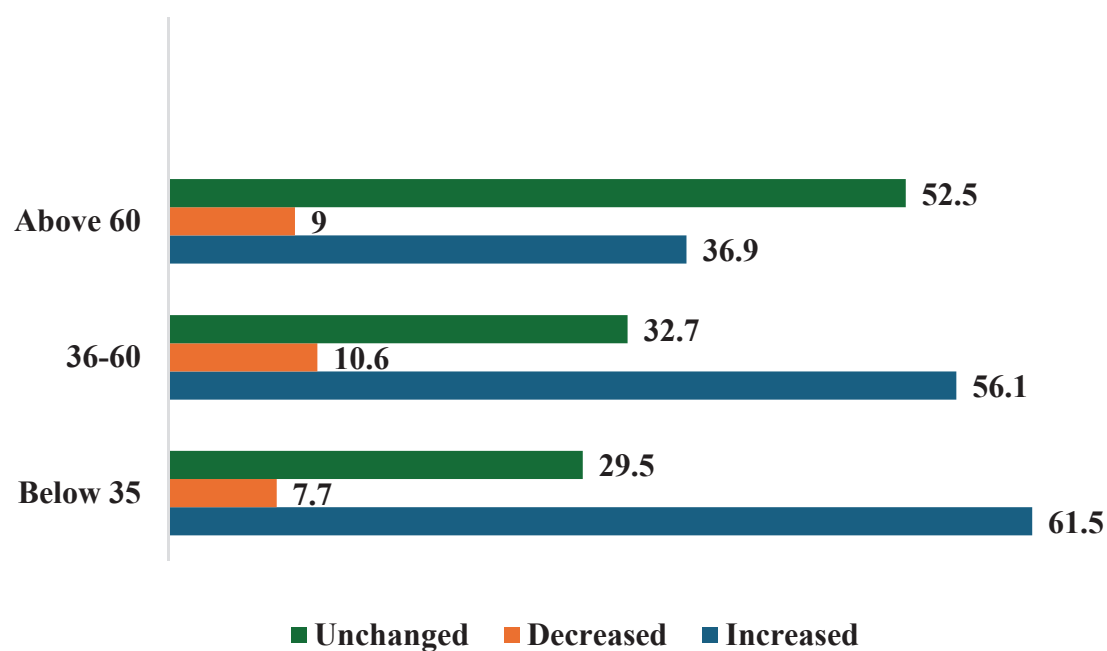
**Graph 16: Political interest after *Aragalaya***



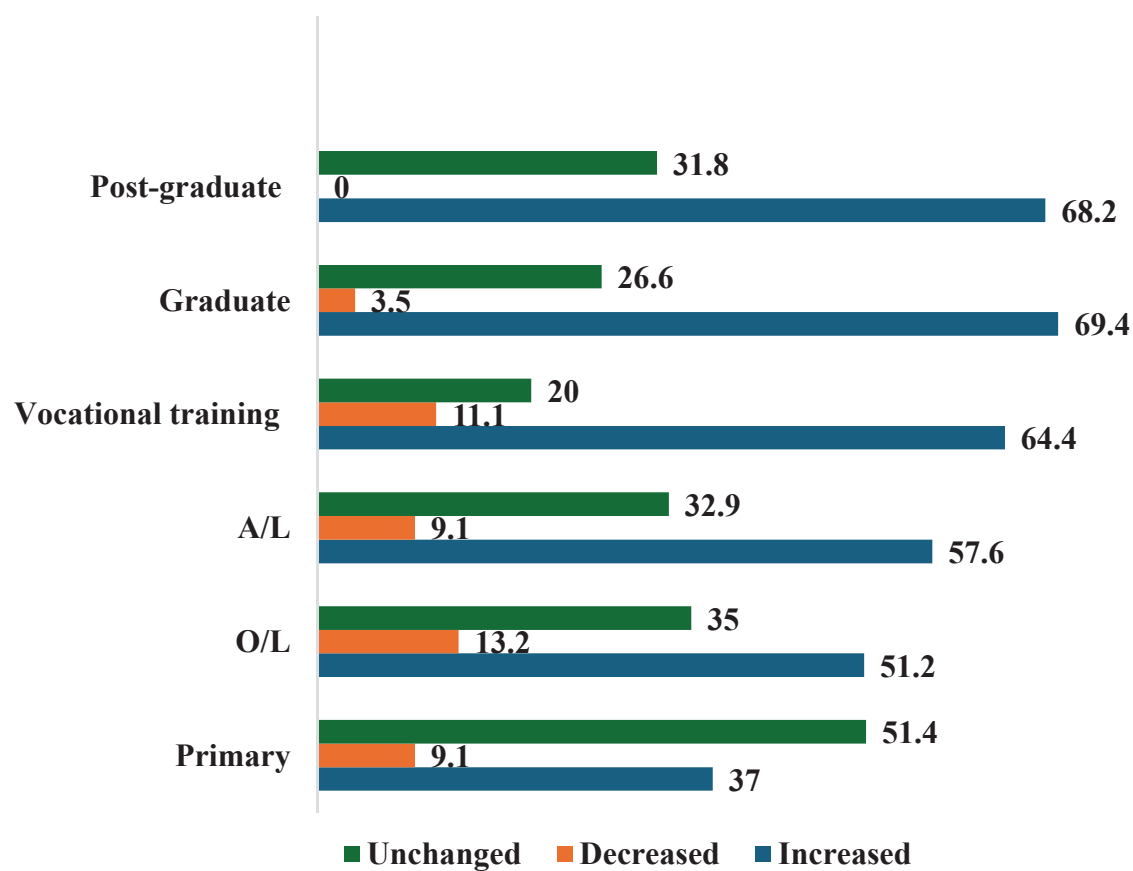
The struggle has succeeded in increasing the political interest of 55% of the respondents, while it has decreased the political interest of 10% of the respondents. However, the political interest of 35% remains unchanged after the struggle.

According to the data, the struggle has increased political interest across all age groups, with a notable rise among young and middle-aged respondents. Additionally, the struggle has significantly impacted educated respondents, with nearly 70% of degree holders indicating an increase in political interest as a result of the struggle. In a nutshell, the struggle has led to heightened political interest across all segments of Sri Lankan society, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or occupation (see Graph 17, 18, & 19).

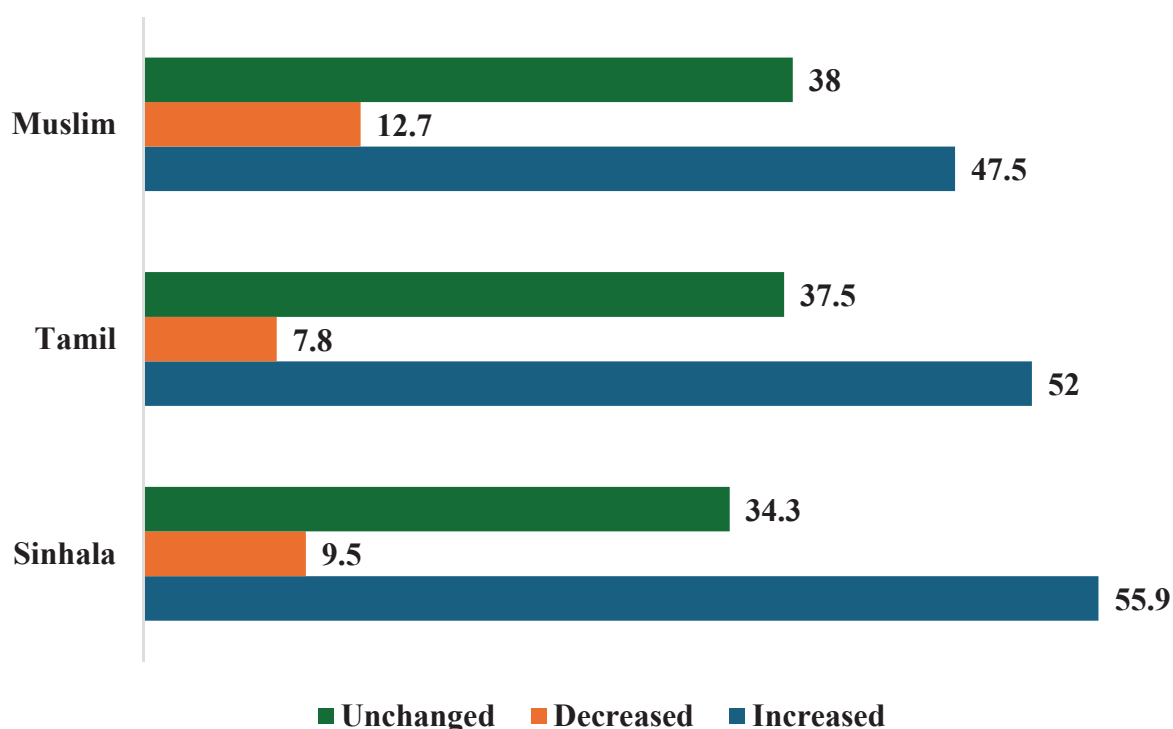
**Graph 17: Political interest after Aragalaya by age**



**Graph 18: Political interest after Aragalaya by education level**

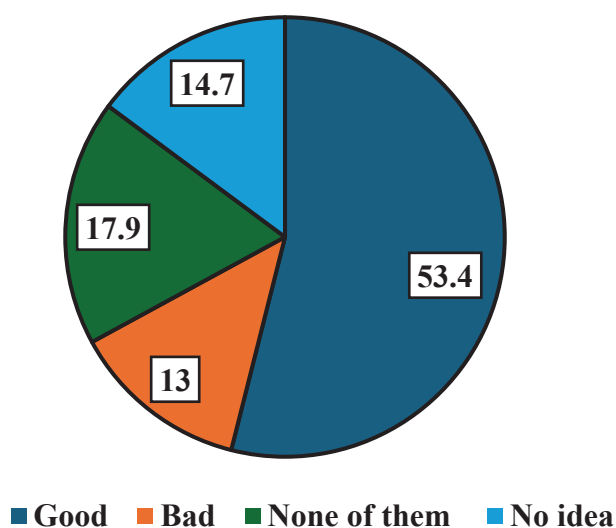


**Graph 19: Political interest after Aragalaya by ethnic group**



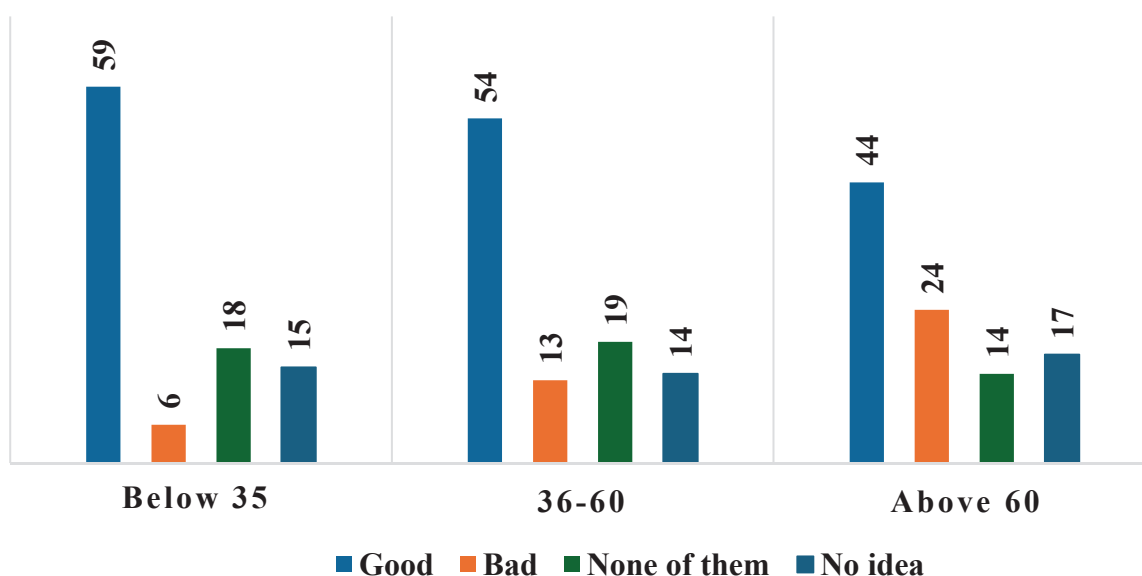
To capture public opinion on *Aragalaya*, the respondents were asked, “What is the impact of *Aragalaya* on Sri Lankan politics?” A majority amounting to 53% of the respondents believe that the struggle had a positive impact on the political landscape in Sri Lanka. In contrast, 13% think that the struggle had a negative impact, while almost 18% believe that nothing significant occurred as a result of *Aragalaya*, viewing it as an isolated incident (see Graph 20).

**Graph 20: Impact of Aragalaya**

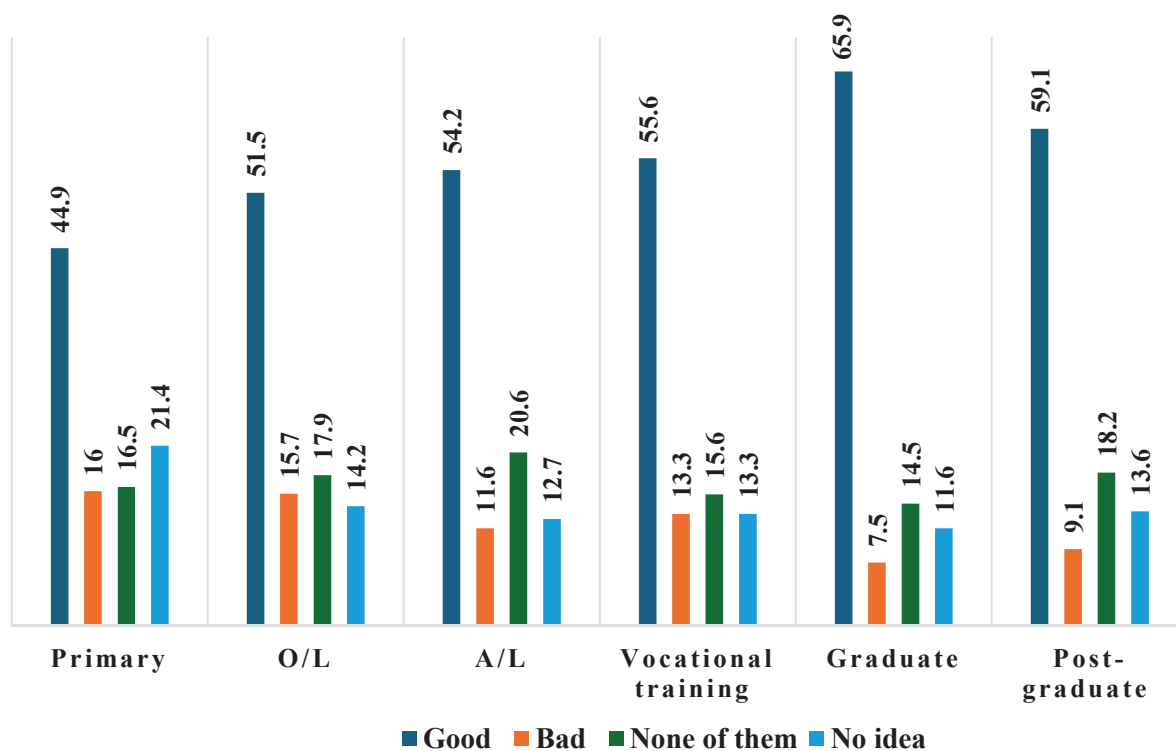


In general, this study reveals that younger and more educated respondents tend to view the struggle more positively compared to those above the age of 60 (see Graph 21). As shown in Graph 22, over 50% of respondents across all education levels hold a positive opinion of Aragalaya, except for those with only a primary education.

**Graph 21: Impact of Aragalaya by age**



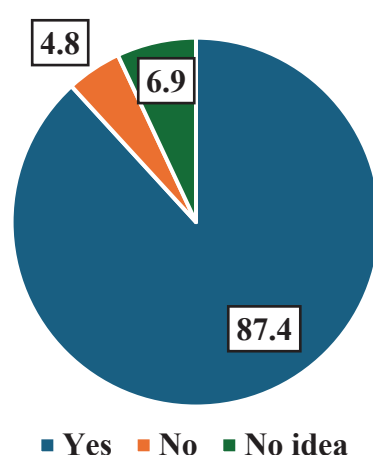
**Graph 22: Impact of Aragalaya on the country by the education level**



## 6.6 Voters' opinion on political system change

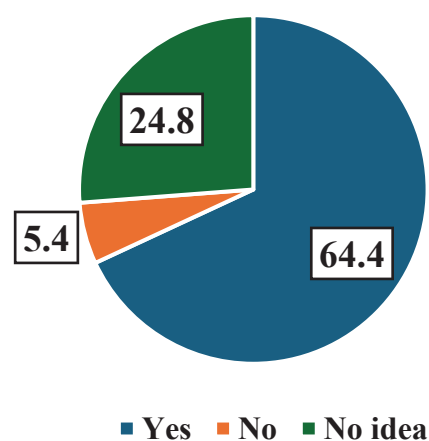
To understand voters' opinions on system change, the survey posed two questions. One question aimed to capture the respondents' personal opinions on system change, while another sought their views on others' opinions regarding system change. The first question was, "Do you support a political system change in this election?" Interestingly, around 90% of the respondents support a political system change, while less than 5% are unwilling to support it (see Graph 23).

**Graph 23: Personal opinion on political system change in the upcoming election**



The second question was, "Do you think others will support a political system change in the upcoming election?" More than half of the respondents (65%) are confident that others will support a political system change, while one-fourth (25%) are unable to make a prediction (see Graph 24).

**Graph 24: Personal opinion on political system change in the upcoming election**



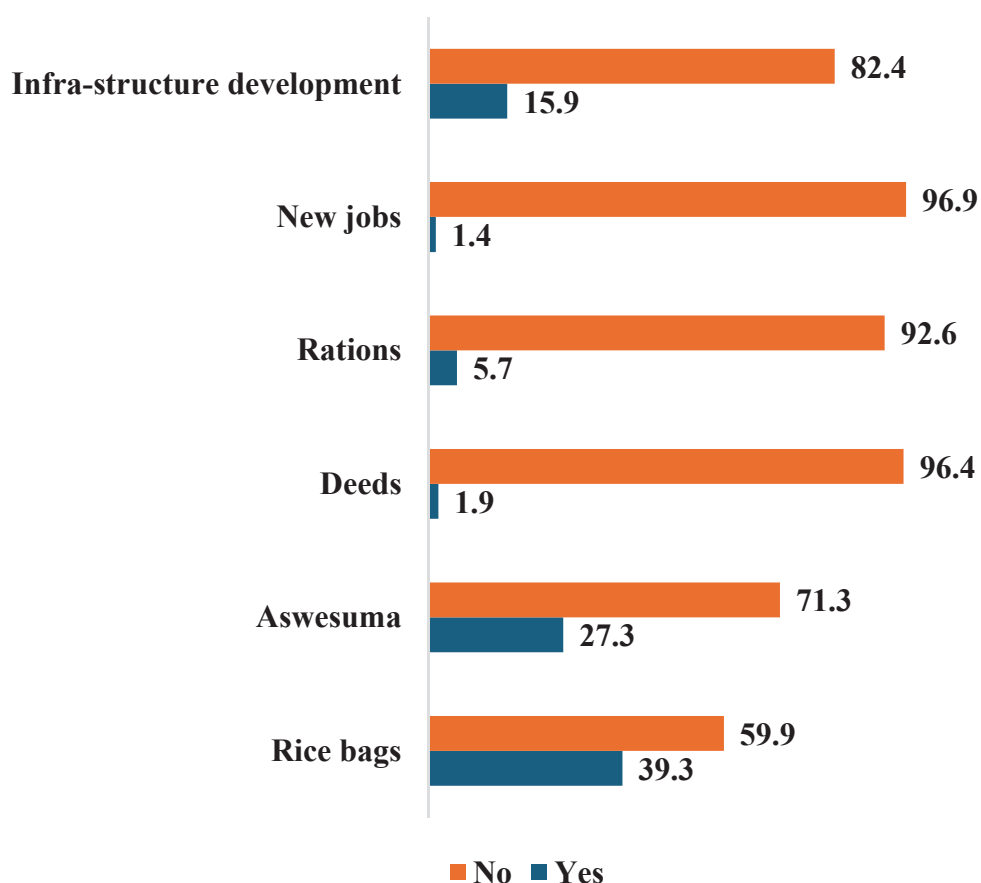


## 6.7 Patronage politics

To identify the implementation of patronage politics during the election campaign, the survey asked six questions reflecting various aspects of the patron-client relationship. Two prominent activities under patronage politics were the distribution of rice bags and the *Aswesuma Programme*. Nearly 40% of the respondents received rice bags, and around 30% of respondents received benefits from the *Aswesuma Programme*. According to the respondents, about 15% experienced some infrastructure development programmes in their locality.

Furthermore, very few respondents from the North and East received promises of new deeds, while some respondents received new government jobs after the election.

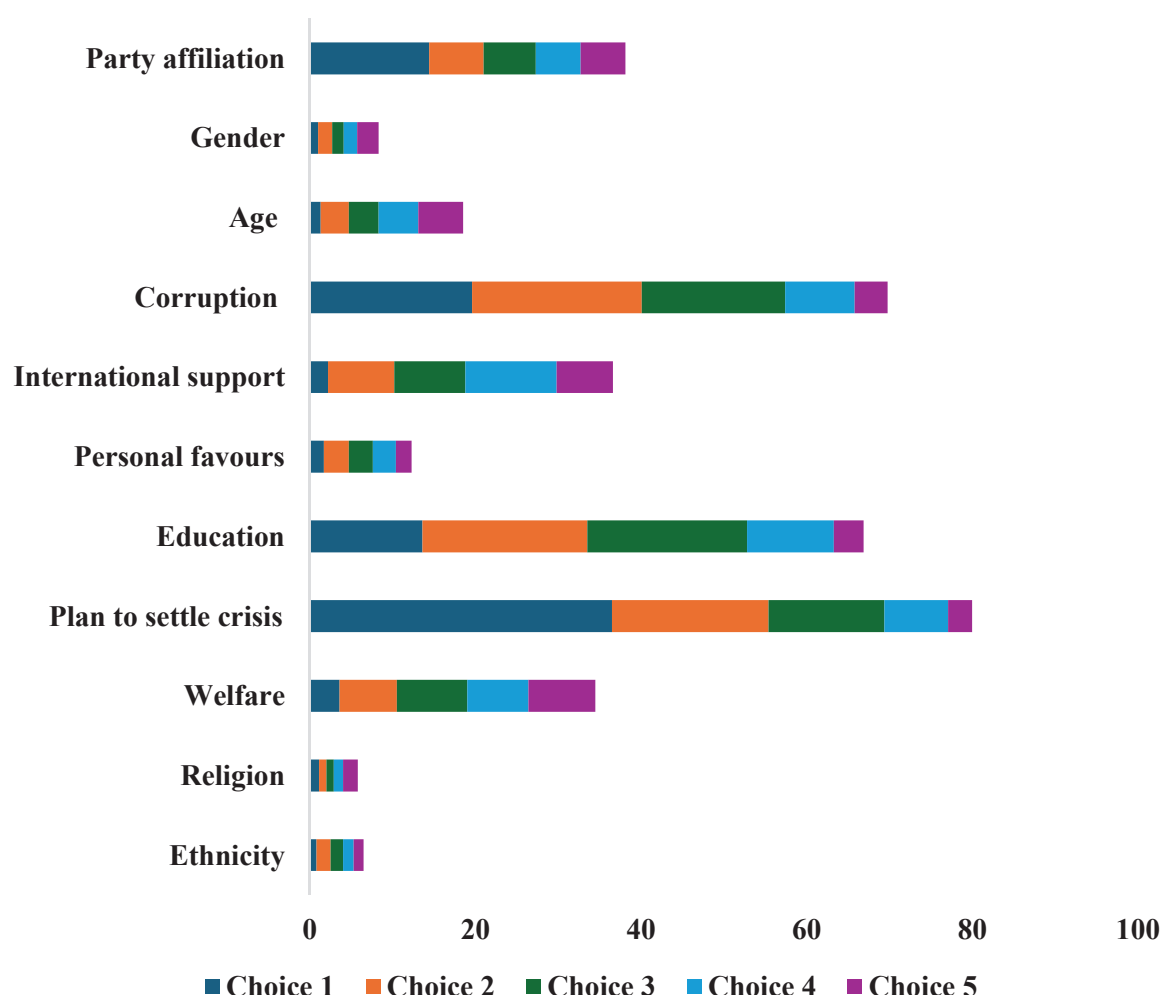
**Graph 25: Maintenance of patronage politics**



## 6.8 Voters' preferences and prominent attributes in upcoming election<sup>4</sup>

The country's political landscape is likely to change in the upcoming election due to the ongoing crisis and the people's struggle - *Aragalaya*. Consequently, the survey included questions designed to understand the key attributes influencing voters' preferences in the upcoming election. The study identified three critical attributes: 1) a plan to resolve the crisis, 2) holding corrupt politicians accountable, and 3) the educational background of politicians. In addition to these attributes, party labels were also somewhat considered. Interestingly, the general findings of the survey suggest that ethnic and religious identities do not feature prominently among the respondents.

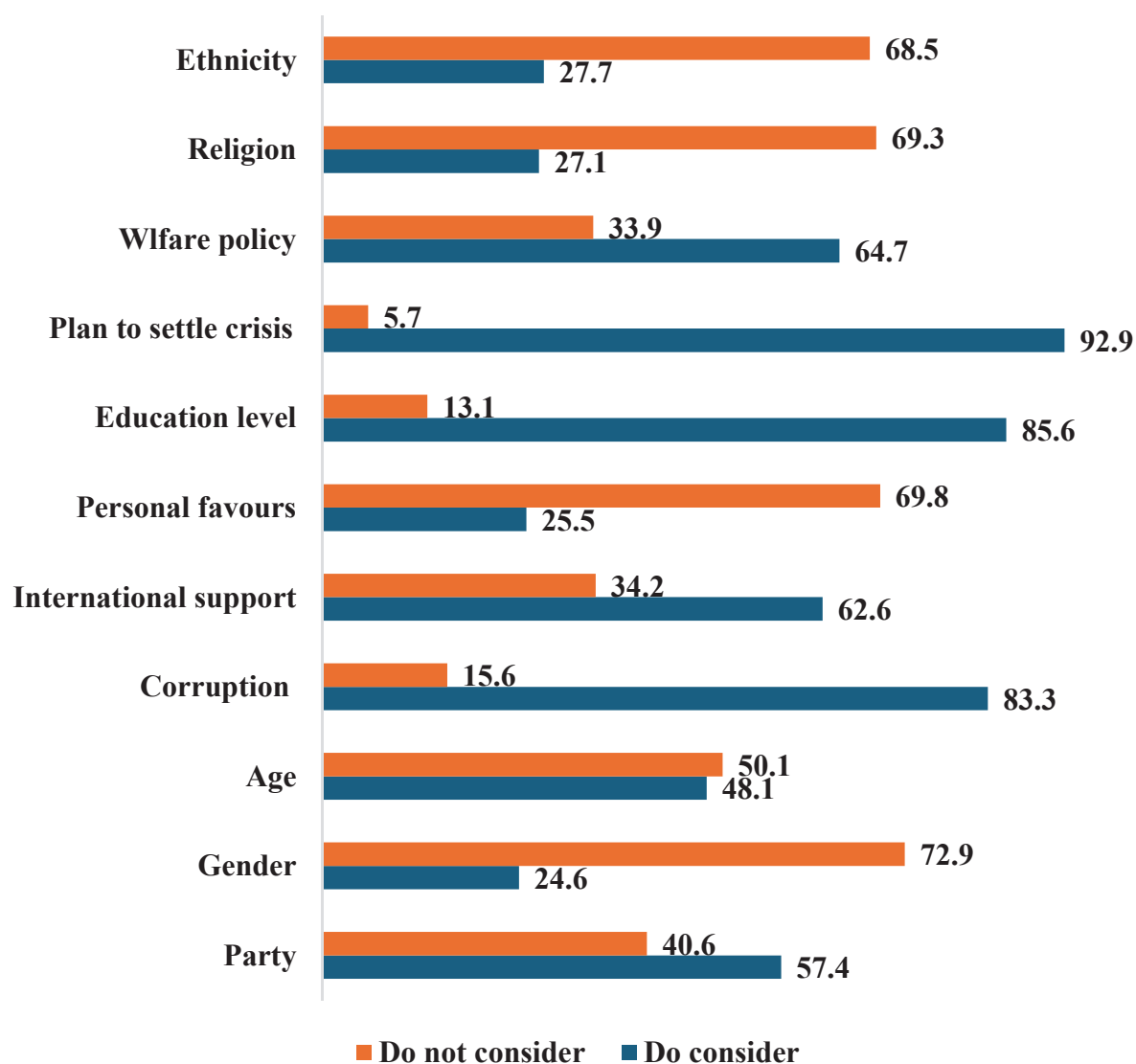
**Graph 26: Voters' choice based on key attributes by priority**



<sup>4</sup> This analysis is based on the general survey conducted for sub-group analysis.

To identify the key features that voters consider in the upcoming election, respondents were asked, “What are the key features you consider in the upcoming election when you choose your political candidate?”

**Graph 27: Influential characteristics that will be considered in the upcoming election**

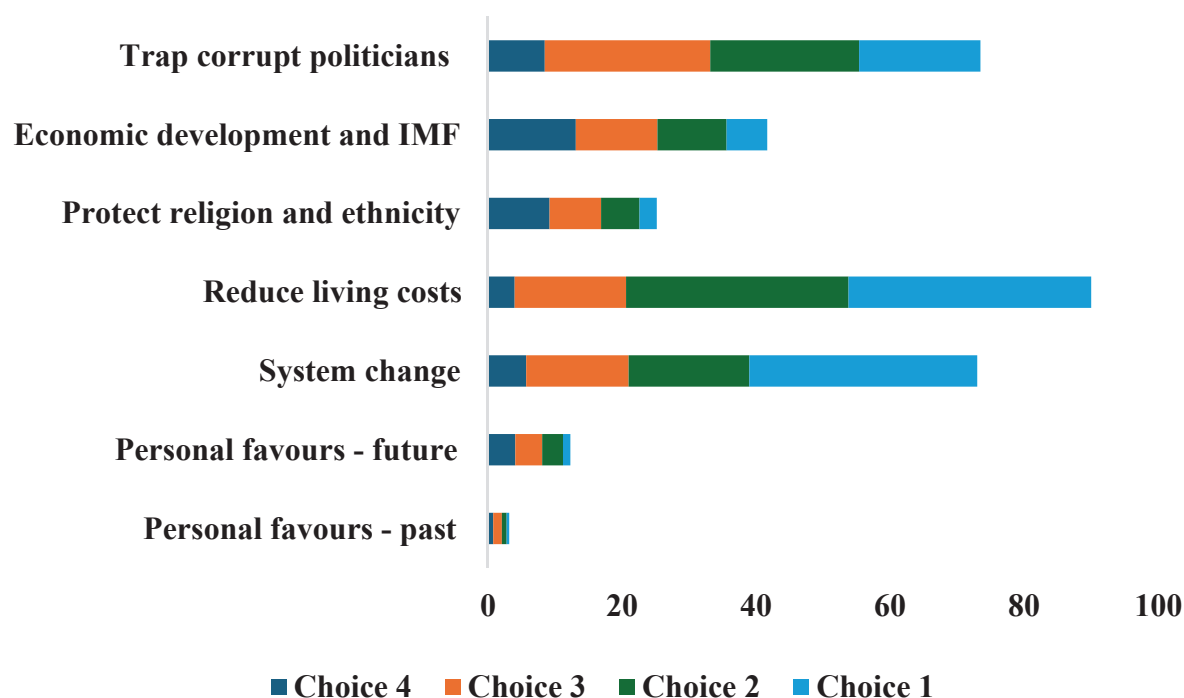


When choosing political candidates in this election, more than 90% of respondents will consider the candidates' capacity and plans to address the ongoing political and economic crisis. Additionally, around 85% of respondents will consider the candidates' educational qualifications and reports of corruption and fraud. The candidates' political party affiliation, welfare policies, and international support are also important to about 60% of respondents. Approximately 50% of respondents consider the age of their political candidates. Interestingly,

ethnicity, religion, gender, and patronage politics are not deemed crucial factors according to the survey responses.

The survey also asked: “What are the main objectives of your vote in the upcoming election?”

**Graph 28: Main objectives of voting in upcoming elections**

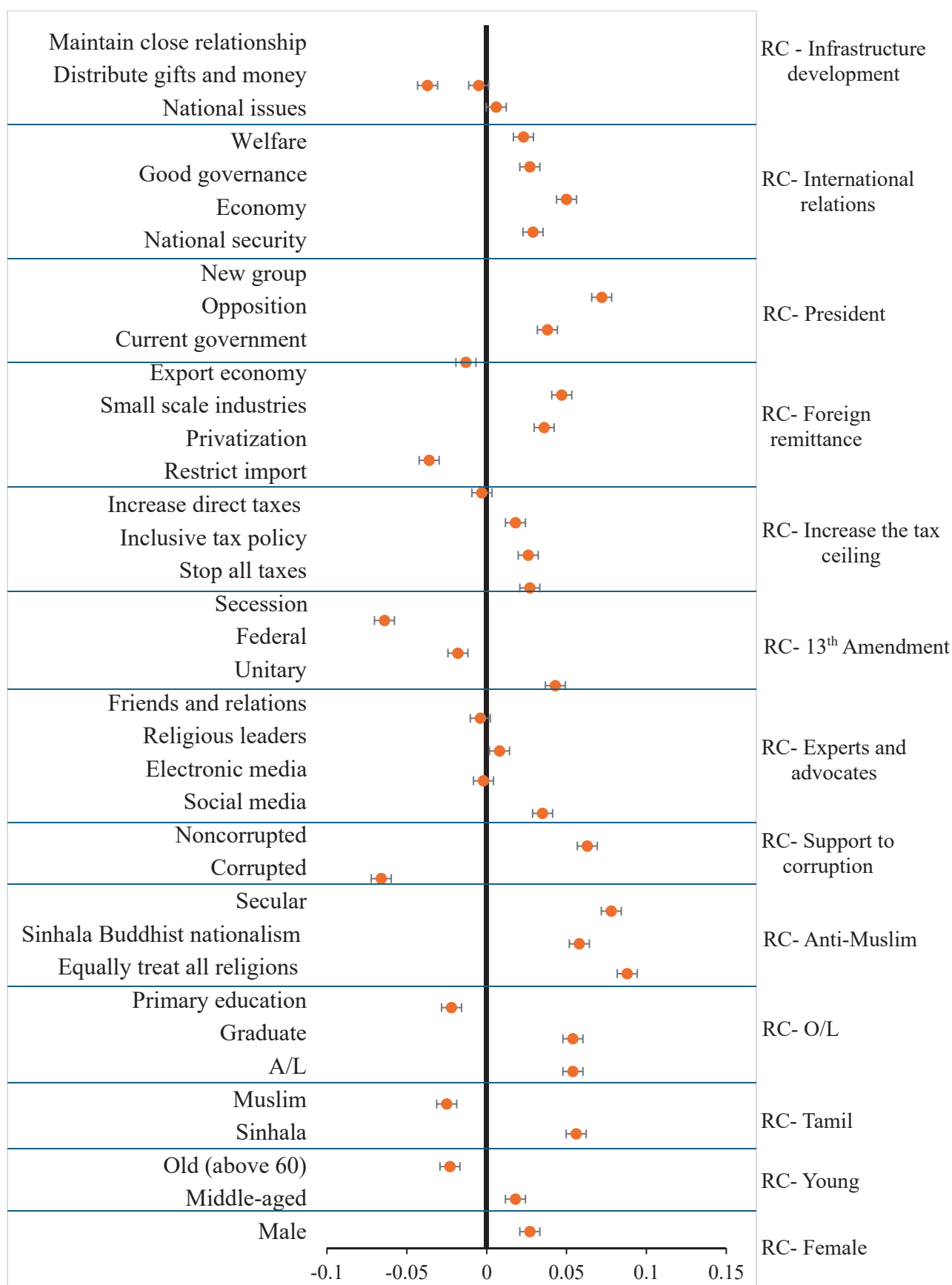


Survey data shows that the majority of respondents rally around two main goals: reducing the cost of living and changing the system. Removing corrupt politicians is also a prominent objective. Most respondents indicated that benefiting from patronage politics, as well as religious and ethnic labels, is not a compelling objective in the upcoming elections.

## **7. Voters’ preferences based on conjoint experiment**

Traditional survey experiments are inherently one-dimensional, allowing the examination of only one component (attribute) at a time. In contrast, conjoint experiments enable the simultaneous examination of multiple attributes (multi-dimensional). This section analyses voters’ preferences and their salient attributes by comparing traditional survey data with data generated from conjoint experiments.

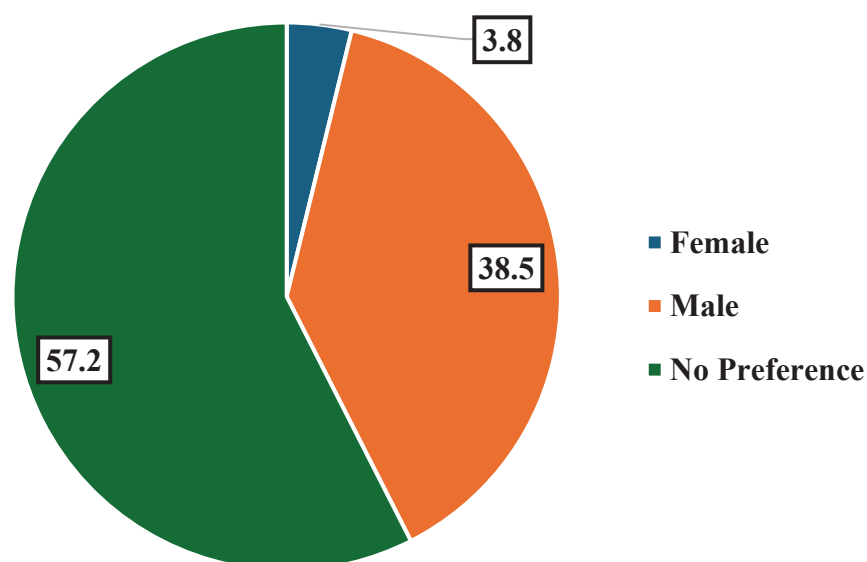
**Graph 29: Salient attributes of the upcoming elections in Sri Lanka: overall analysis**



**Note:** This note illustrates Graph 30 and its key elements. The dots represent the unstandardised regression effects (values), and the bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals. The graph is based on the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model. Reference categories (RC) for each attribute are Infrastructure Development, International Relations, President, Foreign Remittance, Increasing the Tax Ceiling, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, Experts, Advocates, Support for Corruption, Anti-Muslim, O/L, Tamil, Young, and Female. The value of the reference category is set to 0, and the values of the other attribute levels are measured relative to this reference category.

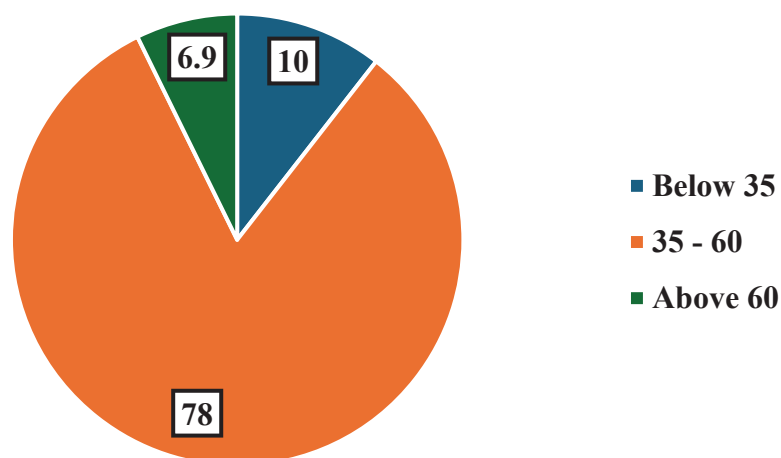
The first variable pertains to the gender of the candidates, with females serving as the RC for comparison. Among the two attribute levels, respondents predominantly preferred male candidates. Consistently, traditional survey findings indicate that most respondents do not prioritize the gender of candidates. However, both the conjoint experiment and traditional surveys reveal that female candidates are less popular than their male candidates.

**Graph 30: Candidate preference based on gender**



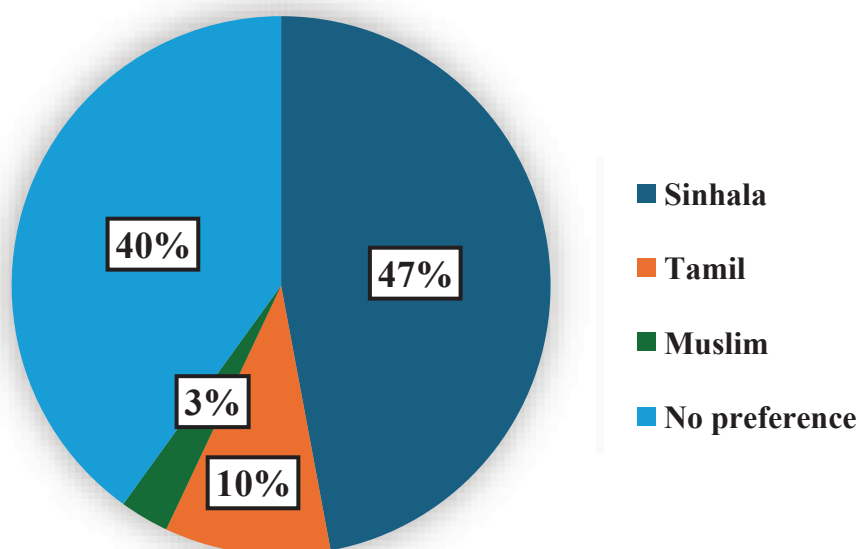
The second variable focuses on the age of the candidates, with young candidates (below 35) serving as the RC. Among the three age categories, middle-aged candidates are preferred the most, while candidates over 60 are the least preferred, as indicated by a negative estimate for this attribute level. Traditional surveys also reflect this same trend.

**Graph 31: Candidate preference based on age**



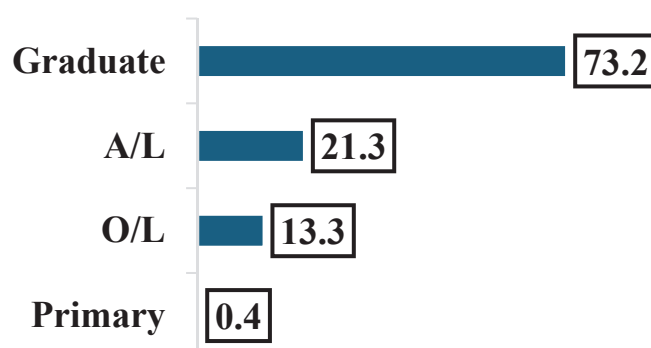
The third variable addresses the ethnic identity of the candidates, with Tamil serving as the RC. The majority of respondents prefer Sinhala candidates, reflecting the sample's composition of 70% Sinhala respondents. Muslim candidates are the least popular, receiving a negative estimate. Data from both the traditional survey and the conjoint experiment show that respondents predominantly favor Sinhala candidates (47%), while 40% indicate that they do not consider the ethnicity of their political candidates. Nevertheless, the conjoint experiment reveals an undisclosed racial bias in candidate preference.

**Graph 32: Candidate preference based on ethnicity**



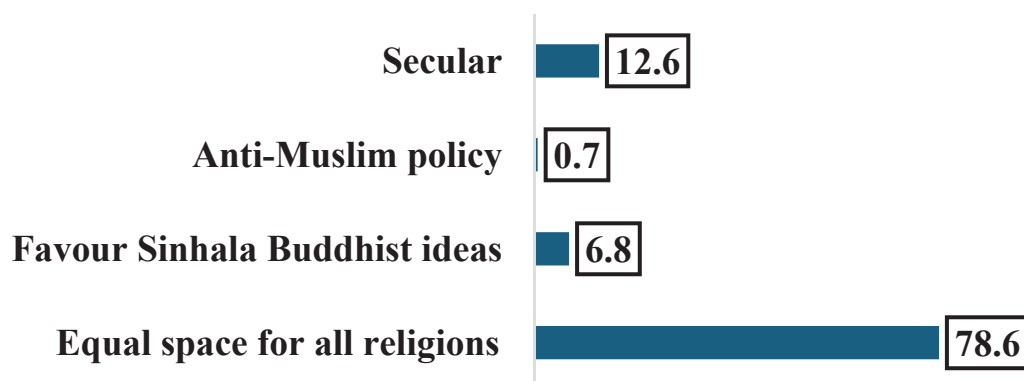
The fourth variable addresses the educational qualifications of the candidates, with O/L serving as the RC. Among the four attribute levels, candidates with A/L and degree qualifications are equally popular among respondents. Candidates with primary education are the least popular, and those with O/L qualifications are also not highly regarded. In the traditional survey, 73% of the respondents favor candidates with degree qualifications, compared to only 21% who prefer candidates with A/L qualifications. However, the conjoint experiment shows that respondents consider not only degree holders but also candidates with A/L qualifications.

**Graph 33: Candidate preference based on education**



The next variable addresses the religiosity of the candidates. The RC reflects anti-Muslim sentiment. Most respondents preferred moderate candidates. In the conjoint experiment, the majority of respondents selected political candidates who treat all religions equally and hold a secular position. In the traditional survey, there is a significant preference for candidates who treat all religions equally compared to those with a secular stance.

**Graph 34: Candidate preference based on religiosity**



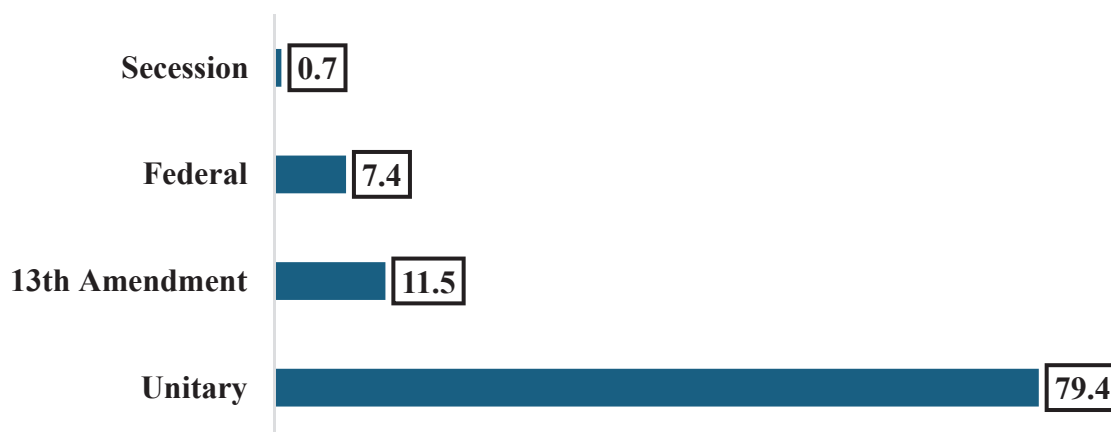


The sixth variable captures the corruption records of the candidates. The reference category is non-corrupted but supports corruption. According to the survey responses, corrupt politicians are highly unpopular among voters and are held in low regard. In contrast, uncorrupted politicians are very popular among voters.

The seventh variable focuses on the impact of diverse endorsements on voters' choices, with the endorsements of experts and advocates serving as the RC. Despite the popularity of television in traditional surveys, most respondents rely on social media endorsements of their political candidates. It appears that endorsements from other media sources are not very influential in voters' choices.

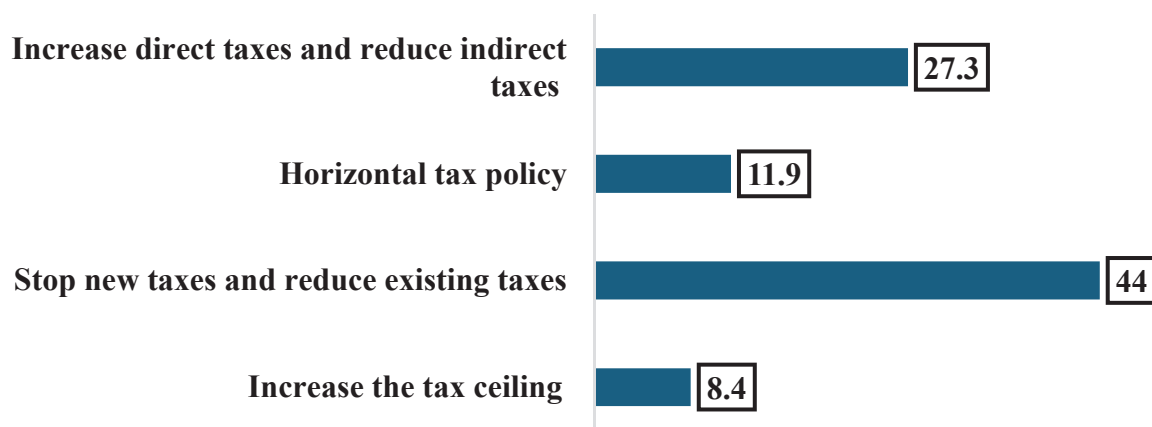
The eighth variable seeks to identify the impact of candidates' positions on ethnic conflict on voters' choices, with the RC being the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution. Since the majority of the sample represents the Sinhala ethnicity, promoting a unitary state is the most popular attribute level among respondents. Both federalism and separatism are unpopular attributes positioned negatively, with separatism emerging as the least favored attribute level among respondents. This finding is consistent with the results of traditional survey.

***Graph 35: Candidate preference based on the position of ethnic conflict***



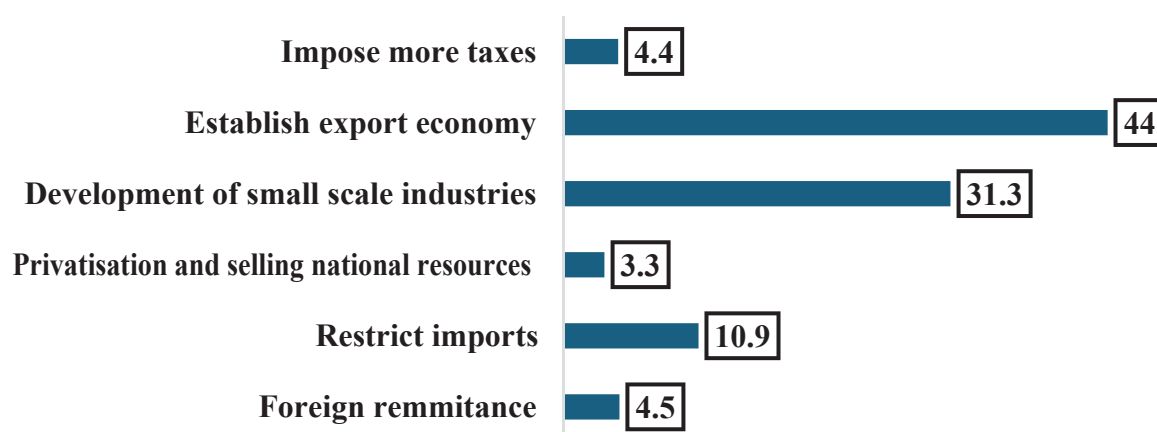
The ninth variable focuses on the current tax policy of the country, with the RC being the increase in the income tax ceiling. Interestingly, all three attribute levels are equally popular among the respondents. Despite the existing tax policy being unpopular among the public, it is not a significant factor in voters' choices. However, traditional survey findings present a slightly different perspective: candidates who propose stopping new taxes and abolishing existing taxes are dramatically more popular compared to the other attribute levels.

**Graph 36: Candidate preference based on tax policy**



The tenth variable aims to capture what people perceive as the most appropriate strategies for addressing the country's debts, with foreign remittance serving as the RC. Among the attribute levels, the most popular strategies involve establishing an export economy and implementing measures to develop local small-scale industries. In contrast, privatization is the least favored attribute level, and import restrictions are also unpopular to some extent.

**Graph 37: Voters' preference based on the solution for the crisis**



The next variable aims to determine which political factions' candidates are likely to have more chances in the upcoming election, with the RC being the current president's party. Most respondents express a willingness to support a new political force, while candidates from the opposing party also have a chance of being elected compared to other parties.

The twelfth variable seeks to identify voters' preferences based on the priority areas of candidates, with international relations as the RC. Consequently, candidates who focus on

economic issues are likely to attract more voters. Other priority areas are regarded as equally significant without significantly influencing voters' choices.

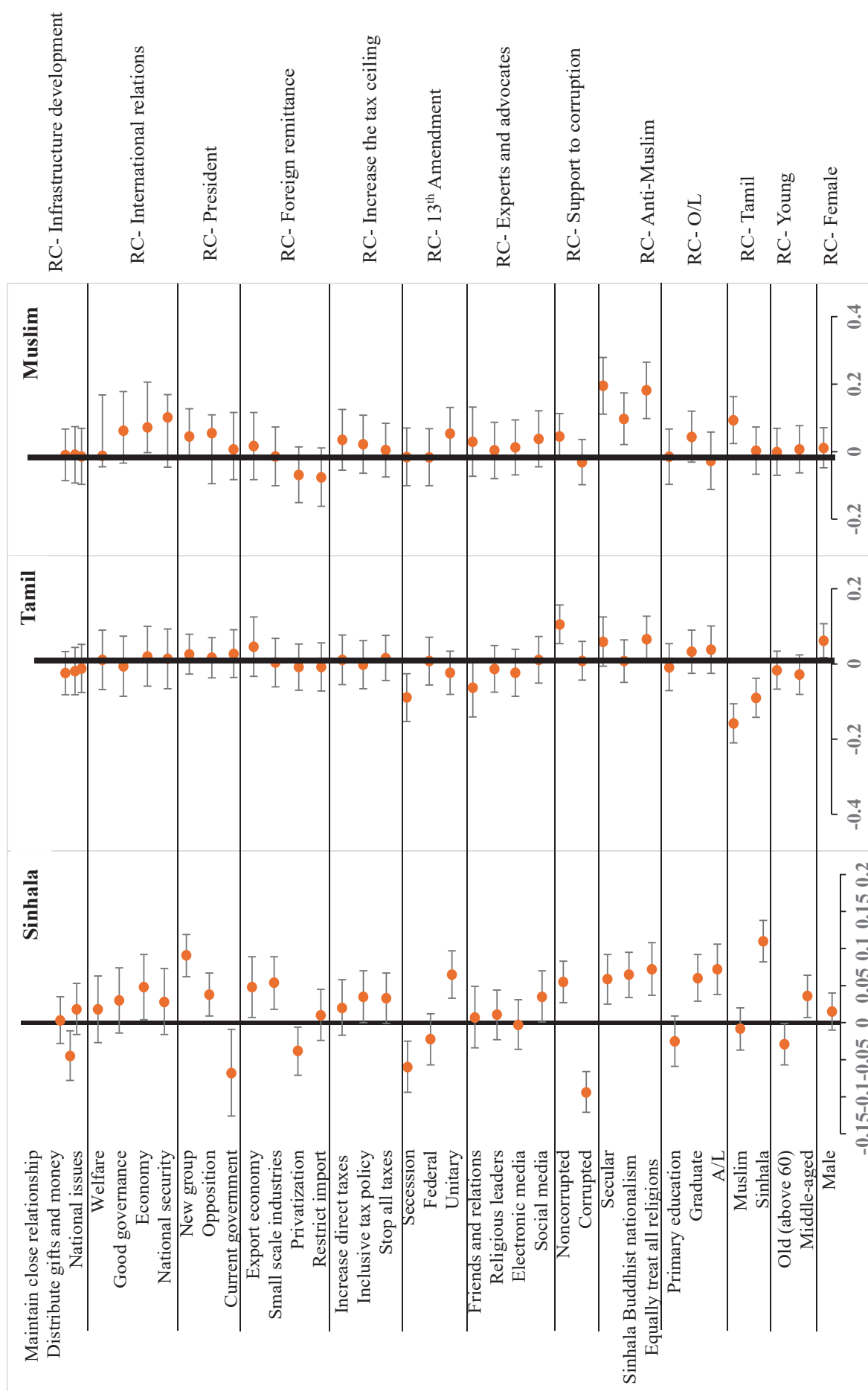
The final variable examines the impact of patronage politics on voters' preferences. It appears that patronage politics is not a popular strategy for expanding the voter base in the upcoming elections.

### **7.1 Voters' preferences based on the ethnicity**

All three ethnic groups prefer males as their political candidates over females. Notably, the preference for males among the Tamil ethnic group is significantly higher than that in the other two groups. Sinhalese respondents favor middle-aged political candidates and express a strong dislike for those over 60. Tamils exhibit a slight preference for younger candidates compared to other age groups, while Muslims do not place much importance on the age of their political candidates. Each ethnic group tends to prefer political candidates from their own ethnic group. Tamil and Muslim candidates are equally unpopular among Sinhalese respondents. Similarly, Muslim and Sinhalese candidates are equally unpopular among Tamils. Muslims maintain a neutral stance regarding candidates from other ethnic groups.

Compared to the other two ethnic groups, the Sinhalese are more concerned about the education level of their political candidates. Graduates are slightly more popular among Muslims than candidates with other education levels, while Tamil respondents tend to ignore education levels when selecting their political candidates. Secular Sinhala Buddhists and political candidates who treat all religions equally are equally popular among Sinhalese respondents. Tamils predominantly prefer secular candidates who treat all religions fairly. Candidates who hold an anti-Muslim stance are notably unpopular among Muslims. All three ethnic groups prefer non-corrupt politicians. Interestingly Tamil and Muslim respondents maintain a neutral stance toward corrupt politicians, while only Sinhala respondents reject corrupt politicians, assigning them negative estimations. Media endorsements of political candidates are not influential attributes in candidate choice, with only Sinhala respondents relying on social media compared to other media sources.

Graph 38: Salient attributes of the upcoming elections in Sri Lanka: based on ethnic group



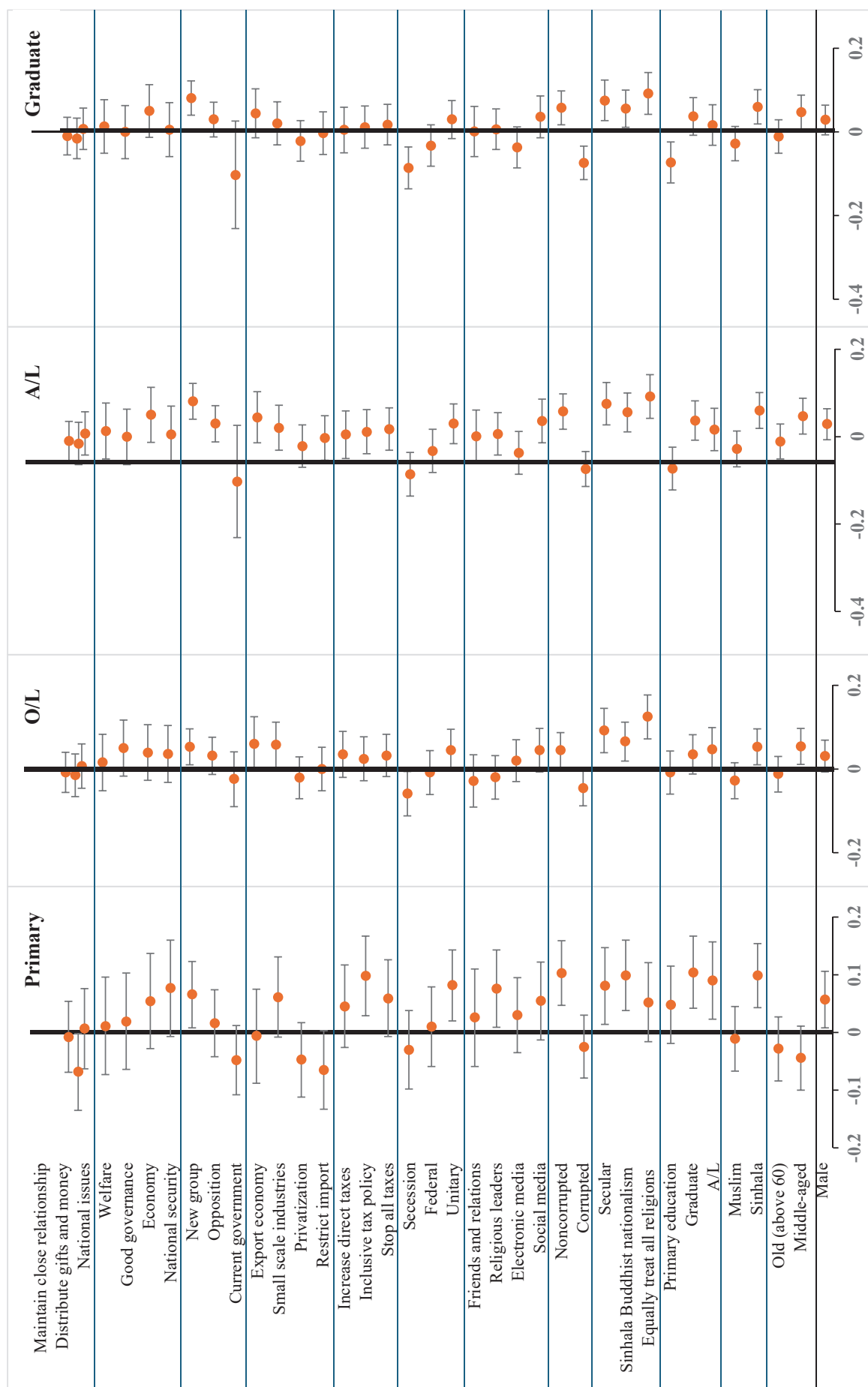
Sinhala respondents place significant emphasis on their political candidates' stance on the national issue. Candidates who support secession and federalism are particularly unpopular among Sinhala respondents. However, interestingly, other ethnic groups do not express the same level of concern about the national issue when selecting candidates. Only Sinhala respondents showed some interest in tax policy, whereas the other two ethnic groups showed less concern over this issue when making electoral decisions.

The Sinhala respondents also take into account the plans of their candidates to address the ongoing crisis in the country. They are particularly interested in the candidates' strategies for boosting the export economy and developing small-scale industries. Candidates who support privatization are more likely to be unpopular among voters. This attribute does not have a significant impact on other ethnic groups.

In addition, Sinhala respondents show notable interest in their candidates' relationships with mainstream political parties. They strongly reject candidates associated with the current government and demonstrate greater interest in new political groups. There also appears to be some confidence among the Sinhalese in candidates affiliated with the opposition. Tamils, by contrast, do not place much emphasis on party affiliation, while Muslims equally support candidates from new groups or the opposition.

Political candidates focused on economic issues and national security tend to be more popular among the Sinhala ethnic group, and those interested in good governance also gain some support from the Sinhalese community. All three types of candidates—those focused on the economy, national security, and governance are equally popular among Muslims, while Tamils do not show a strong preference. Patronage politics, on the other hand, is not considered a desirable trait among respondents, particularly among Muslims, who do not rely on it, and Sinhala respondents, who prefer candidates addressing national issues over patronage.

Graph 39: Salient attributes of the upcoming elections in Sri Lanka: based on education level



\*\* Reference categories of this graph are equivalent to the Graphs 30 and 31

## **7.2 Voters' preferences based on education level**

The majority of people, irrespective of their educational level, tend to prefer male political candidates over female candidates. Individuals with primary education are more inclined to favor younger political candidates, whereas older and middle-aged candidates are generally unpopular among them. In contrast, respondents with higher levels of education tend to prefer middle-aged candidates. Most respondents, regardless of their educational background, prefer Sinhala political candidates. Muslim candidates are somewhat unpopular among respondents with O/L or degree qualifications. Overall, ethnicity does not seem to significantly influence candidate preferences.

Respondents from all four groups provided similar feedback regarding the educational qualifications of their political candidates. Candidates with a degree or A/L qualifications are more popular among all respondents, while candidates with only primary education are unpopular, except among those with primary education themselves. The majority of respondents, across all educational categories, predominantly favor political candidates who support secularism and treat all religions equally. Additionally, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism is a popular attribute, though it is slightly less favored than the other two. Interestingly, no respondents expressed support for political candidates with anti-Muslim sentiments. Politicians perceived as non-corrupt enjoy clear support, as respondents at all educational levels reject corrupt candidates.

Candidates who receive endorsements on social media tend to be more popular among voters of all educational backgrounds. Graduates are particularly inclined to rely solely on social media for information, exhibiting skepticism towards endorsements from traditional electronic media. In contrast, those with primary education or A/L qualifications are more likely to value endorsements from religious leaders and their close social circles. The impact of candidates' stance on the ethnic conflict follows a similar pattern across all education levels. The majority favor political candidates who support a unitary state, while secession is viewed as an extreme opposite. Respondents remain neutral towards candidates who support the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the federal system.

Respondents with primary and A/L qualifications show greater interest in the tax policies of political candidates. In contrast, respondents with O/L qualifications and degrees are not

significantly influenced by the stance of their candidates' tax policies. Generally, political candidates who advocate for privatization and import restrictions are the least popular across all education levels. Conversely, candidates who support the export economy and the development of small-scale industries tend to be more popular, irrespective of respondents' educational background. Moreover, candidates affiliated with the current government are more likely to be rejected by voters across all educational categories. The most popular candidates among respondents are those representing new political groups, while those aligned with the current opposition are slightly less popular than candidates from new political groups.

At present, political candidates with expertise in economic matters are most likely to capture voters' attention. Notably, graduates prefer only candidates who are economic experts, whereas respondents with primary education exhibit a slight preference for candidates focused on national security over those prioritizing economic issues. Respondents with O/L and A/L qualifications express an equal preference for all types of candidates. Patronage politics is not a major factor in voter decision-making for this election. However, respondents with A/L qualifications show a slightly higher interest in patronage politics compared to others.

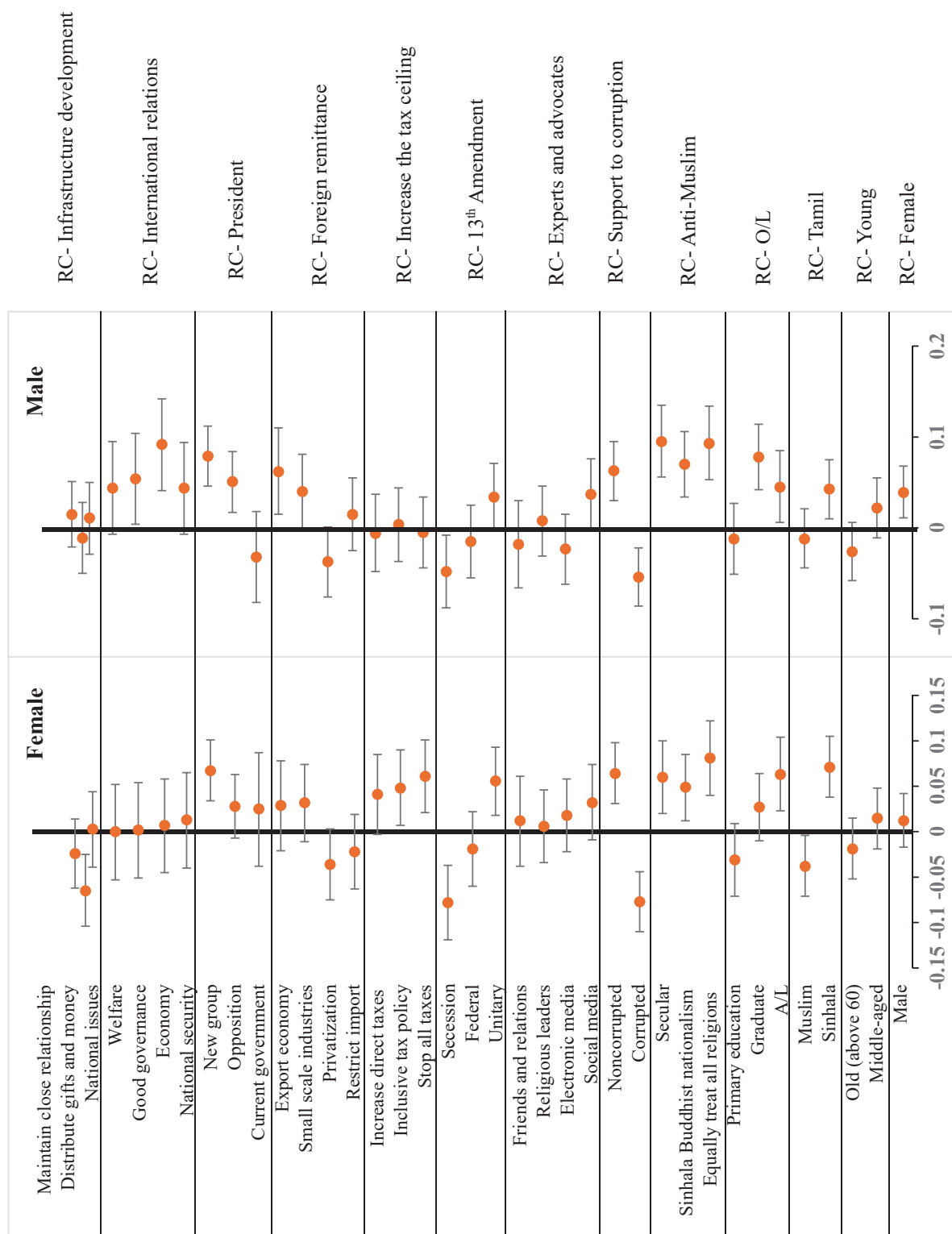
### **7.3 Voters' preferences based on gender**

Both male and female respondents in the sample are more likely to vote for a male candidate in an election. However, while male respondents strongly favor male candidates, female respondents show a slight preference for female candidates in comparison. Both genders tend to prefer middle-aged candidates for political positions and hold a negative view of candidates over 60. Their preferences regarding ethnicity are similar, with the majority favoring Sinhala candidates, while Muslim candidates are unpopular and placed in negative estimation.

Regarding the educational qualifications of political candidates, male respondents prefer graduates, with A/L qualifications as their second choice, while female respondents show the opposite preference. Both groups do not favor candidates with qualifications below A/L. Regardless of gender, all respondents reject corrupt politicians and show a strong preference for non-corrupt candidates.



Graph 40: Salient attributes of the upcoming elections in Sri Lanka: based on education level



Women tend to rely on endorsements from social media and electronic media when selecting political candidates, with other forms of media having minimal influence on their decisions. In contrast, men are more likely to prioritize endorsements from social media and may disregard endorsements from electronic media or their inner circles. The opinions of politicians on national issues have equally influenced both men and women. Candidates advocating for a unitary state are popular among both genders, while those supporting federalism or secession have received negative responses.

Women tend to place greater emphasis on the tax policies of political candidates than men. Their primary preference is for candidates who advocate the abolition of existing taxes and the cessation of new tax introductions. Their second preference is for candidates who support inclusive tax policies, while their third preference is for those who favor increasing direct taxes and reducing indirect taxes. In contrast, men's voting decisions are not significantly influenced by the tax policies of political candidates.

Candidates promoting the establishment of an export economy and the development of small-scale industries to address the ongoing crisis are likely to be equally popular among both men and women. Additionally, both groups tend to reject candidates who support privatization. Candidates advocating import restrictions neither gain nor lose popularity among voters.

Political candidates affiliated with new political groups are popular among both male and female respondents. Candidates from the opposition political camp are the second most popular, while those supporting the current government lack popularity among men and hold little appeal for women.

The expertise of political candidates does not significantly influence women, while men regard it as an important attribute. Of all factors, men are most attracted to candidates who focus on the country's economic issues. Additionally, men are equally drawn to candidates who prioritize national security, welfare, and good governance. Patronage politics does not strongly influence candidate selection for either gender. However, political candidates who prioritize national issues and maintain close relationships with voters tend to enjoy a certain level of popularity among men.

## **8. Conclusion**

This document presents the findings from a survey experiment on “Factors Influencing Voter Preference in Elections”, conducted in Sri Lanka in August 2024. The aim is to provide insights into voter behavior in the context of the upcoming elections in Sri Lanka.

The survey revealed that a significant proportion of participants are interested in politics and related issues. Specifically, around two-thirds of respondents expressed an interest in politics. However, the data indicate that men generally exhibit higher levels of political interest and a greater tendency for independent decision-making in political matters compared to women. This suggests that women’s voluntary or deliberate disengagement from politics remains a substantial social constraint, even in contemporary society.

The level of education is strongly correlated with political interest. Graduates demonstrate significantly higher political interest compared to respondents with lower education levels, indicating an inverse relationship between education level and political interest. The employment sector of a person is likely to influence their political interests. The survey found the highest levels of political interest among those working in the agricultural and public sectors. The political interests of those in the private sector and self-employed individuals were almost identical, while the remaining groups were not considered politically active. However, differences in age and ethnicity do not significantly affect political interest.

Most respondents are content with their level of political knowledge and have stated that they make political decisions autonomously. Although this is a positive situation, the majority who indicated this have limited their political activities to voting. Therefore, transforming them from mere voters into active citizens is essential for constructing a better political culture in the country.

Public political awareness is often influenced by the sources from which people receive information. Television is popular among respondents of all age categories and is the most preferred source of information among middle-aged and elderly respondents. Additionally, social media is rapidly emerging as a major source of political information.

According to the data, *Aragalaya* the struggle has been able to increase political interest among all age groups, with a particularly dramatic rise in political interest among young and middle-aged respondents following the struggle. In general, the majority of respondents acknowledge

that the *Aragalaya* made a positive impact on the political culture of the country. This situation has largely contributed to shaping the political behavior of citizens, as well as their political demands, in a manner that diverges from the usual pattern. As a result, most respondents rely on popular political slogans advocating for “system change”.

The general portion of the survey indicates that ethnic and religious identities do not feature prominently among the respondents. In this context, patronage politics has been significantly challenged in the current political landscape. Furthermore, religious and ethnic labels, as well as gender orientation, are not compelling factors in the upcoming elections. However, these findings may be influenced by social desirability, in contrast to the findings of the conjoint analysis.

In this study, it is possible to identify the key attributes that voters prioritize when electing their political candidates in the upcoming election. Among these attributes, the first is the corruption records of the political candidates. Voters are more likely to vote for non-corrupt candidates and strongly reject corrupt candidates.

The third attribute is the strategies for addressing the country's debt. In the upcoming election, two popular strategies will be: 1) establishing an export economy, and 2) developing small-scale industries, while privatization is expected to be the least popular stance. The next attribute is religiosity, with most respondents preferring moderate candidates. In the conjoint experiment, the majority of respondents selected political candidates who treat all religions equally and adopt a secular position.

Given that the majority of the sample represents the Sinhala ethnicity, the promotion of a unitary state emerges as the most popular attribute level among respondents. Both federalism and separatism are viewed unfavorably, with separatism appearing to be the least favored among them. Although the traditional survey did not indicate racism, the conjoint experiment reveals an underlying bias in candidate preference. Tax policy, media endorsements, and patronage politics are less effective in influencing candidate choice in the upcoming election. The education, gender, and expertise of candidates are somewhat influential but not critical factors. In the forthcoming election, Sinhalese respondents are likely to be more active, while Muslims are also expected to play a somewhat active role. In contrast, Tamils are more likely to adopt a passive stance compared to other groups.

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## Attachments

Attachment 1: Research locations		
Electoral District	Geo-economic cluster	Selected polling divisions
Colombo	Urban	Kesbewa, Homagama, Kolonnawa
Gampaha	Urban	Katana, Biyagama
Kaluthara	Sub-urban	Beruwala
Kandy	Sub urban	Kandy
Nuwara- Eliya	Sub-urban	Nuwaraeliya
Matale	Rural	Raththota
Galle	Urban	Galle, Rathgama
Matara	Rural	Akuressa
Hambantota	Sub-Urban	Thissamaharama
Jaffna	Urban	Jaffna
Kilinochchi	Rural	Kilinochchi
Mullaitivu	Rural	Vavuniya
Vavuniya	Rural	Mulaithivu
Mannar	Rural	Mannar
Ampara	Rural	Pothuvil
Trincomalee	Sub-urban	Trincomalee
Batticaloa	Sub-urban	Kalkuda
Kurunegala	Rural	Kurunegala, Mawathagama
Puttalam	sub-urban	Puttalam
Badulla	Sub-urban	Bandarawela
Monaragala	Rural	Buththala
Polonnaruwa	Rural	Medirigiriya, Minneriya
Anuradhapura	Sub-urban	Kekirawa
Kegalle	Sub-urban	Mawanella, Rambukkana
Rathnapura	Rural	Kalawana

Attachment 2: Level of Attributes	
Attributes	Values
<b>Sex</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Male</li> <li>2. Female</li> </ol>
<b>Age</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Young</li> <li>2. Middle aged</li> <li>3. Old</li> </ol>
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Muslim</li> <li>2. Tamil</li> <li>3. Sinhala</li> </ol>
<b>Education level and political experience</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Graduate with political experience</li> <li>2. Graduate without political experience</li> <li>3. Secondary school with political experience</li> <li>4. Primary with political experience</li> </ol>
<b>Nationalistic positions</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support Sinhala Buddhist hegemony</li> <li>2. Support secularism</li> <li>3. Promote minority labels</li> </ol>
<b>Governance</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Corrupted</li> <li>2. Non- corrupted</li> <li>3. Non-corrupted but support corruption</li> </ol>
<b>Welfare policy</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Expand welfare benefits even if this leads to a budget deficit</li> <li>2. Attempting to balance the budget and welfare</li> <li>3. Substantially cut welfare benefits to achieve a balanced budget.</li> </ol>
<b>Tax policy</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Stop tax increase and reduce the existing tax</li> <li>2. Increase direct tax and reduce indirect tax</li> <li>3. Increase the ceiling of direct tax</li> <li>4. Establishing a horizontal tax policy to include all high-income segments of the society</li> </ol>
<b>Economic growth strategy for settle the foreign loans</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Privatization as much as possible</li> <li>2. Encourage foreign remittances</li> <li>3. Activate growth in rural areas and small businesses</li> <li>4. Restrictions for import</li> <li>5. Establishment of industries for export</li> </ol>
<b>Orientation to mainstream and party affiliation</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support the current government (both president and parliament)</li> <li>2. Support only president</li> <li>3. Believe that politicians are a corrupted elite who deserve to be punished</li> <li>4. Try to bring the existing opposition to power</li> <li>5. Represents an alternative force</li> </ol>
<b>Patron-client relationship</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Help voters for their personal requirement</li> <li>2. Develop the infrastructure of the electorate</li> <li>3. More interested in national and international issues</li> <li>4. Maintain close relationship with voters</li> </ol>
<b>Endorsement</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Endorse by social media</li> <li>2. Endorse by electronic media</li> <li>3. Endorse by experts and political advocates</li> <li>4. Endorse by religious leaders</li> <li>5. Endorse by inner circle (family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, etc.)</li> </ol>
<b>Issue specialization</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. National security</li> <li>2. Good governance and corruptions</li> <li>3. Welfare</li> <li>4. Economy</li> <li>5. International relations</li> </ol>
<b>Position on ethnic conflict</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Promotes only Sinhala position and a unitary state</li> <li>2. Support 13 Amendment to the 1978 Constitution (power sharing)</li> <li>3. Promote federal idea</li> <li>4. Promotes Tamils' demand for separatism and self-determination.</li> </ol>

**Note.** This table shows the dimensions and related attributes that will be used in the conjoint experiment. The list of attributes can be amended during the development of research tools.

Attachment 3: Sample Treatment Form		
	Candidate A	Candidate B
<b>Sex</b>	Male	Female
<b>Age</b>	Middle aged	Old
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Muslim	Tamil
<b>Education level and political experience</b>	Graduate without political experience	Secondary school with political experience
<b>Nationalistic positions</b>	Support secularism	Promote minority labels
<b>Governance</b>	Corrupted	Non-corrupted
<b>Welfare policy</b>	Substantially cut welfare benefits to achieve a balanced budget	Attempting to balance the budget and welfare
<b>Tax policy</b>	Stop the tax increase and reduce the existing tax	Increase the ceiling of direct tax
<b>Economic growth strategy for settle the foreign loans</b>	Encourage foreign remittances	Encourage foreign remittances
<b>Orientation to mainstream and party affiliation</b>	Support only president	Try to bring the existing opposition to power
<b>Patron-client relationship</b>	Develop the infrastructure of the electorate	Maintain close relationship with voters
<b>Endorsement</b>	Endorse by social media	Endorse by religious leaders
<b>Issue specialization</b>	Welfare	Good governance and corruptions
<b>Personal Traits</b>	Visionary (Has a clear vision of the future and foresight)	Autocratic (Individualism, arrogance, and subjugation)
<b>Position on ethnic conflict</b>	Promote federal idea	Promote federal idea

Whom would you like to vote for?

Candidate A ☐

Candidate B ☐

**Note.** This figure shows an example of one set of candidate profiles that will be presented to a respondent in our conjoint experiment. The content will be translated into Sinhala and Tamil languages for the convenience of the respondents.





The National Peace Council (NPC) was established in 1995 by an inter-religious coalition of civil society leaders at the height of Sri Lanka's internal conflict, with the objective of promoting a peaceful resolution to the war. As we mark our 30th anniversary in 2025, we recognize and honor the commitment of our directors, past and present staff members, partner organizations and donors in advancing our mission.

Since its inception, NPC has been dedicated to public education, mobilization of civil society and advocacy, striving to foster inclusive, fair, and just solutions for all ethnic and religious communities through active public participation. Our work continues to be guided by the principles of peace, justice, and democratic engagement.

The ACED project, funded by the European Union, seeks to uphold human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democratic values in Sri Lanka and the Maldives. In line with these objectives, this research on factors influencing voter preferences in elections has been published to inform training programs and awareness materials developed under the project.

This study, which is based on survey findings, provides valuable insights for implementing organizations and the wider public, offering a deeper understanding of the dynamics shaping voter behavior amid growing disillusionment with elected representatives. Additionally, it examines the conditions that enable vote buying and other electoral influences.

At this critical political, social, and economic juncture, we believe this research serves as a timely and essential resource in strengthening democratic engagement and accountability.

## **NATIONAL PEACE COUNCIL OF SRI LANKA**

No. 12/14, Balapokuna Vihara Mawatha, Colombo 06.

Telephone: 011 2818344, 011 2854127, 011 2809348

Fax: 011 2819064

Website: [info@peace-srilanka.org](mailto:info@peace-srilanka.org)

Email: [www.peace-srilanka.org](http://www.peace-srilanka.org)