PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2024
ASPIRATIONS
OF THE
PEOPLE

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2024: ASPIRATIONS OF THE PEOPLE

Certain findings in this report have been removed in accordance with the guidelines of theElection Commission, respecting laws and regulations related to elections in the country.
Law & Society Trust regrets the inconvenience caused to the reader.

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Introduction

Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948. From the time of its preparation for independence and self-government Sri Lanka has championed a model of liberal representative democracy – i.e., "parliamentary democracy", in which people's representatives elected through periodic elections that are required to be free and fair are given the authority and the power to represent people's political aspirations. This model is noticeable in many other countries that share a British colonial legacy. However, the Sri Lankan experience of representative democracy also provides ample evidence of its utter failure. Sri Lanka's democratic institutions such as the Parliament, have been afflicted bv elite-capture and appear to exist merely to serve for the interests of corrupted elite politicians, and the general public perceive them as being oppressive and anti-people. (Uyangoda 2024)[1]. The Aragalaya (popular uprising that occurred in 2022) is the most recent and most intense expression of popular frustration with failure of representative democracy in Sri Lanka.

In a representative democratic, political system, elections play a pivotal role in electing representatives to democratic institutions such as the parliament. However, with the introduction of the executive presidency in 1978 with the President vested with superior powers, presidential elections have gained more importance and attention compared to other elections such as Parliamentary and local government elections in Sri Lanka. The upcoming 2024 Presidential Election is particularly important as it is the first election since the 2022 Aragalaya which caused the incumbent, the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to be sent home. The Aragalaya made national history as this was the only instance of when a president or a prime minister resigned due to public protests in the Sri Lankan history. Political analysts suggest that the upcoming election would be a "two-cornered, three-way fight" (Peiris 2024)[2], which is significantly different from previous presidential elections that were basically "one-cornered, two-way fights" or "two-cornered, two-way fight". As Peiris points out, it is a three-way fight because there are three main candidates who are contesting to win - Ranil Wickramasinghe (RW), Sajith Premadasa (SP) and Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD); but only two broad political projects - RW (and United National Party/UNP) and SP (and Samagi Jana Sandhanaya / United People's Alliance/SJB) that represent the political culture against which people rose in 2022, and AKD (and Jathika Jana Balawegaya / National People's Power / NPP)

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1 https://www.anidda.lk/2024/06/11/%E0%B6%B4%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%BB%E0%B6%A2%E0%B7%8F%E0%B6%AD%E0%B6%B1%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%AD%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%BB%E0%B7%80%E0%B7%8F%E0%B6%AF%E0%B6%BA-%E0%B6%B4%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%BB%E0%B6%A2-2/

2 https://polity.lk/2024-presidential-election-two-cornered-three-way-fight-pradeep-peiris/

that claims to represent an alternative an alternative, hence the two-cornered fight. This is in stark contrast to previous presidential elections where there were only two main candidates.

In this context, there is a fierce competition among the three main candidates, and it is difficult to predict who will be the 9th President of Sri Lanka despite the election being held less than a month. Although this competition reproduce the prevailing, ugly political culture and is shaped by mudslinging, unethical crossovers, financial irregularities and other electoral abuses, it is not without its merits: the candidates make extensive promises, people are very interested in knowing the policies and action plans of the candidates and their political parties and the voters are coming forward to question and challenge them. On the other hand, people are keen to express their political aspirations and what they expect from the candidates and their parties if they come to power. This transformation in people's political consciousness could be directly attributed to the Aragalaya of 2022, which is identified as the most salient democratic moment in Sri Lanka since the introduction of universal franchise in 1931 (Korf et al. 2024)[3]. The current study attempted, inter alia, to explore the transformation in how people interact with their representatives and the institutions of their representative democracy.

The upcoming presidential election of 2024 being critical and more intensely contested when compared to previous elections, it is important to understand voters' perceptions of the candidates who they intend to vote for, and the factors that determine their decision. In contrast to many surveys and opinion polls that have been published recently on the presidential election of 2024, which primarily focused on predicting the winning candidate, this study attempts to explore people's priorities when they choose the presidential candidates they intend to vote for, how their voting priorities have changed over time, and the varying dynamics of ethnicity, age, and gender that influence the decision.

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3 Korf, B., Rambukwella, H., Peiris, P., de Mel, N., Sivamohan, S., Schenk, C., Wijewardene, S., Kadirgamar, A., and Geiser, U. 2024. The 'Cultural Life' of Democracy in Sri Lanka (And Beyond). Geopolitics, 1–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2024.2379306

Methodology

It is widely accepted that Sri Lankan polity in the post 1983 - Black July period has been shaped and overdetermined by ethnic conflict and attendant nationalisms (Gunasinghe 1986; Goonewardena 2020)[4]. Previous presidential elections demonstrate that ethnic polarizations within the electorates played a crucial role in determining the ultimate winner, and this was specifically so among voters from the North in the elections of 2005 and 2015 elections and among voters in the South in the 2019 election. Following this proposition, the current survey considered four separate samples which represent the four main ethnicities in Sri Lanka in terms of the population size. Those are the Sinhalese, the Sri Lankan Tamils, the Sri Lankan Muslims and the Malaiyaga Tamil. There was a very small number of respondents (n=8) representing other ethnic groups but due to quantitative insignificance, they were excluded from the analysis. Accordingly, this survey analyzes and attempts to understand people's voting behaviors and perceptions in presidential elections within each ethnic category, rather than comparing and contrasting the voting behaviors and perceptions across the ethnic communities.

A total of 2867 survey responses were collected from 42 Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions from 25 districts; 69 responses were disregarded during the data cleaning process due to inconsistencies, and 2798 responses were considered for the final analysis. GN divisions from each district were selected to represent the ethnic composition of the respective district. When the overwhelming majority of the entire district belongs to one ethnic group, one GN division was selected in the district; and when the district consists of multiple ethnic groups, several GN divisions were selected to include the ethnic diversity of the district. For example, in the Kilinochchi district, only one GN division (Pallai Nagaram) was selected, while in Colombo district Maradana, Grandpass, Sahaspura, Liyangoda, and Unduruguda GN divisions were selected.

Table 01 provides a breakdown of the sample by district, by divisional secretariat and by GN divisions.

	Province	District	DS Division	GN Division	Respondents
1	Central Province	Kandy	Udapalatha	Gampola West	103
2			Gangawatakorale	Heerassagala	99
3		Mathale	Udapalatha	Nikagolla	30
4			Ukuwela	Thawalamkoya	27
5			Ukuwela	Varakanda	53
6		Nuwara Eliya	Norwood	Kirkoswald	86

4 Gunasinghe, N. 1986. Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Perceptions and Solutions. South Asia Bulletin, vol. 6, no. 2, https://doi.org/10.1215/07323867-6-2-34; Goonewardena, K. (2020). Populism, nationalism and Marxism in Sri Lanka: from anti-colonial struggle to authoritarian neoliberalism. Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography, 102(3), 289–304. https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2020.1780146

7	Eastern Province	Ampara	Damana	Vadinagala	50
8			Kalmunei	Islamabath	50
9		Batticaloa	Kiran	Muruthankerni	100
10		Trincomalee	Seruvila	Narwakkaernikadu	21
11				Serunuwara	39
12				Thanganagar	30
13	North Central	Anuradhapura	Nochchiyagama	Nalawagama	99
14		Polonnaruwa	Hingurakgoda	Chandanapokuna	101
15	Northern	Jaffna	Chulipuram	Tholpuram West	98
16		Kilinochchi	Pallai	Pallai Nagaram	94
17		Mannar	Musali	Silavathura	94
18		Mullaitivu	Puthukudiirruppu	Valluvarpuram	106
19		Vavuniya	Vavuniya North	Nainamadu	73
20			Vavuniya South	Nendukulama	25
21	North Western	Kurunagala	Mawathagama	Delgollawatta South	104
22		Puttlam	Madampe	Galahitiyawa	50
23			Kalpitiya	Alankuda	56
24	Sabaragamuwa	Kegalle	Draniyagala	Miyanavita	49
25			Warakapola	Athnawala	48
26		Rathnapura	Balangoda	Balangoda	50
27			Rathnapura	Pagoda	50
28	Southern	Galle	Hikkaduwa	Modarapatuwatha	99
29		Hambanthota	Suriyawawa	Badigamthota	102
30		Mathara	Mulatiyana	Devalegama East	99
31	Uva	Badulla	Bandarawela	Bandarawela	51
32			Mahiyanganaya	Ginnoruwa	50
33		Monaragala	Suriyawawa	Mahakalugolla	100
34	Western	Colombo	Colombo	Maradana	25
35			Colombo	Grandpass North	24
36			Maharagama	Liyanagoda	50
37			Boralla	Sahaspura	50
38			Homagama	Undurugoda	50
39		Gampaha	Negambo	Munnakkaraya	45
40			Biyagama	Kaduboda	105
42			Biyagama	Heiantuduwa South	60
43		Kaluthara	Kaluthara	Vadduva South	75
44				Kalutara West	28
	Total				2798

Table: 01: Number of respondents from each GN division

The Sinhala sample consisted of 1574 respondents from 21 districts selected, and the district with the most significant number of people was Gampaha (189). Another significant percentage of the sample was drawn from the districts of Colombo, Anuradhapura, Kalutara, Kurunegala, Matara, Polonnaruwa, Hambantota and Galle. The Sri Lankan Tamil sample consisted of 611 people belonging to 16 districts, most of which were from Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Batticaloa, and Vavuniya districts. Most of the Muslim sample was comprised of 280 and were drawn from 13 districts including Ampara, Puttalam, Mannar, Matale, and Trincomalee districts. The Malaiyaga Tamil sample consisted of 325 people belonging to 12 districts. Most respondents belonged to Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Kegalle and Ratnapura districts. Figure 1 to 4 show the district-wide composition of each ethnic sample.
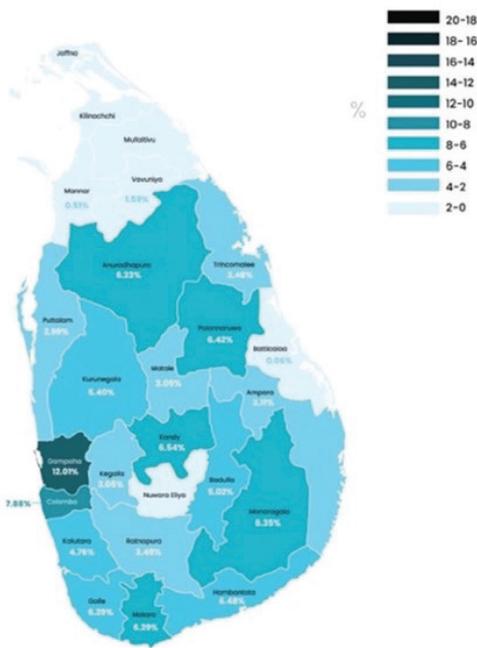

Figure 01: District-wide composition of the Sinhala sample
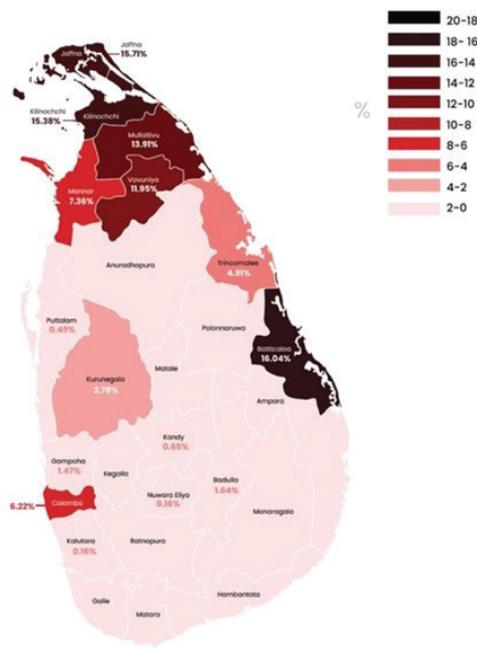

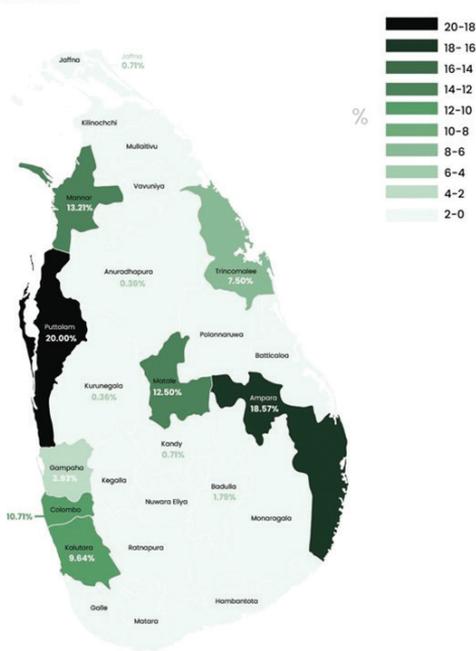Figure 02: District-wide composition of the Sri Lankan Tamil sample

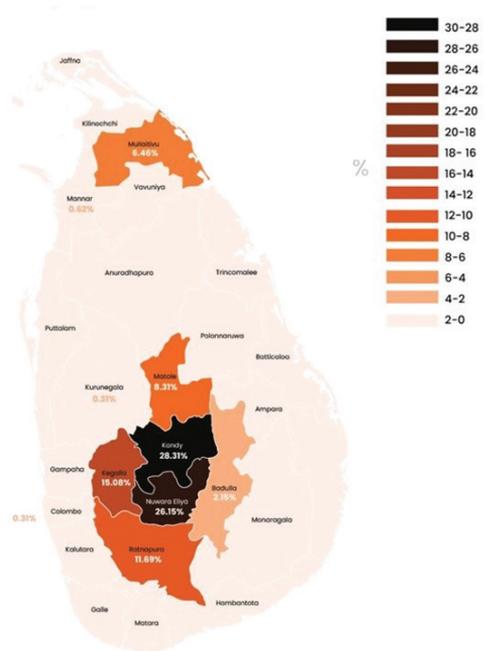Figure 03: District-wide composition of the
Sri Lankan Muslim sample

Figure 04: District-wide composition of the
Malaiyaga Tamil sample

A group of 45 field assistants collected data through face-to-face interviews with respondents using an online survey form. Before commencing data collection, all field assistants received a half-day training program, either in-person or online, and they were thoroughly briefed about the questionnaire, ethical considerations and other technicalities involved with the survey. Since the survey inquired about the primary factor motivating the choice of the candidate in the 2019, 2015, and 2005 presidential elections, the field assistants were specifically instructed to help the respondents refresh their memory of the past elections. After the first 2 days of data collection another session was conducted to discuss the challenges they experienced in the field and the difficulties they had identified were addressed. Data collection was conducted between 03 – 14th August 2024 in all districts. Accordingly, the survey findings reflect the people's perceptions during the said period and not beyond. Complementary to the quantitative data primarily collected through the survey form, was the qualitative data collected to understand the people's aspirations in greater detail. Accordingly, the opinions expressed by the people regarding the factors influencing their decision in the election were recorded in the "remarks" section of the survey form. At the end of the field data collection, a full-day de-briefing workshop was organized with the field assistants to discuss their observations and experiences with the lead researchers. In this discussion the qualitative responses recorded were contextualized and identified within key thematic areas.

Efforts were made to maintain equal gender representation in all 4 samples. In general, the difference in the proportion of the Malaiyaga Tamils and the Sinhalese samples was not insignificant (Malaiyaga Tamils - 52% female and 48% male, Sinhalese - 49% female and 51% male). Male-female proportions of the Sri Lankan Tamil and Muslim samples had slightly less than 10% difference (Sri Lankan Tamil-females 56% and males 44%, Muslim females 45% and males 55%). Graph 1 shows the division of each sample by gender. It is noteworthy that the number of respondents who did not identify their gender as either male or female was very low (n = 3), hence they were excluded in the subsequent analysis.

Figure 05: Gender composition of each ethnic sample

People belonged to all the age categories were included in all ethnic samples. Figures 06 to 09 show the gender disaggregation of each age group within each ethnic sample.
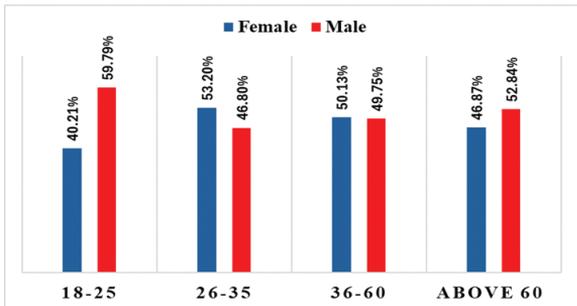

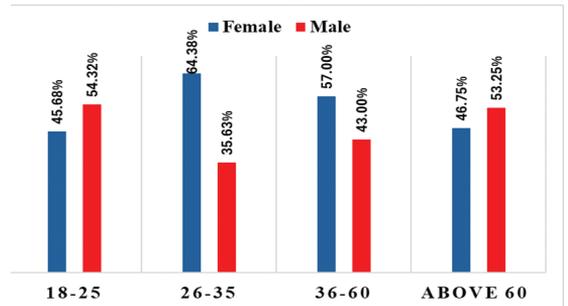Figure 06: Gender disaggregation of each age group within the Sinhala sample

Figure 07: Gender disaggregation of each age group within the Sri Lankan Tamil sample
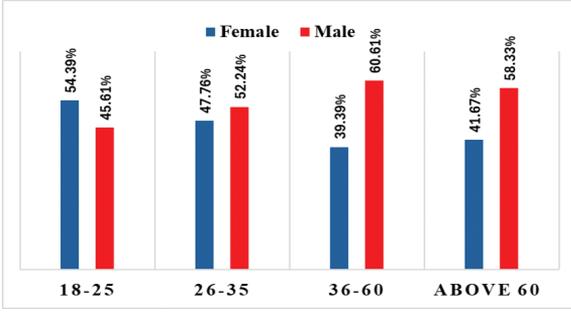
Figure 08: Gender disaggregation of each age group within the Muslim sample
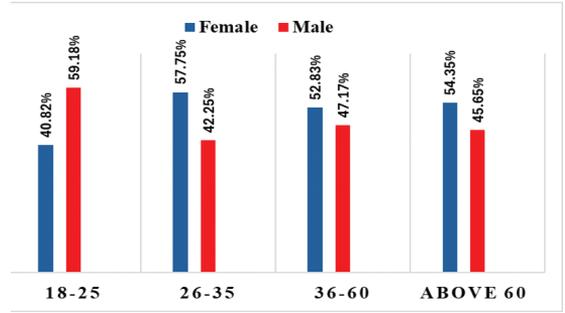

Figure 09: Gender disaggregation of each age group within the Malaiyaga Tamil sample

Restricted as per Election Commission requirement

When the data collection started, Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), the party led by Jeevan Thondaman had already expressed its support to RW. Three days after starting the data collection, Tamil Progressive Alliance with the prominent Malaiyaga Tamil party leaders of Palani Digambaram, Mano Ganesan, and V. Radhakrishnan extended their support to SP. This change did not have much effect on the survey as the data collection was not started until 6th August in most of the areas in which Malaiyaga Tamil community live (apart from Heerassagala in Kandy district). Accordingly, the data of the majority of Malaiyaga Tamils was collected after the polarization of significant leaders of the Malaiyaga community.

The raw data, totaling 2,867 entries collected separately in both Sinhala and Tamil languages, were processed, ensuring for accuracy by reviewing the discrepancies or mistakes. These entries were then identified under the related GN divisions, districts, and provinces. Before analyzing the data, 69 data points were removed from the analysis due to their inconsistencies and irregularities. The remaining 2,798 entries were standardized, and data analysis began using pivot tables based on key hypotheses. The results from the pivot tables were illustrated through both bar charts and pie charts, showing related percentages for a better understanding. Where it was required, statistical tests were conducted to confirm the significance of the observations. This process allowed for an examination of the voting dynamics within each community by analyzing correlations, and where needed, testing hypotheses to verify the accuracy of the results.

Findings and discussion

In terms of voting in this year's presidential election, most respondents said they would cast their vote. 97% of the Malaiyaga Tamils and the Sri Lankan Tamils said that they will vote this time. The proportion of who were determined to vote among Sinhalese and Muslim ethnic samples were 90%.
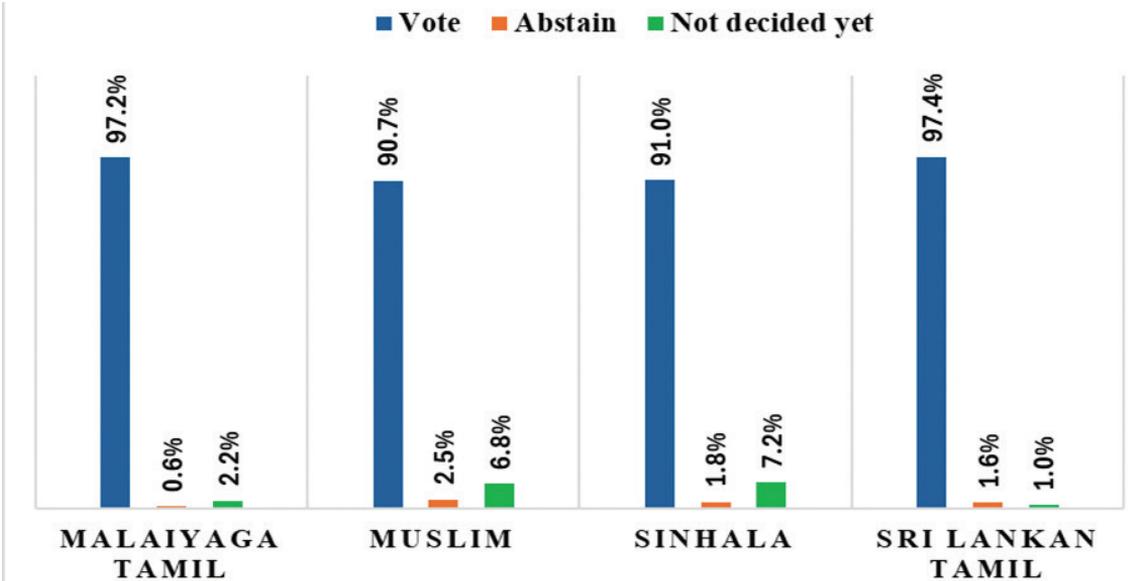

Figure 10: Decision to vote or abstain in each ethnic sample

When asked who they would vote for in the election, the majority of Sinhala people, ____, chose ____. ____ said they would vote for ____, and nearly ____ for ____. ____ was the choice of ____
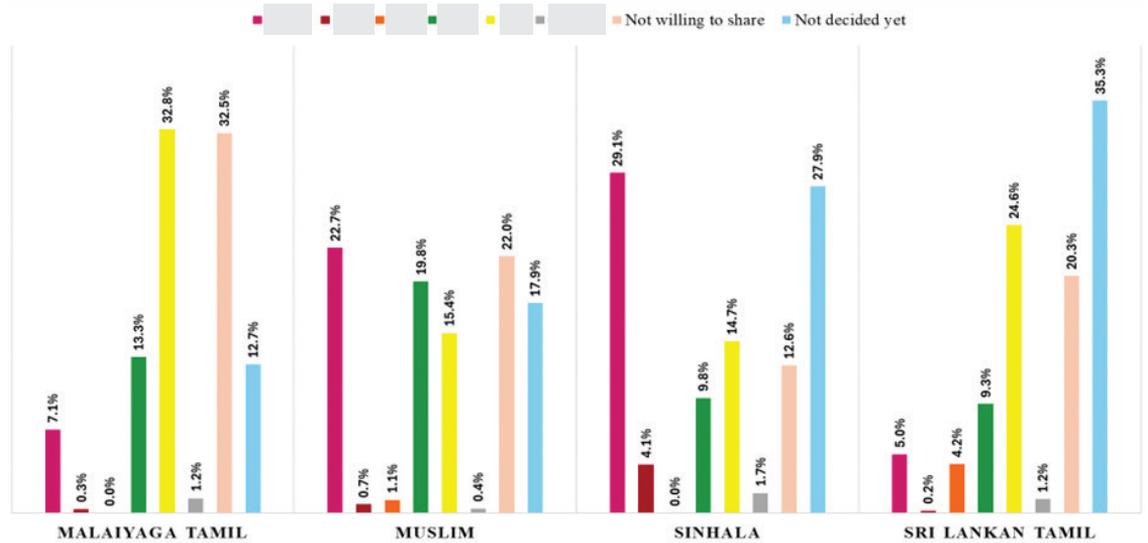
Figure 11: Voting preferences as expressed per ethnic group

The most striking fact was that 27.94% of the Sinhalese sample (432 of the 1574) are yet to decide on a candidate. Another 12.6% said they had already decided but were reluctant to reveal their choice.

Figure 12: Sinhalese voter preferences

Another important fact was that most Sinhalese voters who said they had decided to vote for   were young voters. Most of the people who said they would vote for   and   were elderly voters. The people who said they would vote for   and   did not have a specific age group to identify.
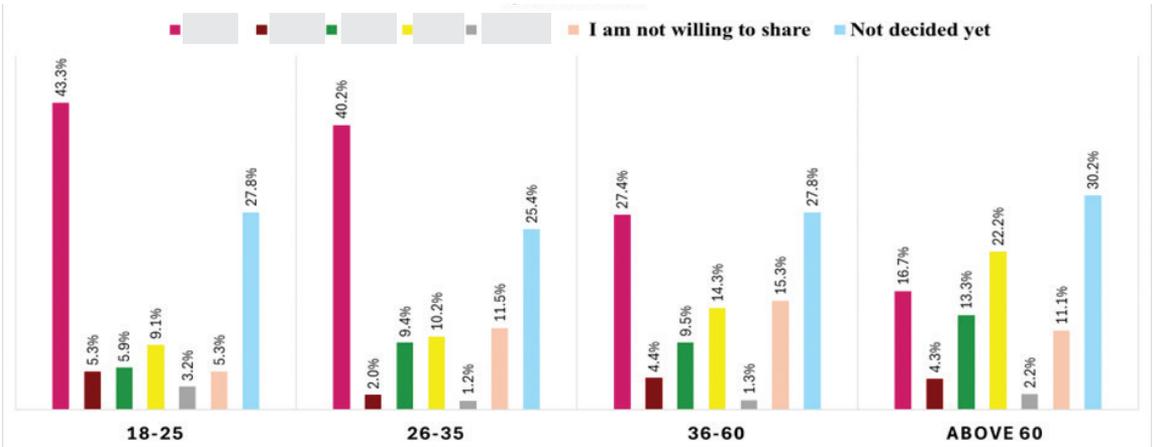
Figure 13: Sinhalese voter preferences – disaggregated by age

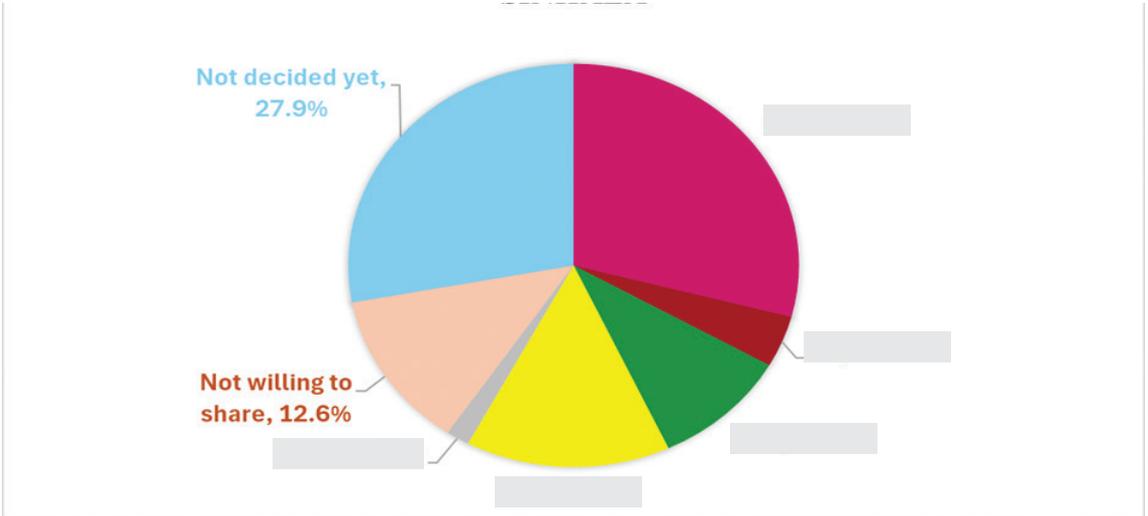The Sri Lankan Tamil community responded differently;   chose   said they expect to vote for   , and almost   for   .   said they would vote for the Tamil candidate in the North. Only one out of the 611 Sri Lankan Tamils in sample said they would

The most notable fact is that most of the sample (35.27%) responded that they are yet to decide. Another 20% said they did not want to declare their decision. Accordingly, this survey could not determine which candidate would get 50% (334 of 611) of the Sri Lankan Tamil voters.
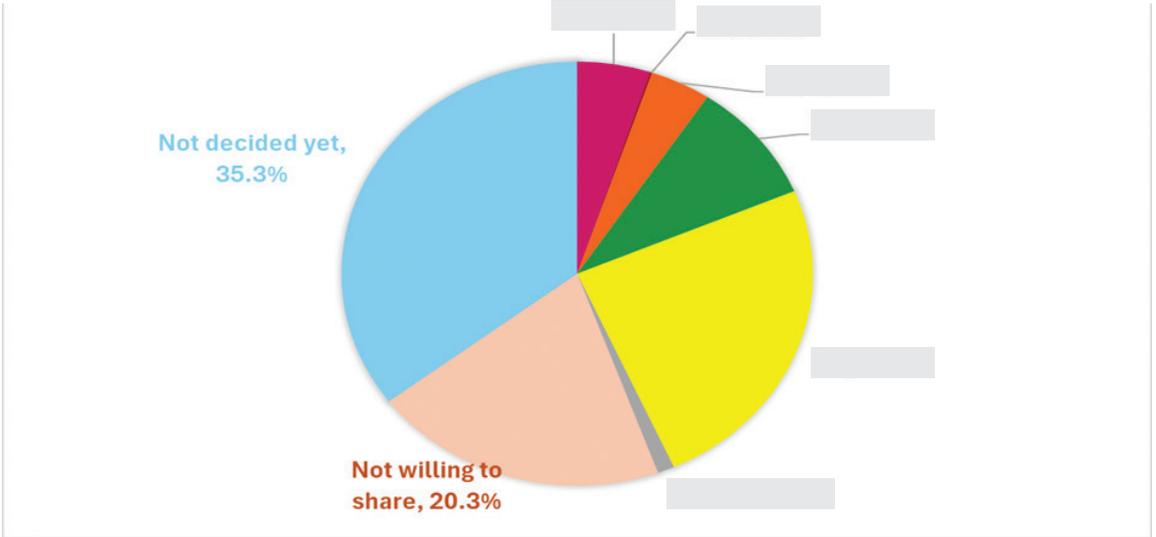
Figure 14: Sri Lankan Tamil voter preferences
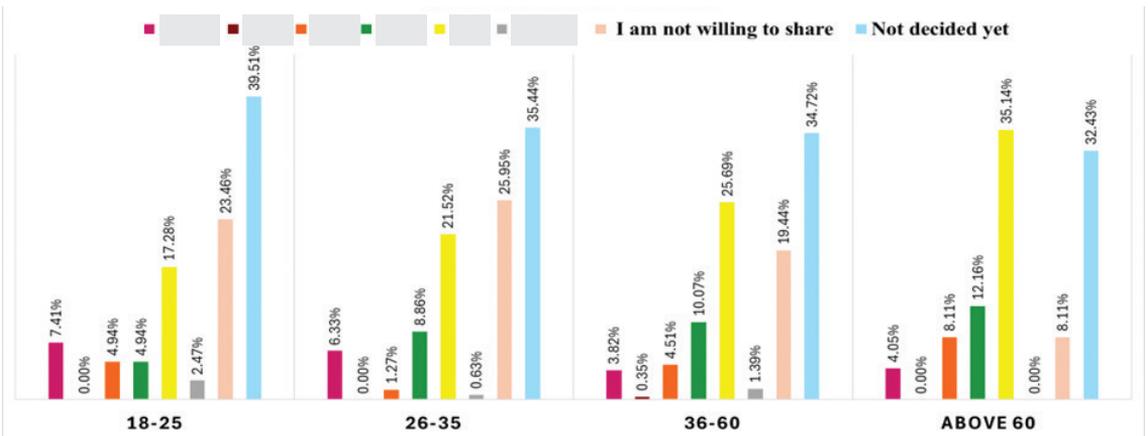
Figure 15: Sri Lankan Tamil voter preferences – disaggregated by age

was the choice of most of the Muslims. He received _____ support among the Muslin sample. _____ said they would vote for _____ and _____ for ___. _____ said they are yet to decide, and _____ said they do not want to declare their decision. Another unique feature that could be identified was that the Muslims who said they would vote for _____ were mostly young. In contrast, the people who said they would vote for _____ were mainly over 35 years old.
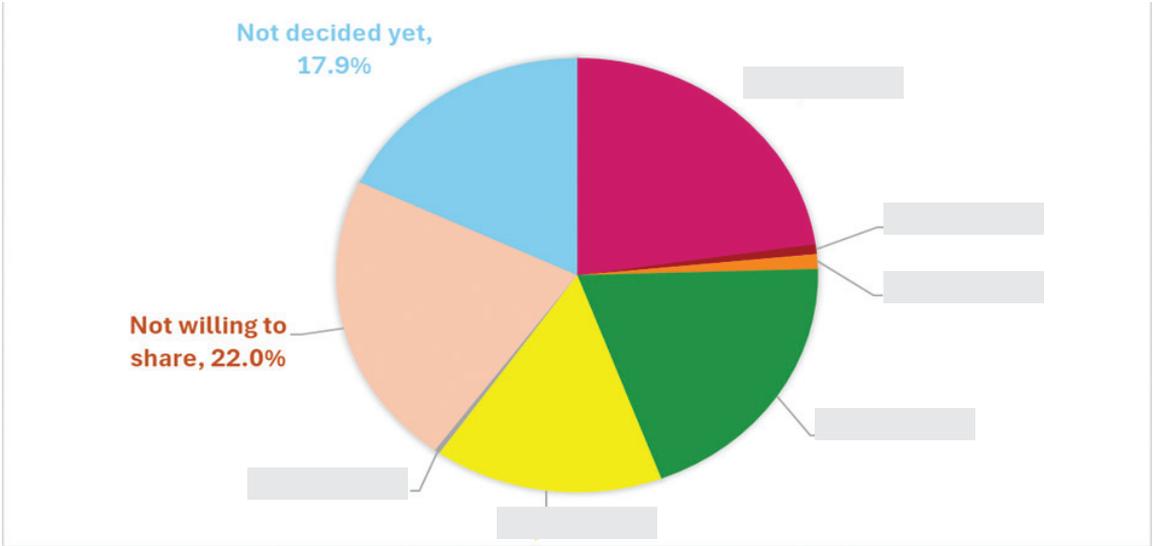
Figure 16: Muslim voter preferences
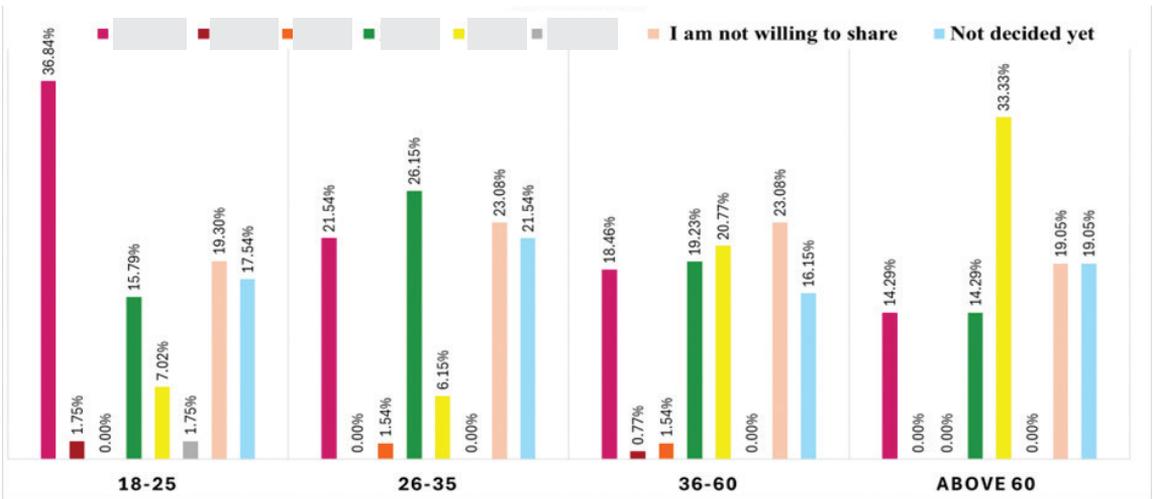
Figure 17: Muslim voter preferences – disaggregated by age

Among the Malaiyaga Tamil community, ⬚ was the most popular candidate. ⬚ said they would vote for ⬚, and they belonged to all age categories. ⬚ was the choice of ⬚ and ⬚ was the choice of ⬚. The tendency to vote for ⬚ among younger voters could also be observed among the Malaiyaga Tamils. For example, out of the 46 people over 60 in the sample, no one said they would vote for ⬚.
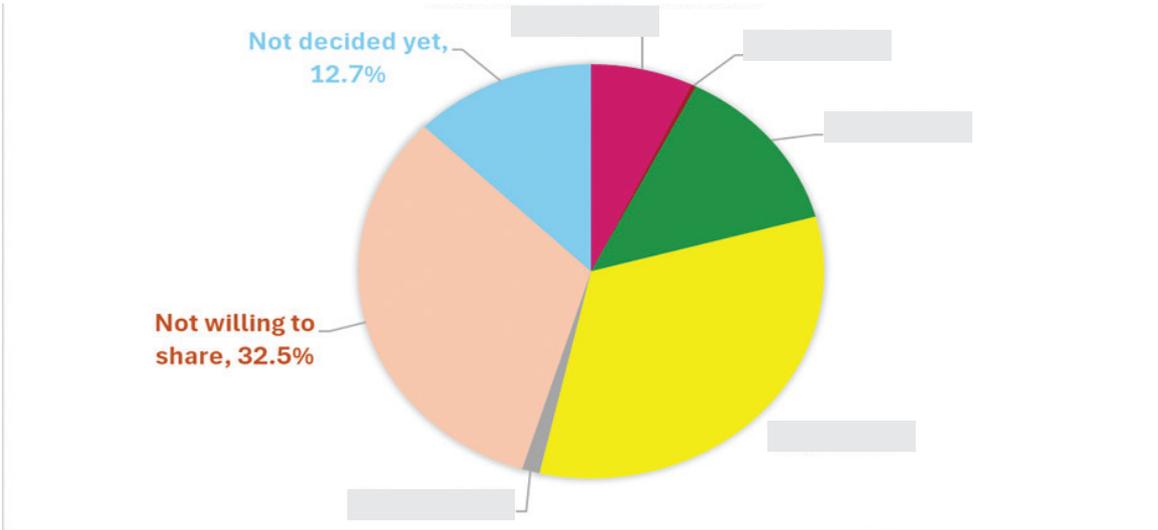
Figure 18: Malaiyaga Tamil voter preferences
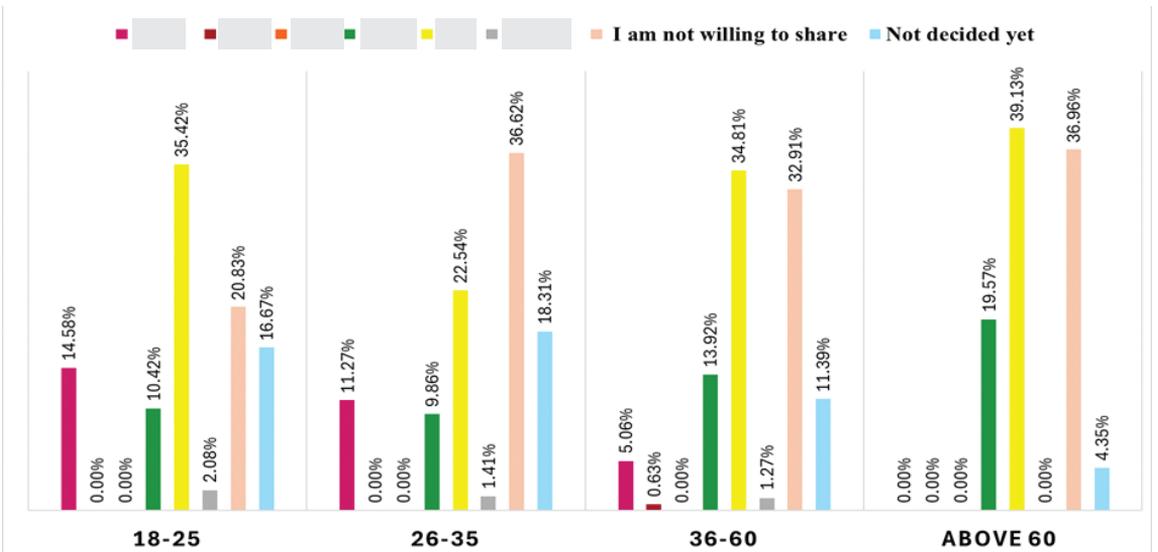
Figure 19: Malaiyaga Tamil voter preferences – disaggregated by age

The survey explored the voters' main considerations in deciding to exercise their vote in the 2024 presidential election. They were invited to prioritize the first 3 factors they considered when exercising their vote and the options included the following: the respective candidate's approach to the economy, their approach to the national question, their interventions in relation to the rule of law, the fact that their family traditionally voted for that candidate or his camp, the ethnicity

of the candidate, and any other factors that do not belong to the aforesaid factors. The majority in each of the four samples – i.e., the Sinhala, the Sri Lankan Tamil, the Muslim, and the Malaiyaga Tamil sample communities – exprewsed the view that the candidate's approach to the economy is the most decisive factor in their vote in the 2024 presidential election.

Respondents in the Malaiyaga Tamil community were the highest in prioratising the economy (82.35%). Compared to other ethnic groups, a low percentage prioratising the economy came from the Muslim community (63.74%). Among the Muslim community, the number of people who said that the main factor they consider is the rule of law was higher compared to other ethnic groups (Muslim-17.95%, Sinhalese-10.8%, Sri Lankan Tamil-7.65%, Malaiyaga Tamil- 4.64%).
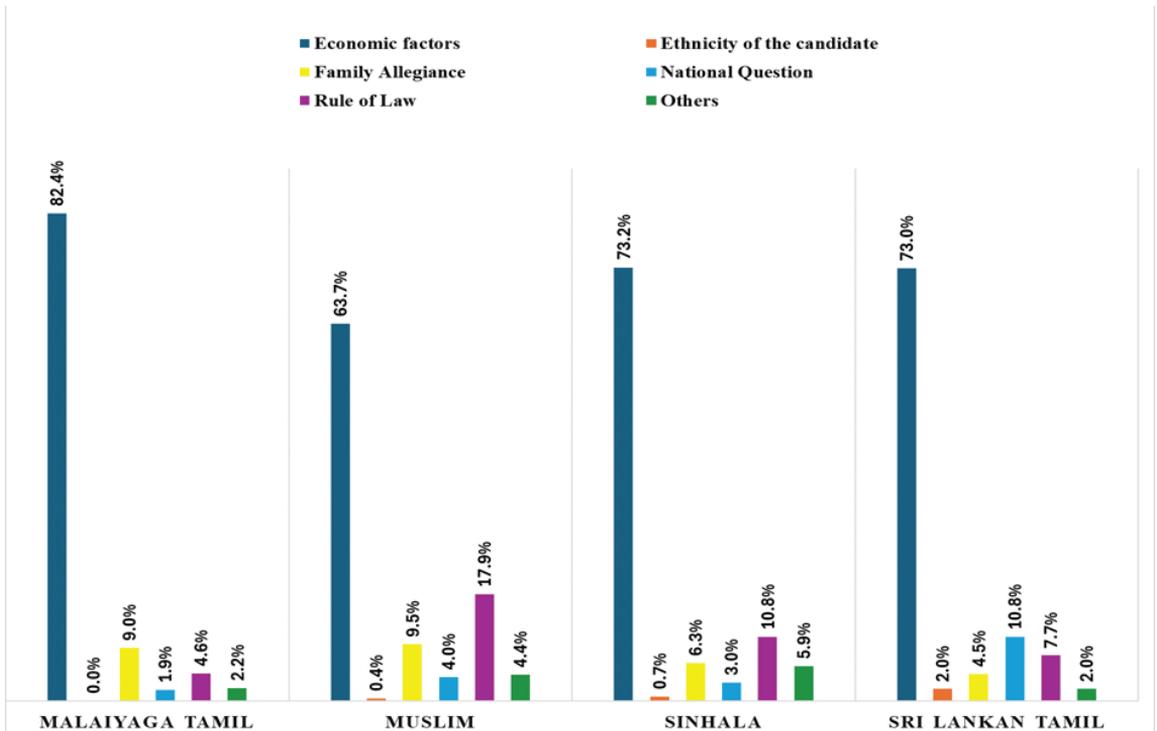
Figure 20: Ethnic community's priorities in decision making for the 2024 Presidential election

As the choices provided to respondents were broad, each respondent was asked to elaborate their choice where possible, and the detailed responses were recorded on the survey form as data collector's notes. At the end of the data collection, the choices of respondents were further unpacked with detailed discussions with data collectors on their experiences.

Economic factors

One of the key findings of the study was that there are discernible differences between rural, urban, and planation communities regarding their economic aspirations and the motivations in their decisions on voting. Urban communities (especially in the Western Province) considered interventions related to the economic crisis to reduce tax burdens and issues related to commodity prices as more important. In comparison, most of the respondents in areas such as Hambantota, Monaragala, Matara, and Anuradhapura focused on reducing the price of chemical fertilizers, reducing taxes on agricultural machinery and providing compensation for crop damage. Unemployment among the University graduates was declared a crucial economic factor for many young people, especially among Sinhalese in the Anuradhapura district and the Sri Lankan Tamils in the north. Most of the Malaiyaga Tamil respondents expressed views that it is essential to reduce the price of goods, provide subsidies, provide meals and uniforms to school children, provide special assistance to the elderly and increase the wages of people working in plantations. Apart from matters associated to welfare, the survey results demonstrated that solving the issue of the landlessness of the Malaiyaga community is also considered a crucial economic factor by most of the respondents. The need to solve issues related to post and r land grabbing was also emphasized in remote areas like Silawathura and this was seen within the broader context of the economy. The Sinhala and Muslim communities in Trincomalee and Puttalam districts indicated that large numbers of women were migrating due to the economic crisis. Survey investigators regarded this as a significant economic issue and were of the view that addressing the economic crisis of the country effectively would reduce the numbers of women leaving the country for foreign employment. Apart from the other economic considerations shared in common with other ethnic communities, a considerable number among Sri Lankan Tamil respondents expressed their concern on housing issues and the low wages of government employees. It was evident that there is a great diversity among the economic factors which different communities consider to be significant and refer to when prioritizing their decisions on voting. The factors varied from commodity prices, welfare, social security, production, tax reduction to employment generation.

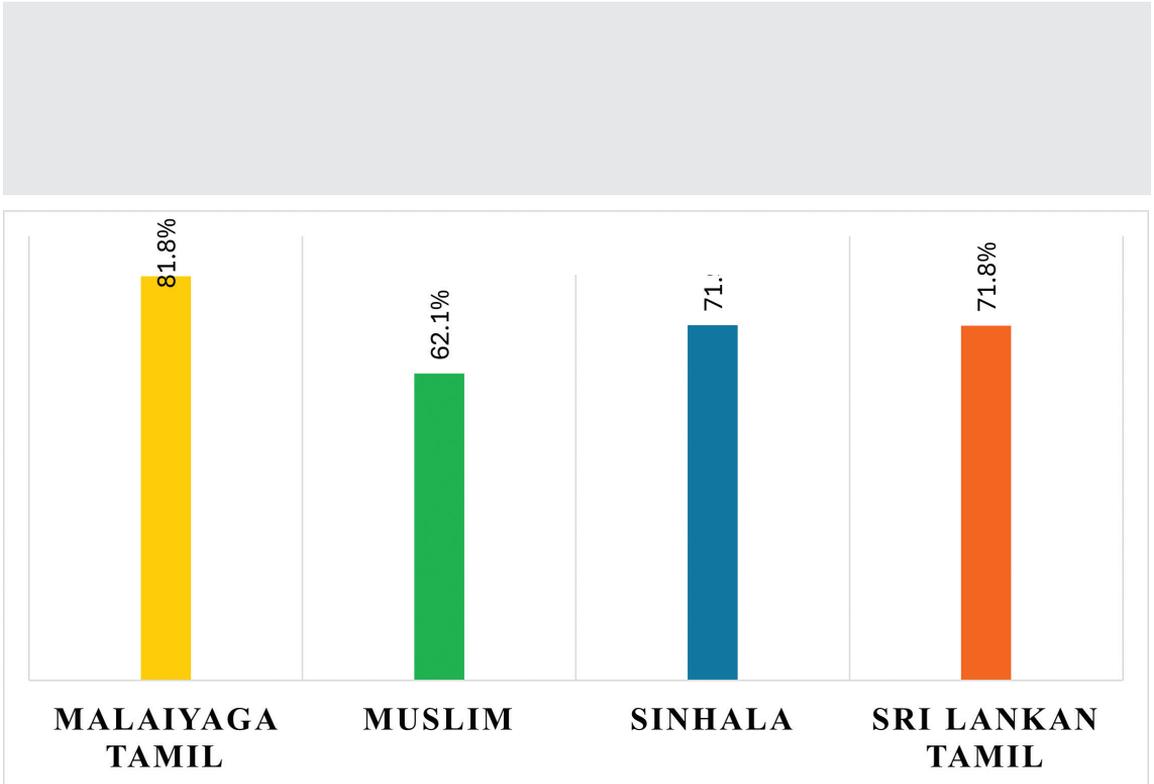*Restricted as per Election Commission requirement*

Figure 21: Prioritizing economic factors by ethnic community

Rule of law

After the economy, respondents were most concerned with the rule of law. The respondents who showed more interest in the rule of law were from the Muslim community. Respectively, 16.9% of the Muslim community, 10% of the Sinhalese community, 7.9% of the Sri Lankan Tamil community, and 4.6% of the Malaiyaga Tamil community said that they consider the rule of law more important than all other factors. For a majority of Muslim respondents, the rule of law meant the protection of the law against the injustices they had experienced in the past (especially after the Easter Sunday attacks). They believed that conducting house searches and arrests under the Prevention of Terrorism Act were discriminatory. They opined that instead of searching for those involved in extremist activities, the law was misused to suppress the politically active members in their community. They perceived that the same injustice and discrimination occurred in the forced burial of dead bodies during the Covid-19 epidemic. They expressed the need for a system of governance that can nurture the rule of law with due respect for equality and non-discrimination, with protection against victimizing any community. Simultaneously, Muslim women were of the view that they were discriminated due to their attire. They said they should have legal protection to wear what they want under the right to protect one's cultural identity.

Many respondents interpreted anti-corruption under the broad category of law and order. Some, especially from the urban community, expressed lack of hope in the likelihood of legal action being taken against those who commit fraud and corruption, in the absence of the necessary legal reforms. Others said that anti-corruption was crucial in 2015, but in the context of the current economic crisis, it is less decisive than before. Some respondents thought that the public was no longer taking it seriously as no action had been taken against those who were accused of fraud and corruption.

was the most preferred candidate to address the issue of fraud and corruption. This attitude was strong among young respondents. Some others, the majority of whom were above 35 said that although the camp he represents has been heavily talking about fraud and corruption, they have not intervened sufficiently to prevent and punish those responsible.

Figure 22: Prioritizing rule of law by ethnic community

National question

The respondents from the Sri Lankan Tamil community accounted for the majority who expressed that the approach to the national question was the most critical factor in their decision on voting, at nearly 10%. Among all other ethnic communities the percentage who prioritized the national question over all other factors was less than 5%. Most of the Sri Lankan Tamil community, who considered the national question as paramount, believed that new leadership is needed to solve it. According to them, addressing the issue of land grabbing and the injustices and grievances caused during the war was essential in solving the national question. Many said that they have no confidence in any candidate who does not belong to their ethnic community to address this. Some said that although they know that a Tamil candidate would not win, they also know from their

experience that voting for a non-Tamil leader is futile. A significant number of Muslim respondents in the sample who were from Silawathura and Alankuda, which have significant numbers of landless and displaced people, expressed the view that solving the land issue would be the basis of any solution to the national question. Respondents from the Sinhala community who expressed their desire to see the national question as a priority in their voting (less than 2% of the sample) were mainly victims of the Easter Sunday attack. According to them, any solution to the national question should accompany a social security mechanism in the face of future injustices and victimizations such as Easter Sunday attacks.

It is noteworthy that the priority given to the national question was low among all the communities and this was the first presidential election in which the national question and nationalism played a less prominent role in election propaganda for decades. Although ethnic tensions may not emerge as prominent factors in this context, we cannot conclude that the importance of the national question has withered away in our society. For example, statements like "no matter what happens, we cannot allow anyone to divide the country" were frequently expressed by the Sinhala respondents.
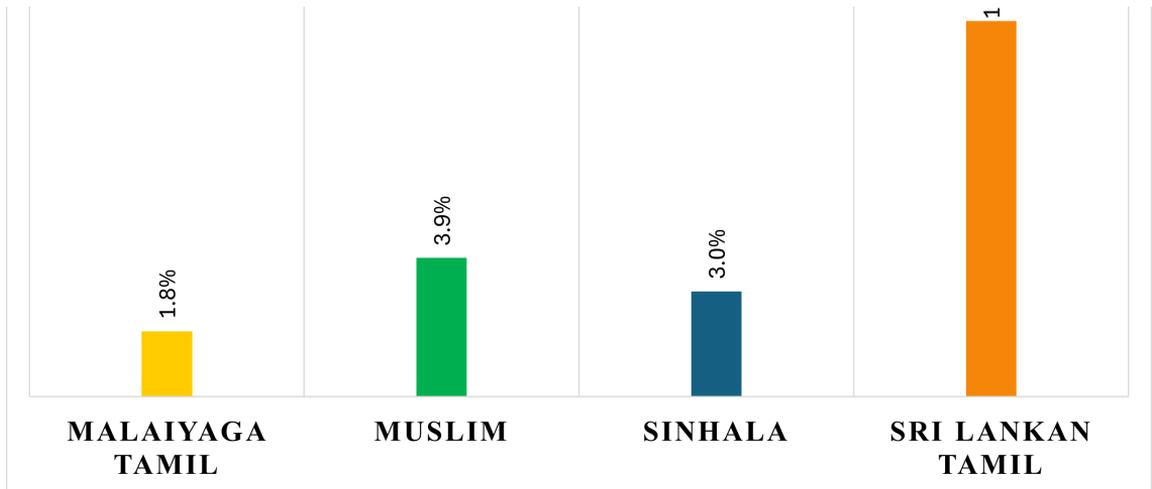

Figure 23: Prioritizing national question by ethnic community

Traditional political allegiances of the family

Most respondents who stated their traditional family allegiances as the most crucial factor in their decision-making were among the Muslim and the Malaiyaga Tamil communities (9.5% and 8.2%, respectively). The same percentage was 6.3% and 4.5% among Sinhala and Sri Lankan Tamil communities, respectively. Older respondents in the sample considered traditional family political loyalties as a decisive factor in their decision than younger respondents.
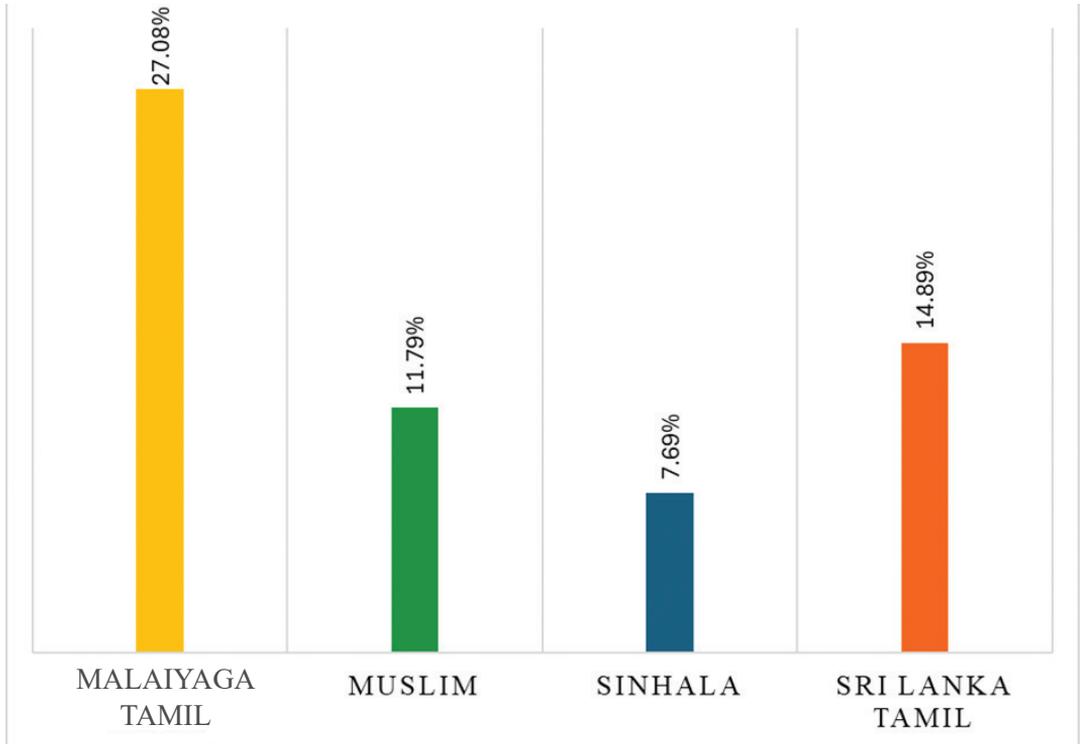

Figure 24: Prioritizing family allegiance by ethnic community

Ethnicity of the candidate

Among the ethnic communities that were surveyed, the highest percentage of respondents who considered ethnicity of the candidate as the most crucial factor were from the Sri Lankan Tamil community (2%). Significantly, none of the respondents from the Malaiyaga Tamil sample said that they prioritize the candidate's ethnicity in making decisions on voting. They attributed this decision to the realization of the unlikelihood of a candidate of their ethnic identity ever becoming the president of the country. They opined that irrespective of the political party of the president, he or she will be a Sinhalese.

Most of the Sinhalese respondents said that they did not consider ethnicity an important factor in deciding to vote, as they were in the view that only a Sinhala-Buddhist could become the president of this country according to the country's laws. Some believed that the law states that the president should be a Sinhala-Buddhist and a married person.

Restricted as per Election Commission requirement

People's priorities in the 2019, 2015, and 2005 presidential elections

The survey also explored the leading factors that were decisive for the respondents in making their decisions during the 2019, 2015, and 2005 presidential elections. In the said presidential elections, the candidate of the ruling party was defeated, and another candidate came to power. The transitions changed the country's political trajectory in a number of ways, varying from the approach towards the national question, foreign relations, nepotism and dramatic changes in the elite-cluster which became closer to the wielders of power and were able to influence high-level political decisions.

The gradual increase of the prominence of the economic factors emerged as a trend when observing the leading factors that determined people's decisions before the 2024 presidential election, when compared to the elections of 2019, 2015, and 2005. This trend could be observed among all ethnic groups surveyed. Among the four main ethnic groups, the respondents from the Muslim community expressed the lowest percentage in preferencing the economy over all other factors when making voting decisions. Respondents from the Muslim community indicated that the preference for rule of law or the national problem remained their priority in the past three presidential elections. The primary focus of the Sri Lankan Tamil respondents in the 2015 and 2005 elections was on the national question. Sinhalese respondents' primary concern has shifted

from the national question in 2005, to economic factors and rule of law/anti-corruption in 2015, and to economic factors in 2019. Therefore, it can be assumed that the dominant narrative of the election discourse in each election has been influential on the Sinhala community or the needs of the Sinhala community had become the dominant narrative(s) in each the popular discourse during elections.

On the other-hand, the other ethnic communities have primarily focused on the relevance and effect of each dominant narrative on their community: when anti-Tamil sentiments are prominent in the election campaign in the South, Sri Lankan Tamils have focused more on the national problem, and the same has happened to the Muslim community. However, in the present context of economic crisis, the priority of the national question as a decisive factor in making decisions on voting has reduced, and the economic factors have emerged more decisive. Although, traditionally, family allegiances have played a vital role among the Malaiyaga Tamils, the current study depicts it is gradually weakening. While the current study has revealed a gradual decrease of the prominence of the national question and an increase in prominence of economic-related issues in making decisions on voting in presidential elections from 2005 to 2024, this needs a further in-depth study.
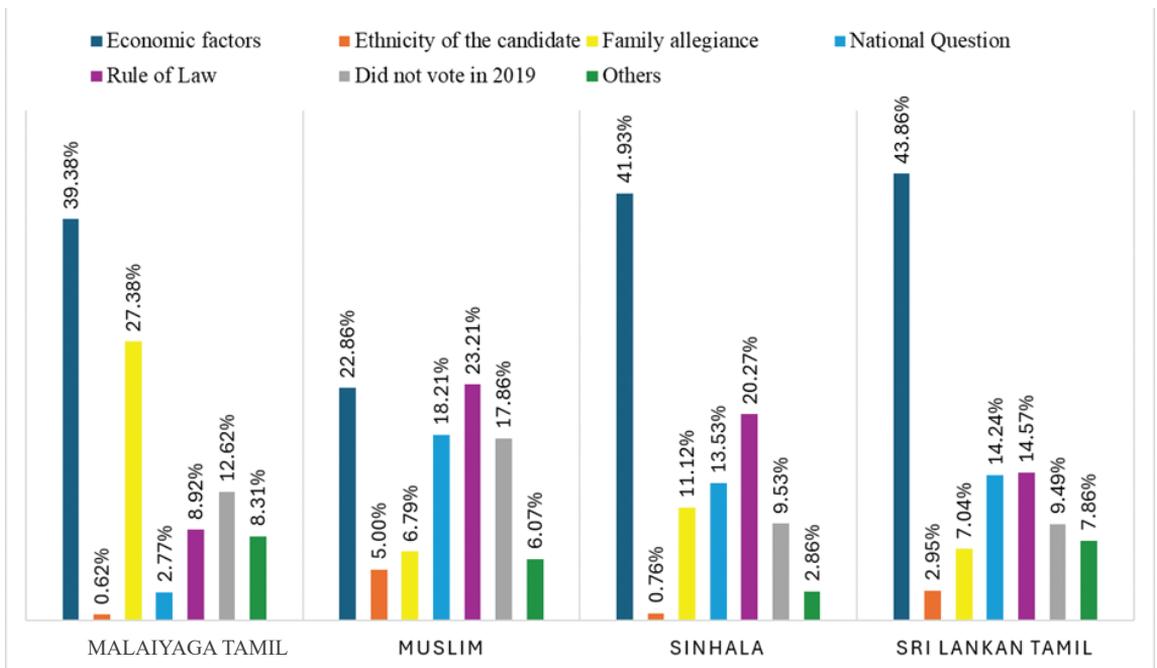

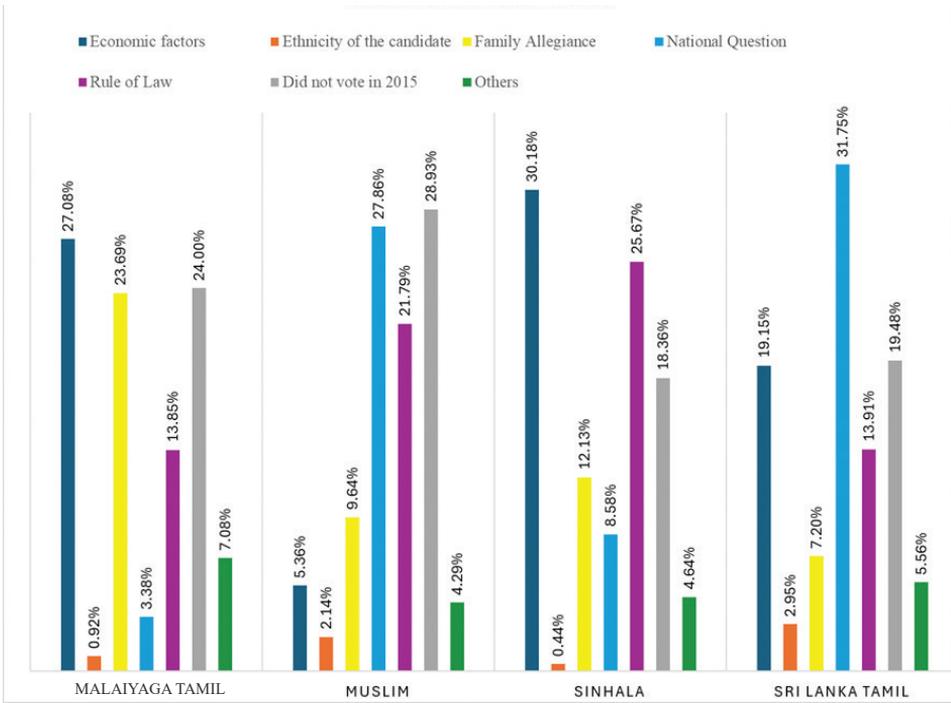Figure 25: Priority in decision making in 2019
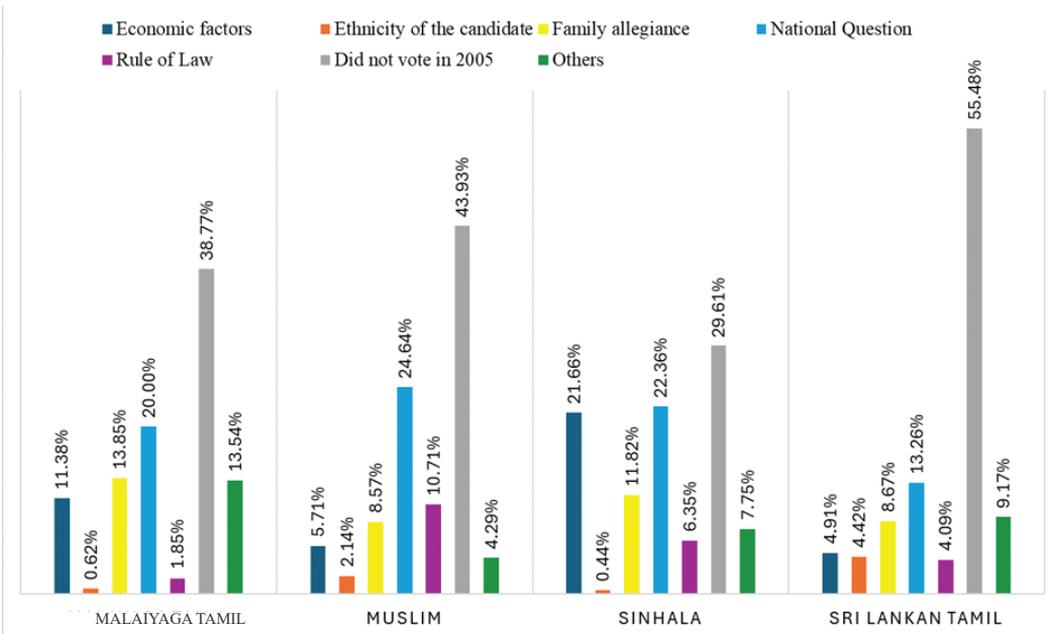
Figure 26: Priority in decision making in 2015

Figure 27: Priority in decision making in 2005

When asked how they decide which candidate suits their aspirations, the majority responded that their primary source of information was the media (Sinhalese-55%, Sri Lankan Tamil-48%, Muslim-41%, and MalaIyagaTamil-29%). The next most crucial information source was their social networks (workplace, trade unions, village societies, welfare societies, religious societies). 25% of Muslims, 23% of Malaiyaga Tamils, 22% of Sri Lankan Tamils, and 13% of Sinhalese said they mainly depend on the information they receive through their social networks. 27% of the Malaiyaga Tamil sample said the information they get through their family and close family network are more influential. In the Sinhalese sample, it was 18%, and in the Muslim sample, 17%, while in the Sri Lankan Tamil sample, it was the lowest at 12%.
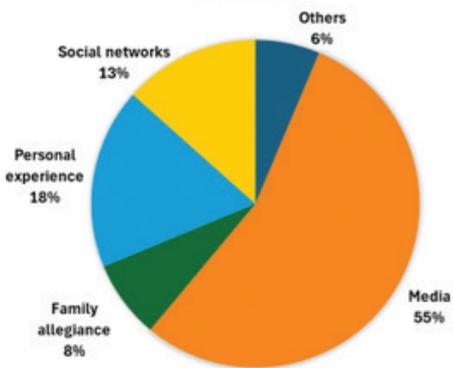

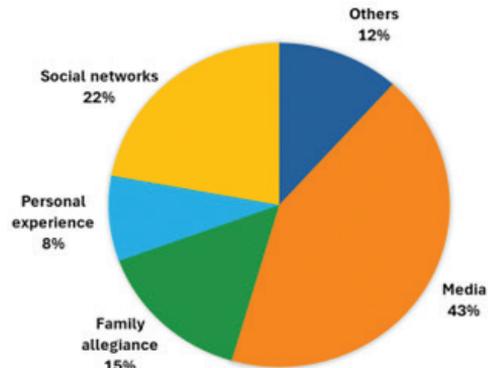Figure 28: Primary information source (Sinhalese)

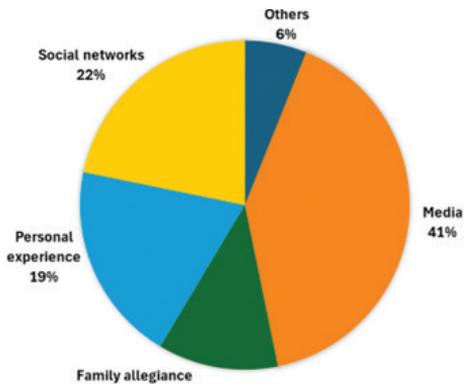Figure 29: Primary information source (Sri Lankan Tamil)

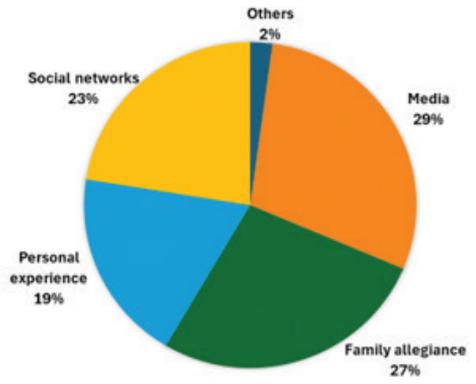Figure 30: Primary information source (Muslim)

Figure 31: Primary information source (Malaiyaga Tamil)

Finally, respondents of each ethnic sample were asked what they would do if their preferred candidate won the election and betrayed their aspirations. The majority of all ethnic groups except respondents from Sri Lankan Tamil community, said that they would wait until the next presidential election to remove him from power (Sinhalese-35.6%, Muslim 36.1%, and Malaiyaga Tamil-54.2%). Most of the respondents of the Sri Lankan Tamil sample said that instead of waiting for the next Presidential election, they would vote against his camp in all the upcoming elections to express their dissatisfaction. The respondents who said they would go for public protests were less than 9% among all the ethnic samples. It is interesting to see the people's unwillingness to resort to protests two years after a President was overthrown through public protests. A considerable proportion of every sample expressed that they have no idea how to respond if a betrayal of aspirations occurs (Sinhalese- 29.2%, Sri Lankan Tamil-25%, Muslim- 29.8%, and Malaiyaga Tamil- 25%).
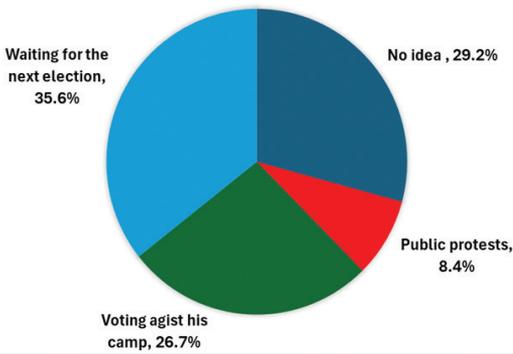

Figure 32: Response to betraying the promises (Sinhalese)
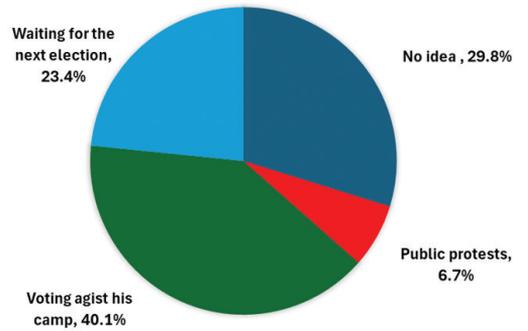

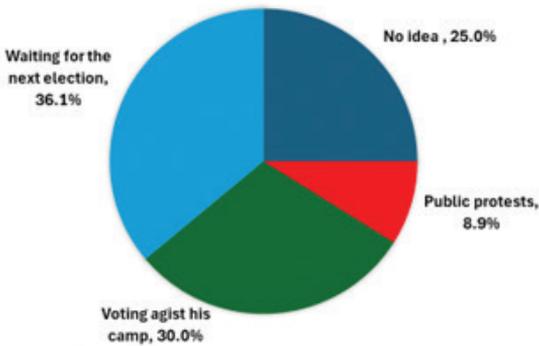Figure 33: Response to betraying the promises (Sri Lankan Tamil)

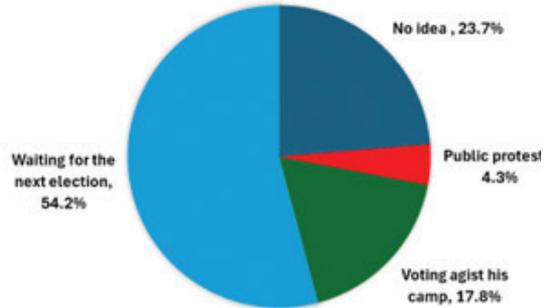Figure 34: Response to betraying the promises (Muslim)

Figure 35: Response to betraying the promises (Malaiyaga Tamil)

Conclusion

The upcoming Presidential election is the first election in the country after the Aragalaya, and it is the first opportunity for the people to express their voice within the representative democratic framework. Decisions in presidential elections have the most influence on the country's polity. In this context, it is unsurprising that the majority of the voters in all ethnic communities express their eagerness to cast their vote. According to the findings of the current study, the overwhelming majority of the Sinhalese are in favor of   and the majority of them are young voters below 35. He is also more popular among the Muslim community than other candidates.   is more popular among the older voters in Sinhala and Muslim communities.

However, in terms of overall preference,   is ahead of   among Muslims.   is the most popular candidate among Sri Lankan Tamils and Malaiyaga Tamils.   is the second preferred candidate. Further,   is more popular among older voters in both communities. In all four ethnic samples, since a considerable proportion of respondents had not decided on the candidate they would vote for and another considerable proportion was not willing to share their choice, the survey result projects only preferences of 60% of the Sinhala community, 45% of the Sri Lankan Tamil community, 60% of the Muslim community and 55% of the Malaiyaga Tamil community sampled in the survey.

Compared to the past Presidential elections, economic factors have become the primary consideration among voters of all ethnicities for their choice. There is a difference in what is understood as the critical economic factor among different ethnicities, sectors, and localities. They vary from commodity prices, welfare, and social security to facilitating agriculture, tax reduction, and employment generation. Compared to other ethnic communitas, a considerable proportion of Muslims have prioritized (after economic factors) the importance of the rule of law, which many of them linked with their experience in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks. The highest interest in the national question was expressed by the Sri Lankan Tamils (but very much secondary to economic factors), and it incorporated the need to address the issue of land grabbing and other post-war grievances. A particular portion of Muslims (especially those who were displaced from the North in 1990) and victims of the Easter Sunday bombings (Sinhalese) framed their concerns under the national question, showing the multifaceted nature of the issue. The political allegiance of the family as a critical factor was higher among the Malaiyaga Tamil community than other ethnicities.

The ethnicity of the candidate is the least prioritized factor by the Muslims and Malaiyaga Tamils; simultaneously, Sri Lankan Tamils showed the highest percentage in prioritizing ethnicity of the candidate among the ethnic samples, although it was relatively low compared to other factors. The overwhelming majority of the Sinhalese thought that consideration of the ethnicity of the

candidate was unnecessary, as they believed that only a Sinhala-Buddhist could become the President of the country according to the law of the country.

Compared with the 2019, 2015, and 2005 elections, a decline in the importance of the national question in the discourse during the Presidential election can be observed. Simultaneously, grievances of the Muslims and Sinhalese (especially after the Easter Sunday attacks) have added a new dimension to the national question, which was earlier limited to Sinhalese and Tamils. In the present context, diverse concerns of all ethnic communities related to economy, law and order and identity have been articulated to the national question. Therefore, the future government may have to incorporate these diverse dimensions and address the grievances of all the communities within a nation-building process. The gradual weakening of traditional family allegiance in determining voting is a promising feature for the future.

The primary source based on which voters make their decisions on voting is the media. Therefore, the role of the media is crucial for a free and fair election in which informed voters can decide based on unbiased information. This is important to note given the numerous allegations against the state and private media for their biased reporting. Recently, the Election Commission issued warnings to certain media stations for defamatory comments on specific candidates and criticizing selected candidates for behaviours inconsistent with media ethics. Dependency on social networks as the primary source of influence for decision-making was lower among Sinhalese than among other ethnic communities. Significance of the information received through the family network was high among Malaiyaga Tamil community compared to the others.

It was evident that the overwhelming majority of the respondents in all ethnic communities were not considering the option of publicly protesting against the betrayal of the election promises of the selected candidate. Instead, the majority would opt to wait for the next Presidential election or the other elections to respond. However, approximately 25% of respondents in all communities expressed an inability to imagine a political response in such a situation. This is challenging to the idea of transformation of the people's political consciousness displayed during the Aragalaya. Accordingly, the people's political consciousness after the Aragalaya is an area that needs further research.

The presidential election of 2024 is crucial as it is the first election after the Aragalaya and the chance to elect a President with a legitimate mandate from the people. On the other hand, people have high hopes that the person elected will address their diverse economic concerns. These hopes are not limited to short-term economic benefits, which can be materialized through welfare and a reduction in living expenses. People have broad, far-reaching, and long-term aspirations for their economic and political future. Although submerged in the economic discourse, ethnic grievances and nationalism have not withered away and the need to rebuild the nation remains a priority. Simultaneously, people are yearning for the rule of law to be established. Therefore, expectations are high from the candidate who wins the current "two-cornered, three-way fight".

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In the Republic of Sri Lanka sovereignty is in the People and is inalienable. Sovereignty includes the powers of government, fundamental rights and the franchise.

Article 03, Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

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