

# The Influence of Mass Media on Voting Discussion: Analyzing Sri Lankan Voter Behavior

A.R. Azsam

Postgraduate Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Peradeniya. [azsamar@gmail.com](mailto:azsamar@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

This study, explores how mass media shaped voter decisions during Sri Lanka's 2019 presidential election. The research focuses on media coverage of key events such as the Easter Sunday attacks, allegations of economic deals with U.S. corporations, and controversies around contraceptive pills and racial tensions. Through a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative analysis, the study examines the extent to which media narratives influenced voting patterns and whether the media's portrayal aligned with voter perceptions. The study highlights significant demographic variations in media influence, with media authenticity and public trust being central to understanding voter behavior.

Mass media has long been recognized as a powerful tool in shaping political behavior, particularly during elections. In democratic societies, media outlets serve as platforms for public debate, information dissemination, and opinion formation. In Sri Lanka, the 2019 presidential election occurred amidst significant political and social upheaval, with the media playing a central role in framing public discussions. This study investigates how media coverage of key events, such as the Easter Sunday attacks and national controversies, influenced voter perceptions and decisions during the election.

The primary aim of this research is to assess the role of mass media in shaping voter behavior, examining how media narratives influence public opinions on security, sovereignty, and social policies. This research focuses on whether the media's portrayal of key issues affected voting intentions, identifying which candidates benefitted from media coverage and how these portrayals shifted traditional voter loyalties. The study also evaluates public perceptions of the authenticity of media narratives, investigating how media credibility shaped voter trust.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to assess the influence of mass media on voter behavior. A survey was conducted with a sample of 500 voters from diverse demographic backgrounds, including urban and rural regions. The survey focused on the impact of specific media coverage on voting intentions, while qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into the voters' experiences and perceptions of media narratives.

A content analysis of media outlets during the election period, including state-owned, independent, and social media, was conducted to examine how key events were framed and disseminated. The study also analyzed voter responses to media portrayals of national security, economic policies, and social issues.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### Media Coverage of Key Events and Its Influence on Voting Behavior

**Easter Sunday Attacks:** The media's extensive coverage of the Easter Sunday attacks had a significant impact on voter behavior. Approximately 65% of survey respondents indicated that media coverage of the government's handling of the attacks influenced their voting decisions.

Many voters expressed concerns about national security and leaned toward candidates, such as Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who promised stronger security measures. Qualitative interviews highlighted emotional reactions to media portrayals of the attacks, with many voters feeling a heightened sense of insecurity and demanding a change in leadership.

**Deals with U.S. Corporations:** The media's portrayal of alleged economic deals between the Sri Lankan government and U.S. corporations raised concerns about the country's sovereignty and economic independence. About 40% of respondents cited these deals as a key factor in their voting decisions. Independent media outlets emphasized the potential risks of foreign influence, while state-owned media downplayed the significance of these deals. Voters from rural areas, in particular, were more likely to be influenced by narratives around economic sovereignty.

**Contraceptive Pill Controversy:** Controversies surrounding contraceptive pills, tied to religious and racial tensions, received significant attention on social media. Approximately 25% of respondents indicated that the media's portrayal of this issue influenced their voting decisions. This issue highlighted the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and public policy, and was amplified by viral social media posts that claimed certain communities were being targeted.

### **Racial Tensions and Media Influence**

Racially charged comments, particularly on social media, played a significant role in shaping voter behavior. Over 30% of respondents acknowledged that media coverage of racial tensions influenced their voting decisions. Social media, in particular, became a platform for spreading divisive narratives, which resonated strongly with younger, urban voters. The research revealed a generational divide, with younger voters being more susceptible to emotional and racially divisive content.

### **Perception of Media Authenticity**

The authenticity of media coverage was a critical factor in voter behavior. Around 55% of respondents expressed skepticism regarding the objectivity of media narratives, particularly those from state-owned outlets. Independent media outlets were viewed as more credible by 40% of respondents, though their reliability varied depending on the issue. The research found that voters tended to cross-reference multiple media sources to verify information, reflecting a general distrust in singular narratives.

### **Shifts in Voting Patterns**

The study found clear correlations between media exposure and changes in voter behavior. Urban youth, primarily exposed to social media, were most influenced by issues related to racial tensions and national security, resulting in a 20% shift in their voting preferences. Rural voters, who consumed more traditional media, were influenced by concerns about security and economic independence, with a 10% shift in their voting intentions. The middle class, exposed to a mix of media, displayed a more nuanced response, considering both economic policies and security concerns.

Table 1: Voter Shifts Based on Media Exposure

Voter Group	Main Source	Media Change in Intention (%)	Voting Key Issues Influencing Shift
Urban Youth	Social media	20%	Racial Tensions, Security
Rural Elderly	TV and Radio	10%	Security, U.S. Corporate Deals
Middle Class	Mixed	15%	Economic Independence, Security

The survey revealed that 65% of voters were strongly influenced by media coverage of the Easter Sunday attacks, with 30% influenced by U.S. corporate deals and 25% by the contraceptive pill controversy.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study highlights the powerful role of mass media in shaping voter behavior during the 2019 Sri Lankan presidential election. The findings suggest that media coverage of key issues, particularly national security and racial tensions, significantly influenced voter decisions. The media's portrayal of events such as the Easter Sunday attacks and racially charged comments played a pivotal role in shaping perceptions, with emotional and security-related narratives resonating strongly with voters.

However, the study also underscores the importance of media authenticity. Voter skepticism about the credibility of media sources suggests that a more balanced and objective media environment is necessary for fostering informed electoral decisions. The findings call for a more responsible approach to media reporting, particularly during election periods, to ensure that media narratives do not unduly polarize public opinion or distort the democratic process.

Future elections should see an emphasis on improving media literacy among voters, encouraging them to critically assess media content, and promoting fair and balanced reporting. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between mass media and voter behavior, offering valuable insights for policymakers, media professionals, and election organizers in Sri Lanka.

#### 5. Keywords

Mass Media, Voting Behavior, 2019 Presidential Election, Media Influence, Political Perception, Sri Lanka

#### 6. References

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