Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey
2022-08

FOR RELEASE August 15, 2022

JVP Support Surges with the Collapse of the Economy and the Gotabaya Presidency

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FOR MEDIA INQUIRIES

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About the IHP Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey

The IHP Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey (SLOTS) was launched to track public experience and opinion during the recovery from COVID-19. It is run by the Institute for Health Policy (IHP), which is an independent, non-partisan research centre based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The SLOTS lead investigator is Dr Ravi Rannan-Eliya of IHP, who was trained in public opinion polling at Harvard University, and who has conducted numerous opinion surveys over three decades.

SLOTS interviews representative samples of Sri Lankan adults every day by telephone to gather their current views and situation. All interviews include a core set of common questions, with additional rotating sets of other questions that examine issues of topical importance. The survey is made possible by the generous funding support of the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust and others. The survey has an omnibus design, and the Institute welcomes sponsorship to continue the survey, to add new questions, or to undertake tailored analyses of the data. Potential sponsors should contact the Institute for further details.

SLOTS respondents consist of a mix of respondents reached by random digit dialling of mobile numbers, and others coming from a national panel of respondents who have agreed to be re-interviewed, and who were previously recruited using random selection. As with any survey, bias can arise from the sampling design and non-response, which means that respondents are not representative of the underlying population. To adjust for this, unless otherwise noted, all reported estimates and analyses use data that have been weighted to ensure that they are representative of the national adult population. This weighting process uses propensity weighting and iterative proportional fitting (raking) to match the national population according to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic ranking, education, sector, and geographical location, and where appropriate by voting history.

JVP Support Surges with the Collapse of the Economy and the Gotabaya Presidency

The street protests and the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on 14 July was accompanied by collapse in support for the ruling parties. The nation faces critical economic and political choices, but this did not lead to public consensus about whom to support. That is now changing, with the NPP/JVP emerging as the most popular choice of Sri Lankans.

At the Institute for Health Policy (IHP), our Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey (SLOTS) has been tracking public opinion every day since August 2021, interviewing people across the country. I share here for the first time what we have been seeing, and how we have been doing this.

## The collapse in support for President Rajapaksa

As the economy seemed to recover, reflected in improvements in IHP's SLOTS Index of Consumer Sentiment (ICS) which tracks consumer confidence, and as the COVID-19 Delta wave receded in late 2021, support for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa recovered. Earlier, his popularity had been hit by failing to respond strongly and earlier to the Delta wave. Our August–September polling revealed strong public support for tougher COVID-19 controls, a view that the government should have acted earlier, especially amongst poorer Sri Lankans, and high public regard for Dr Sudarshini Fernandopulle, the one minister who had signalled her unhappiness with the COVID-19 response.

From October to January 2022, Presidential Rajapaksa led in our Presidential Election tracker poll, which asked people who they would vote for if given a two-way choice of President Rajapaksa or Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa. But as the economic crisis became evident—in foreign exchange scarcities, supply disruptions, lack of cash in the Treasury, and then from March in nationwide power cuts, consumer confidence collapsed and with it support for the President.

This wasn't a pushback against a perceived ethnic agenda nor conversely perceptions that he was failing to look after Sinhala Buddhist interests, nor any outcry against corruption. "It's the economy, stupid" as James Carville, Bill Clinton's campaign strategist, once said. There is remarkable correlation between trends in consumer confidence and President Rajapaksa's electoral support during September 2021—March 2022. Sri Lankan voters resemble those in Western democracies. Culture and identity issues influence people, but it's living standards that really matter in the end.

Our Presidential tracker only offered respondents two choices to replicate the scenario in a real election after second preference votes are transferred to the top two candidates, so support for Sajith automatically increased, as Gotabaya's fell. In March 2022, Sajith edged ahead in our tracking of a two-way contest, and the two then ran within our survey's margin of error—effectively neck and neck—till June, when Sajith took a clear lead as the Aragalaya filled the streets.

Collapse in President Rajapaksa's support driven by growing economic pessimism and economic collapse, October 2021–July 2022

PRESIDENTIAL VOTING PREFERENCE (2-WAY) (%)

- Rajapaksa
- Premadasa

IHP SLOTS INDEX OF CONSUMER SENTIMENT (ICS)
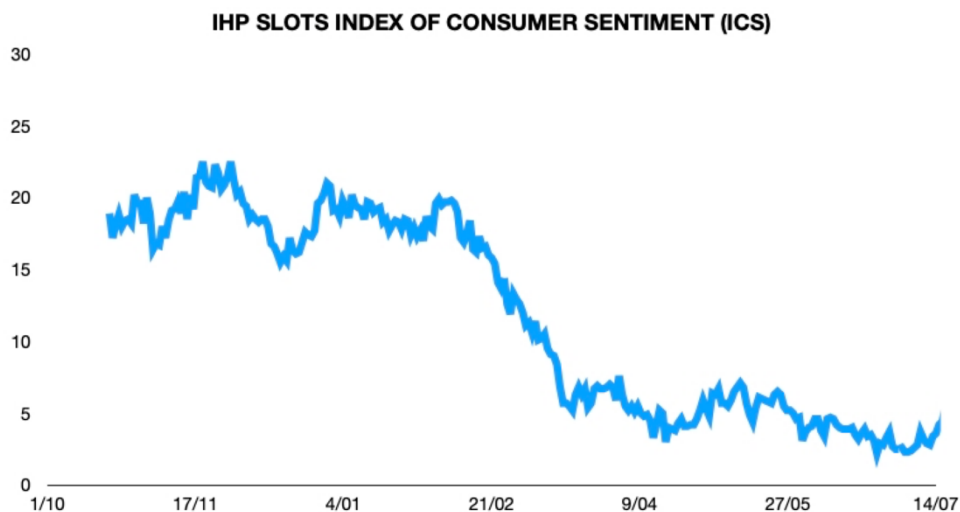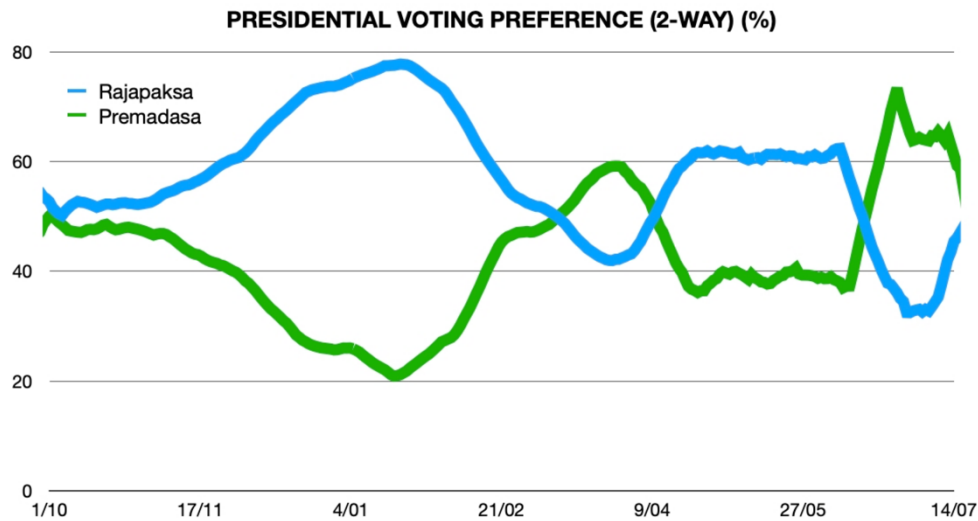
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Voting intentions based on asking respondents to choose from the two named options, with modelling of refusals and don't knows to predict likelihood of voting for each option. Consumer sentiment based on responses to five questions. Daily estimates based on the average of responses in the days before and after each day, with each daily estimate weighted to be representative of the national population, with voting intention also weighted for how respondents voted in 2019 and 2020 elections. Estimates based on interviews with 5,428 respondents from Oct. 2021 to mid-Jul. 2022.

Rising disaffection with all politicians

However, Sajith Premadasa's position was much weaker than this indicates. His support was soft, and his favourability ratings were falling with the President's. Since August 2021, we have been tracking the favourability of leading politicians. Net favourability is the difference between the percentage of people who say they have a favourable opinion and those who have an unfavourable opinion of an individual. In other countries, this often predicts how Presidential candidates will perform in a real election.

Gotabaya retained a net positive favourability (+10 to +30) that was better than Sajith's during late 2021 through early 2022. When it fell and became deeply negative (-70 and less) in April, Sajith's fell also, although not as steeply. By May, both Gotabaya (-76) and Sajith (-77) had equally negative favourability ratings, and Sajith's lead in our two-way Presidential Election tracker was despite most of the public also reporting an unfavourable view of him. At this stage, if Sajith had won a Presidential Election it would have been a rejection of Gotabaya, not a public embrace of him.

These negative favourability ratings were not confined to them. Since March 2022, there has been a dramatic collapse in the favourability ratings of all the politicians we track, regardless of whether they are in the government or opposition. Public disaffection is specifically with the political class, since the public continues to report favourable opinions of other stakeholders we track, such the Ministry of Health, the GMOA and the military. Only a few politicians, such as Dr Sudarshini Fernandopulle, now maintain a net positive rating.

As street protests mounted, the public was divided about who to support

There were other indications that Sajith Premadasa was failing to make a positive case to the public, despite the unprecedented economic crisis and the collapse in support for Gotabaya Rajapaksa. First is that in our two-way Presidential polling, large numbers of respondents were refusing to pick a choice, telling us that they wanted to vote for somebody else or would not vote at all. The second came from our General Election tracking poll that asks people which party they would vote for if there was a General Election.

As President Rajapaksa's support collapsed, support for the ruling SLPP fell. There was a shift in support towards the SJB (and UNP) and the NPP/JVP, with our data suggesting that if a General Election was held in March or April, the SJB might have won. However, the SJB gains were modest. Disaffected SLPP voters were increasingly opting for the NPP/JVP. From April to June, the public was essentially split between all three, with no single party dominating, and large numbers of our respondents sitting on the fence and telling us they would not vote.
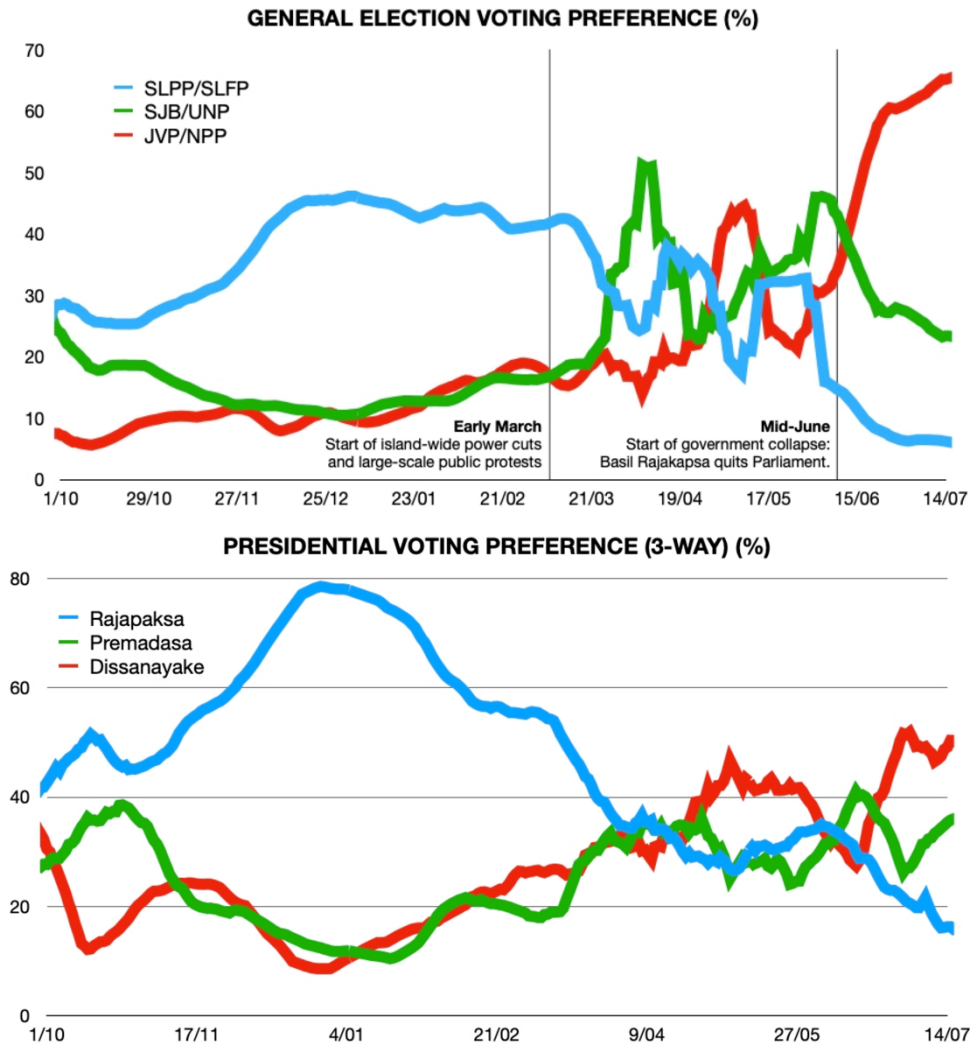
After President Rajapaksa's departure, the NPP/JVP emerges as the biggest winner

From June, as street protests made President Gotabaya's position untenable, leading to his resignation, support for the NPP/JVP surged with the number of undecided respondents declining, indicating many were finally deciding. The NPP/JVP took a clear lead. By mid-July, more than half of Sri Lankan adults would have voted for the NPP/JVP, However, this may overstate JVP performance, as NPP/JVP supporters were less likely to have voted at previous elections or were less strongly committed, so might not turn out on the day. The SJB and UNP, who I will treat as one bloc for reasons of simplicity, would be in second place, leaving the SLPP and SLFP bloc, a distant third, and probably failing to win seats in many districts.

We recently modified our Presidential Election tracker question to give respondents a three-way choice between Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Sajith Premadasa and AK Dissanayake. We don't have responses to this before July, but we can use support for the NPP/JVP in a General Election to proxy supporting AKD in a Presidential poll. When we do this, support for AKD in a hypothetical

Presidential Election was increasing from January before surging after May. Today, the JVP leader would probably win a Presidential Election.

The rise of the NPP/JVP in General Election and Presidential Election voting preferences, October 2021–July 2022

GENERAL ELECTION VOTING PREFERENCE (%)

Legend:
— SLPP/SLFP
— SJB/UNP
— JVP/NPP

Early March
Start of island-wide power cuts and large-scale public protests

Mid-June
Start of government collapse: Basil Rajakapsa quits Parliament.

PRESIDENTIAL VOTING PREFERENCE (3-WAY) (%)

Legend:
— Rajapaksa
— Premadasa
— Dissanayake

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Presidential election voting intention based on asking respondents to choose from the three named options, with modelling of refusals and don't knows to predict likelihood of voting for each option. As AK Dissanayake was not offered as an option prior to Jul. 2022, intention to vote for the NPP/JVP in a general election used as a proxy before that. Chart for general election voting intent does not display trends for other parties and excludes "Would not vote". Daily estimates based on the average of responses in the days before and after each day, with each daily estimate weighted to be representative of the national population, including for how respondents voted in 2019 and 2020 elections. Estimates based on interviews with 5,428 respondents from Oct. 2021 to mid-Jul. 2022.

What's driving the surge in NPP/JVP support?

I don't have space to discuss what insights SLOTS provides on why voters are picking the NPP/JVP. What I can do is to share what it tells us about who these voters are. During April–July, the NPP/JVP and AKD averaged just over 40% in our two tracking polls, far exceeding the JVP's previous best performance—9% in the 2001 General Election. Much of this support is due to it doing better than

the SJB in winning over Sri Lankans who voted for Gotabaya and the SLPP or SLFP back in 2019/20. The NPP/JVP is also winning over voters who opted for Sajith in 2019 and is doing better than the SJB/UNP amongst better-off voters, reflecting bigger gains in urban areas. This is increasingly leaving the SJB core support confined to non-Sinhala voters and worse-off rural voters.

How Sri Lankans voted in the Presidential Election 2019 and where those votes would go today, SLOTS April–July 2022
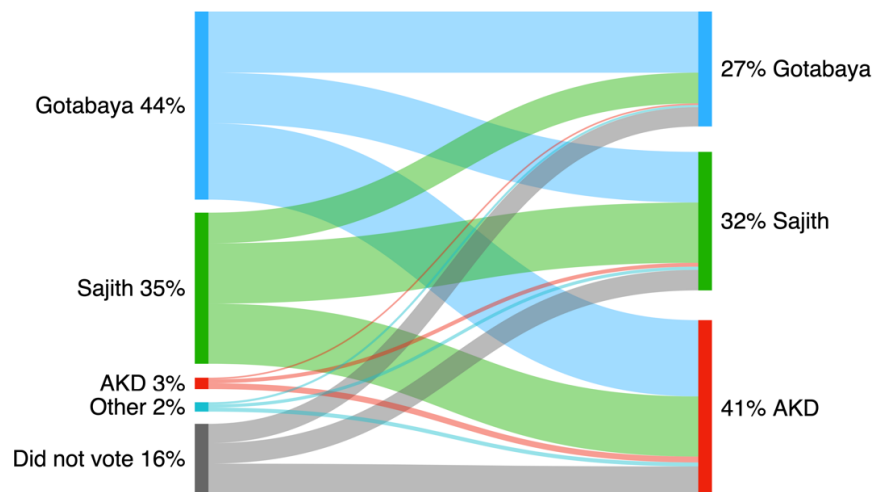
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Analysis of data from interviews of 1,419 adults from 1 Apr. to 14 Jul. 2022, with estimates weighted to match the national population by major sociodemographic characteristics and 2019 and 2020 voting history. Left hand side of chart displays distribution of electorate by how it voted in 2019 Presidential Election, with the width of each bar proportionate to the share of the electorate. AKD= AK Dissanayake. Width of each flowline is proportionate to share of electorate.

How Sri Lankans at different income levels would vote in a General Election, SLOTS April–July 2022
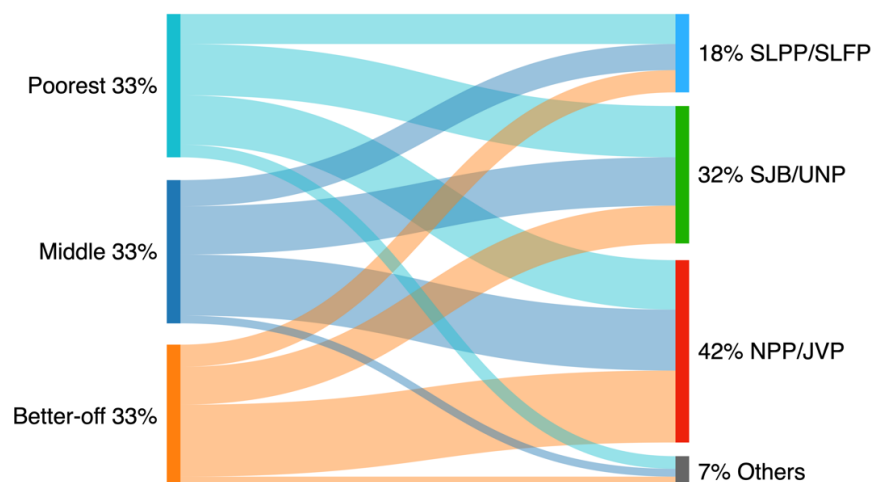
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Our polling suggests that during early March to late-June, which coincides with the Aragalaya protests, many voters lost faith in President Rajapaksa and the SLPP, but were hesitant to support either the SJB or the NPP/JVP. This was particularly true of Sinhala voters, since the SJB had consolidated its support amongst Tamil and Muslim voters during late 2021 to early 2022. But from mid-June, as the government disintegrated and as the economic situation deteriorated, most of these predominantly Sinhala voters came off the fence and picked the NPP/JVP.

What does this portend in the coming months?

The country faces considerable hardship and critical economic choices in the next few months as it negotiates an IMF agreement and restructures foreign debt. Realistically, the current government will lead this process. This is despite it lacking any significant support in the electorate today, however constitutionally sound its formation is. Most likely, there will be a General Election in early 2023. In those elections on current trends, the choice will be between the SJB and the NPP/JVP. The NPP/JVP is in the ascendant and is likely to replace the SLPP/SLFP as the main centre-left force. The SLPP seems unlikely to recover and will probably need time in opposition to restructure and to rework its relationship with its erstwhile ally the SLFP.

The biggest unknown will be what Sajith Premadasa and the SJB do. Will they be able to work out why they have failed to win over the disaffected Gotabaya/SLPP voter and to capitalize on the ignominious collapse of the SLPP? and will they be able to come up with a new agenda that resonates better with the public?

How IHP tracks voting intentions

IHP's Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey (SLOTS) is a national daily telephone survey that interviews people, asking questions about their experience of everyday life and their opinions. Respondents are drawn from a national panel of respondents previously recruited through face-to-face interviews from all parts of the country, and others reached by randomly dialling mobile numbers. Estimates are generated for each day separately, pooling data from days immediately before and afterwards to improve accuracy. Voting preferences and consumer confidence reported here are based on interviews with 5,428 adults during 1/10/2021 to 14/07/2022. Analysis of voter flows in April–July is based on 1,419 interviews.

A big problem with Sri Lankan phone surveys is that respondents tend to be younger, better-off, and more urban. To deal with this, the SLOTS data are adjusted to be representative of the national population, according to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic ranking, education, sector, province, and how people voted in the 2019 and 2020 elections. Another problem is that many respondents are reluctant to divulge their voting preferences. SLOTS uses statistical models to account for this and to predict how these adults might vote. The results given here are from one set of those models.

Acknowledgement