

Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey

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IHP MRP Voting Intentions Estimates February 2023

**Voters consolidate around the NPP/JVP,
SJB and ITAK, with NPP/JVP taking a clear
lead**

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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 has been funded by the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust, the UK National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), the Asia Foundation, 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.

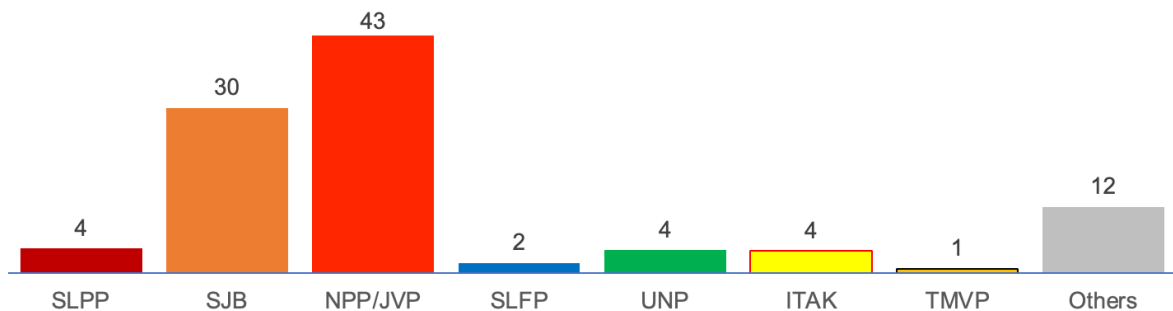
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Voters consolidate around the NPP/JVP, SJB and ITAK, with NPP/JVP taking a clear lead

The latest Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey (SLOTS) polling in February 2023 shows that nationally voters are consolidating around the NPP/JVP and SJB, and around ITAK and SJB in the Northern Province, with support for the SLPP, SLFP and UNP falling.

General Election voting intention, February 2023 (% likely voters)

If there was a General Election today, which party would you vote for?



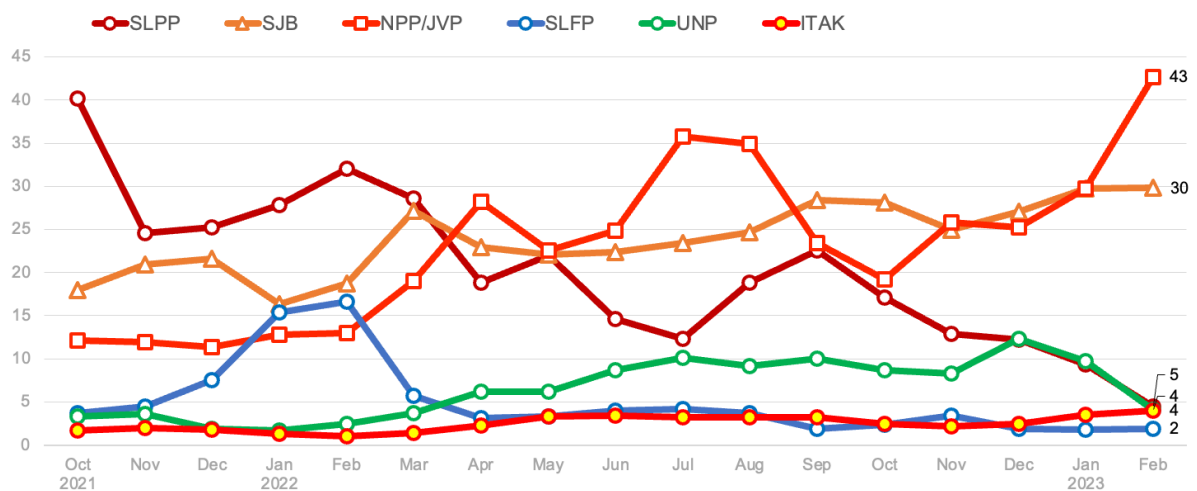
Institute for Health Policy Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey MRP

Estimates based on 421 interviews conducted in Feb. 2023, and 10,050 interviews conducted overall from 31 Aug. 2021–12 Mar. 2023. Estimates are derived from a MRP model and are associated with a margin of error assessed as 2–5%.

Overall, NPP/JVP support surged in February giving it a clear lead with 43% of likely General Election voters, compared with 30% for the SJB. The SLPP, UNP and ITAK were far behind with support of 4% of likely voters each, and SLFP support remained at 2%.

IHP SLOTS General Election voting intention tracker (% likely voters)

If there was a General Election today, which party would you vote for?



Institute for Health Policy Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey MRP

Monthly estimates based on 10,050 interviews conducted from 31 Aug. 2021–12 Mar. 2023. Estimates are derived using a MRP model and are associated with a margin of error assessed as 1–6%, depending on the month and party.

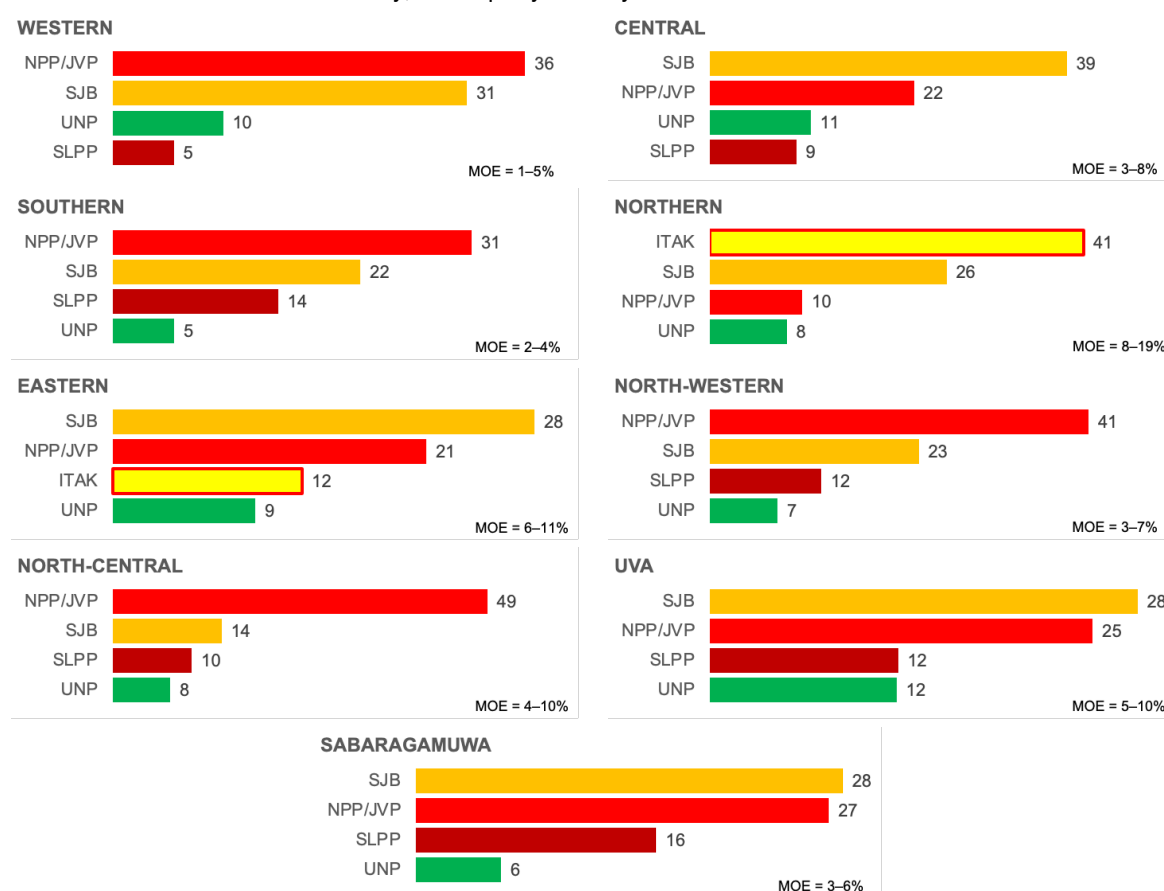
The NPP/JVP lead in February would have been larger if not for a gap in voter enthusiasm with its supporters saying they are less likely to vote. We estimate this reduces its lead over the SJB from 15 points amongst all adults (44% vs. 29%) to 13% amongst likely voters.

The surge in favour of the NPP/JVP follows three months in which it ran neck-and-neck with the SJB. In contrast, there was no increase in support for the SJB in February. IHP’s latest MRP analysis of likely voters indicates that in the 12 months since February 2022 when SLPP support last peaked, the NPP/JVP has gained 30 points and the SJB 11 points. Meanwhile, the SLPP, and SLFP have lost 28 and 15 points respectively, and the UNP has seen its support fluctuate but end only two points higher. During these twelve months, support for the NPP/JVP has fluctuated, peaking in April and in July 2022, and then again currently, but over the longer term its support has steadily risen. In contrast, the increase in support for the SJB has been slower but also less volatile. The fluctuations in support for the NPP/JVP indicate that it has benefited successively from successive swings in floating voters. During February–April 2022, it gained support from the SLPP and SLFP; then during May–July 2022 it benefited from more voters abandoning the SLPP; and most recently from October 2022 it has gained from declines in support for the SLPP and UNP.

In the Northern Province, ITAK has gradually gained support, with the SJB and JVP also making gains. The NPP/JVP and SJB share the lead in the other provinces.

NPP/JVP and SJB led General Election voting preferences in four provinces each, and ITAK in the Northern Province during November–February (% likely voters)

If there was a General Election today, which party would you vote for?



Institute for Health Policy Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey MRP

Based on 2,332 interviews conducted during Nov. 2022–Feb. 2023. Estimates are derived from a MRP model. The margins of error (MOE) are indicated separately for each province.

Overall trends in the past three months suggest that the electorate is moving on from the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Gotabaya Rajapaksa Presidency, when voter preferences remained fluid and voters divided across five national parties. The NPP/JVP and SJB appear now to have emerged as the primary choices of most voters, with they and ITAK receiving the support of almost eight in ten voters. The other three leading national parties—the SLPP, SLFP and UNP—are still likely to win some seats in a general election, but all three would fail to win seats in many districts.

How IHP estimates voting intention

IHP's voting intention estimates use polling data from the Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey (SLOTS), which is a national phone survey that has been tracking public opinion every day since August 2021, interviewing people across the country. Respondents are drawn from a mixed sample of a national representative panel of respondents previously recruited in 2019 through face-to-face interviews from all parts of the country, and others reached by randomly dialling mobile numbers. SLOTS asks respondents who they voted for in the 2019 and 2020 elections, and who they intend to vote for in a future presidential and general election. To minimize bias, the order in which voting choices are presented is randomized between respondents.

For much of the survey period, a major challenge in the SLOTS polling compared with other countries is that many respondents refuse to answer the voting questions, especially current voting intentions, with those who do respond more likely to be SLPP supporters. This has also changed over time, with the rate of refusals declining after the collapse of the government in mid-2022.

To analyse SLOTS data, IHP has used two alternative approaches. The first simply smoothed the monthly voting data by pooling each month with interview responses from the previous and following weeks, using iterative proportional fitting to match each monthly sample to the national population according to demographic characteristics and past election results. Previous SLOTS reports through end-2022 reported results using this approach. This approach is unbiased, but it lacks granularity because it pools three months of data for each point estimate, and it is challenged when making estimates for subgroups.

This report and IHP's previous report use a second approach, which is an adaptation of *Multilevel Regression and Post-Stratification (MRP)*. IHP uses MRP to overcome the relatively small number of interviews in each month ($N=400-1,000$) which leads to a lot of noise in the data. Pollsters in other countries have increasingly used MRP in recent years to leverage small polling samples to track voting intention and predict detailed election results. Its most notable uses have been by YouGov in predicting the Brexit referendum and 2017 and 2019 elections in the United Kingdom, where MRP performed more robustly than traditional polling methods.

IHP has experimented with different MRP methods to generate voting estimates. For this report, the approach was significantly revised, partly to respond to known deficiencies in earlier estimates, and partly to explicitly quantify the margin of error in estimates. The revised method consists of the following steps:

1. A data file is compiled of all SLOTS interviews to date to represent the national electorate at national, provincial, and district levels. This leverages the sourcing of most SLOTS respondents from a previously collected national sample of high quality that is well balanced across a range of dimensions, including geographical location, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. As of

February 2023, this file contains ~10,000 individual records, all weighted to match the national and provincial level populations.

2. Non-response in the national data file to questions about past voting behaviour is managed by imputing past voting using a multiple imputation framework that retains information on the uncertainty involved in the imputation modelling. The imputation model uses a diverse range of variables that are available in the SLOTS data, plus incorporates information on the propensity of respondents to answer voting questions derived from a Heckman selection model. Currently, this uses 20 imputations, owing to the substantial computation effort required, and generates 20 different copies of the national data file. This multiple imputation step also imputes missing data for questions about human values, which have only been asked in a subset of respondents, as human values have been found in other countries to correlate with voting preferences.

3. The national data file is weighted to match the national population along multiple dimensions, including age, gender, ethnicity, religion, education, socioeconomic status, geographical location, sector, and the 2019 and 2020 election results. This is done separately for each of the multiply imputed copies.

4. The data on current voting intention are then analysed to model the relationship between respondent background characteristics, including past voting, and current voting intention. This uses a multilevel modelling approach to estimate voting intention in each month, considering differences in voting patterns by province and district. In a change from our previous estimates, respondents outside the Northern and Eastern provinces who said they will vote for ITAK, TMVP and AITC are now treated as missing responses. Currently this is implemented using penalized spline regression, as the more conventional hierarchical modelling procedure requires substantially more computation resources. Spline regression is mathematically equivalent to standard multilevel or hierarchical modelling in the context of this analysis.

5. The model estimates from the previous step for each month are then taken and used to predict current voting intention in that month for each individual record in the national data file. This is done as the probability of voting for each party, and yields estimates that are more robust and more finely detailed than would be possible if only the interviews for say a given month were used.

6. The likelihood of a respondent voting on election day is modelled using responses to a question on whether they will vote, with the estimated likelihoods adjusted to match turnout in the 2020 General Election. In our previous estimates (MRP estimates for January 2023), the last step was done by pooling the whole national sample, but this yielded implausibly high turnout in the Northern Province, and lower turnout in other provinces, because SLOTS respondents in the Northern Province are much more likely to say they will vote. We suspect this is a difference in the way in which these respondents answer the question, so this step now scales the likelihood of voting to match 2020 General Election turnout at the provincial level.

7. Steps 3–5 are implemented in the multiple imputation framework, so multiple different estimates of current voting intention are produced for each month (currently 20 in total). These estimates are then pooled using Rubin's rules (the standard approach in multiple imputation) to produce point estimates for each month plus 95% confidence intervals. These confidence intervals reflect both sampling noise in the original data as well as the additional error associated with the various imputation and modelling steps.

8. Final estimates are reported separately for all adults and for likely voters, which adjusts for the likelihood of voting from Step 6. The estimated confidence intervals are reported as the margin of

error (MOE). These MOE estimates for the February 2023 update are statistically derived and reassuringly are similar to the previously guesstimated numbers that were released in the January 2023 update. They will still be subject to some error themselves as we currently rely on just 20 multiple imputations, but we hope to increase the number of imputations in future. The main factor limiting this is the computation time, as even with just 20 multiple imputations, it takes approximately half a day on a fast computer to process and generate the final estimates.

Acknowledgements

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