

Electoral Literacy and Political Participation in Multi-Ethnic Societies of Sri Lanka: A Case Study in Trincomalee District

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Abstract

The inequality in political participation at different levels of social structures is generally considered a 'democratic deficit'. As a number of studies suggest, in most cases, the disengaged citizens in electoral processes are disproportionately poor, less educated, and younger. There is no doubt that a lower level of women's and youth participation in electoral processes creates negative consequences for a substantive democracy. It has widely been noted in the public debate of electoral democracy in Sri Lanka during the last few years that women and youth were often alienated from the political system. Against this backdrop, this study attempts to investigate electoral behavior and electoral literacy in Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic societies. The research focused on four selected Grama Niladhari (GN) Divisions in the Trincomalee District. The research employed mixed methods in order to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. Therefore, it was effectively combined qualitative methods, including focus group discussions and expert interviews, with quantitative research methods involving a structured questionnaire. This study explored critical themes, including the awareness of Local Government Election Act No. 16 of 2017, women's representation through the 25% quota, youth participation in politics, and democratic accountability under the PR system while the findings reveal a mix of progress and challenges: Public awareness of the Local Government Election Act No. 16 of 2017 reveals mixed perceptions while recognized as progressive legislation, its complex nature and implementation challenges have limited its effectiveness. The 25% female representation quota represents a landmark achievement toward gender-inclusive governance, though cultural resistance persists. Youth representation faces similar challenges, with widespread recognition of young leaders' potential contrasted against entrenched systemic barriers limiting their participation. The Proportional Representation system, while theoretically inclusive, suffers from public distrust due to its complexity and perceived weaknesses in accountability mechanisms. Recent political developments signal potential for transforming passive voters into engaged citizens, though this requires an innovative institutional framework to collaborate across state and private sectors in collaboration with civil society in redefining Sri Lanka's political culture.

Key words: Electoral literacy, Political participation, Multi-ethnic societies, and electoral behavior