IHP
INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH POLICY

Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey

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SLOTS Favourability Ratings

Methodology for tracking public favourability

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About the IHP Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker

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 each month 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.

SLOTS Favourability Ratings

Methodology for tracking of public favourability

Why are we polling?

In a democracy like ours, the fundamental basis of government is that the people are the ultimate decider of government leadership and public policies. Our sovereignty is vested in the people, and the people are the ultimate source of power. Indeed, the structure of our health system and the general health policies that governments have followed have largely reflected public preferences.

At election time, the people—as voters—determine who will hold government office and provide leadership between elections, and by voting voters have their say on what policies should be pursued. But between scheduled elections, it is not practical for the people to have their say on every issue at the ballot box. In this context, eliciting and making known the views of the public strengthens the democratic process. It can help shape policy, particularly when circumstances have substantially changed since the previous elections. Indeed, this has been arguably the situation in Sri Lanka since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and then the more recent economic crises.

Public opinion polling, done systematically and with minimal bias, provide the most practical means to assess public opinion between elections, especially when issues are divisive and given the reality that some segments of society are privileged in their ability to make their views known. Making those views as elicited by public opinion polls publicly available also contributes to public discussion and deliberation. Unfortunately, little reliable opinion polling is done in Sri Lanka, and even less is shared publicly. Our polling and sharing of results is our effort to address this gap in our democratic life.

Why survey favourability?

How the public views different social groups, organisations, or individuals influences their reactions to what public figures do, their attitudes to different policies, and ultimately who they vote for in elections, which is the fundamental basis for decision-making in Sri Lanka. Understanding how views of politicians and organisations change over time also provides an important perspective on what the public feels and thinks between elections and knowing how views differ between subgroups in the population may provide useful insights into what society thinks and why.

Favourability and job approval

Favourability of a political figure or organisation is a general measure of public sentiment or feelings. It differs from a job approval rating, which is whether the public thinks an individual is doing their job well. The public can have negative feelings about a political leader, but still think they are doing their job well, and *visa versa*. One example of this is US President Clinton during his second term, when his favourability ratings fell following personal scandals and impeachment proceedings, but his job approval ratings rose on the back of a booming economy. Both measures capture different aspects of what the public thinks, and both have been shown to be related to how people vote in elections.

However, job approval ratings are only meaningful in relation to individuals holding specific posts, and cannot be asked about social groups, organizations, or pollical figures who do not currently hold

an official position. In contrast, favourability is applicable in a wider range of cases, and is more flexible a measure. The Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey (SLOTS) tracks favourability for a range of political figures and other organisations, whilst tracking job approval for a smaller subset of political figures.

Measuring favourability

We assess favourability by asking respondents whether they have a favourable or unfavourable opinion about selected political figures and organisations. The question is worded as follows:

> *I am going to list some people and groups.*
>
> ***Can you tell me whether you have a favourable or unfavourable view of them — or that you have no view of them, or that you have not heard of them?***

They are then asked about a list of individuals and organisations, and for each one they can select from three responses: (i) ***favourable***; (ii) ***unfavourable***, and (iii) ***no opinion***, or they can respond that they do not know the person (or organisation), or they can refuse to answer at all. This question wording is consistent with favourability surveys in other countries, including the well-known Gallup Survey in the United States. To minimize response bias, the order in which the response options are read out to the respondent is also randomized between respondents.

Responses are scored as follows:

Unfavourable = -100

No opinion = 0

Favourable = +100

The ***favourability*** score is the percentage of respondents who give a positive rating, and the ***unfavourability*** score the percentage who give a negative rating. In the United States and other countries with regular polling, the percentage of respondents who have no opinion is usually reported as a third indicator. However, in the SLOTS phone survey, there is considerable reluctance to express opinions about political leaders and many respondents opt to say they have no opinion or refuse to answer, making this third category less meaningful, so we do not separately report this.

Net favourability is the average of all responses, and in effect is equal to the percentage of respondents saying they hold a favourable opinion minus the percentage saying they hold an unfavourable opinion. It provides an overall measure of public sentiments.

Survey Sample and Weighting

SLOTS obtains responses from two separate survey samples. The first is a sample of individuals contacted by random digit dialling (RDD) of mobile phone numbers, and the second consists of individuals who can be contacted by phone (mobile and landline) from the Sri Lanka Health and Ageing Study (SLHAS), a high quality nationally representative longitudinal cohort of adults of all ages that was recruited for a scientific study in 2019 using face to face interviews. The RDD sample tends to be more affluent, younger, urban, better educated, and more likely to use social media than the general population, whilst the SLHAS sample tends to be quite representative of all socio-demographics and income levels, although skewed towards older persons owing to the design of the

SLHAS. Pooling responses from both sources yields a sample that is well representative of the population. In combination, the two source surveys conduct 5–20 interviews a day that ask favourability questions. Since September 2021, phone interviews have been conducted daily, seven days a week, in Sinhala, Tamil and English.

The responses to the favourability questions suffer from significant amounts of bias. General factors leading to bias include the known unrepresentativeness of the RDD sample (and phone and internet surveys in Sri Lanka in general). In addition, the favourability questions suffer from a significant non-response rate, particularly those relating to political figures. Respondent refusals or non-responses are also more frequent in individuals who are less supportive of the government. Consequently, responses must be appropriately weighted to minimize bias and to ensure that the profile of respondents matches the overall population.

To do this, we use a two-part procedure. In the first part, we characterize political partisanship of all respondents based on their voting in the 2019 Presidential Election. To overcome the problem of non-responses to the Presidential Election voting question and the observed non-random pattern of refusals, a Heckman selection model is used to impute 2019 Presidential Election choice for respondents who did not answer this question, with calibration of responses against the actual 2019 election results. The Heckman selection model is a procedure that has been used by political scientists in other countries to reduce this kind of bias. In the second part, we use iterative proportional fitting (raking) to match respondents to the national population according to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic ranking, education, sector, geographical location, and political partisanship as proxied by 2019 Presidential Election choice. Reference data for these characteristics are sourced from official publications plus internal estimates generated from the SLHAS Wave 1 survey in 2019. Raking is an adjustment procedure that is widely used by reputable opinion surveys in the United States and other developed countries.

Smoothing and Precision

As our daily samples are too small to allow for robust weighting or to prevent substantial random variation from day to day, we pool responses from a fixed number of days preceding and after the relevant date. For month-specific estimates, we pool all data from that month. Each point estimate is weighted separately as previously discussed. To further eliminate noise when reporting the daily trend, we smooth the daily weighted index values using a moving average.

Owing to the complexity of the combined weighting, pooling, and smoothing process, it is technically challenging and would be computationally very burdensome to robustly estimate confidence or credibility intervals for our estimates, which is the typical method for indicating precision in opinion surveys. As a proxy measure of the likely precision of our estimates, we generate confidence intervals assuming that the estimate for a particular day is based on a simple random sample and accounting for design effects arising from the use of the raking weight procedure. However, it should be noted that none of this accounts for errors arising from the fact that the unwillingness of some respondents to share their opinions is correlated with political partisanship. This kind of bias cannot be easily quantified and remains an additional source of error, despite the efforts we take to counter its effects.

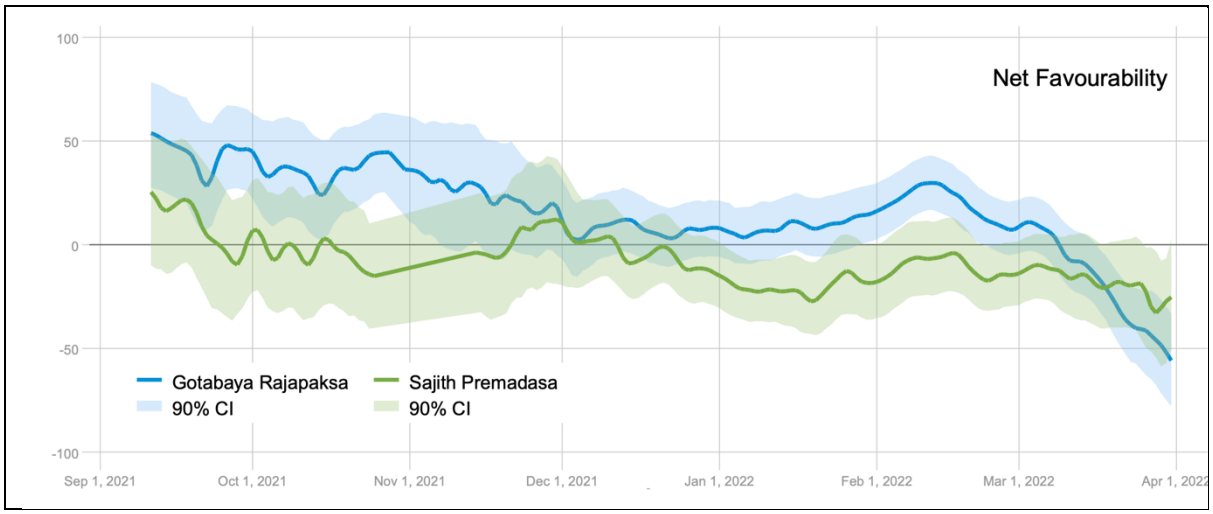
Sample Results

With the data we collect, SLOTS can track public favourability over time, and on a weekly or daily basis depending on how large the sample is for a given question. Owing to the need to minimize respondent time, health leaders and organizations, and major political figures are given priority when allocating questions. Over longer periods of time (1 month+), samples are also large enough to provide analysis of variations in favourability across major individual characteristics, such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity.

The first chart below reports trends in net favourability of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa till end-March 2022. The bold lines indicate the smoothed daily estimates of favourability, and the lighter shaded areas indicate the estimated 90% confidence intervals for each daily estimate. As can be seen, President Rajapaksa's net favourability rating declined from the end of the September 2021 lockdown, but remained positive, before recovering in early 2022, until it started to decline sharply from late February 2022.

In contrast, Opposition Leader Premadasa has had consistently less positive favourability ratings through early 2022, with his net favourability rating often being in negative territory. His favourability ratings then also declined from February 2022, but not as rapidly as those of President Rajapaksa, so by end-March both had negative favourability ratings, but Premadasa's ratings were less negative than President Rajapaksa's.

Net Favourability of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa, 11/09/2021–31/03/2022



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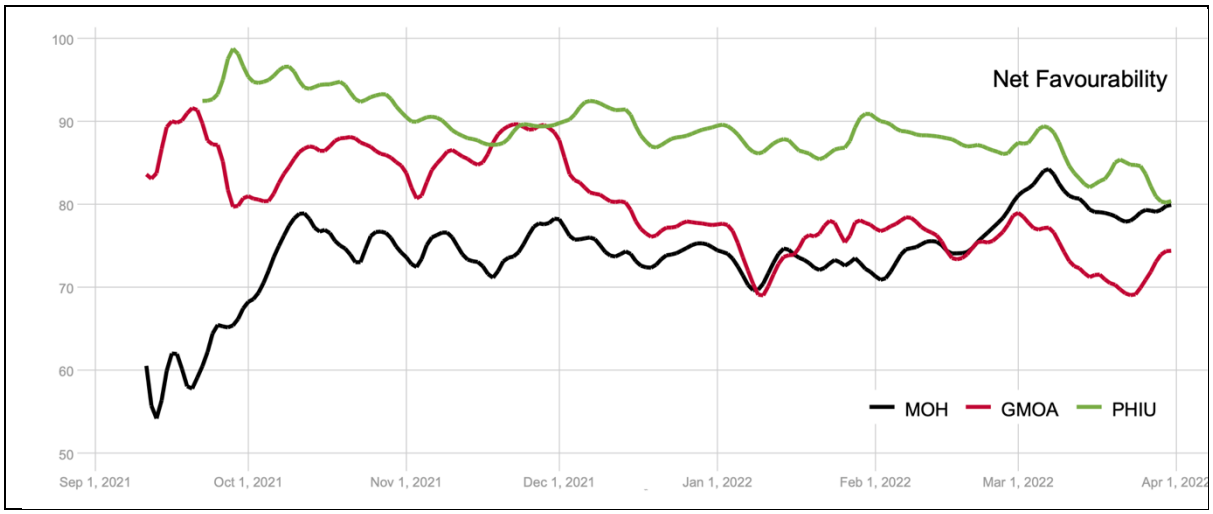
The next chart illustrates changes in favourability of three key health stakeholders, the Ministry of Health (MOH), the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA), and the Public Health Inspectors Union (PHIU). During the September 2021 lockdown, MOH's favourability ratings were generally positive, but much less than those of the GMOA and PHIU representing frontline health workers. Since October 2021, MOH's favourability improved, whilst the GMOA's experienced some decline.

Net Favourability of Ministry of Health, GMOA and Public Health Inspectors Union, mid-Sep. 2021–end-Mar. 2022



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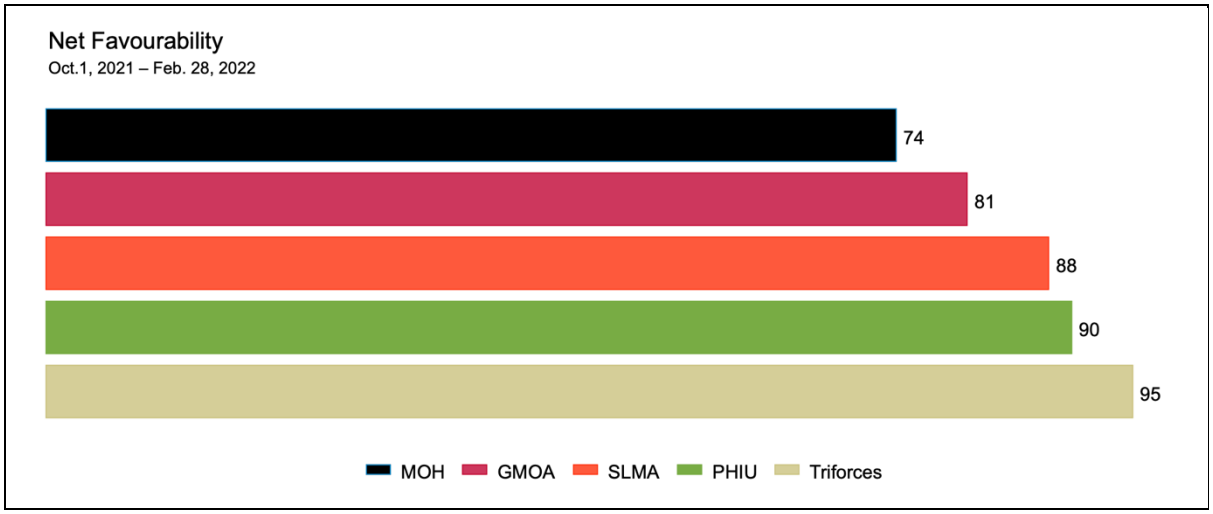
The last chart below compares average favourability of a wider range of institutions involved in the COVID-19 response, using data for October 2021 to February 2022. In general, health stakeholders and official institutions enjoyed very positive (>70%) and much higher favourability ratings than political leaders during this period. Additionally, stakeholders most involved in the front-line response enjoyed higher favourability ratings than the Ministry of Health.

Favourability of Institutions involved in COVID-19 response



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Publication

IHP will release additional SLOTS favourability ratings and analysis in future. IHP will also consider requests to sponsor additional favourability questions or to track specific individuals or organizations in greater frequency,