

# Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey

**2023-09**

FOR RELEASE APRIL 20, 2023

## IHP Presidential Election Voting Intentions Update March 2023

### **AK Dissanayake (48%) leads Sajith Premadasa (37%) in Presidential Election voter preferences**

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#### RECOMMENDED CITATION

Institute for Health Policy, April 2023, "IHP Presidential Election Voting Intentions Update March 2023: AK Dissanayake (48%) leads Sajith Premadasa (37%) in Presidential Election voter preferences", SLOTS Report #2023-09.

## 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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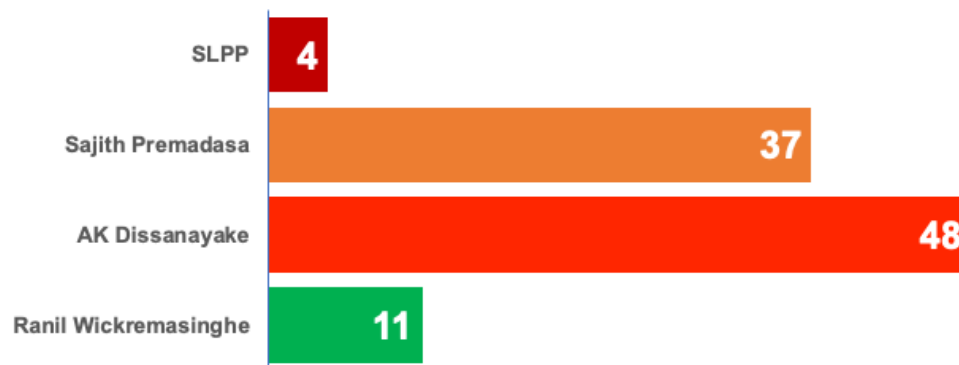
# AK Dissanayake (48%) leads Sajith Premadasa (37%) in Presidential Election voter preferences

In the first release of results from IHP’s Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey (SLOTS) MRP tracking of Presidential Election voting intent, AK Dissanayake, NPP/JVP leader, leads with 48% of likely voters in March 2023, ahead of Sajith Premadasa, SJB leader on 37%. Both run far ahead of President Ranil Wickremasinghe on 11% and a generic SLPP candidate on 4%. Estimates are associated with a margin of error of 1–5%.

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## Presidential Election Voting Intention, March 2023 (% likely voters)

If there was a Presidential Election today, who would you vote for?



Institute for Health Policy Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey MRP

Estimates based on 521 interviews conducted in Mar. 2023, and 10,601 interviews conducted overall from 31 Aug. 2021–9 Apr. 2023. Estimates are derived from a MRP model and are associated with a margin of error assessed as 1–5%. SLPP referred originally to “President Gotabaya Rajapaksa”, but respondents are now asked about a generic SLPP candidate.

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Voter preferences for a hypothetical Presidential Election track General Election preferences. Support for re-electing President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and more recently a generic SLPP candidate has continuously fallen since late 2021. Fewer than 10% of voters now support a generic SLPP candidate, although it’s certainly possible that a named SLPP candidate might fare differently—worse or better.

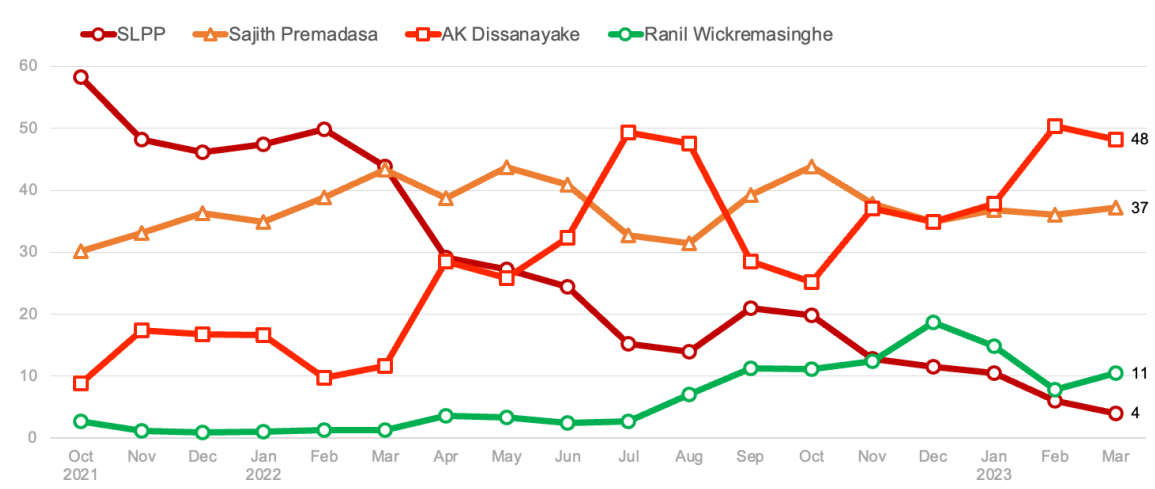
NPP/JVP leader AK Dissanayake has been the main beneficiary, with his support increasing from the low teens in late 2021 to the mid-40s by early 2023. Support for SJB leader, Sajith Premadasa, has also increased over time, but only modestly by 5–10%.

Support for AK Dissanayake has been more volatile than for Sajith Premadasa, with the two switching leads several times since President Rajapaksa’s resignation. The general trends suggest that Sajith Premadasa benefits from a more loyal core support base, whilst support for AK Dissanayake fluctuates as former Gotabaya voters switch between him and other candidates.

Support for Ranil Wickremasinghe in a potential Presidential Election was boosted after he became President in mid-2022, but his honeymoon with the voters dissipated by early 2023. However, the latest polling in March, in which he gained 3%, suggests a possible increase in voters support for a potential Wickremasinghe candidacy, although he continues to run well behind the two main leaders.

## IHP SLOTS Presidential Election Voting Intention Tracker (% likely voters)

If there was a Presidential Election today, who would you vote for?



### Institute for Health Policy Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey MRP

Monthly estimates based on 10,601 interviews conducted from 31 Aug. 2021–9 Apr. 2023. Estimates are derived using a MRP model and are associated with a margin of error assessed as 1–7%, depending on the month and candidate. SLPP referred originally to “President Gotabaya Rajapaksa”, but respondents are now asked about a generic SLPP candidate.

AK Dissanayake appears to have an advantage in voter enthusiasm over Sajith Premadasa, as his lead amongst all voters was only 8% (47% to 39%) compared with 11% amongst likely voters. This contrasts with a similar sized advantage in voter enthusiasm that the SJB enjoys over the NPP/JVP in General Election preferences.

Based on reported voter preferences, it is likely that AK Dissanayake would have won a Presidential Election held in March. Although his support was below the required 50% to win a Presidential Election, it is likely he would have won enough second preferences from Ranil Wickremasinghe and SLPP voters to put him over the top.

The SLOTS tracking of voter preferences in a hypothetical Presidential Election only offers respondents a choice of the four candidates. It’s entirely possible that the entry of new candidates or one or more of the four parties represented combining would lead to different results. Of these a SLPP-UNP combination might make more sense since SLOTS polling indicates their supporters are much closer in their views and past voting history, but this would still not be able to gain more than a fifth of the vote currently. An SJB-UNP tie-up might be more competitive since their combined share of voter preferences is close to the NPP/JVP share, but it would be hazardous to assume that all or most of the UNP voters today would opt for a SJB candidate as many are ex-Gotabaya Rajapaksa/SLPP voters.

## 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

hypothetical presidential and general election held today. 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 during 2022 reported results using this approach. This approach is statistically 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.

IHP now uses a second approach for tracking both Presidential and General Election voting preference, 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, and it makes incremental improvements on a regular basis to improve precision and reduce bias. The current method used in this report 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 April 2023, this file contains ~11,000 individual records, all weighted to match the national and provincial level populations.
2. In the first SLOTS polling of Presidential Election voting intent, respondents were only offered a choice of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Sajith Premadasa. Following President Rajapaksa's resignation, interviewers offered respondents the option of "Gotabaya Rajapaksa or another SLPP member". As Ranil Wickremasinghe and AK Disanayake were not offered as options in SLOTS polling during 2021 through mid-2022, for Presidential Election voting Intent it is assumed that respondents who said they would vote for the UNP or NPP/JVP in a General Election during this time would also vote for the respective party leaders in a Presidential Election.
3. 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. In its most recent iteration, this uses 30 imputations, owing to the substantial computation effort required, and generates 30 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.

4. 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.

5. 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. 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.

6. 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 or each Presidential candidate, 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.

7. 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 turnouts for the 2019 Presidential Election and the 2020 General Election. This adjustment is now done at the provincial level.

8. Steps 4–6 are implemented in the multiple imputation framework, so multiple different estimates of current voting intention are produced for each month (currently 30 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.

9. Final estimates are reported separately for all adults and for likely voters, which adjusts for the likelihood of voting from Step 7. The estimated 95% confidence intervals are reported as the margin of error (MOE). The current estimates of margins of error are based on 30 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 30 multiple imputations, it takes approximately a day on a fast computer to process and generate the final estimates.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author thanks his many colleagues at IHP who contributed to the design, management and implementation of the SLOTS survey, and related data analyses, as well as the SLOTS field interviewers who have been interviewing essentially non-stop more than 18 months.