

Three General Elections of the Last Decade: Trends in Voter-Preferences for the Major Political Parties

This section describes the results of an informal statistical analysis of the three Parliamentary General Elections of July 1960, 1965 and 1970 with a view to assessing the performance of the principal political parties in Sri Lanka. It is possible to draw *some* inferences from this simple analysis; however, it is not claimed that these are necessarily the only possible inferences.

In the following presentation several alternative measures of party performance are discussed and each party's performance at each election is assessed at the national level in terms of these measures.

The Popular Vote

One measure that could be adopted to compare the performance of different political parties at general elections is the "popular vote". The popular vote received by a political party is taken to mean the total number of votes received by all candidates officially fielded by that party. This aggregate includes the votes received by both winners and losers. The following table shows the popular vote and its percentage distribution among the more important parties at the three general elections.

One of the important features of Sri Lanka's voting pattern brought out in the table below is that there is a

high degree of concentration of the popular vote in the two major political parties, the UNP and the SLFP. In both 1960 (July) and 1970 General Elections these two parties together collected over 70% of the popular vote. Although their share in 1965 was 68% due mainly to a noticeable shift to "other" groups which consisted of minor political parties and independents, the underlying tendency appears to have been towards increasing concentration. The share of each of the two major parties—the SLFP and the UNP suggests a cyclic pattern although it may not be as pronounced as one would expect it to be considering the changes in the parliamentary strength of the parties which resulted. Except for the two parties the MEP and the FP, the other major political parties generally increased their share of the popular vote during the period. Outstanding among them are the two parties LSSP and the TC whose popular vote increased somewhat faster than the total turnout at the polls.

Vote Per Candidates

The popular vote as a measure of party performance has a very important significance, namely that the measure is affected by (positively correlated to) the number of candidates fielded by each party. In other

words the larger the number of candidates fielded by a political party, the larger does its popular vote tend to be, irrespective of its relative popularity. Therefore, where the comparison is between parties with varying financial and organisational capacities, the popular vote is not a very satisfactory measure. This limitation can be overcome if a modified measure which we refer to as "vote per candidate" (VPC) is used. The VPC for a political party is obtained by dividing the popular vote of that party by the number of candidates put forward. Table 2 at right shows the VPC for the principal parties along with the number of candidates put forward at each of the three General Elections.

As expected, the figures in this table reveal several new features of party performance. At the outset it is necessary to note that the apparent increase in the vote per candidate over the period is partly a consequence of the increase in the size of the electorate.

The first important feature revealed is the swing of popularity from the SLFP to the UNP and back again to the SLFP, during the period. As noted earlier this cyclic pattern was not very prominently reflected in the changing share of the popular vote. The UNP received a larger popular vote than the SLFP in 1960 although the number of seats the former won was smaller. The VPC measure, however, shows that the UNP's performance in fact fell short of that of the SLFP in the 1960 July Election. The former party collected a larger popular vote merely by contesting a larger number of seats than the SLFP.

As a general rule, the party candidates performed much better than the independent candidates. This inference can be drawn by noting that their overall average VPC is lower than those of the principal parties. There are however, a few exceptions. Both in the 1960 and 1965 elections the VPC of the MEP was much lower than the overall average. Obviously this was the result of having too many candidates in the field. This party apparently had overestimated its own popularity. However in the 1970 election it put forward only 4 candidates which had the result of increasing its VPC to 11.6; 1.1 percentage points higher than the

TABLE I
POPULAR VOTES RECEIVED BY POLITICAL PARTIES
1960 — 1970

Name of Political Party	Total Votes Received (Thousands)			Total Votes Received (% Distribution)*		
	1960	1965	1970	1960	1965	1970
1. UNP	1,014	1,435	1,718	35.9	37.5	36.8
2. SLFP	974	1,173	1,768	34.5	30.7	37.8
3. MEP	111	95	47	3.9	2.5	1.0
4. LSSP	202	302	415	7.2	7.9	8.9
5. C.P.	64	82	130	2.3	2.1	2.8
6. FP	182	193	222	6.4	5.0	4.7
7. TC	67	95	116	2.4	2.5	2.5
8. Others	195	420	238	6.9	11.0	5.1
9. Rejected votes and statistical discrepancy ...	17	27	18	0.5	0.8	0.4
10. Total vote	2,826	3,822	4,672	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total on register	3,725	4,711	5,505

(*) Takes into account only the contested seats. The recorded number of votes in multi-member constituencies were adjusted to a "voter equivalent" by dividing by the number of members elected in each case.

TABLE 2

Name of Political Party	Number of Candidates*			Vote per Candidate (Thousands)		
	1960	1965	1970	1960	1965	1970
1. UNP	125	113	128	8.1	12.7	13.4
2. SLFP	98	100	106	9.9	11.7	16.7
3. MEP	55	61	4	2.0	1.5	11.6
4. LSSP	21	24	23	9.6	12.6	18.0
5. CP	7	9	9	9.2	9.1	14.4
6. FP	20	20	19	9.1	9.7	11.6
7. TC	8	15	12	8.4	6.3	9.6
8. Others	59	153	138	3.3	2.7	1.7
9. Total	393	495	439
10. Overall average ...	—	—	—	7.2	7.7	10.5

(*) Takes into account only the contested seats. The recorded number of votes in the multi-member constituencies were adjusted to a "voter equivalent" by dividing by the number of members elected in each case.

overall average. The other exception is the TC which put forward 15 and 12 candidates in 1965 and 1970 respectively and caused too much strain on its popular vote.

One question that could be asked at this stage is whether the previously noted feature of the concentration of the popular vote in the two parties, the SLFP and the UNP is not merely a reflection of their ability to field a large number of candidates. The capacity shown by these two parties to muster a high VPC show that this is not the case. Something like the reverse situation appears to be the case with at least one political party, the LSSP.

It is not very meaningful to compare the VPC over time, since its magnitude is affected by the changing size of the electorate. However it is possible to rank the parties according to the VPC earned at a given election, and compare these rankings over time. The table 3 below which is derived from table 2 shows such rankings for the three General Elections mentioned.

TABLE 3

Ranking of Political Parties According to the Size of the Vote per Candidate

	1960	1965	1970
1. ...	SLFP	UNP	LSSP
2. ...	LSSP	LSSP	SLFP
3. ...	CP	SLFP	CP
4. ...	FP	FP	UNP
5. ...	TC	CP	FP, MEP
6. ...	UNP	TC	TC
7. ...	MEP	MEP	—

This table illustrates more clearly than table 2. the changing fortunes of the political parties. One of the more interesting features is the changeability of the relative position of the UNP. Its rank changed from the 6th (in 1960) to 1st (1965) and then plunged to 4th (in 1970). The UNP's major rival, the SLFP has remained at or above the 3rd position although

of seats contested. This measure which we refer to as the "W/C ratio" is an indicator of the success of the election campaign conducted by each political party. Table 4 shows the W/C ratio for each principal political party along with the number from which such ratios were derived.

Considering the average performance in terms of the W/C ratio, the FP and SLFP in that order, appear to have conducted the most successful election campaigns during the period. The main opponents of these two parties: the TC and the UNP appear to have performed rather badly, while the LSSP and the CP appear to have had moderately successful campaigns, on this basis.

The cyclical pattern noted earlier reappears here, in the case of the performance of the two main political parties. The same pattern is also evident to some extent in the case of the two parties: the LSSP and the CP. This is however a reflection of the fact that these two parties

TABLE 4

PARLIAMENTARY SEATS CONTESTED AND WON BY MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES 1960-1970

Name of Political Parties	Number of Seats(*)			Wins as a % of Contests		
	1960	1965	1970	1960	1965	1970
1. UNP ... Wins ...	27	64	16	22	57	13
2. SLFP ... Contests	125	113	128	77	41	85
3. MEP ... Wins ...	3	1	0	5	2	0
4. LSSP ... Contests	55	61	24	57	37	83
5. CP ... Wins ...	4	4	6	57	44	67
6. FP ... Contests	16	14	13	80	70	68
7. TC ... Wins ...	3	3	3	38	20	25
Contests	8	15	12			

(*) Takes into account only the contested seats.

it came first only once. Even more stable has been the relative position of the LSSP, FP and the TC.

Seats Contested and Won

The third measure of performance presented here refers to the number of seats won relative to the number

formally or informally presented common fronts with the SLFP in the three general elections reviewed. The two prominent political parties of the North of Sri Lanka show no discernible cyclical pattern in their performance. However the W/C ratio indicates that the FP has been losing

ground in the period under review, although its campaign performance is still unsurpassed. This slight decline in its performance was also evident in the preceding analysis.

Share of Seats

A possible fourth measure of performance would be the share of parliamentary seats obtained by each political party. This is not considered here, since it does not add anything new to the findings already reported. Had our purpose been to forecast the results of a future election, this would have been the key dependent variable that we would seek to explain. However such an approach calls for a more sophisticated statistical analysis and therefore would be beyond the scope of the present analysis.

Electoral Process

Sri Lanka's political system has been responsive to some of the needs of the poorer sections of the community to an extent, remarkable in the non-socialist world in terms of welfare measures. While these seem to have contributed to bring about a greater degree of income equality during the last two decades, the performance of the economy as a whole has not been as impressive. The growth rate in national income has been barely sufficient to maintain a minimum standard of living in view of falling national income. Sri Lanka has continued to be dependent on imports for many of its food and other consumer requirements as well as for machinery and capital equipment. At the same time unemployment has risen, together with living costs while the question of the desirability of the redistributive measures has been raised.

There have been many sensitive insights into the electoral process in Sri Lanka by various commentators on the country's changing socio-economic situation. Two such comments quoted below were made by two former Ceylon University dons now domiciled abroad. English Professor Emeritus, E.F.C. Ludowyke observed in 1966 that still the masses had not fully perceived the extent of the political power they commanded while those "controlling the electoral machinery" were trying to line them up in their ranks. He states:

".....These changes since 1947 have been given various names: Communism or

totalitarianism by their opponents; socialism by their friends. Whatever they are called, they have been the working out of a process observable since 1931, its direction not at all clear and its movement erratic. Its unevenness has been due both to the slowness with which the masses have perceived the extent of the political power they commanded, and to the determination of the elite to keep their grip on controls which seemed to be slipping out of their hands and to 'fix' things in such a way that, whatever may have been conceded, the new beneficiaries could ultimately be lined up in their ranks". E. F. C. Ludowyke in "Modern History of Ceylon", 1966.

Former Professor of Political Science A. J. Wilson takes another view of the groups in power by adverting to the social welfare measures which have become a necessary part of the socio-economic structure and which no sensitive political grouping could afford to ignore. He states:

"The principle of buying off social discontent in order to stabilise political authority started by the British but taken over by Sri Lanka's political elites anxious to maintain themselves in the seats of power is today the insoluble problem of governments in office", A. J. Wilson in "Politics in Sri Lanka 1947-1973."

Conclusion

The elections taking place now are not only a mere opportunity for the people to choose their rulers, a choice which we must emphasise is not 'free' in an absolute sense but is dependent at least partly on the manipulation of the voter's consciousness. It takes place within the context of a changing socio-economic environment in the country. The socio-economic changes in Europe which gave rise to the system of elections which we in turn inherited from the West, were the result of the breakdown of feudal structures and the growth of a rising new middle class, the bourgeoisie. Parliamentary democracy in the Western world thus largely became the articulation of the interests of this class. Although at times in Europe the interests of other classes like the feudal aristocracy and the working classes found voice in Parliament, the economic interests of the new business class and its system has survived.

In Sri Lanka the socio-economic environment within which parliamentary democracy was introduced was in

the context of the breakdown of feudalism, the existence of a plantation economy and the growth of a local upper-middle class of business and professional interests. Initially representation in parliament was exclusively in terms of these interests. However, with the introduction of other representation, parliament through the years has seen the articulation of other interests and a measure of social concern for the majority of the people. This has in turn induced socio-economic changes specially those related to the interests of some of the rural and urban working class sections. The process of electoral politics over the last twenty years has also seen the growth to prominence of new dominant economic groupings, tied largely to import-substitution industrialisation replacing the dominant economic groupings—the plantation sector.

Not inconsiderable social and economic changes have occurred in the country due to the system of electoral politics. Free education, a fairly efficient health system, a redistribution of incomes towards the rural and lower income groups have been some of its successes. It has also helped the elevation of some elements from the rural middle classes to national upper class status. Due to such processes the nature of the particular social class configuration of the country has changed, though, Sri Lanka remains a country controlled by class interests.

Meanwhile, pressing economic problems yet remain to be solved. An estimated 20 percent unemployed rate which probably could rise, if present trends are continued to about 30 percent in five years is perhaps the most pressing problem. At the moment one of the major constraints of a colonial plantation economy like ours, namely that of falling prices for our primary exports, seems to be changing with the current commodity boom. Further, with the implementation of the Mahaweli Project and other multipurpose irrigation projects, food self-sufficiency seems in sight. The rulers that come into power have to deal—once the rhetoric has died down—with hard economic facts of life such as these. The basic question is, can our particular parliamentary democratic system, representative as it is in reality of particular interests of social groupings of the country, be able to solve these problems.