Political Literacy among the General Public of Sri Lanka
Public Awareness of Electoral Laws Governance and Civic Participation

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Abstract

Background: Political participation requires more than interest in elections. Citizens also need an understanding of electoral procedures, public institutions, accountability mechanisms, and the reliability of political information. **Objective:** To describe political knowledge, civic attitudes, and information practices among participants in a Sri Lankan survey reported in 2024. **Methods:** The study combined in-person questionnaires and an online Google Forms survey, with interview accounts used to interpret responses. The reported sample comprised 500 people recruited through convenience and online snowball sampling. Analysis in this paper is descriptive; subgroup findings retain their original scope, and interview excerpts illustrate experiences rather than estimate their prevalence. **Results:** Reported familiarity with proportional representation was 37%; knowledge of the Right to Information Act was 23%; and 29% reported attending a civil-society civic-education programme. Social media was the main political-news source for 68%, while 56% reported encountering political misinformation and 31% reported checking information against other sources. Among younger respondents, 73% expressed interest in online digital-literacy programmes. Interview accounts described uncertainty about constitutional change, inherited party loyalties, limited procedural knowledge, and both learning opportunities and credibility problems online. **Conclusion:** The findings identify priorities for practical civic education and information evaluation within this sample. The non-probability design and self-reported measures prevent national prevalence estimates or causal claims about voting behaviour. Education initiatives should distinguish political knowledge from political preference, combine accessible offline and online delivery, and assess learning through practical tasks and appropriate follow-up.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; political literacy; electoral knowledge; civic education; media literacy; political participation; survey research.

1. Introduction

Political literacy concerns the knowledge and skills people use to understand public institutions, evaluate political claims, and participate in collective decisions. Recognising a politician or following an election does not necessarily demonstrate an understanding of how a vote is counted, which institution exercises a particular power, or how a citizen can seek public information. Conversely, dissatisfaction with a political institution does not by itself demonstrate ignorance. Knowledge, confidence, trust, preference, and participation are related but distinct aspects of civic life.

The original study was framed around Sri Lanka's political debates and the 2024 electoral period, following the economic crisis and public mobilisation of 2022. Its historical setting matters. Statements about candidates, parties, and constitutional amendments reflect the period discussed by participants; they should not be read as descriptions of present officeholders or predictions about subsequent elections. The study examines public understanding and reported experiences, rather than endorsing a party or judging the legitimacy of a political preference.

The objective is to describe participants' awareness of electoral processes and governance, familiarity with accountability mechanisms, experiences of political information, and perceived educational needs. A further objective is to identify proportionate interventions that follow from those observations. The analysis asks where practical knowledge appears limited, how information is encountered and evaluated, and which claims the available evidence can support.

The scope is deliberately bounded. Recruitment through public-place convenience sampling and online networks can reach varied participants without producing a representative sample of the Sri Lankan population. Accordingly, references to survey findings throughout this paper concern the participating sample. Geographical observations and interview excerpts are exploratory and cannot establish a nationwide urban–rural ranking, demographic effect, or explanation of an election result.

2. Conceptual and Institutional Context

2.1 Dimensions of political literacy

This paper distinguishes four dimensions: institutional knowledge, procedural competence, evaluation of political information, and confidence in civic action. Institutional knowledge concerns the roles and limits of public bodies. Procedural competence concerns using a ballot, identifying the appropriate institution, or pursuing an information request. Information evaluation concerns recognising a claim, locating its source, and comparing it with credible evidence. Confidence concerns whether people believe they can participate effectively.

These dimensions should not be collapsed into a single judgement that a citizen is politically literate or illiterate. A person can be interested in politics while uncertain about constitutional procedure, or knowledgeable about institutions while distrustful of their performance. Political agreement with the researcher is not a valid knowledge test. Party loyalty, protest participation, and support for constitutional reform therefore require interpretation on their own terms.

2.2 Electoral and constitutional distinctions

Parliament's official account distinguishes district representation and preference voting: 196 parliamentary members are returned through electoral districts, and voters can indicate preferences among candidates within their chosen party or independent group. Understanding the relationship between a party vote and candidate preferences is a practical educational task (Parliament of Sri Lanka, n.d.). Parliamentary representation should not be confused with the separate process of electing a President.

Constitutional discussion must also identify the relevant legal version. The Twenty First Amendment was certified on 31 October 2022 and substituted provisions establishing the Constitutional Council. An explanation framed only around the Nineteenth and Twentieth Amendments would therefore omit a material development already relevant to the 2024 study setting (Sri Lanka, 2022). Participants' uncertainty about amendments is retained as an observation about understanding, rather than converted into a legal conclusion about which provisions remained in force.

2.3 Accountability and information evaluation

The Right to Information Act, No. 12 of 2016, establishes a citizen's right to information held by a public authority, subject to the Act's provisions and exemptions. Its procedures and limits are more informative educational content than a general assertion that government should be transparent (Sri Lanka, 2016). Knowing the name of the Act and knowing how to use it are separate outcomes.

UNESCO's media and information literacy framework addresses competencies for engaging critically with communications content, the institutions providing it, and digital technologies. It supports treating evaluation of political information as a set of teachable practices rather than assuming that frequent internet use entails critical literacy (UNESCO, 2021). This framework informs the discussion; it is not evidence that a particular programme has already improved outcomes in the present sample.

3. Methods

3.1 Design and study material

The study is a descriptive cross-sectional survey with qualitative interview accounts and a reported sample of 500 participants. Data collection combined in-person and online approaches. Numerical summaries and interview material support an exploratory account of political knowledge and experience; a formal mixed-methods integration protocol is not reported.

The available results comprise aggregate percentages and selected quotations. Analysis distinguishes overall-sample statements from geographical or age-specific statements. The exact fieldwork dates, item-level response totals, mode-specific sample sizes, complete demographic distribution, questionnaire wording, and participant-level data are not reported here. Their absence limits reproducibility and precision even where a rounded percentage is available.

3.2 Recruitment and collection modes

In-person participants were recruited in public settings, including markets, schools, and

community centres. This approach is described as convenience sampling. The online Google Forms questionnaire circulated through social networks and participant sharing, corresponding to snowball recruitment. Neither procedure gives each eligible citizen a known probability of selection. The study should therefore not be described as a representative random survey.

Using two modes may broaden access, but it can also introduce differences in participant composition, willingness to disclose opinions, and opportunities to clarify questions. Online recruitment may favour people connected to the distribution networks, while public-place recruitment may favour people available at the selected locations and times. Without separate mode totals and comparable item-level results, apparent online–offline differences cannot be attributed to digital literacy itself.

3.3 Measures and interpretation

The described questionnaire included multiple-choice and Likert-type items concerning political institutions, electoral rules, rights, and civic responsibilities. Several findings are expressed as reported familiarity or perceived understanding. These should be read as self-assessments unless the underlying item demonstrates an objectively scored knowledge test. Interview accounts provide additional context about why participants felt uncertain or disengaged.

Table 1 preserves the reported indicators and their stated populations. A rounded percentage is not sufficient to reconstruct an exact count when item non-response, exclusions, weighting, or subgroup denominators are unknown. The paper therefore does not multiply every percentage by 500, assume that all respondents answered every item, or treat differently worded measures as interchangeable.

3.4 Analysis

The quantitative presentation uses descriptive percentages. Although chi-square testing and cross-tabulation were mentioned in the original study plan, no contingency tables, test statistics, degrees of freedom, or p values are reported. This paper consequently makes no new claim of statistical significance, calculates no inferential tests, and does not describe an association as statistically established. No national survey weight or population confidence interval is applied to the convenience and snowball sample.

The qualitative presentation groups excerpts into descriptive topics: political loyalty and policy evaluation, constitutional understanding, accountability, educational access, and information credibility. This is an interpretive organisation of the available quotations. Independent coding, saturation assessment, and theme prevalence are not reported.

3.5 Ethics and confidentiality

The study protocol specified voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymisation, password-protected storage, and the ability to withdraw. Those provisions describe the intended safeguards; the manuscript does not provide an ethics-committee approval identifier or documentation sufficient to establish that formal approval was obtained. This paper does not assert institutional ethical clearance.

Participant names and identifying biographical details are omitted, and neutral codes distinguish the quoted accounts. The wording of

the excerpts is retained. Sharing underlying records requires appropriate consent and protection of information about political views.

4. Results

4.1 Reported survey indicators

The reported findings suggest a difference between exposure to politics and practical understanding. Familiarity with proportional representation and awareness of accountability tools were limited in the described sample, while use of social media for political information was common. Educational dissatisfaction and interest in further learning appeared alongside these findings. The indicators measure different behaviours and judgements, so they should not be added together or interpreted as components of a validated composite score.

Reported indicator	Result	Population or scope stated in the manuscript
Familiarity with proportional representation	37%	Respondents; exact valid-response denominator not supplied
Popularity prioritised over candidate policy	42%	Interviewed people in Colombo and Galle; subgroup total not supplied
Knowledge of the Right to Information Act	23%	Respondents; exact valid-response denominator not supplied
Had heard of CIABOC	Less than 30%	Respondents; exact percentage and denominator not supplied
Knew how to invoke RTI for accountability	Less than 25%	Respondents; distinct from knowing about the Act
Felt school civic education was insufficient	53%	Respondents; exact valid-response denominator not supplied
Had attended a civil-society civic-education programme	29%	Respondents; exact valid-response denominator not supplied
Found preferential voting confusing	41%	Respondents; exact valid-response denominator not supplied
Relied mainly on social media for political news	68%	Survey participants; exact valid-response denominator not supplied
Reported encountering political misinformation online	56%	Respondents; perceived exposure rather than verified content classification
Reported checking political information against other sources	31%	Respondents; self-reported practice
Wanted to attend online digital-literacy programmes	73%	Younger respondents; age-specific denominator not supplied
Felt school education had not prepared them for political engagement	57%	Respondents below 30; not directly equivalent to the 53% overall item

Table 1. Descriptive survey findings. Overall reported sample: 500. Percentages retain their stated population scope; item-level response denominators are not available. These are not nationally representative estimates.

4.2 Institutional and electoral understanding

The reported 37% familiarity with proportional representation and 41% confusion about preferential voting refer to related but distinct concepts. They are not complementary categories and do not need to total 100%. Without exact question wording, the results cannot determine whether uncertainty concerned party allocation, candidate preferences, the distinction between election types, or participants' confidence in their own knowledge.

Interview accounts describe uncertainty about constitutional change and the distribution of institutional powers. Their value is explanatory: they identify the kinds of questions an educational programme might address. They do not establish how often each misconception occurred, nor whether participants who expressed uncertainty had answered separate factual items incorrectly.

4.3 Accountability knowledge and civic confidence

Knowledge of the RTI Act was reported at 23%, while fewer than 25% were described as knowing how to invoke it. Awareness of CIABOC was reported only as less than 30%. These findings should remain separate because recognition of an institution, knowledge of a legal right, and ability to complete a procedure are different competencies. The available thresholds cannot support an exact comparison between the three measures.

The interview material also indicates uncertainty about where complaints should be directed and whether formal engagement can produce change. Such statements may reflect limited procedural knowledge, low trust, perceived barriers, or several of these at once. A statement of powerlessness is not itself proof that a participant lacks factual knowledge or that the institution concerned is ineffective.

4.4 Education and information practices

The 53% overall report of insufficient school civic education and the 57% result among participants below 30 are not a valid age comparison. The descriptions use different wording and provide no corresponding older-group estimate. They can identify perceived educational shortcomings without demonstrating a statistically significant generational gap.

Likewise, the 68% reliance on social media, 56% reported encounter with misinformation, and 31% cross-checking figure do not identify the same people. Without joint responses, the study cannot establish how many frequent social-media users cross-checked information or whether those who cross-checked encountered less misinformation. The 73% interest in online programmes concerns younger participants, rather than all 500 respondents. These distinctions are necessary before designing an intervention around a presumed overlap.

4.5 Interview excerpts

Selected interview excerpts illustrate experiences and preferences within the historical study setting. Statements about parties, officeholders, legal powers, or disputed information are participants' accounts, rather than findings that those political or legal propositions are true. No frequency or demographic

representativeness is inferred from the selection.

Political loyalty and policy evaluation

Participant P01: "I support the Samagi Jana Balawegaya because my family has always supported the United National Party, even though I don't know much about their plans for the economy."

Participant P06: "The Rajapaksas are still the best leaders we've had," and "They ended the war, and no one else has shown the same strength."

Participant P07: "I support Premadasa because he's promising to fix the economy quickly, but I'm not sure how realistic his promises are. We don't really get to see long-term plans."

Constitutional understanding

Participant P02: "I never knew 20A gave so many powers to the President,"

Participant P04: "I want to see the end of the executive presidency, but I don't know how it can be legally changed. I thought it could be done through a protest alone."

Participant P08: "I know the 20th Amendment gave the President more power, but I don't know how or when we can change it again. Does the next President need to do something?"

Accountability and educational experience

Participant P03: "I didn't know that we could request information about government projects or corruption cases. I thought these were things only the media could investigate."

Participant P05: "Even if we are aware that the politicians are corrupt, what can we do? I don't even know how to make a complaint or with whom."

Participant P09: "I only started learning about the constitution and electoral systems during my degree in sociology. Before that, I had no real idea of how our political system works. I wish these subjects had been introduced in school."

Participant P10: "Government says different things about governance and accountability, yet nothing ends up changing. They make programs, yet I do not see them make any actual effort in educating the people as to how they should challenge corruption or hold politicians to account."

Political information online

Participant P11: "I don't have time to watch TV or read newspapers, so I mostly get my news from Facebook. I follow political pages and discussions online."

Participant P12: "I learn a lot from seeing how others argue about political issues online. It's a place where you can see different sides of the argument,"

Participant P13: "I didn't know if that was true or not, but everybody that I know was talking about it in WhatsApp, so it made me be unsure about what to actually believe,"

Participant P14: "I usually trust the information I get from my Facebook feed because it's shared by people I know. I don't always have the time to check if it's true."

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting political engagement without equating it with knowledge

The findings suggest a practical educational problem: some participants followed political developments while expressing uncertainty about institutions and procedures. This is compatible with political interest being stronger than specific knowledge. It does not justify characterising the population as uniformly uninformed or attributing a party's electoral success to ignorance. Citizens can reasonably weigh identity, experience, economic priorities, policy, and trust differently.

A useful interpretation therefore separates the object of each observation. Familiarity with an electoral system concerns perceived knowledge. Trust in a public body concerns an evaluation. A preference for a candidate concerns a political choice. Ability to file a request concerns practical competence. Treating these as the same construct would make it difficult to determine what education is intended to improve or whether the improvement had occurred.

5.2 Comparison with published Sri Lankan evidence

The Centre for Policy Alternatives' 2024 Democracy and Reconciliation survey used face-to-face interviews with 1,350 people across 25 districts, multistage stratified sampling, and weighting. It reported 76.7% preference for democracy alongside 22.4% trust in Parliament and 19.0% trust in political parties. These are attitude measures from a different survey, not benchmarks for the present knowledge items or values to combine with this sample (CPA, 2024).

De Silva and Jayasekara's 2025 study examined 299 undergraduates from one faculty at the University of Ruhuna using five dimensions of political literacy and multivariate analysis. Its publisher abstract reports associations with academic year and social-context variables. It offers a useful multidimensional perspective, but a faculty sample is not a national adult population. Its later publication is used for retrospective discussion and is not presented as a source available during the original 2024 study (De Silva & Jayasekara, 2025).

Together, these comparisons support clearer measurement and attention to context. They do not validate the present percentages, establish a national rate of political illiteracy, or prove that education or location caused the observed differences. Studies can examine related civic questions while measuring different outcomes in different populations.

5.3 Digital media and the distinction between exposure and influence

Bandaranayake's Sri Lanka chapter in LIRNEasia's 2024 election-misinformation report draws on desk research and key-informant interviews. It describes the information environment and counter-misinformation activity, while explicitly avoiding a quantitative estimate of the effect on voter choice. That distinction is directly relevant here: reporting exposure to suspected misinformation is not evidence that it changed an individual's belief or vote (Bandaranayake et al., 2024, Chapter 5).

The interview excerpts also show that online discussion can support learning as well as uncertainty. An intervention focused only on warning people away from social media

would miss the convenience and social interaction that participants value. A more useful response would teach people to locate original claims, examine the date and source, compare coverage, distinguish commentary from legal text, and recognise uncertainty before forwarding information.

5.4 Educational access and practical competence

The reported interest in online learning among younger respondents is a signal about expressed preference, not evidence of eventual attendance, completion, or improved knowledge. Offline options remain important because the online component of the survey is particularly likely to reach connected participants. Accessible education should therefore offer multiple routes rather than interpreting an internet-recruited sample as evidence that digital delivery can reach everyone.

Practical tasks can connect legal knowledge to civic action. Examples include identifying the authority responsible for a service, locating an information officer, explaining a ballot using the correct election type, and distinguishing a proposed amendment from enacted law. These tasks permit observable assessment. They also avoid using support for a favoured party or policy as a proxy for educational success.

5.5 Alternative explanations and causal limits

Several explanations may account for apparent geographical or educational differences: access to information, questionnaire language, age composition, recruitment networks, familiarity with the interviewer, or willingness to acknowledge uncertainty. The manuscript does not provide sufficient cross-tabulations to distinguish them. A claim that rural residence itself causes lower political literacy would therefore exceed the evidence and risk obscuring differences within locations.

Similar caution applies to trust and civic participation. People may avoid a complaint procedure because they do not know it, because it is costly, because they fear consequences, or because they doubt the outcome. Education can address some of these barriers but cannot be assumed to resolve all of them. Institutional accessibility and responsiveness should be evaluated alongside knowledge-building.

6. Recommendations and Evaluation Framework

Recommendations are directed toward non-partisan civic competence. They are proposals arising from the descriptive findings and supporting literature, not programmes whose effectiveness this study has tested. Implementation should involve educators, relevant public bodies, and community organisations, with materials available in appropriate languages and accessible formats.

Priority	Proposed activity	Outcome to assess
Electoral understanding	Separate practical lessons on parliamentary representation, candidate preferences and other election types	Accuracy on scored scenarios rather than self-confidence alone
Accountability skills	Guided practice locating official RTI procedures and identifying the relevant public authority	Ability to identify the correct procedure and explain its limits
Information evaluation	Compare a political claim with dated primary material and independently sourced reporting	Accuracy in source evaluation and willingness to correct an unsupported claim
Educational access	Combine community sessions, school or university activities and optional online modules	Reach across modes and groups; participation and completion
Sustained civic competence	Repeat practical assessments after a suitable interval	Retained knowledge and reported use, with clear denominators

Table 2. Proposed intervention and evaluation framework. These activities are recommendations; no intervention outcomes are claimed.

6.1 Curriculum and teacher support

Schools and universities can integrate scenarios about institutional responsibility, information access, and electoral procedure into existing teaching. Discussions should welcome disagreement while requiring evidence for factual claims. Teacher support should include reliable source material, guidance on handling contested topics, and opportunities to practise neutral facilitation. The present survey does not measure teacher competence and should not be used to assign blame to individual educators.

6.2 Community and digital delivery

Community sessions can use concrete examples relevant to local services and everyday accountability. Digital modules can supplement those sessions through short explanations and source-checking exercises. Attendance should be reported separately for online and offline delivery, with transparent descriptions of recruitment. Programme reach is an implementation outcome; improved political knowledge is a separate learning outcome requiring assessment.

6.3 Future research design

A stronger survey would specify the target population, recruitment frame, fieldwork dates, sampling procedure, language versions, and item wording in advance. It would report valid responses and missingness for each item, document duplicates and exclusions across collection modes, and distinguish self-reported familiarity from scored knowledge. Sample composition should be presented before subgroup comparisons are interpreted.

Future intervention research could use a comparison group, baseline and follow-up assessment, and a pre-specified primary outcome. Repeated measures would help distinguish short-term recall from sustained learning. Interviews could investigate why people do or do not use civic procedures, with documented consent, a transparent coding process, and attention to perspectives that chal-

lenge the dominant interpretation. Such work would extend this study rather than retroactively supply missing statistical evidence for it.

7. Limitations

The convenience and snowball design limits population generalisation. The sample may exclude people outside the recruitment networks or public locations, and respondents who chose to participate may differ from those who did not. Combining collection modes does not remove these selection effects. No claim of a national prevalence estimate or election prediction follows from the reported sample of 500.

The manuscript does not supply complete item denominators, exact questions, missing-data counts, mode totals, or a demographic table. Percentages are retained as reported, including inequality bounds and subgroup restrictions. They cannot establish exact counts, mutually exclusive categories, or statistically significant group differences. Self-reported familiarity and verification practices may differ from demonstrated knowledge and actual behaviour.

Qualitative excerpts are selective and cannot establish saturation, prevalence, or the truth of a disputed political allegation. The article uses participant codes, but the underlying records require appropriate confidentiality arrangements. The protocol's stated ethics safeguards are not a substitute for documented implementation or any required ethical approval; formal approval status is not documented here.

The supporting literature serves contextual and interpretive purposes. The targeted source check is not a systematic review, and the later university study is a retrospective comparison. Published research provides context but does not validate the present study's respondent-level observations. Findings concern the historical study setting and should not be presented as a measurement of current national opinion.

8. Conclusion

The reported survey and interview material identifies practical gaps in electoral understanding, accountability knowledge, and information evaluation among the participating sample. Political engagement and frequent exposure to news coexist with uncertainty about how institutions and procedures work. These observations support education that connects knowledge to usable civic skills while respecting differences in political preference.

The appropriate response is a non-partisan programme of practical learning, accessible delivery and transparent evaluation. The study does not establish a nationally representative political-literacy rate, demonstrate that misinformation changed votes, or prove that a particular demographic group is less capable of civic participation. Its contribution is a descriptive account of reported needs and a framework for improving their measurement and response.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the survey and interview participants and the individuals who assisted with fieldwork, coordination and discussion of the study, including Indeera Weerasinghe, Thevindu Damsith and Fedrick Alensu. Their

acknowledgement does not imply institutional endorsement of the findings.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests regarding this paper.

Data Availability

The article reports the author's original survey summaries and interview excerpts. Supporting respondent records are held by the author and are not publicly distributed with this article. Access or sharing must respect participant consent and confidentiality. Published contextual sources are identified in the references.

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