Young Voices in Politics: Perceptions of Youth Engagement in Sri Lanka

Sithija Sathsara[1*]
[1]Department of Marketing and Tourism Management, NSBM Green University, Sri Lanka
Corresponding Author E-mail: egsthathsara@students.nsbm.ac.lk

***Abstract*— This study aims to explore the perceptions of Sri Lankan youth on youth involvement in Sri Lankan politics. Adopting a qualitative approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with five individuals from diverse backgrounds. The findings indicate that most youth feel optimistic about the recent shifts in the political landscape in Sri Lanka, and the youth express a genuine interest in the current political shift from an elite or nepotism-centric system to a more people-centric government. However, many youths remain hesitant to actively engage in politics due to significant limitations they are facing, such as financing their political career and facing difficulty in obtaining nominations from mainstream political parties. The participants voiced concerns about how the already existing youth in active politics has failed in resolving the youth-related issues such as unemployment. Findings of this study suggest the implementation of a mandatory youth quota in both local government bodies and the parliament in the country as a way of increasing youth representation which can result in more effective way of addressing youth related issues.**

Keywords*— *Youth, Sri Lankan Politics, involvement of youth

I. INTRODUCTION

The Youth are considered the lifeblood of a nation; the youth represent energy, innovation, and the potential for positive change in a country. The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is an island nation located in the Indian Ocean. With a population of approximately 23 million. As of 2022, about 4.85 million individuals fall within the age range of 12 to 29, which highlights a significant youth population in Sri Lanka.

As a democratic nation, Sri Lanka operates under a constitutional framework composed of three main branches of governance: the Executive, the legislature, and the judiciary. The legislation, which is commonly referred to as the parliament, consists of 225 members of parliament (MPs) In the general election, held every 5 years (with exceptions), citizens are allowed to vote for up to 3 candidates to represent themselves from a political party or an independent group of choice.

A Long-standing concern in Sri Lankan politics has been a lack of representation for certain groups, particularly women and youth. To address the lack of representation of woman,[1], [2] a quota system was introduced requiring political parties and independent groups to ensure 25% female representation in election nominations lists. This quota is enforced at the local government level, making it a obligation of the Election Commission of Sri Lanka to ensure 25% female representation in local government institutions including Pradeshiya Sabhas, Nagara Sabhas, and Maha Nagara Sabhas [3].

In May 2025, for the first time in Sri Lankan electoral history, a compulsory 25% youth representation quota was introduced for the local government elections. This policy mandated that political parties and independent groups must nominate candidates between the ages of 18 and 39. However, unlike the female representation quota, there was no obligation placed on the Election Commission of Sri Lanka to ensure that 25% of council seats were ultimately filled by youth. This raises several questions such as Are Sri Lankan youth genuinely active in politics?

The above-mentioned ideas curated the foundations of this research. The main purpose of this study is to understand whether youth are being represented in politics, are youth- related issues being addressed at local and national levels, and finally, should a compulsory youth quota be implemented at both the local and national levels in Sri Lankan Politics?

With this foundation, the research question of what the perceptions of Sri Lankan youth about the involvement of youth in Sri Lankan politics was developed.

To understand the perceptions of Sri Lankan youth about the youth, a qualitative research methodology was adopted. , data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with five individuals from diverse backgrounds. The findings indicate that most youth feel optimistic about the recent shifts in the political landscape in Sri Lanka, and the youth express a genuine interest in the current political shift from an elite or nepotism-centric system to a more people-centric government. However, many youths remain hesitant to actively engage in politics due to significant limitations they are facing, such as financing their political career and facing difficulty in obtaining nominations from mainstream political parties. The participants voiced concerns about how the already existing youth in active politics has failed in resolving the youth-related issues such as unemployment. Finally, in this study as a potential solution for increasing more youth in active political roles, it was suggested that a mandatory youth

quota in both local government bodies and the parliament in the country should be implemented..

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of youth in Sri Lanka on youth involvement in politics. There seems to be a lack of research conducted in Sri Lanka, and only a handful have been conducted at the international level.

Bridging Activism and Electoral Politics, this paper examines the relationship between social movements between the social movement and electoral politics in the United States of America [4]. To understand the relationship between activism and electoral politics, the author discusses the case of the Obama campaign and uses aspects of the 2012 election to highlight the complex relationship between movements and electoral politics in the United States of America. This study found that youth from families with high socioeconomic status tend to talk more about politics regularly, vote frequently, and be more generally engaged. In contrast, youth who come from less privileged backgrounds participate less and are less involved overall. This paper also reflects on youth participation in the 2008 US presidential election. The year 2008 was recorded as one of the years that reported the highest youth turnouts ever. Even though youth vote turnout was lower than that of Americans over 30, youth participation in Obama's campaign is notable; for example, the campaign volunteering for American youth increased by almost 20% between 2000 and 2008. Finally, this research concludes by highlighting opportunities for sociologists to bridge the connections between activism and electoral politics in new and meaningful ways.

Social media is often thought of as a new communication platform for more youth involvement in politics. However,[5] argue that these online tools have not thus far mobilized a new audience to become more engaged in either institution-oriented activities or political expression. They argue that there is one group of youth that uses social media (internet) for political activism and engagement, but there is a category of youth that never uses social media for this purpose. This study was conducted using latent class analysis (LCA) of a unique web survey on youth aged of 22-29. Finally, they conclude that social media may provide some young adults with a new outlet. But that is not helping to reenter the youth who have lost interest in politics back into politics.

[6] argues that the current literature fails to include new political participation methods common among youth, such as digital activism or lifestyle politics and argues that there is no independent or universally accepted definition of youth political participation and that the existing definitions are general and not so youth-specific. Also, the paper argues that the issue of youth non-participation is not adequately examined. Finally, the author calls future researchers to focus further on youth-specific definitions and how youth are engaged politically in society.

Past research has shown that the youth in the West are more drawn to protest than to voting in elections[7]. This raises the question of what the youth think about youth involvement in politics[8]. Polls have shown that the percentage of youth in politics is lower throughout the globe than in other denominations. However,, research has also shown that the youth, in general, have an interest in social affairs, such as being activists. In the Sri Lankan context, research about Youth and Politics is very numerous. This study aims to look at youth's perspectives on youth involvement in Sri Lankan Politics.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using the qualitative approach, employing 05 individuals of a variety of ages, genders, and political views. Most of these individuals were directly involved in political organizations. A number of active politicians who engaged in this study have been representing local councils in the country.

Table 1. demographic details of the participants

	Age	Gender	Political view	Active in politics	Years of experience
Participant 1	25	male	Left Wing (NPP)	Social media activist	2 years
Participant 2	19	Female	Center - Right	Woman's right activist	1 year
Participant 3	22	male	Left (SLPP)	Active – politician	2 years
Participant 4	35	Female	Right wing (SJB)	municipal Council	7 years
Participant 5	22	Male	Centre - left (NPP)	Active politician	5 years

Informed consent was obtained from all the participants after explaining the aim of the study and that they were allowed to withdraw from the study if they wished to. The interview process was conducted through semi-structured interviews. The participants were asked 20 open-ended questions in which they could express their opinionated views on the particular subject in question.

The participants in this study were selected through a background study of the roles they play in their societies. Three of the participants are university Students who are known to be interested in decision-making in the country and are active in the student life of the universities they represent. Also, two of the participants are lawyers by profession both focusing on constitutional law and civil law cases in Sri Lanka

Also, when selecting these interviews, one factor that was taken into consideration was the diversity of views in society; for instance, participants from both the left, center, and right areas of politics were represented. Also, in the list of considerations, many of the major

political parties are being represented in this interview series, such as the National Peoples Power (NPP/JVP), Samagi Jana Balawagaya (SJB), Sri Lanka Podhu Jana Peramuna (SLPP), United National Party (UNP) and 1 Independent group represented in this study.

Also, several participants who engaged in the interviews expressed an idea of being independent instead of aligning to any political organization: instead, they stand as independent individuals representing themselves and the youth.

Three of the interviews were conducted physically, while seven were conducted remotely for practical reasons. Using the Zoom online platform. The time duration varied from one interview to another. The longest interview lasted two hours, while the shortest interview lasted 30 minutes. It was seen that the majority of the interviews lasted around 40 minutes.

IV. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

A. The impact of socio-political change on Youth Perceptions of politics in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan Youth appear to demonstrate awareness and critical engagement with the evolving political landscape in the present society. According to the findings of this study, most participants expressed that politics in Sri Lanka has changed drastically and positively in recent years. One central thought expressed was that, at present, the power of politics in the country has shifted from elitists and family-dominated politics to more of a people-centric government structure.

One participant noted, "Politics has changed drastically because, in the past decades, politics were dominated by a few families, but now it's more of a people-centric government." Which may suggest a perceived democratization of political representation.

Likewise, another participant commented that people have greatly supported President Anura Kumara Dissanayaka and the government of the National People's Power (NPP). and for the first time, voters in the country expect politicians to be qualified, contrasting it with the past,

"If you passed grade 08, you could do politics."

Another participant states that the year 2024 marked a turning point in Sri Lankan Politics. The participant also says,

"This new administration, which came to challenge the previously established administrations, in which all the old were rejected". She also says that in the present, it is no longer party-dependent politics, loyalty to one party is not much present in modern society, and that it is more now about policy, and also commented that this is good in a way. In contrast, politicians or organizations are put on the check to walk the talk. participant 5 mentioned that it is not just about voting; the citizens have woken up. Some say that politics has strayed from what it is meant to be. The reasons for this statement, according to the interview, are that politicians are focused on gaining power and popularity rather than genuinely addressing the people's problems.

B. Political ideology among youth

Most of the youth who participated in this study appear to align with identifiable political ideologies. Many youth support a center-left position, advocating for a free-market economy with a strong intervention to protect the underprivileged. these youth expressed the responsibility of the government in ensuring that all Sri Lankans may be given the same opportunities in accessing fundamental services such as education and that the government may take the needed approaches in alleviating poverty

Some participants expressed support for right-wing politics in which priority is given for global markets, social democracy, and economic liberalism, suggesting a trust that the youth believe that the importance markets play in driving social upliftment.

A notable segment of the youth prefers not to be confined to a single political ideological stance and chooses to identify as independent. These youth says that they advocate based on the issues and on the issue they align their political opinion based on those.

C. Youth attitudes towards voting

Based on the participants who engaged in this study, the youth overwhelmingly acknowledge the importance of voting, viewing it as a constitutional right in which the voter gets to participate in the local and national decision-making of the country.

When deciding whom to vote for, most participants in this study said that they priorities the policy, proposals, and the profile of the individual over popularity or party affiliation. However, some do acknowledge that the influence of social and public opinion places a prominent role in the minds of youth on whom I'm going to vote for.

Some participants mentioned that the factors they considered were the political ideology or the policy that the candidate was advocating and promising. They say that for them to cast their vote for a particular candidate, these factors need to sink in with them.

D. Preferences for youth candidates

Youth voters in the country are inclined to vote for younger candidates, but this support for younger candidates is conditional. The youth who engaged in this study shared that if the young candidate is a youth who inherits a level of maturity, competence, and has the ability to deliver on promises most youth in general are prawn to vote for such a young candidate instead of the senior or opponent.

E. Youth interest in politics

The youth interest in today's context appears to be robust and multifaceted. Many of the youth who participated in this study are politically active, particularly through social media platforms, which can be identified as a key area for political expression for young people. The 2024 presidential election, in which the youth are very involved through social media

campaigns. However, he states that the youth are a bit hesitant to come into active politics, such as contesting for an election, Saw heightened youth involvement, reflecting an increased activity among youth in politics.

Nevertheless, there is an audience of youth who do not directly participate in formal politics. factors for this, such as educational commitments, professional commitments, disillusionment with political institutions, and a preference for indirect engagement, can be common factors which limit youth engagement in politics.

F. Challenges faced by youth in contemporary Sri Lanka. Socio-Economic Barriers

The youth in Sri Lanka face numerous socio-economic challenges. One of the most common issues the Sri Lankan youth faces is unemployment and limited access to opportunities. And structural barriers in the educational system are often cited as contributing factors. However, even though these factors have been identified, many youths in the country feel marginalized and unsupported.

G. Legislative approaches to youth issues

An accusation brought up by youth is that youth-related issues are not addressed with seriousness by successive governments. While some political actors advocate for increasing youth representation, there still remains skepticism about the effectiveness and sincerity of such efforts.

Representation is viewed as a necessary part for resolving youth-related issues in the eyes of the youth. In other words, the participants believe that more youth involvement in Sri Lankan politics is needed, but the youth who engaged also expressed that the youth who come into politics must be genuinely committed to addressing the real challenges faced by youth.

Concerns have been brought up about the current cohort of youth politicians, the participants says that the youth who are in politics at present can be perceived as self-serving or disconnected from the grassroot reality.

the phenomenon of brain drain in which much of the educated youth migrates due to the lack of opportunities available in the island. And the youth who have represented themselves claiming to be “youth” has not even addressed these issues. But notably some young politicians in the past have done a notable number of work for the Lankan youth.

H. Representation of youth in politics

Debates continue to go on over whether the youth are adequately represented in formal political institutions. Some believe that the current political regime the NPP includes a sufficient number of youth but others contend that the definition of “Youth” in Sri Lankan politics is problematic, often encompassing politicians aged 35 to 40.thay argue that truly youthful voices remain underrepresented and that fresh perspectives are lacking in policy-making circles.

I. Youth participation in politics

Many youths expressed an interest in political participation, though their levels of engagement vary. Some youth prefer to remain politically aware and not engage in active politics. On the other hand, a notable number of youths are preparing to enter politics or have already entered active politics. In which several youth have contested in local level elections, which is a clear indication of how a growing number of youth are willing to engage in active politics.

J. Barriers in entering politics for the youth.

The youth who are coming into active politics face several challenges such as lack of experience, inefficient financial resources, and getting nominations from mainstream parties, and societal discouragement. Also factors such as conventional campaigning structures, in which the candidate is expected to spend in running a campaign -which can be an issue a new youth may face.

K. Political parties and Youth Inclusion

Even though a majority of mainline political parties have youth wings, the youth are not allowed to enter the political front of the party.

Established politicians may view ambitious, youthful youth as a threat to their continuation in politics. However, there are some exceptions as well where some political parties actively create opportunities for youth to get involved in politics. Some say that parties should assign meaningful responsibilities, offer training, and create parallel structures such as shadow cabinets to interrelated youth into not just active politics but into policy-making processes.

L. Implementing a Youth Quota in Sri Lankan Politics

There is broad support for the introduction of a compulsory 25% youth quota in both the national and local government institutions. But still opinions vary on the mechanisms and the potential outcomes, all agree that a compulsory quota system chould enhance youth representation. Some advocate for a merit-based approach to ensure that only the capable youth are elected based on the division of the voters also some emphasize the symbolic and practical importance of guaranteeing youth participation and representation through structural mandates.

proposals for implementing a compulsory youth quota of 25% include integrating them into existing frameworks such as local councils, and aligning them with similar initiative aimed at increasing woman representation. The importances of calling for a quota is not merely about numbers, but about creating a political culture that values, nurtures, and respects the contributions of young leaders.

The literature review sets the theoretical foundation by analysing international studies and scholarly critiques on youth political participation. It underscores recurring global issues: the stratification of youth engagement based on socioeconomic background (Fisher, 2012), the overestimated political impact of

social media (Keating & Melis, 2017), and the lack of a clear, youth-specific framework for political participation (Weiss, 2020). These studies often emphasize structural disadvantages and disengagement, particularly among marginalised youth. Youth are portrayed as either active but elite-driven or passive and politically alienated, with activism and voting often disconnected from one another. Most of these findings are derived from contexts like the United States and Western Europe, highlighting the divide between youth who are empowered to participate and those who are excluded.

In contrast, the discussion shifts the focus to Sri Lanka's specific political climate and the voices of its young citizens. The empirical data collected through interviews presents a more engaged and hopeful youth demographic. Participants demonstrated strong political interest, nuanced ideological positions, and awareness of governance issues. For example, several interviewees cited the shift from elitist politics to people-centric leadership following the rise of the National People's Power movement. Unlike the passivity observed in much of the international literature, Sri Lankan youth— though not always involved in formal political roles—were shown to be engaged through voting, social media advocacy, and even candidacy in local elections.

Moreover, the barriers to youth political engagement differ significantly. While the literature highlights digital fatigue and systemic alienation, the interviews reveal challenges such as lack of financial support, intra-party resistance to youth inclusion, and societal skepticism about youth leadership. Interviewees also discussed how political parties often treat youth as tools for canvassing rather than as decision-makers, with some advocating for youth quotas and shadow cabinets to institutionalize representation. This demonstrates a greater level of critical reflection and proactive problem-solving among Sri Lankan youth than what is portrayed in the literature.

Another contrast lies in the role of social media. Literature paints social media as largely ineffective in reaching disengaged youth, often reinforcing existing political divides rather than bridging them. However, the discussion presents a more dynamic view—where platforms like Instagram and Twitter served as catalysts for youth mobilization during the 2024 presidential elections. Although this engagement often remains confined to digital spaces, it has visibly increased youth awareness and political discourse.

In terms of political ideology, the literature suggests that youth often lack coherent ideological direction. Conversely, the discussion indicates that Sri Lankan youth do have ideological leanings—ranging from centrist-left positions favoring welfare economics to right-wing perspectives supporting global markets. This ideological maturity signals a more politically conscious generation than global narratives might suggest.

Finally, while the literature frequently critiques the lack of structured participation pathways, the Sri Lankan context reveals an ongoing negotiation between aspiration and access. Despite systemic hurdles, some youths have entered politics or aspire to do so, suggesting an evolving political culture more receptive to youth voices, especially at the local level.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research reveal a stark contrast between global academic narratives and the lived experiences of Sri Lankan youth. While the literature paints a fragmented and often disengaged picture of youth political participation, the voices of Sri Lankan youth tell a different story—one of rising political consciousness, growing ideological clarity, and a desire for genuine involvement in governance. Despite facing challenges such as tokenism, lack of funding, and structural exclusion from political parties, young Sri Lankans are not only interested in politics but are also actively seeking pathways to influence decision-making. Social media, contrary to being a passive platform, has emerged as a vibrant space for youth activism in Sri Lanka. The research thus underscores the need for localized, context-sensitive approaches to understanding youth political engagement and calls for practical reforms such as youth quotas, party-level inclusion strategies, and leadership development programs to bridge the gap between interest and actual political participation.

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