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Electoral System Reforms and Their Impact on Representation and Governance Under Sri Lanka's Nineteenth Amendment

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Abstract

Electoral system design has played a pivotal role in shaping Sri Lanka's post-independence political trajectory, influencing the nature of representation, the structure of the party system and the quality of governance. This article critically examines the evolution and impact of electoral reforms associated with 19A. It traces the historical development of Sri Lanka's electoral system, analyses the core features of the post-19A reform package—including the move towards a mixed-member proportional model, the capping of preferential votes, changes to local government electoral rules and the strengthening of the independent Election Commission—and evaluates their effects on political representation and governance. Particular attention is paid to parliamentary representation and party system change, the representation of ethnic and religious minorities, and the evolving position of women and youth in formal politics. Using evidence from the 2015 and 2020 parliamentary elections and the 2018 local government elections, the article assesses how institutional changes have altered patterns of competition, coalition formation and accountability. The analysis finds that the reforms have modestly improved the integrity and inclusiveness of elections, enhanced the visibility of local representatives and women councilors, and created stronger institutional checks through independent commissions. However, significant challenges remain, including political resistance and institutional inertia, legal and administrative complications, weak campaign finance regulation, and limited public understanding of complex mixed-member rules. Drawing on comparative experiences from other mixed-member and hybrid systems, the article concludes with policy recommendations aimed at consolidating and deepening the democratic gains initiated by the Nineteenth Amendment.

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1. Introduction

Electoral systems determine how citizens' preferences are converted into legislative seats and political authority, thereby shaping the quality of representation, party competition, and governmental stability (Nohlen, 2005; Reynolds, Reilly, & Ellis, 2008) [28, 35]. In post-colonial states such as Sri Lanka, electoral design has also been closely linked with questions of nation-building, ethnic accommodation, and democratic consolidation (DeVotta, 2004; Uyangoda, 2015) [8, 40]. Since independence in 1948, Sri Lanka has experimented with different electoral arrangements: initially a Westminster-style first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, later a form of district-based proportional representation (PR), and more recently a hybrid model that combines constituency-based and proportional elements. Each reform cycle was driven by political and social pressures to correct the perceived

deficiencies of the preceding system.

The introduction of PR under the 1978 Constitution was justified as a way of overcoming the disproportionality and “manufactured majorities” associated with FPTP, while also providing better opportunities for minority parties to gain representation in Parliament (Edrisinha & Welikala, 2008; Nohlen, 2005) ^[10, 28]. However, the practical operation of the system—particularly the use of large multi-member districts and open-list preferential voting—generated new problems. Scholars and observers pointed to the weakening of the direct link between Members of Parliament (MPs) and their constituencies, the intensification of intra-party competition, high campaign costs, and an escalation of election-related violence (Aliff, 2012; DeVotta, 2016; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[1, 9, 40]. The system also encouraged the centralization of power within party leaderships and fostered patronage-based politics that undermined accountability. These shortcomings led to a broad consensus among political parties, civil-society organizations and academic commentators that further electoral reform was necessary. From the early 2000s, a series of parliamentary select committees and expert groups examined alternatives, many of which proposed mixed-member or hybrid systems that would restore a strong constituency link while preserving overall proportionality in seat allocation (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Gamage, 2015; Welikala, 2015) ^[5, 12, 42]. The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, enacted in 2015, emerged from this reformist climate. Although 19A is best known for curbing the powers of the executive presidency and re-establishing independent commissions, it also laid important foundations for restructuring the electoral system by strengthening the Election Commission, clarifying its powers, and reaffirming the commitment to introduce a mixed electoral model (Gamage, 2021; Welikala, 2015) ^[13, 42].

Understanding the democratic implications of these reform efforts requires a careful look at the historical evolution of Sri Lanka’s electoral system. By tracing the trajectory from post-independence FPTP, through the PR arrangements of the 1978 Constitution, to the debates that produced the Nineteenth Amendment, it becomes possible to assess whether successive reforms have improved representation, moderated ethnic conflict, and enhanced governance—or whether they have simply exchanged one set of problems for another. The next section therefore reviews this historical evolution in three stages: the post-independence electoral arrangements, the adoption of PR under the 1978 Constitution, and the reform debates that ultimately paved the way for 19A.

2. Historical Evolution of Sri Lanka’s Electoral System

2.1. Post-independence electoral arrangements

At independence, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) inherited a Westminster-style parliamentary system under the Soulbury Constitution of 1947. Elections to the House of Representatives were conducted mainly in single-member constituencies using the simple plurality or FPTP formula, with a small number of multi-member constituencies in areas considered to have complex demographic patterns (Wilson, 1988; Manor, 1989) ^[44, 26]. Under this system, the candidate who obtained the highest number of votes in each constituency was elected, regardless of whether they secured an absolute majority. In addition, the constitution allowed for the appointment of a limited number of members to represent

“unrepresented interests,” which was intended, at least in principle, to provide some voice for minorities and special groups (DeVotta, 2004) ^[8].

The FPTP system was valued for its simplicity and for the strong territorial link it created between MPs and their electorates. Constituency representatives were expected to maintain close contact with local communities and to act as intermediaries between citizens and the central state, particularly in relation to development projects, employment, and public services (Manor, 1989; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[26, 40]. Nonetheless, as in many majoritarian systems, the translation of votes into seats was often highly disproportional. Parties could win substantial parliamentary majorities on the basis of a minority of the popular vote, while smaller parties with geographically dispersed support found it difficult to gain representation (Nohlen, 2005; Reynolds *et al.*, 2008) ^[28, 35]. The impact on ethnic representation was mixed. On the one hand, FPTP allowed regionally concentrated minority parties, such as those representing Sri Lankan Tamils in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, to secure seats in Parliament. On the other hand, dispersed minorities—particularly Muslims and Indian Tamils living outside their traditional plantation areas—were under-represented, and constituency boundary delimitation became a politically contentious process (DeVotta, 2004; Edrisinha & Welikala, 2008) ^[8, 10]. Accusations that constituencies were gerrymandered to favour the governing party contributed to mistrust among minority communities. Combined with the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and policies such as the “Sinhala Only” Act, the majoritarian electoral logic intensified ethnic polarization and laid part of the groundwork for later conflict (Goodhand, Klem, & Sørbo, 2011; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[14, 40]. The First Republican Constitution of 1972 retained the essential features of this Westminster model, including the predominance of FPTP constituencies, although the institutional structure of the state was altered and the legislature was renamed the National State Assembly (Amarasinghe, 2010; Wilson, 1988) ^[2, 44]. By the mid-1970s, however, both major parties had begun to question whether the existing system could ensure stable governance and fair representation in a context of increasing party fragmentation, economic crisis, and intensifying ethnic tensions.

2.2. The 1978 Constitution and proportional representation

The Second Republican Constitution of 1978 introduced sweeping changes to Sri Lanka’s political system. It created an executive presidency and, crucially, replaced the FPTP electoral model with a nationwide system of PR for parliamentary elections (Amarasinghe, 2010; Edrisinha & Welikala, 2008) ^[2, 10]. The country was divided into multi-member electoral districts, largely corresponding to administrative districts, and a new formula was adopted to allocate seats in proportion to each party’s share of the vote within each district. Under the new arrangements, Parliament consisted of 225 members: 196 elected from the multi-member districts and 29 from a “National List” allocated according to each party’s total share of the national vote (Gunasekera, 1999) ^[16]. Voters cast a single ballot for a party or independent group and could then indicate up to three preferential votes among the candidates of that list. Seats were first distributed among parties based on their vote share, and then assigned to

candidates according to the number of preferential votes received.

Supporters argued that the shift to PR would correct the distortions of FPTP, produce results that more accurately reflected the popular vote, and offer enhanced opportunities for smaller parties and minorities to gain representation (Nohlen, 2005; Reynolds *et al.*, 2008) ^[28, 35]. The National List was promoted as a mechanism for bringing professionals, technocrats and under-represented groups into Parliament, thereby improving the quality of legislative deliberation (Amarasinghe, 2010) ^[2]. In practice, however, the system generated significant unintended consequences. The abolition of geographically compact constituencies weakened the direct relationship between MPs and specific communities; voters often struggled to identify “their” representative in large, multi-member districts (Aliff, 2012; DeVotta, 2016) ^[1, 9]. The open-list preferential vote introduced intense competition among candidates of the same party, encouraging personalized campaigns and factionalism. This competition escalated campaign spending and contributed to an increase in election-related violence, as candidates relied on patron-client networks and, in some cases, coercive tactics to secure preference votes (Aliff, 2012; Goodhand *et al.*, 2011) ^[1, 14]. Moreover, the PR system strengthened party leaders who controlled candidate lists and the distribution of campaign resources. MPs became more dependent on the party hierarchy than on voters, further entrenching patronage politics (Edrisinha & Welikala, 2008; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[10, 40]. Although minority parties gained more seats than under FPTP, this did not necessarily translate into more consensual policy-making or stable power-sharing arrangements, as coalition dynamics often remained adversarial (DeVotta, 2016) ^[9].

By the 1990s and early 2000s, the cumulative effect of these problems led to growing calls for another round of reform. Critics claimed that while PR improved numerical proportionality, it had undermined accountability, constituency service, and public trust in the electoral process (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Gamage, 2015; Welikala, 2015) ^[5, 12, 42].

2.3. Reform debates and the road to the Nineteenth Amendment

Systematic efforts to reform the PR-based electoral system gathered pace in the early 2000s. In 2003, Parliament appointed a Select Committee chaired by Dinesh Gunawardena to review electoral reforms for parliamentary and local authority elections. The committee’s report identified the erosion of the MP–constituent link, intense intra-party rivalry, excessive campaign expenditure, and continued under-representation of women and marginalized groups as major defects of the existing system (Gunasekera, 2004; Gamage, 2015) ^[17, 12].

A range of actors—including political parties, women’s organizations, election-monitoring groups, and constitutional scholars—contributed proposals. Many advocated a mixed-member or hybrid system combining single-member or small multi-member constituencies with a compensatory PR tier, drawing inspiration from models in Germany and New Zealand (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Reynolds *et al.*, 2008; Welikala, 2015) ^[5, 35, 42]. Such a system was expected to restore territorial accountability while maintaining overall proportionality and safeguarding

minority representation.

Parallel to these debates, concerns about the neutrality of electoral administration prompted the Seventeenth Amendment in 2001, which created a Constitutional Council and independent commissions, including an Election Commission. However, political deadlock often prevented the proper functioning of these bodies, and key appointments were delayed or left vacant, limiting their effectiveness (Edrisinha & Welikala, 2008; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[10, 40]. The experience underscored the need for stronger constitutional guarantees to protect the independence of electoral management.

The presidential election of January 2015 and the subsequent formation of a broad “good governance” coalition created a new window of opportunity. The reform agenda included curbing presidential powers, strengthening independent commissions, and overhauling the electoral system (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Jayasekara, 2016) ^[5, 20]. Intense negotiations among coalition partners and opposition parties eventually produced the Nineteenth Amendment, enacted in April 2015. While 19A did not immediately replace the PR system for parliamentary elections, it re-established the Constitutional Council, entrenched the independent Election Commission, and reaffirmed the commitment to introduce a mixed electoral model for future polls (Gamage, 2021; Welikala, 2015) ^[13, 42].

In this way, the Nineteenth Amendment represents the latest stage in a long process of institutional experimentation. The journey from FPTP to PR and towards a mixed system reflects Sri Lanka’s ongoing attempt to balance competing objectives: ensuring stable and effective governments, guaranteeing fair representation for diverse communities, and strengthening democratic accountability. The next sections of the article build on this historical overview to examine in detail the specific reforms associated with 19A and their impacts on representation and governance.

3. Electoral Reforms Introduced by the Nineteenth Amendment

The Nineteenth Amendment was presented to the public as a package of “good governance” reforms. While it is popularly associated with reducing presidential powers, its significance for electoral democracy is equally important. The amendment responded to long-standing frustrations with the proportional representation system, the politicization of electoral administration, and the absence of effective checks on executive dominance (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Gamage, 2015) ^[5, 12]. This section examines the constitutional background and objectives of 19A, the work of the Parliamentary Select Committee on electoral reform, and the core elements of the reform package: the move toward a mixed-member proportional system, the capping of preferential votes, changes to local government electoral rules, and the strengthening of the Election Commission.

3.1. Constitutional background and objectives of 19A

By the time 19A was drafted, Sri Lanka had experienced several decades of strong presidential rule under the 1978 Constitution. Amendments over the years, particularly the Eighteenth Amendment in 2010, had further concentrated power in the presidency by removing term limits and weakening independent commissions (Amarasinghe, 2010; DeVotta, 2016) ^[2, 9]. Many analysts argued that this framework undermined accountability, blurred the separation

of powers, and allowed the governing party to dominate the electoral playing field through control of state resources and administration (Uyangoda, 2015) ^[40].

The political coalition that came to power in January 2015 campaigned on a platform of restoring constitutional balance and “yahapalanaya” (good governance). A central pledge was to reverse the most problematic features of the presidential system and to depoliticize key state institutions, including those responsible for elections (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015) ^[5]. The Nineteenth Amendment therefore had several interlinked objectives:

1. **Re-establishing checks and balances** by reintroducing presidential term limits, reducing some presidential powers, and strengthening Parliament and the judiciary.
2. **Restoring and entrenching independent commissions**, such as those for elections, police and public service, supervised by a Constitutional Council rather than by the executive alone.
3. **Laying the groundwork for electoral system reform**, particularly by empowering the Election Commission and reaffirming the state’s commitment to revise parliamentary and local authority electoral systems.

In this sense, 19A did not create a wholly new electoral system on its own but provided the constitutional scaffolding for later legislation. It sought to ensure that any future reforms would be designed and implemented under the supervision of an independent Election Commission, thereby enhancing their legitimacy and durability (Gamage, 2021; Welikala, 2015) ^[13, 42].

3.2. Parliamentary Select Committee on electoral reform

The debate culminating in 19A built on more than a decade of discussion within Parliament and civil society. A key milestone was the appointment of a Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) on electoral reform in the early 2000s, chaired by Dinesh Gunawardena. The PSC was mandated to study weaknesses in the existing electoral arrangements and to propose reforms for parliamentary, provincial and local government elections (Gunasekera, 2004) ^[17].

The PSC gathered evidence from political parties, academics, women’s organizations and election-monitoring groups. Its deliberations highlighted several recurrent complaints about the proportional representation system. First, MPs elected from large multi-member districts were perceived as being less accountable to local communities, weakening the traditional constituency link that many Sri Lankans valued (Aliff, 2012) ^[1]. Second, the open-list preferential vote was widely seen as a driver of intra-party competition, factionalism and violence. Candidates within the same party effectively ran individual campaigns against each other, often relying on money and patron-client networks to mobilize preference votes (DeVotta, 2016) ^[9]. Third, the system did little to address the under-representation of women and minorities, in part because party leaderships retained tight control over candidate lists (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Gamage, 2015) ^[5, 12].

The PSC recommended moving towards a mixed electoral system that would combine single-member constituencies with a proportional “list” component. This hybrid model was intended to preserve vote-to-seat proportionality while restoring geographic accountability and reducing destructive competition for preference votes. Although political

bargaining and constitutional constraints delayed the implementation of these recommendations, they provided an important blueprint for the electoral aspects of 19A and subsequent legislation (Gamage, 2021; Welikala, 2015) ^[13, 42].

3.3. Design of the mixed-member proportional (MMP) system

The mixed-member proportional (MMP) model discussed in Sri Lanka drew on international examples such as Germany and New Zealand. In these systems, voters typically cast two ballots: one for a constituency candidate and one for a party list, with the overall composition of Parliament adjusted to reflect parties’ total share of the vote (Reynolds, Reilly, & Ellis, 2008) ^[35]. The Sri Lankan adaptation sought to retain some features of the existing proportional representation framework while reintroducing single-member or small multi-member constituencies.

Although the precise details have been debated and adjusted at different stages, the broad design envisaged the following elements:

- **Constituency seats** elected through FPTP in smaller territorial units, intended to re-establish a clear representative–voter link.
- **Proportional seats** allocated to parties based on their overall share of the national or provincial vote, ensuring that larger parties could not gain excessive seat bonuses merely by winning many constituencies.
- **A reduced role for preferential voting**, with some proposals suggesting that voters would no longer mark individual candidate preferences on party lists.
- **Mechanisms to guarantee minority and gender representation**, such as reserved slots within party lists or minimum thresholds for women candidates at different levels (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Gamage, 2021) ^[5, 13].

The implementation of this model required complex delimitation exercises to define new constituencies, as well as amendments to ordinary legislation such as the Parliamentary Elections Act. 19A itself did not codify the precise seat formula, but it signaled a clear policy direction and enabled the Election Commission and the Delimitation Commission to undertake the necessary technical work (Welikala, 2015) ^[42]. Importantly, the mixed model was also applied—more fully and earlier—in local government elections, serving as a testing ground for its viability before full adoption at parliamentary level.

3.4. Capping preferential votes in parliamentary elections

One of the most visible and controversial aspects of Sri Lanka’s PR system was the use of multiple preferential votes. Voters could indicate up to three preferences for candidates within the list of the party or group they supported. While this arrangement aimed to give voters some influence over which individuals entered Parliament, it also generated intense intra-party rivalry and drove up campaign costs (Aliff, 2012; DeVotta, 2016) ^[1, 9].

Reform advocates argued that intense competition for preference votes encouraged personalized campaigning, clientelism and, in some instances, violence. Candidates of the same party competed for visibility by organizing large rallies, displaying extensive poster campaigns and

distributing material benefits. These practices distorted policy debates and made it difficult for parties to discipline members who engaged in unethical or illegal conduct, because they often commanded their own localized vote banks (Uyangoda, 2015) ^[40].

The Nineteenth Amendment and subsequent legislative changes responded by capping and simplifying preferential voting. Proposals included reducing the number of permissible preferences or eventually moving towards closed lists in which the order of candidates would be determined by parties, subject to internal democracy rules and gender quotas (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Gamage, 2021) ^[5, 13]. Even partial reforms, such as lowering the number of preferential votes and limiting campaign materials, were expected to reduce internal rivalries and financial excesses. From a governance perspective, capping preferential votes was designed to shift the focus of electoral competition away from individual personalities and back towards party programs and policy platforms. It also complemented the move towards mixed-member representation, because constituency races would already provide voters with a direct say over specific individuals, reducing the need for complex preference marking on party lists (Reynolds *et al.*, 2008) ^[35].

3.5. Local government electoral reforms

Local government elections have often served as a laboratory for electoral experimentation in Sri Lanka. Even before 19A, there had been attempts to adjust local authority electoral rules to address concerns about representation and accountability. However, these efforts were fragmented and marred by legal and administrative delays. The Nineteenth Amendment and its associated legislation sought to harmonize and consolidate these reforms, particularly by applying the mixed-member model more fully at the local level (Gamage, 2015; Welikala, 2015) ^[12, 42].

Under the new arrangements, a substantial portion of local council members are elected from single-member or small multi-member wards, while the remainder are chosen from party lists to ensure overall proportionality. This model aims to ensure that local councillors have clear geographic constituencies, making them more visible and accountable to residents, while still allowing parties with significant overall support to secure representation even if they do not win many ward contests (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015) ^[5].

An important innovation was the introduction of mandatory gender quotas for local government bodies. Parties are required to nominate a minimum proportion of women on their lists, and the PR component has been used to top up women's representation where necessary. For the first time in Sri Lanka's history, this led to a dramatic increase in the number of women elected to local councils, although challenges remain regarding their effective participation and influence (Kodikara, 2017) ^[22].

These local government reforms served several purposes. Substantively, they were intended to improve service delivery, responsiveness and inclusiveness at the grassroots level. Institutionally, they provided valuable experience with the practicalities of mixed-member elections, including ballot design, voter education and result tabulation, thereby informing future adjustments at parliamentary and provincial levels (Gamage, 2021; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[13, 40].

3.6. Strengthening the independence and powers of the Election Commission

Perhaps the most fundamental electoral innovation of the Nineteenth Amendment was the re-establishment and strengthening of the Election Commission. Earlier attempts to depoliticize electoral administration through the Seventeenth Amendment had been undermined by political deadlock, as the Constitutional Council responsible for appointing commissioners was often not constituted, allowing presidential discretion to prevail (Edrisinha & Welikala, 2008) ^[10].

19A addressed these weaknesses by redesigning the Constitutional Council and giving it a more robust role in recommending appointments to the Election Commission and other key bodies. Members of the Commission are now appointed by the President on the Council's recommendation, with representation from both government and opposition and from civil society. This procedure is meant to insulate commissioners from direct partisan control and to enhance public confidence in their neutrality (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Welikala, 2015) ^[5, 42].

The amendment also clarified and, in some areas, expanded the powers and functions of the Election Commission. These include:

- Supervising the preparation and revision of electoral registers.
- Issuing guidelines to public authorities and media organizations to ensure a level playing field during election periods.
- Monitoring the use of state resources and taking action against their misuse for partisan purposes.
- Requesting the deployment of police and other security personnel to maintain order during campaigns and on polling days.
- Advising on proposed changes to electoral laws and constituency boundaries.

By constitutionalizing these responsibilities, 19A sought to reduce the scope for executive interference in elections and to create a professional, rules-based electoral administration. Observers have noted that the Election Commission has, since its establishment, taken a more assertive stance in regulating campaign conduct, though its effectiveness still depends on political will and broader respect for the rule of law (Gamage, 2021; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[13, 40].

Overall, the Nineteenth Amendment's electoral provisions represent an attempt to tackle both structural problems in the design of the electoral system and institutional problems in its administration. The move toward a mixed-member model, the capping of preferential votes, the reform of local government elections, and the empowerment of the Election Commission collectively aimed to create a more representative, accountable and peaceful democratic process. The extent to which these objectives have been realized is explored in subsequent sections through an analysis of electoral outcomes, representation patterns and governance indicators after the introduction of 19A.

4. Impacts on Political Representation

The reforms associated with the Nineteenth Amendment sought not only to correct institutional imbalances between the executive and the legislature, but also to recalibrate the

way in which citizens and groups are represented in the political system. Changes to the electoral formula, constituency structure, and election administration were expected to alter patterns of party competition, minority inclusion, and descriptive representation. This section analyses these effects in three domains: parliamentary representation and party system change, the representation of ethnic and religious minorities, and the participation of women and young people.

4.1. Parliamentary representation and party system change

One of the central critiques of the pre-reform proportional representation system was that it fostered an increasingly fragmented and personalized party system. Large multi-member districts and open-list preferential voting created incentives for candidates to cultivate individual vote bases, often in competition with fellow party members, rather than to build coherent programmatic platforms (Aliff, 2012; DeVotta, 2016) ^[1, 9]. The mixed-member reforms introduced after 19A—particularly at local level and as a model for parliamentary elections—were designed to rebalance these incentives by re-establishing single-member constituencies while retaining a proportional “top-up” component (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Gamage, 2021) ^[5, 13].

From a mechanical perspective, reintroducing constituency seats enhances the chances that the largest parties will win districts outright, potentially magnifying disproportionality in their favour. However, the compensatory list tier and national-list allocations soften this effect and help preserve a broadly proportional distribution of seats, especially for medium-sized parties that are competitive across multiple districts but rarely dominant in any single one (Reynolds, Reilly, & Ellis, 2008) ^[35]. In Sri Lanka’s case, simulations based on recent electoral results suggest that a mixed-member system would still produce coalition politics, but with somewhat clearer lines of accountability, as voters could identify “their” constituency MP while also expressing a preference for a party at the national level (Gamage, 2021; Welikala, 2015) ^[13, 42].

Behaviorally, the new arrangements were expected to reduce intra-party competition driven by preferential voting. By capping or eventually eliminating multiple preference marks on party lists, and by shifting much of the personalized competition into single-member constituency races, the reforms aimed to change how candidates campaign and how parties manage internal rivalries (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015) ^[5]. Constituency contests encourage candidates to appeal to a territorially defined electorate, while list seats—allocated centrally—reward parties that maintain national or district-wide appeal. Evidence from post-reform local government elections indicates a modest decline in overt intra-party violence and a greater emphasis on party labels rather than individual personalities, although patronage networks remain influential in many areas (Kodikara, 2017; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[22, 40].

The structure of the party system is also affected by thresholds and district magnitudes. Under the earlier nationwide PR system, relatively low effective thresholds encouraged the proliferation of small parties, some of which served as satellite organizations allied to larger parties. Mixed-member arrangements with smaller constituencies can raise the barriers to entry for such parties in constituency races, while still allowing them to win list seats if they attain

sufficient overall support (Reynolds *et al.*, 2008) ^[35]. In Sri Lanka, this has tended to favour parties with strong territorial bases—such as regionally concentrated ethnic parties—while making it more difficult for highly localized factions to survive independently. At the same time, the bargaining power of mid-sized parties in coalition formation may increase, because they can be pivotal in securing parliamentary majorities even when the largest party wins many constituency seats (DeVotta, 2016; Welikala, 2015) ^[9, 42].

Another important dimension is the quality of parliamentary representation. Proponents of the reforms argued that reviving constituency ties would make MPs more responsive to local needs and more accessible to citizens, counteracting perceptions of remoteness associated with large electoral districts (Manor, 1989; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[26, 40]. Initial observations from mixed-member local councils suggest that residents are better able to identify councillors responsible for their ward and to direct complaints and service requests accordingly. Whether this pattern will be replicated at parliamentary level depends on how constituency boundaries are drawn and how effectively MPs balance local service roles with national legislative responsibilities.

Overall, the reforms linked to 19A appear to have nudged the party system away from the extreme personalization and fragmentation associated with the old preferential-vote-driven PR model, while preserving a substantial degree of proportionality and multiparty competition. The long-term impact on party institutionalization and programmatic politics, however, remains contingent on broader developments in Sri Lanka’s political culture and governance environment (DeVotta, 2016; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[9, 40].

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4.2. Representation of ethnic and religious minorities

Sri Lanka’s electoral system has always been evaluated in light of its implications for ethnic and religious representation. The shift from FPTP to PR in 1978 was justified partly on the grounds that it would enable minority parties to secure parliamentary seats more commensurate with their vote share (Edrisinha & Welikala, 2008; Nohlen, 2005) ^[10, 28]. In practice, Tamil and Muslim parties did gain improved descriptive representation under PR, yet they often lacked effective leverage in the policy arena, particularly when dominant parties achieved large majorities (DeVotta, 2004) ^[8].

The mixed-member model developed in the wake of 19A sought to retain these representational gains while addressing other shortcomings. The use of proportional list seats ensures that ethnic and religious minorities that are nationally or provincially dispersed can still achieve representation even if they do not win many constituency races (Reynolds *et al.*, 2008) ^[35]. At the same time, the reintroduction of smaller constituencies can benefit regionally concentrated minorities, such as Sri Lankan Tamils in the Northern and Eastern Provinces or certain Muslim communities, by allowing them to elect candidates directly accountable to local voters (Goodhand, Klem, & Sørbo, 2011) ^[14].

However, the impact of these reforms on minority representation is not automatic; it depends on delimitation, party strategies and coalition dynamics. If constituency boundaries are drawn in ways that fragment minority populations across multiple districts, their ability to win

constituency seats may be diluted—a phenomenon known as “cracking” (Nohlen, 2005) ^[28]. The role of the independent Delimitation Commission and Election Commission, strengthened under 19A, is therefore crucial in ensuring that boundaries are crafted according to objective criteria rather than partisan or ethnic manipulation (Welikala, 2015) ^[42].

Party behaviour is equally significant. Majoritarian parties may choose to field minority candidates in winnable constituencies or to allocate them prominent positions on party lists, thereby integrating minority concerns within broader party platforms. Alternatively, they may rely on alliances with minority parties that retain distinct organizational identities. Post-reform local government elections have shown both patterns: in some areas, minority parties have performed strongly under the mixed system, while in others, minority candidates have been incorporated into mainstream party lists (Kodikara, 2017) ^[22]. These experiences suggest that the institutional framework created after 19A offers multiple routes to representation, though the substantive responsiveness of elected officials to minority interests still varies.

Another dimension is symbolic representation and inter-ethnic accommodation. The presence of visible minority MPs and councillors can enhance the perceived legitimacy of state institutions in the eyes of marginalized communities, particularly in post-war contexts (Goodhand *et al.*, 2011) ^[14]. Reforms that protect minority parties from being squeezed out by majoritarian dynamics—such as proportional top-up seats and low thresholds—can therefore contribute to conflict mitigation, provided that parties use their parliamentary presence to advocate constructively for compromise rather than polarizing agendas (DeVotta, 2016) ^[9].

In sum, the electoral reforms linked to 19A have largely preserved, and in some respects expanded, opportunities for ethnic and religious minorities to obtain parliamentary and local representation. The degree to which this translates into meaningful policy influence depends on boundary design, coalition politics, and the broader climate of inter-ethnic relations.

4.3. Gender and youth representation

Perhaps the most striking representational change in the post-19A era has occurred in the domain of gender, particularly at local government level. Sri Lanka long lagged behind regional and global averages in women’s political representation, with female MPs rarely exceeding five to six percent of Parliament (Kodikara, 2012) ^[21]. One of the criticisms of the old PR system was that it did little to incentivize parties to nominate women, especially in winnable positions on lists, because preference-vote campaigns favoured well-resourced male incumbents (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015) ^[5].

Reforms associated with 19A, and the subsequent local government legislation, introduced mandatory quotas for women in local councils. Parties are now required to include women in a specified proportion of their nominations, particularly in the PR component that “tops up” ward winners (Kodikara, 2017) ^[22]. As a result, the number of women elected to local authorities increased dramatically in the first elections held under the new rules. While this change does not directly alter parliamentary representation, it creates a pipeline of experienced female politicians who may later contest national or provincial seats, thereby gradually transforming the gender profile of higher-level institutions.

The picture is more mixed for youth representation. The earlier system’s emphasis on individual vote-pulling often allowed younger candidates with strong local followings to compete effectively, but it also demanded substantial financial resources and patronage networks that many young people lacked (Aliff, 2012) ^[1]. Under the mixed-member model, constituency contests may favour more established figures, while party lists could either entrench senior elites or serve as channels for promoting youth candidates, depending on internal party democracy (Uyangoda, 2015) ^[40]. Some parties have responded to public demand for renewal by placing younger candidates prominently on their lists, but this trend is uneven.

Normatively, 19A’s emphasis on good governance and depoliticized institutions has created a discursive environment more conducive to claims for inclusive representation. Youth movements and women’s organizations have used the language of democratic reform to advocate for broader access to candidacy and leadership positions (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Kodikara, 2017) ^[5, 22]. The independent Election Commission has also supported awareness campaigns highlighting the importance of women’s and young people’s participation, although its formal powers to regulate party nominations remain limited. Despite these advances, significant challenges remain. Many newly elected women councillors report difficulties in accessing decision-making arenas dominated by male party leaders, and youth representatives often struggle to translate their visibility into concrete policy influence (Kodikara, 2017; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[22, 40]. Electoral rules alone cannot overcome entrenched patriarchal norms, clientelistic networks, and hierarchical party structures. Nevertheless, by altering the opportunity structure—through quotas, list requirements, and more transparent election administration—the post-19A reforms have created openings for gradual change.

Overall, the Nineteenth Amendment and related electoral reforms have had a complex but generally positive impact on political representation. They have moderated some of the distortions and perverse incentives of the earlier PR system, preserved and in some areas enhanced minority inclusion, and laid foundations for improved gender and youth representation. The extent to which these institutional changes will translate into deeper democratic transformation will depend on sustained political commitment, vigilant civil society engagement, and the ability of new representatives to assert their roles within Sri Lanka’s evolving political landscape.

5. Impacts on Governance and Accountability

The changes associated with the Nineteenth Amendment were framed not only as electoral engineering but as part of a broader project to improve governance. Reformers argued that recalibrating the electoral system, empowering independent commissions and revising local government arrangements would strengthen vertical accountability from citizens to representatives and horizontal accountability among state institutions (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Gamage, 2021) ^[5, 13]. This section discusses the impact of these reforms in three interrelated domains: decentralization and multi-level governance, accountability and transparency (including campaign finance), and the balance of power between the executive and the legislature.

5.1. Decentralization and multi-level governance

Sri Lanka's constitutional history reveals a tension between centralization and demands for greater regional autonomy. The 13th Amendment introduced Provincial Councils as a response to ethnic conflict, but fiscal and administrative centralization persisted, and local authorities often remained weak in practice (Amarasinghe, 2010; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[2, 40]. Electoral reforms connected to the Nineteenth Amendment contributed to a modest reconfiguration of this landscape by strengthening local representation and clarifying the roles of subnational bodies.

The introduction of mixed-member electoral arrangements at local level is particularly important for multi-level governance. Electing a substantial proportion of councillors from single-member wards gives communities a clearly identifiable representative responsible for local issues such as infrastructure, sanitation and social welfare. At the same time, a proportional "top-up" component ensures that overall party support is reflected in council composition, thereby avoiding the exclusion of significant political currents (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Gamage, 2015) ^[5, 12]. This combination enhances both the input legitimacy (citizens' sense that their vote matters) and output legitimacy (perceived effectiveness of service delivery) of local authorities.

The empowerment of the Election Commission under 19A also has a decentralizing dimension. By mandating the Commission to supervise voter registration, demarcation of wards and the conduct of local elections, the amendment reduces the potential for central executive manipulation of subnational electoral processes (Edrisinha & Welikala, 2008; Welikala, 2015) ^[10, 42]. The Commission's ability to issue guidelines to public officials—such as limiting the use of centralized state resources for partisan campaigns—helps ensure that local authorities are elected under more equitable conditions, thereby strengthening their legitimacy vis-à-vis both citizens and the central government.

Furthermore, the local government reforms interact with existing provincial structures. Although 19A did not fundamentally redesign Provincial Councils, the expectation is that more representative and accountable local councils will either complement or, in some cases, pressure provincial and central authorities to respond more effectively to grassroots needs (Goodhand, Klem, & Sørbø, 2011; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[14, 40]. For example, locally elected ward councillors can articulate community concerns more clearly in provincial forums, thereby enhancing vertical linkages within the state.

Nonetheless, the impact on decentralization is constrained by persistent fiscal and administrative centralization. Local bodies often depend on central grants and line ministries for major projects, limiting their autonomy regardless of electoral reforms (Amarasinghe, 2010; DeVotta, 2016) ^[2, 9]. Without parallel reforms in public finance, civil service deployment and sectoral devolution, electoral innovations alone cannot fully transform multi-level governance. Even so, by improving the representativeness and visibility of local councils, the post-19A framework creates a more solid foundation for future decentralizing initiatives.

5.2. Accountability, transparency and campaign finance

One of the central governance objectives of the Nineteenth Amendment was to enhance accountability and transparency in the electoral arena. Under the pre-reform arrangement, the

combination of open-list PR, multiple preferential votes and weak regulatory oversight incentivized high-spending, personality-based campaigns. Candidates often relied on private financiers and the misuse of state resources, creating opportunities for corruption and policy capture once in office (Aliff, 2012; DeVotta, 2016) ^[1, 9].

The strengthened Election Commission plays a pivotal role in addressing these concerns. Constitutionally entrenched under 19A, the Commission is empowered to issue binding guidelines to public officials and media institutions during election periods, to monitor the use of government property and personnel, and to intervene when state resources are deployed in a partisan manner (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Welikala, 2015) ^[5, 42]. By publicizing violations and, where possible, initiating legal action, the Commission contributes to horizontal accountability, constraining the ability of incumbents to tilt the playing field. The move towards mixed-member representation and the capping of preferential votes also have implications for accountability. Reducing the number of preference marks or moving away from open lists weakens the fierce intra-party competition that previously encouraged candidates to build individualistic patronage networks. Instead, parties are incentivized to coordinate campaigns and present more coherent platforms, making it easier for voters to attribute responsibility for policy outcomes (Gamage, 2015; Reynolds, Reilly, & Ellis, 2008) ^[12, 35]. Constituency races further enhance vertical accountability by allowing citizens to reward or punish specific MPs based on local performance, rather than perceiving them as anonymous figures on a district-wide list.

However, progress in campaign finance regulation has been more uneven. While the Commission's monitoring powers have expanded, Sri Lanka still lacks a fully comprehensive legal framework that sets clear limits on campaign spending, requires detailed disclosure of donations and expenditures, and establishes effective sanctions for non-compliance (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[5, 40]. In practice, informal funding networks continue to play a major role, and wealthy candidates or those with business backing retain advantages. The mixed-member system may actually increase the importance of constituency-level spending if races are highly competitive, underscoring the need for robust regulation.

Transparency has nonetheless improved in certain areas. The Election Commission's public communications, including press conferences and published guidelines, have made electoral rules more visible and understandable to citizens. Civil-society organizations, empowered by the more open governance climate associated with 19A, have intensified their monitoring of media coverage, campaign conduct and the use of state resources (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Goodhand *et al.*, 2011) ^[5, 14]. This societal accountability complements formal institutional mechanisms, creating reputational costs for parties that flout norms of fair play.

In short, the governance gains associated with 19A in the domain of electoral accountability are significant but incomplete. Stronger independent oversight and changes in electoral incentives have reduced some of the most egregious abuses of the earlier period, yet the absence of comprehensive campaign finance laws and persistent clientelistic practices continue to limit the transformative potential of these reforms (DeVotta, 2016; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[9, 40].

5.3. Checks and balances and executive–legislative relations

Perhaps the most widely discussed governance impact of the Nineteenth Amendment concerns its effect on checks and balances within the constitutional architecture. Prior to 19A, the combination of an all-powerful executive presidency, pliant parliamentary majorities and politicized commissions produced what many scholars termed “hyper-presidentialism” (Amarasinghe, 2010; DeVotta, 2016) ^[2, 9]. This configuration weakened the legislature’s ability to scrutinize the executive, undermined judicial independence and facilitated the politicization of electoral administration.

19A addressed these problems through multiple mechanisms. It reintroduced presidential term limits, curtailed certain presidential powers—such as the unfettered authority to dissolve Parliament—and restored the Constitutional Council, tasked with recommending appointments to independent commissions and high judicial offices (Edrisinha & Welikala, 2008; Welikala, 2015) ^[10, 42]. By making the composition of the Council pluralistic and including non-partisan members, the amendment sought to insulate key institutions from direct executive control.

For executive–legislative relations, these changes had several implications. First, limitations on presidential dissolution powers extended the effective life of Parliament and increased its bargaining strength. Governments now had to maintain working coalitions rather than relying solely on presidential prerogatives, which in theory encouraged greater consultation and compromise (Uyangoda, 2015) ^[40]. Second, the requirement that the President act on the advice of the Prime Minister in certain areas shifted part of the political centre of gravity back toward the Cabinet and the legislature. The empowerment of the Election Commission is also central to rebalancing relations between branches. By removing day-to-day control of elections from the executive, the amendment created a neutral arbiter that can mediate disputes over polling dates, campaign conduct and result certification. This reduces the temptation for incumbents to manipulate electoral timetables or administrative procedures for partisan gain, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of both Parliament and the presidency (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Gamage, 2021) ^[5, 13].

Nevertheless, 19A did not fully resolve the underlying tension between presidential and parliamentary authority. Ambiguities remain regarding the precise division of powers, especially in periods of cohabitation when the President and the parliamentary majority belong to different parties (Amarasinghe, 2010; Jayasekara, 2016) ^[2, 20]. Such situations can lead either to constructive power-sharing or to institutional deadlock, depending on the political culture and willingness to compromise. Later constitutional developments have further illustrated the fragility of these arrangements, showing that formal rules alone cannot guarantee stable checks and balances in the absence of strong democratic norms (DeVotta, 2016; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[9, 40].

From an accountability perspective, however, the post-19A configuration represents a relative improvement over the pre-reform era. The presence of independent commissions, including the Election Commission, has created additional veto points and oversight mechanisms. Parliament’s oversight committees, though still constrained by party discipline and resource limitations, operate within a more favourable institutional environment when the executive’s dominance is no longer absolute (Gamage, 2021; Welikala,

2015) ^[13, 42].

In conclusion, the Nineteenth Amendment’s impact on governance and accountability operates through multiple channels: enhanced local representation within a multi-level state, strengthened mechanisms for monitoring electoral conduct and campaign behaviour, and a recalibrated balance of power between the executive and the legislature. These changes have not eliminated all governance pathologies—such as clientelism, weak campaign finance regulation and political polarization—but they have created a more pluralistic and rule-based institutional framework within which further democratic reforms can be pursued.

6. Electoral Outcomes under the Reformed System

While the Nineteenth Amendment did not instantly replace Sri Lanka’s parliamentary electoral system, it changed the environment in which subsequent elections were conducted by empowering the Election Commission, revising local authority laws, and signalling a shift toward a mixed-member model. The three key post-19A elections—the 2015 parliamentary elections, the 2018 local government elections under the new mixed system, and the 2020 parliamentary elections—together illustrate both the potential and limits of these reforms for reshaping political competition and democratic governance.

6.1. The 2015 parliamentary elections

The parliamentary election of 17 August 2015 was the first national poll held after the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in April 2015. Although the basic proportional representation (PR) system with preferential voting remained in place, 19A had already altered the institutional context by restoring the Constitutional Council and strengthening the legal basis for an independent Election Commission, even though the new Commission itself was established later (Amarasinghe, 2010; Welikala, 2015) ^[2, 42].

The election followed the surprise presidential victory of Maithripala Sirisena in January 2015, which fractured the previously dominant United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and produced an unstable cohabitation between reformist and conservative factions (DeVotta, 2016) ^[9]. Campaign discourse was strongly shaped by themes of “good governance”, anti-corruption and constitutional reform, reflecting the agenda that had driven the adoption of 19A.

In electoral terms, the United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG), led by Ranil Wickremesinghe, became the largest bloc in Parliament with 106 seats, while the UPFA secured 95 seats. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) won 16 seats, consolidating its position as the main representative of Sri Lankan Tamils, and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) obtained 6 seats as a leftist opposition force. Smaller parties, including the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the Eelam People’s Democratic Party, shared the remaining seats. Voter turnout was high at around 78 percent, indicating continued public engagement despite political turbulence.

The outcome produced a hung Parliament, with the UNFGG short of an outright majority. Rather than reverting to confrontational politics, a national government was formed when a section of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) agreed to support Wickremesinghe as prime minister. This arrangement reflected the new balance created by 19A: a presidency constrained by term limits and subject to greater parliamentary oversight, and a legislature that had to function

through coalition and compromise (Uyangoda, 2015; Welikala, 2015) ^[40, 42].

From a representational standpoint, the 2015 election displayed both continuity and incremental change. The PR system still produced a relatively proportional seat distribution, allowing minority and smaller parties to be present in Parliament. However, patterns of personalized campaigning, preferential-vote competition and patronage persisted, revealing that the core incentives of the old electoral design had not yet been structurally altered (Aliff, 2012; DeVotta, 2016) ^[1, 9]. The main innovations associated with 19A at this stage were thus institutional rather than mechanical: a stronger framework for independent electoral administration and a renewed normative emphasis on accountability and coalition governance.

6.2. Local government elections of 2018

The local government elections held on 10 February 2018 marked the first large-scale test of the mixed-member model and women's quota developed in the post-19A reform cycle. Under the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Acts, local councils were elected through a 60:40 formula, with 60 percent of members chosen from single-member wards using first-past-the-post voting and 40 percent from closed party lists allocated proportionally (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015) ^[5]. A statutory 25 percent quota for women was also introduced, primarily implemented via the PR component (Kodikara, 2017) ^[22].

The election was one of the largest in Sri Lanka's history: roughly 8,300 councillors were elected to 340–341 local authorities, with turnout close to 80 percent. Politically, the most striking outcome was the emergence of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)—a new party aligned with former president Mahinda Rajapaksa—as the clear winner. The SLPP obtained about 40–41 percent of the national vote, over 3,400 councillors and control of more than two-thirds of local bodies, dramatically outperforming both the UNFGG/UNF and the UPFA (Peiris, 2018) ^[33].

These results had several implications for the assessment of electoral reform:

1. Mechanical and psychological effects of the mixed system

- The ward-based FPTP tier allowed the SLPP, whose support was territorially concentrated and highly mobilized, to convert votes into a large number of ward victories.
- The proportional list tier ensured that opposition parties, particularly the United National Front and regional minority parties, still obtained representation even in areas where they were not winning wards (Reynolds, Reilly, & Ellis, 2008) ^[35].
- The high incidence of hung councils—nearly 200 local authorities without single-party majorities—showed that the mixed system produced fragmented local landscapes requiring coalition-building and negotiation.

2. Impact on governance and party competition

- The SLPP's sweeping success was widely interpreted as a referendum on the national coalition government, exposing public frustrations with economic performance and intra-coalition conflict (DeVotta, 2016; Peiris, 2018) ^[9, 33].

- At the same time, the requirement to form coalitions in many councils forced parties to engage in local-level bargaining, sometimes crossing ethnic and partisan lines and thereby deepening multi-level governance dynamics.

3. Gender representation

- The 25 percent quota transformed women's presence in local government: for the first time, women came close to one quarter of local councillors, a dramatic increase from previous single-digit levels (Gunasekera, 2023; Kodikara, 2017) ^[15, 22].
- Subsequent research, however, indicates that many of these women faced obstacles such as limited access to leadership positions, party-level marginalization and persistent patriarchal attitudes, illustrating that quotas are necessary but not sufficient for substantive gender equality (Gunasekera, 2023; UNFPA, 2025) ^[15].

From the vantage point of 19A, the 2018 local elections confirmed that mixed-member rules and quotas can reshape the descriptive profile of local councils and re-energize territorial representation, but also that electoral engineering cannot by itself resolve deeper issues of coalition instability, elite polarization and socio-economic discontent.

6.3. The 2020 parliamentary elections

The parliamentary election of 5 August 2020 took place in a context very different from 2015. Sri Lanka had endured the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in 2019 and was grappling with the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Politically, the Rajapaksa family had returned to prominence: Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the presidency in November 2019, and Mahinda Rajapaksa was appointed prime minister.

Although the core parliamentary electoral system remained the PR model introduced in 1978, the institutional framework inherited from 19A still applied: the Election Commission organized the poll, supervised health-related adaptations, and sought to maintain a level playing field despite intense partisan polarization (Gamage, 2021) ^[13]. Official results show that the Sri Lanka People's Freedom Alliance (SLPFA)—an alliance dominated by the SLPP—obtained about 59 percent of the vote and 145 of the 225 seats, gaining a near two-thirds majority in Parliament. The newly formed Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) emerged as the main opposition with 54 seats, while the TNA was reduced to 10 seats, National People's Power (NPP) secured 3 seats, and the once-dominant United National Party (UNP) was reduced to a single seat. Turnout remained high at roughly 76 percent. These outcomes highlight several features of the post-19A electoral landscape:

1. Concentration of power despite formal safeguards

- The SLPFA's victory demonstrates that even under a PR system with independent electoral administration, a sufficiently popular party can obtain a commanding parliamentary majority.
- This majority enabled the government to rapidly pursue further constitutional changes—most notably the Twentieth Amendment—which rolled back several constraints on presidential power introduced by 19A (DeVotta, 2016; Gamage, 2021) ^[9, 13].

2. Party system realignment

- The near-collapse of the UNP and the rise of both the SLPP/SLPFA and the SJB signalled a profound restructuring of party competition, with new formations replacing older alignments rather than a simple alternation between traditional parties.
- The electoral system, with its nationwide PR component and modest thresholds, facilitated this realignment by allowing new parties to convert their support into substantial parliamentary blocs relatively quickly.

3. Representation and opposition capacity

- Minority-oriented parties, particularly the TNA, experienced reduced representation, reflecting changing voter preferences and the impact of new majority-oriented narratives after the end of the civil war.
- Nonetheless, the presence of SJB, NPP and regional parties ensured that Parliament retained pluralism, even if opposition groups faced structural disadvantages against a government with constitutional-amendment-level strength.

From an accountability perspective, the 2020 election underscores an important lesson: institutional reforms like 19A can create fairer procedures and more independent electoral administration, but they cannot predetermine electoral outcomes. When a governing coalition enjoys broad public support, it can use those very institutions to legitimize and deepen its power. The resilience of democratic checks and balances therefore depends not only on electoral rules but also on the willingness of political actors to respect constitutional limits and on the capacity of civil society, courts and the media to scrutinize the exercise of power. Taken together, the 2015, 2018 and 2020 elections reveal a complex picture. The reforms associated with the Nineteenth Amendment improved the integrity and inclusiveness of electoral processes—especially through independent oversight and mixed-member rules at the local level—yet they also coexisted with strong majoritarian impulses and volatile party realignments. The next stages of Sri Lanka's constitutional development will determine whether these procedural gains can be consolidated into a more durable culture of democratic accountability and balanced representation.

7. Challenges, Critiques and Implementation Gaps

Although the Nineteenth Amendment and related electoral reforms were widely welcomed as a democratic breakthrough, their implementation has been uneven and contested. The move towards a mixed-member system, the capping of preferential votes, and the strengthening of the Election Commission all confronted entrenched political interests, legal ambiguities and public misunderstanding. This section reviews three broad sets of difficulties: political resistance and institutional inertia, legal and administrative challenges, and issues of voter education and public perceptions.

7.1. Political resistance and institutional inertia

Electoral systems shape who wins and who loses; therefore, the actors who benefited from the previous arrangements were often reluctant to embrace change. In Sri Lanka, many MPs and local politicians had built their careers under

district-level proportional representation and preferential voting, developing clientelist networks and personal vote bases that might be weakened by a shift to single-member constituencies and reduced preferential competition (Aliff, 2012; DeVotta, 2016) ^[1, 9]. For these politicians, the proposed mixed-member model threatened existing power structures inside parties as well as between parties.

Within major political organizations, intra-party resistance manifested in several ways. Some party elites accepted the principle of reform but sought to influence the design details—such as the ratio of constituency to list seats or the drawing of boundaries—in ways that would protect their own electoral prospects (Gamage, 2015; Welikala, 2015) ^[12, 42]. Others used procedural tactics to delay legislation or to postpone the full application of reforms, particularly at parliamentary level. Even after the adoption of 19A, bargaining over the precise formula and timing of the mixed-member system continued, revealing how formal constitutional commitments can be diluted through everyday political negotiations (Gamage, 2021) ^[13].

Institutional inertia also played a role. Public administrative bodies accustomed to operating under the old electoral rules were sometimes hesitant to adapt to new procedures. Delimitation exercises required the cooperation of multiple ministries and agencies, including those responsible for land records, population data and local administration. Where coordination was weak or bureaucratic incentives were misaligned, technical processes stalled, creating grounds for political actors to question or contest the outputs (Amarasinghe, 2010; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[2, 40].

Moreover, the subsequent constitutional trajectory highlighted the fragility of 19A's achievements. The comfortable parliamentary majority obtained by the ruling alliance in 2020 enabled the adoption of further constitutional changes that rolled back some checks on presidential power and altered the balance carefully crafted in 2015 (DeVotta, 2016; Gamage, 2021) ^[9, 13]. This illustrated a key critique: that while 19A created important institutional guardrails, it did not fundamentally transform the competitive logic of Sri Lankan politics, where parties still seek to use constitutional amendments as instruments in power struggles.

In short, political resistance and institutional inertia limited the speed and depth with which electoral reforms could be realized. The existence of cross-party consensus on principles of reform did not always translate into sustained support for specific design choices, especially when these threatened the interests of powerful incumbents.

7.2. Legal and administrative challenges

The implementation of 19A's electoral vision also encountered a range of legal and administrative difficulties. The amendment itself set out broad constitutional principles—such as the independent status of the Election Commission and the commitment to a mixed electoral model—but required supplementary ordinary legislation to operationalize these commitments for parliamentary, provincial and local government elections (Welikala, 2015) ^[42]. Drafting, debating and enacting these laws proved complex and time-consuming.

One major challenge was delimitation. The shift towards single-member wards and smaller constituencies required a complete redrawing of electoral boundaries. Delimitation commissions needed to balance multiple criteria—population equality, geography, administrative convenience, community

ties and minority protection—while avoiding accusations of partisan gerrymandering (Nohlen, 2005; Reynolds, Reilly, & Ellis, 2008) ^[28, 35]. In practice, their reports were frequently contested by parties and local stakeholders, leading to revisions, court challenges and political bargaining that delayed implementation (Gamage, 2015) ^[12].

Administrative capacity constraints further complicated matters. The Election Commission, although constitutionally empowered, had to oversee new tasks such as managing mixed-member ballots, training polling officials on revised counting procedures, and educating party agents and observers about the new rules (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015) ^[5]. Local government officials, many of whom had operated for decades under the old system, required substantial reorientation to understand how ward representation and proportional “top-up” seats would interact in council composition. Limited financial and human resources, particularly in rural areas, stretched administrative systems that were already burdened by routine electoral duties (Amarasinghe, 2010; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[2, 40].

Legal ambiguities also generated disputes. The coexistence of multiple constitutional amendments and election laws—some predating 19A—created overlapping and sometimes conflicting provisions. For example, clarifying the respective powers of the President, the Cabinet and the Election Commission in setting election dates became contentious in situations where Parliament had been dissolved or public health emergencies (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) required postponement of polls (Gamage, 2021) ^[13]. While courts provided some guidance, litigation itself caused uncertainty and gave political actors opportunities to question the impartiality of institutions.

At local level, the experiment with mixed-member rules and gender quotas revealed operational challenges that had not been fully anticipated. The allocation of seats under the 60:40 formula, particularly in councils with fragmented vote distributions, proved mathematically complex. Errors or delays in tabulating results not only frustrated parties and candidates but also opened the Commission to criticism, even when problems arose from legal formulae adopted by Parliament rather than from administrative negligence (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Kodikara, 2017) ^[5, 22]. Thus, while 19A provided a strong normative and constitutional framework, the translation of that framework into effective electoral practice demanded legal clarity, technical expertise and administrative resources that were not always consistently available.

7.3. Voter education and public perceptions

A further set of implementation gaps concerns voter education and public perceptions. Electoral reforms can only achieve their democratic objectives if citizens understand the new rules, trust the institutions that administer them, and believe that their participation will make a difference (Reynolds *et al.*, 2008) ^[35]. In Sri Lanka, public awareness of 19A’s technical details has often been limited, even if slogans about “good governance” and “independent commissions” became widely known during the 2015 reform moment (DeVotta, 2016; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[9, 40].

The mixed-member model used in local government elections, for instance, introduced new concepts such as ward councillors, proportional “top-up” lists and a reserved quota for women. Many voters struggled to grasp how their votes in a ward race would interact with party list allocations to

determine the final composition of councils (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Kodikara, 2017) ^[5, 22]. Misunderstandings also arose about the role of women elected through the quota; some members of the public, and even some male councillors, perceived them as “second-tier” representatives, undermining the symbolic and substantive impact of the reform (Kodikara, 2017) ^[22].

The Election Commission launched voter education campaigns through media announcements, posters and outreach programs to explain the new system. Civil-society organizations complemented these efforts by conducting workshops and producing simplified guides. However, the scale of change and the diversity of local contexts meant that messages did not always reach all communities, especially in remote areas or among marginalized groups (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015) ^[5]. Literacy levels, language barriers and distrust of political actors further constrained the effectiveness of communication strategies (Goodhand, Klem, & Sørbo, 2011) ^[14].

Public perceptions were also shaped by broader political developments. The initial optimism surrounding 19A was tempered by subsequent constitutional reversals and political crises, leading some citizens to view reforms as elite maneuvers rather than durable guarantees of their rights (DeVotta, 2016; Gamage, 2021) ^[9, 13]. When later amendments appeared to undo parts of the 19A settlement, scepticism grew about whether independent commissions and revised electoral rules could withstand the pressures of majoritarian politics. This scepticism in turn affected how voters interpreted each new change: rather than seeing the mixed-member system and quotas as neutral technical improvements, they were sometimes framed as strategies to favour particular parties or leaders.

Another challenge is the persistence of clientelistic expectations. In many constituencies, voters continue to assess representatives less on policy performance and more on their ability to deliver individual benefits, jobs or local projects (Manor, 1989; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[26, 40]. Even when electoral reforms create structures for programmatic competition and constituency accountability, these expectations can encourage candidates to maintain patronage-based campaign styles, limiting the transformative potential of institutional change. For instance, some ward councillors elected under the new local rules continue to rely heavily on personalized networks rather than party platforms, blurring the intended distinction between individual and party-based representation.

Despite these obstacles, there are signs of gradual change in public attitudes. Surveys and qualitative studies suggest that citizens increasingly value fair procedures, transparent counting and impartial administration, especially after experiences of violence and malpractice in earlier elections (Goodhand *et al.*, 2011; Uyangoda, 2015) ^[14, 40]. The visible role of the Election Commission—through press conferences, guidelines and enforcement actions—has contributed to perceptions that elections are more professionally managed, even when voters remain critical of politicians themselves. Youth activists and women’s groups have also used the language of constitutional rights and electoral fairness to demand deeper reforms, indicating that 19A has had a broader pedagogical effect in the political culture (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015; Kodikara, 2017) ^[5, 22].

In sum, voter education and public perceptions represent a

crucial frontier for consolidating the gains of 19A. Without sustained efforts to explain complex reforms, build trust in institutions and challenge clientelist norms, even well-designed electoral systems will fall short of their democratic promise. The experience of Sri Lanka underscores that constitutional and legal change must be accompanied by long-term civic engagement and political learning if electoral reforms are to translate into genuinely accountable and participatory governance.

8. Comparative Perspectives and Future Reform Agenda

8.1. Lessons from other MMP and hybrid systems

Sri Lanka's move toward a mixed-member model, as envisaged under the Nineteenth Amendment and implemented most clearly at local level, can be better understood by comparing it with other countries that use mixed-member proportional (MMP) or hybrid systems. Comparative experience confirms that mixed systems can successfully combine constituency representation with overall proportionality, but also shows that detailed design choices—such as the ratio of constituency to list seats, thresholds, and overhang mechanisms—are crucial for democratic outcomes (Lijphart, 1999; Reynolds, Reilly, & Ellis, 2008; Shugart & Wattenberg, 2001) [25, 35, 37].

Germany's long-standing MMP system is often cited as the archetype. Voters cast two ballots: one for a constituency candidate and one for a party list. The final partisan composition of the Bundestag is determined primarily by the list vote, with constituency seats deducted from each party's total entitlement. "Overhang" seats are added when a party wins more constituencies than its proportional share, and "compensatory" seats are used to preserve overall proportionality (Shugart & Wattenberg, 2001) [37]. This design has produced relatively stable multi-party coalitions and a high degree of proportionality, while maintaining strong constituency links between MPs and voters (Norris, 2011) [30].

New Zealand offers another instructive example. The adoption of MMP in 1993 was driven by dissatisfaction with the disproportional outcomes of its first-past-the-post system. The New Zealand model also uses a two-vote system, with approximately half of MPs elected from single-member constituencies and the remainder from party lists (Vowles, 2013) [41]. The change led to more inclusive representation of smaller parties and Māori interests, a shift from single-party to coalition governments, and enhanced scrutiny of executive power (Boston, Levine, McLeay, & Roberts, 1996) [4]. At the same time, New Zealand has had to manage challenges such as party fragmentation and public confusion about the relationship between electorate and list MPs.

Other hybrid systems illustrate additional design trade-offs. Japan's post-1994 electoral system combines single-member districts with a separate proportional tier, but with limited compensation between the two components, producing a mixed-member majoritarian rather than proportional outcome (Reynolds *et al.*, 2008) [35]. This arrangement has preserved dominance by large parties while offering some space for smaller parties in the proportional tier. Similarly, Mexico and South Korea use mixed systems that retain significant majoritarian bias, indicating that mixed-member formulas do not automatically guarantee proportionality and that political elites can steer reforms to protect incumbent advantages (Nohlen, 2005; Norris, 2011) [28, 30].

Several lessons emerge from these experiences for Sri Lanka.

First, clarity of the compensatory mechanism is essential. Systems that explicitly tie the distribution of list seats to the national or regional party vote, as in Germany and New Zealand, are more likely to produce proportional outcomes and to prevent "seat bonuses" for dominant parties (Lijphart, 1999; Shugart & Wattenberg, 2001) [25, 37]. Second, reasonable thresholds—typically between 3 and 5 percent of the list vote—help balance party system fragmentation with representational fairness. Very low thresholds can encourage excessive party proliferation, while very high thresholds can exclude significant minorities (Reynolds *et al.*, 2008) [35].

Third, comparative evidence highlights the value of gender and minority inclusion mechanisms. New Zealand, Scotland and Wales have used party quotas and list strategies to increase women's representation under MMP, while Germany's Länder experiments illustrate how list placement rules can promote descriptive diversity (Norris, 2004; Krook, 2009) [29, 23]. These experiences resonate with Sri Lanka's use of quotas in local government and suggest that similar tools could be adapted for parliamentary and provincial tiers.

Finally, comparative systems underscore that mixed-member reforms are most effective when accompanied by robust independent electoral management and campaign finance regulation. Germany's non-partisan election administration and strict controls on party funding have helped sustain public confidence in the integrity of elections (Norris, 2015) [31]. New Zealand's Electoral Commission and transparency rules perform similar functions. For Sri Lanka, the strengthened Election Commission under 19A provides an institutional platform, but further legal and administrative development is necessary to match these standards (Gamage, 2021; Welikala, 2015) [13, 42].

Overall, other MMP and hybrid systems confirm that Sri Lanka's reform trajectory is consistent with global trends toward combining proportionality with constituency representation, but they also highlight that the success of such reforms depends on careful technical design and supportive political and legal frameworks.

8.2 Policy recommendations for deepening democratic gains

Drawing on both Sri Lanka's experience and comparative lessons, several policy directions can be identified to deepen the democratic gains associated with the Nineteenth Amendment.

First, Sri Lanka should complete and refine the mixed-member design at parliamentary and provincial levels. This includes clearly specifying the ratio of constituency to list seats, adopting a transparent compensatory formula that ties overall seat allocation to the national or provincial party vote, and introducing mechanisms to address overhang seats. A two-vote system, in which voters can separately choose a constituency candidate and a party, would enhance voter choice and strengthen the link between electoral outcomes and party support (Reynolds *et al.*, 2008; Shugart & Wattenberg, 2001) [35, 37].

Second, reforms should consolidate and extend inclusion measures. The successful introduction of a women's quota in local government suggests that reserved proportions of women on party lists or "zipper" rules alternating male and female candidates could be considered for parliamentary elections (Kodikara, 2017; Krook, 2009) [22, 23]. Similar tools could be designed to secure representation for historically marginalized ethnic and religious communities, either

through list placement rules or reserved seats in constituencies where such groups are concentrated (Goodhand, Klem, & Sørbrø, 2011) ^[14].

Third, there is a strong case for comprehensive campaign finance legislation. Independent oversight alone cannot curb the influence of money without clear statutory limits on donations and expenditures, robust disclosure requirements, and effective sanctions for violations (Norris, 2015) ^[31]. A transparent regime—monitored by the Election Commission in collaboration with the Auditor General and civil-society watchdogs—would help reduce clientelism and level the playing field between incumbents and challengers (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015) ^[5].

Fourth, Sri Lanka should further institutionalize the independence and capacity of the Election Commission. This could include constitutional entrenchment of key powers, multi-year budgetary guarantees, and clear criteria for the appointment, tenure and removal of commissioners (Edrisinha & Welikala, 2008; Welikala, 2015) ^[10, 42]. Strengthening the Commission's research and training units would also enhance its ability to manage complex mixed-member elections, undertake boundary delimitation, and conduct voter education campaigns.

Fifth, long-term success requires investment in civic and voter education. Systematic programs in schools, universities and community organizations can help citizens understand the logic of mixed-member representation, the roles of constituency and list MPs, and the importance of programmatic voting over patronage-based expectations (Uyangoda, 2015) ^[40]. Partnerships between the Election Commission, media and civil society can facilitate accessible explanations of electoral rules in all national languages and tailor materials to different regions and social groups.

Finally, any future constitutional reforms should seek to protect the core democratic safeguards introduced by 19A, including independent commissions and balanced executive–legislative relations. This may involve raising amendment thresholds for provisions relating to the electoral system and the independence of key institutions, or requiring special procedures such as referendums for changes that significantly affect the electoral playing field (DeVotta, 2016; Gamage, 2021) ^[9, 13].

In summary, the comparative record suggests that Sri Lanka's partial move to a mixed-member framework and its reinforcement of independent electoral administration are steps in the right direction, but not the end of the reform journey. By refining the technical design of the system, enhancing inclusion, regulating campaign finance, strengthening institutions and investing in civic education, policy-makers and citizens can transform the procedural gains of the Nineteenth Amendment into deeper, more resilient democratic consolidation.

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