

The Effects of Media Ownership Patterns on Public Opinion Towards Voter Intention

Thameera Manju¹, Arun Kumar Tarofder², S. M. Ferdous Azam³

Abstract

The election is a social process that establishes representative democracy. To accurately represent public opinion, the election process must be held on a level playing field. The role of the news media in creating a level playing field is critical. It is essential that the news media behave unbiasedly, objectively, and neutrally during the election season. The ownership of the news media is a crucial factor in that unbiased role. There have been numerous empirical studies to identify how election coverage varies with news media ownership patterns. These studies have confirmed that news media owners affect public opinion by transferring the news media agenda onto the public agenda. However, empirical studies that examine the effect of news media ownership patterns on public opinion toward voter intention are rare. The primary goal of this study is to fill this research gap in the Sri Lankan context. This study was conducted using a quantitative survey method. Data was collected through a well-organized questionnaire that tested face validity and content validity. In the data analysis, it was found that news media ownership patterns do not have a direct effect on voter intention. However, the effect of news media ownership patterns on public opinion is strong. This study revealed that public opinion mediates the relationship between ownership patterns and voter intention. The data analysis revealed that it is a fully mediated effect. In light of this, it can be said that public opinion is a mediating variable. These findings once again confirm the agenda-setting theory, Shoemaker and Reese's ownership theory, and the spiral of silence theory. Finally, identifying public opinion as a mediating variable in this study will open a new window for future public opinion studies.

Keywords: news media, ownership patterns, public opinion, voter intention, election.

1. Introduction

Walter Lippmann, the intellectual father of agenda-setting theory, published "Public Opinion" in 1922, which brought the notion of public opinion to the field of communication studies. Now, public opinion is a widely discussed subject in the context of mass communication (Alhuntushi and Lugo-Ocando, 2023; Bartels, 2023; Arnold-Forster, 2023; Van Rythoven, 2022; Gaitano et al., 2022; Bhowmik, 2022). Public opinion is important to democratic governance and is at the core of the world's representative democracies (Rudolph, 2022). It is a major factor influencing a person's perception of a controversial public issue (Lin, 2022).

¹ Graduate School of Management, Post Graduate Centre, Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, Section 13, 40100, Selangor, Malaysia, 072019070015@pgc.msu.edu.my

² Graduate School of Management, Post Graduate Centre, Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, Section 13, 40100, Selangor, Malaysia, arun_kumar@msu.edu.my

³ Graduate School of Management, Post Graduate Centre, Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, Section 13, 40100, Selangor, Malaysia, drferdous@msu.edu.my

During an election season, many factors affect the public opinion (Ranatunga, 2023). One of the most prominent is the news media (Khudaikulov, 2022). The news media drives the public agenda by influencing how much importance people attribute to issues based on media coverage (Nik Hasan & Dauda, 2020). In other words, news media affect public opinion directly and indirectly by transferring the salience of the issues on the media agenda to the public agenda. Setting the media agenda as the public agenda is called agenda setting (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021).

Media ownership is the crucial factor influencing the internal gatekeeping of the news media in agenda setting. The media ownership pattern takes many forms, such as state ownership, private ownership, family ownership, party ownership, trust ownership, public or corporate ownership, etc. (Sjøvaag & Ohlsson, 2019). The effect of the news media on public opinion also varies depending on the form of these ownership patterns. There have been numerous empirical studies to identify how election coverage varies with media ownership patterns. These studies have confirmed that media owner patterns affect public opinion by transferring owners' own political agendas (= media agenda) into the public agenda. However, empirical studies that examine the effect of media ownership patterns on public opinion toward voter intention are still somewhat lacking. The primary goal of this study is to fill this research gap in the Sri Lankan context. According to this objective, the primary research question of the study is, "Is there an effect of media ownership patterns on public opinion toward voter intention?"

A level playing field is an important principle of a democratic election (ACE Encyclopaedia, 2023). The media is the most powerful force in establishing a level playing field. If the agendas of media owners have a negative impact on public opinion, it creates an uneven electoral playing field. As a result, new laws to regulate media ownership's electoral behavior are required to ensure a level playing field during elections (Sooriyabandara, 2023; Ranasinghe, 2019; Levitsky & Way, 2009). The findings of this study will provide academic guidance for that. Also, empirical studies identifying the mediating role of public opinion in the context of elections are scarce, so this study will also fill that research gap. This study will also address a research void because there aren't many empirical studies identifying the mediating role of public opinion in the context of elections.

2. Literature Review

There are two national elections in Sri Lanka. That is the parliamentary election and the presidential election. The presidential election is the most significant national election in Sri Lanka among these. 2019 was the year of the most recent presidential election. International Media Support (IMS) performed a scientific audience survey covering the entire island in order to identify the form of media consumption in Sri Lanka during that election period. The audience survey revealed that the majority of Sri Lankans turn to multiple sources to verify news and current affairs-related information. The audience survey also revealed that Sri Lankan media consumers do not tend to use social media (and especially Facebook) as a key news source for political news and current affairs information. Television (96%) was the most widely and regularly used source by Sri Lankan media consumers for political news and current affairs. Second was radio (55%), and third was newspaper (39%). There were only 31% of people using social media (IMS, 2019). This demonstrates that despite how popular social media is nowadays, Sri Lankan media consumers still prefer mass media (traditional media) to get political news and current information during the election season.

The Sri Lanka Press Council registered 180 newspapers in 2019. Among these newspapers, 14 were daily newspapers, and 32 were weekly newspapers. Another 134

newspapers were registered under the other newspapers category, namely monthly and bimonthly (Source: Sri Lanka Press Council, 2022). In 2019, there were 24 terrestrial broadcast television channels as well as 54 terrestrial broadcast radio channels. (Source: Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka, 2022). The Secretariat for Media Reforms (2016) points out that the owners of all these media are trying to control media content.

Media ownership is divided into two categories in Sri Lanka: government and private (Source: Department of Government Information, 2023). The statistics show that most of the news media institutions in Sri Lanka are privately owned. The government has only three news media institutions: Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, Independent Television Network Ltd., and Lakehouse (Ministry of Mass Media of Sri Lanka, 2022). However, in 2019, the number of media owned by these three media institutes of the government was 46: five (5) TV channels, sixteen (16) radio channels, seven (7) main newspapers, and eighteen (18) periodicals. Among the privately owned media institutes, Maharaja Organization (Pvt) Ltd. owns three (3) television channels and four (4) radio channels; Asia Broadcasting Corporation (Pvt) Ltd. owns one (1) TV channel and five (5) radio channels; Voice of Asia Network (Pvt) Ltd. owns two (2) television channels and four (4) radio channels; and Power House (Pvt) Ltd. owns one (1) TV channel and one (1) radio channel. In addition, twelve (12) newspapers were owned by the Wijewardene family, six (6) by the Upali family, and four (4) by the Alas family (source: The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka). This shows that although the number of media outlets in Sri Lanka is relatively large, their control is divided among only a few owners. As a result, media diversity has decreased and media cross-ownership has increased (Secretariat for Media Reforms, 2016). The Secretariat for Media Reforms concluded that it has hindered the creation of a fair playing field during the election season.

In Sri Lanka, the power to regulate the media ownership effect in election reporting rests with the Election Commission of Sri Lanka. In every election, the Election Commission issues media guidelines for telecasting, broadcasting, and print media under Article 104 B(5)(a) of the Constitution of Sri Lanka (Parliamentary Secretariat in Sri Lanka, 2023).

Accordingly, for the 2019 presidential election, which was the most recent presidential election in Sri Lanka, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka issued the presidential election media guideline on September 12, 2019, in a special gazette number 2140/53. In its guidelines 15 and 16, it is specifically stated that when media owners such as the chairperson, member of the board of management, and director are often involved in actively engaging in political activities, a conflict of interest is created in providing balanced broadcasting or publishing. Therefore, it is explicitly stated in the media guidelines that media owners who actively engage in political activities during the election season should not actively participate in the responsibilities placed on them in such media institutions. Its guidelines 29, 30, and 31 emphasize that it is not only the duty but also the responsibility of media owners to adhere to media guidelines. Failure to comply with these guidelines is a punishable offense under the Constitution (Election Commission, 2019).

However, according to election media monitoring reports issued by the Election Complaints Management Center, Government Information Department, and Ethics Eye, the majority of the media has been biased in its reporting. These reports noted that in some instances, the interests of media ownership controlled how the election was covered by the media. Also, after the presidential election, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka officially announced that, except for two or three media organizations, all media, in general, violated election media guidelines. The Election Commission of Sri Lanka officially stated that all the news media unfairly shaped public opinion and media space by promoting their chosen candidates and prejudicing the other candidate. The Election Commission of Sri Lanka insisted that the indiscreet behavior of the media was due to the political interests of the media owners. The Election Commission of Sri Lanka has

warned that unless immediate steps are taken to control news media ownership's electoral behavior, in the future the power to choose the president will be taken away from the voters and will be in the hands of a few media owners. The Election Commission also emphasized that it will be impossible for a political party to reach the people without the support of media owners (Ranasinghe, 2019). The Chairman of the Election Commission (2019) issued a warning that a small number of media owners might determine the outcome of the election. The chairman also emphasized that the situation has become more serious since the Election Commission has no power to regulate private media. The Chairman was of the opinion that the Election Commission has only the power to regulate the state media (Chairman of the Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 2019). Thus, the Election Commission emphasized that new laws are required to regulate media ownership elections during the election period (Ranasinghe, 2019). However, Verite Research's (2019) report shows that there are already enough laws to regulate the media during elections, regardless of whether it is state or private. Nevertheless, Verite Research emphasizes that the Sri Lankan Election Commission continues to be conservative when it comes to enforcing electoral media guidelines on privately owned media. Verite Research emphasized that the lack of regulation of private media created an unfair and unlevel playing field in the 2019 presidential election (Verite Research, 2019).

In addition, in 2020, when the most recent parliamentary elections were held, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka issued media guidelines. According to these media guidelines, during the period of an election, every news media outlet should engage in neutral and impartial reporting without unfairness or harm to any political party, independent group, or candidate. The 2020 media guidelines also emphasize that media ownership cannot be afforded while engaging in active politics (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 2020). However, several independent media monitoring reports indicated that in reporting the 2020 parliamentary elections, both the state media and the private media in Sri Lanka have failed to provide neutral, impartial, balanced, and subject-based reporting (Ethics Eye, 2020; SLPI, 2020; ANFREL, 2020). Weerasinghe (2021) further discloses that, during the elections, private television outlets in Sri Lanka became the voice of their owners (his master's voice), while the state-run media became the voice of the government. A small number of media owners control the idea market in Sri Lanka's election market (Weerasinghe, 2021). Instead of being media owners, they are media mogul. Journalists have become media workers as a result of the role of media mogul. Regardless of editorial independence, which is a fundamental moral quality of news, media mogul control the news content. By purchasing media employees, the media owner fabricates and disseminates false information, harmful information, harmful information, fake information, and misleading information in an effort to shape public opinion in favor of the election candidate he prefers and against the opposition (Ranatunga, 2023). Lokumannage's (2020) study also reveals that due to a lack of proper regulation, news media credibility in Sri Lanka is permanently in decline. The study also emphasized that people are disappointed when there is a lack of fully reliable information during events of both social and national importance (Lokumannage (a), 2021). Considering this situation, the Sri Lankan government has decided to amend the Press Council Act No. 05 of 1973 in line with the new trends in newspapers. Also, the cabinet of the Sri Lankan government has decided to introduce a Broadcasting Regulatory Act for electronic media for more optimal regulation (Department of Government Information, 2022). The Broadcasting Regulatory Commission will be established under that Act. Until now, media licenses and electronic frequencies have been given at the discretion of the minister in charge of the subject. Thus, it is proposed in this Act to grant media licenses and electronic frequencies under a specific and identified methodology. Under the Act, electric frequencies will be declared public property. Sooriyabandara (2023) points out that it is essential to take proper measures to minimize the effect of media ownership on public opinion in introducing this act.

3. Theoretical background

Three main theories of public opinion are used for the theoretical basis of this study. These theories are the agenda-setting theory, Shoemaker and Reese's ownership theory, and the spiral of silence theory. The agenda-setting theory, one of these theories, tries to explain how the news media and voters interact as well as how the media shapes public opinion. The intellectual father of this Agenda Setting Theory was Walter Lippmann. In 1922, Lippmann expresses in the book "Public Opinion" that people are not capable of directly experiencing the bigger world. Thus, people have to rely on the images and messages constructed by the news media to form perceptions. Therefore, news media can influence the setting of a certain image in people's minds. Further, Lippmann expressed that news media determines what pictures are formed in our minds, therefore refiguring the events to make them simpler for viewers to understand. Lippmann noted that our opinions and behavior are a response to the pictures in our heads, not the larger outside world (Lippmann, 1922). Further refining this notion of Lippmann (Stacks et al., 2015), Cohen stated in 1963 that "It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. It follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors, and publishers of papers they read" (Cohen, 1963).

Lippmann and Cohen's arguments were a confirmation of the direct media affect theory of the classic age. Based on the classic notion of agenda-setting theory developed by Lippmann and Cohen, many scholars have argued that the news media directly influence voters' behavior and intentions during election periods. Thus, the agenda-setting theory begins as an explanation on how the news media affects to change the patterns in voter behavior, intention, and public perception during elections (Wetzelaer, 2023; Zain, 2014; Cohen, 1963). McCombs and Shaw performed the first empirical study in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to assess this idea by comparing the news media agenda and the public agenda during the 1968 US presidential election (Sulistyanto, Jamil, 2023). McCombs and Shaw's study found a significant indirect relationship between the news media and public opinion toward voter behavior and intention, in addition to the direct relationship between the news media and the voter (Ranatunga, 2023).

The 1968 McCombs and Shaw's study later gained popularity as the Chapel Hill study. Based on the results of this Chapel Hill study, the modern notion of agenda-setting theory was presented in 1972 (McCombs, 2015). Two dimensions of the developed agenda-setting theory can be clearly identified. The first of which is the relationship between the news media and the public's perception. In the election context, it can be identified as the relationship between the media and voter intention. The second is the relationship between the news media and public opinion. In the dimension between media and the public's perception, agenda-setting theory explains that the news media has a significant effect on the public issues that voters prioritized in the election. The news media's selection and presentation of news topics directly affect the public's perception of the most pressing issues at election time (Sooriyabandara, 2023). Thus, agenda-setting theory argues that the media has massive power to influence the public's perception of salient issues by selecting and emphasizing certain issues. The theory revealed that the more prominent and repeated the coverage of a particular issue, the more likely it is to be perceived as important by the public (McCombs, 2015).

In the dimension of the relationship between media and public opinion, agenda-setting theory explains strong correlations between the salient or prominent issues of the news media and the leading public issues (Stacks et al., 2015). Thus, by consistently covering specific political topics or issues, the media can shape public opinion (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). There, the news media frequently shapes public opinion to advance its own agendas. For that, the news media transfer the salience of the issues on the media agenda to the public agenda (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021). The agenda-setting theory explains

that the news media has the massive ability to shape public opinion by determining what issues are given the most attention. According to the agenda-setting theory, the news media influence public opinions by repeatedly giving them news on certain issues, which causes the public's view of the subject to change (Wetzelaer, 2023). According to this theory, the media actively participates in framing and shaping public opinion and thought (El Alami, 2023). This active participation takes place at three levels. That is the first level, the second level, and the third level.

In the first-level agenda setting for shaping public opinion, the news media, in line with its own agenda, frequently highlights and reports chosen issues among several issues as salient issues. In other words, the media transfers the salient issues from the media agenda to the public agenda in first-level agenda setting. Thus, the media tells the audience "what to think about" (Kabir & Chowdhury, 2023), and first-level agenda setting provides an answer to the question "What are the pictures about?" (Lan & Kioussis, 2023; McCombs, 2015). In the second-level agenda setting, among the attributes of an issue or object, one attribute of their choice is frequently highlighted and reported as a salience attribute (Kabir & Chowdhury, 2023). Other attributes are mentioned less frequently, some only in passing. As a result, media transfer attribute salience from the media agenda to the public agenda at the second level of agenda setting, providing a response to the question, "What are the main characteristics presented in these pictures?" (McCombs, 2015). To put it another way, it tells the public "how to think about it" (Kabir & Chowdhury, 2023). In the third-level agenda setting, news media present objects and attributes as a network. That representation takes the form of a structure in which any particular node representing an individual's cognition is connected to a number of other nodes (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021). The third-level agenda setting brings us closer to answering the question, "What are the pictures?" (McCombs, 2015). For example to these levels, frequent reporting of a salient issue related to a candidate is an influence on public opinion at the first level agenda setting. A second level agenda setting of public opinion shaping is the frequent reporting of selected salient attributes of the candidate to describe that candidate (Gondwe, Muchangwe, 2020). At the third level, the news media frequently reports salient issues (objects) and salient attributes of a candidate as a network. However, the process of setting the agenda during election season is not simple. Many different external and internal factors influence the news media when setting agendas (Littlejohn, 2002).

According to Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences model, there are five major influences on journalists in shaping and producing news messages or news content settings (Takahashi & Zhang, 2023). These are individuals, routines, organizations, social institutions, and social systems (Reese and Shoemaker, 2017; 2016). Those factors operate across different levels, from the micro (individual) to the macro (society) (Kasmani, 2020). Among these factors, the most powerful is media ownership. Journalists have to prepare news content in a way that reflects the media's owner preferences and goals (Reese, 2019; Shoemaker and Reese, 2013). The needs and interests of the news media owner are directly correlated to the news content (Altschull, 1984). Additionally, news content frequently reflects the media owner's viewpoint. One of the key theory that examines this unrestricted power of media owners to influence public opinion is the media ownership theory by Shoemaker and Reese.

There is a direct correlation between the news content and the interests of the media owner. Altschull (1984) argued that news content often reflects the point of view of media ownership (Wekesa et al., 2023; Forcha & Ngange, 2022). This argument was refined by Shoemaker and Reese in 1991 as media ownership theory (Shoemaker and Reese, 1991; 1996). The media ownership theory introduced by Shoemaker and Reese argues that the owners of a news media organization have the ultimate power over the news content (Forcha & Ngange, 2022). Shoemaker and Reese contend that media ownership may distort journalists' attempts to present the world objectively (Herscovitz, 2020). It means

that "the owner has the last word." In fact, media ownership has grown to be such a strong driving force behind the news media organization that it now influences not only editorials and columns but also how news and features are covered (Shoemaker and Reese, 2017; 2016). Shoemaker and Reese also reveal that there is a difference in the use of that power by the state and private news media. Shoemaker and Reese say that state-owned news media are more objective in their news coverage than privately held companies (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; 1996). Thus, it is clear that the effect of the news media on shaping public opinion toward voter intention varies according to the media ownership pattern.

Public opinion and the voter are two interrelated variables. One of the main theories that reveals the relationship between these variables in the election context is the "spiral of silence" theory. This theory was first introduced by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1974 (Long, 2023). The "Spiral of Silence" theory is one of the most studied theories of public opinion. According to this theory, people are afraid of social isolation. Therefore, this theory explains that people are not more willing to express their opinion when they feel that it is a minority opinion. On the other hand, people express their opinions without fear when they feel that their personal opinion is the majority opinion (Kushin et al., 2019). The "spiral of silence" theory further explains that people who perceive themselves as minority opinion holders suppress or change their views for fear of being socially isolated (Roberts, 2022). This means that those who belong to the perceived majority are more likely to express their opinion publicly than those who belong to the perceived minority (Zeng, 2023). The spiral of silence theory further explains that individuals' willingness to express their true beliefs in public depends on the congruency between personal beliefs and the public opinion climate (Yun et al., 2022; Neumann, 1974).

The spiral of silence theory has been widely discussed in relation to public opinion and political opinion expression or voter intention in the election context (Matthes et al., 2018; Malaspina, 2014). In the context of elections, the Spiral of Silence theory explained that people's willingness to express their true and genuine beliefs in public depends on how much their beliefs align with the public's majority opinion (Yun et al., 2022; Neumann, 1974). Also, the Spiral of Silence theory explained that individuals may be less intent to voice support for a particular candidate or party if they believe their views are unpopular or socially unacceptable. On the other hand, individuals with minority opinions may be hesitant to voice their true intent due to the fear of social isolation or backlash. However, according to this theory, individuals are more intent to publicly express support for a candidate or political party if they believe their views align with the perceived majority opinion (Malaspina, 2014; Neumann, 1974). Thus, the theory suggests that the perceived majority opinion can influence the behavior of individuals who hold minority opinions. Minority people may become more reluctant to express their views, leading to a spiraling effect where the majority opinion appears even more dominant, further silencing the minority (Neumann, 1974).

Simply put, a vote is an individual opinion (Athugala, 2016). The extent of the gap between individual opinion and public opinion affects voter intention. Thus, if the gap between the voter's opinion and the majority's opinion is smaller, the voter will be more intent to express his vote along with the majority. If the gap between the voter's opinion and the majority opinion is large, the voter will be more intent on expressing his vote silently or not to vote. It means that for the voter representing the minority, the fear of isolation creates an intention to remain politically silent (the silent vote) or not to vote (Liu et al., 2017; Gearhart & Zhang, 2014; Scheufele & Moy, 2000, Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

4. Hypotheses Development

The primary objective of this study is to identify the effect of media ownership patterns on public opinion toward voter intention in an electoral context. Accordingly, there are four variables under investigation in this study. State media, private media, public opinion, and voter intention are those variables.

State media is media organizations that are, directly or indirectly, under the financial and/or editorial control of the state or government (Gehlbach & Sonin, 2014). Sometimes state media is also known as government media or public media. Governmental bodies (ministries, state agencies, state organizations, and state institutions) control the majority of state media. They may occasionally be controlled by state-owned companies. Dragomir & Söderström (2021) point out that there are also state media that are run as part of a state institution (example: a department in the Ministry of Communication) without any form of actual ownership (Dragomir & Söderström, 2021). Private media are media that are run and owned by individuals or companies. These privately owned media outlets are licensed and frequently pursue financial objectives (The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 2023).

Public opinion is the opinion of the people about a specific issue or their views about matters affecting them (Athugala, 2016). Individuals making an electoral decision address people's opinions about specific issues that are the subject of pre-election discourse (Wojtasik, 2013). In the context of elections, public opinion can be divided into two dimensions, such as majority opinions and minority opinions. In democratic political systems, elections are the key tool for converting majority opinion into collective outcomes and conveying a sense of legitimacy to governing elites (McCann & Domínguez, 1998). Public opinion is fundamental to citizen freedom, but it can also be built by being influenced by different social factors, especially the media (Mayssa, 2020). Voter intention is a mental plan in voters minds for voting behavior, such as voting or not voting. It is a mental plan of an individual's anticipated or premeditated future voting behavior (Morar & Chuchu, 2015). Voter intention is a psychological anticipation or mental blueprint (Manju et al., 2022). Voter behavior is an active physical act. Voters' behaviors during the voting process are controlled by their intentions. A range of factors have an impact on voter intentions (Morar & Chuchu, 2015). Two of those factors are the news media and public opinion (Manju, 2023).

In this study, three main theories are used to identify the relationships between each of these variables. Thus, as discussed deeply in the theoretical background section, agenda-setting theory and Shoemaker and Reese's media ownership theory assess the relationship between state media/private media - voter intention, and state media/private media-public opinion. The Spiral of Silence theory assesses the relationship between public opinion - voter intention. Agenda-setting theory, Shoemaker and Reese's media ownership theory, and Spiral of Silence theory assess the relationship between state media / private media - public opinion - voter intention. The discussion of that theoretical basis has been centered on the context of elections.

In the context of elections, political communication plays an important role. In the framework of modern elections, the mass media, particularly the news media, is the most important tool for political communication. The news media has a significant effect on voter behavior (Kim, 2022; Go & Lee, 2020) with voter intention (Enikolopov et al., 2023; Ranatunga, 2023) as "positively - adversely" and "direct and indirect" (Intyaswati et al., 2021; Gentzkow, 2006). Several empirical studies have also demonstrated that this effect varies depending on the proprietary (State and public) form of the media or media polarization. (See, for example, Nwamara and Etumnu, 2022; Gattermann, 2022; Yeandle, 2021; Abeysinghe and Vatagala, 2021; Hutasoit, 2020; Sørensen, 2019; Dewenter et al., 2019; Ellingsen & Hernæs, 2018; Durán, 2018; Bernhardt, 2008; Chinthani, 2015; Gerber et al., 2009).

Also, without a question, the news media plays an important role in shaping public opinion and changing people's thoughts and narratives (Saeed et al., 2021). The media owners influence the outcome of elections through public opinion by determining the direction of election reporting (Longe, 2023). Considering this all notion, number of empirical studies have evaluated the relationship between media ownership patterns (i.e., state and private) and public opinion during the election season based on agenda-setting theory and Shoemaker and Reese's ownership theory. Those studies are often done by comparative examining the tone of coverage, opinion of news content, and reporting style. (e.g., Baptister, S. 2022; Akoja, 2022; d'Haenens, 2022; Kartinawati & Purwasito, 2021; Zamroni et al., 2021; Lokumannage (b), 2020; Ichlas, 2020; Fahadi, 2019; Martin & McCrain, 2019; Kazibwe, 2018; Pradita et al., 2018; Abubakre, 2017; Mordi & Ogbu, 2017; Nwofe, 2016; Maheshwari, 2015, Chukwu, 2015; Dunaway & Lawrence, 2015; Simiyu, 2014; Dunaway, 2013; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2010; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2010; Dunaway, 2008; Lo et al., 1998). Also, various empirical studies have been conducted to identify the effect of public opinion on voters in election season with the use of the spiral of silence theory (e.g., Roberts, 2022; Yun et al., 2022; Kushin et al., 2019; Matthes, et al., 2018; Scheufele & Moy, 2000). These studies defined that public opinion has served as a dependent variable in one point and as an independent variable in another point. If it depicts both dependent and independent roles in the same time, it is a mediating variable (Awang, 2012). The main model showing the mediating effect of public opinion is Costain and Majstorovic's public opinion mediation model (Costain and Majstorovic, 1994). In addition, there are many studies that have studied the mediating effect of public opinion in several contexts. (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1983; Burstein, 1998; Costain and Majstorovic 1994; Huff & Kruszewska, 2016; Muralidharan & Sung, 2016; Anderson et al., 2017; Van Dyke & Taylor, 2018; Wlezien et al., 2021). However, there aren't many empirical studies in the most recent literature looking at the mediating role of public opinion in the setting of elections. However, Ranatunga (2023) reminds out that it is conceptually simple to prove the mediated effect of public opinion, a crucial element in an electoral scenario. It is possible to categorize the different factors that affect public opinion during an election as individual demographic, institutional, social, media, and others. The spiral of silence theory shows that voter intentions are affected by public opinion. As a result, the model that follows shows how public opinion might mediate an election's results. The researcher created this model based on Costain and Majstorovic's public opinion mediation model.

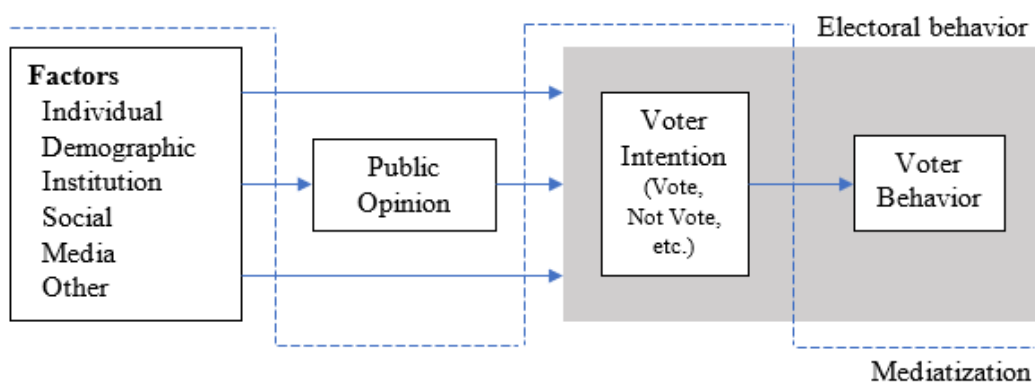


Figure 01: Public opinion mediation model in election context

In light of the discussion presented thus far, the researcher created the conceptual framework outlined below to investigate the mediating role that public opinion may have in the relationship between media ownership patterns and voter intentions. The independent variables of this study are state media and private media under news media ownership patterns. Public opinion serves as a mediating variable. Voter intention is the

dependent variable. To meet the study objectives and based on the conceptual framework presented, seven hypotheses are constructed as follows:

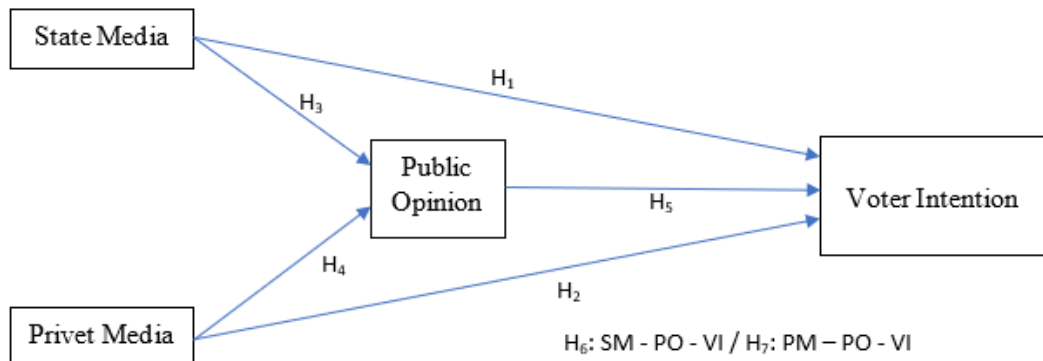


Figure 02: Conceptual framework

H1: State media affect voter intentions during the election season.

H2: Private media affect voter intentions during the election season.

H3: State media affect the shaping of public opinion during the election season.

H4: Private media affect the shaping of public opinion during the election season.

H5: There is a relationship between public opinion and voter intention.

H6: Public opinion mediates the relationship between state media and voter intention.

H7: Public opinion mediates the relationship between private media and voter intention.

5. Research Methodology

The research method of this study is the quantitative survey method. The survey method defined is as the practice of collecting data for the study by asking individuals questions related to research. The survey method is the most appropriate data-collection method. The survey method aids in predicting the nature of the overall population from which the sample is drawn (Fowler, 2013). Another advantage of the survey method is that it can be placed over a large population within a comparatively short time frame (Azam et al., 2021).

The "292 B Willimbula South electoral division" of the "Mahara" polling division of the "Gampaha" district in Sri Lanka was the study's target population. It is the most populous electoral division in Sri Lanka's largest electoral district, Gampaha. The key grounds for this pick were access to all sorts of news media (newspapers, radio, and television) and the fact that people of different ethnic groups and religions dwell in this area. A voter in this electoral division has access to all Sri Lankan newspapers, radio channels, and television channels. Because of these peculiarities, this sample is a generalizable population for determining voter intentions in Sri Lanka. Also, the researcher used well-known studies from around the world, like the Elmira Study (1948) and the Chapel Hill Study (1968), to model the population selection for this study. These studies examined the relationship between the media, public opinion, and the voter.

The sample frame for this study was the electoral register of the 292 B Willimbula South electoral division, and the population was 2690. Thus, this study requires a minimum sample size of 338 respondents to reflect a 100% response rate and the sample size to population ratio (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970, cited by Azam et al., 2021). An average response rate of generally 80%–90% was found in prior research conducted in Sri Lanka with paper copies. (e.g., Jayathilake et al., 2022: 90%; Hettige et al., 2022: 89.5%; Weerasekera & Seneviratne, 2022: 85.29%; Fonseka et al., 2022: 85%; Rosayuru et al.,

2022: 85%; Pathiraja et al., 2022: 83%; Indu Ramira, 2022: 82%). As a result, the sample size was increased to 423 when the response rate was considered to be 80%. In addition, 27 questionnaires were added to bring the total number of questionnaires distributed to 450, ensuring that the minimum 338 samples required for this study's data analysis were obtained. The sampling technique was the simple random sampling method.

In the structured self-administered questionnaire, multiple-choice questions were used to collect the demographic data. For items, a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly agree" to 5 = "strongly disagree" was employed. All items were 33. The mass media, especially the news media, influences public opinion and voter intention by manipulating coverage, time or space, content, media guidelines, and election advertising to suit its own media agenda. Based on those five dimensions, the researcher developed eight items each to measure the variables of state media and private media. Seven of them are: "In the election season, The state media / The private media: 1) often gives More coverage to interested parties and candidates; 2) often gives More airtime/ space to interested parties and candidates; 3) often promotes favorable news about interested parties and candidates; 4) gives less coverage to some selected parties and candidates; 5) gives less airtime/space to some selected parties and candidates; 6) spreads more damaging news about some selected parties and candidates; 7) often violates Media guidelines." The remaining items were asked from the advertisement dimension for state and private media: "In the election season, the state media mostly advertises the advertisements of the ruling party" and "In the election season, The private media mostly advertises the advertisements of the selected parties".

Public opinion is a mediating variable in this study. Nine items were used to measure public opinion. Four of them were Adapted. The rest was developed by the researcher. The development of those items was developed according to the agenda-setting theory and The spiral of silence theory. All the items are shown in the table below.

Table 1.

Items for public opinion		
I am interested in political information.	Adapted	(Austin & Pinkleton, 1999)
I am very care about the public opinions in the voting.	Adapted	(Moy & Gastil, 2006)
I considered and listened to public opinions during elections I have recently voted.	Adapted	(Venkatraman, 1989)
When selecting a candidate, I am concerned about public opinion.	Adapted	(Moy & Gastil, 2006)
When selecting a political party, I am concerned about public opinion.	Adapted	(Moy & Gastil, 2006)
The daily issues highlighted by the media influence me in voting.	Developing	According to agenda setting theory
I have less intention of voting when the gap between the public opinion and personal opinion widens.	Developing	According to The spiral of silence of theory
I have more intention of voting when the gap between the public opinion and personal opinion narrows.	Developing	According to The spiral of silence of theory
I try to avoid conflicts between public opinion and personal opinion in making political decisions.	Developing	According to The spiral of silence of theory

In this study, the voting intention was measured using eight (8) items. The agenda-setting theory, Shoemaker and Reese's ownership theory, and the spiral of silence theory were all used by the researcher to develop those items. Those items are: "The news media is a major source of election information.", "During elections, I pay more attention to news and current affairs.", "I am more interested in political ads during elections.", "Salient issues highlighted in the news media are highly correlated to prominent public issues.", "The party symbols and candidates that are often highlighted in the news media stick in

my mind.", Current issues frequently discussed in the news media often influence my voting decisions." "My trust in the news media often depends on its pattern of ownership.", "I am more careful to select political parties and candidates who are sensitive to public issues in elections. All items' face and content validity, as well as their reliability, were evaluated by an expert review and a pilot test, respectively. The national language of Sri Lanka, Sinhala, was used to write the questionnaire.

Questionnaire distribution was done manually (Hard copy) by a professional survey team. In the process of the data screening, descriptive analysis of the respondents' demographic data and reliability analysis of the study variables were performed by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The factor analysis method was used for data analysis. Hence, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to extract the principal factors. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in SEM validates the model's factor structure. Path analysis was used to test the hypothesis. SPSS version 26.00 was used to examine the EFA, and the Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS) version 23.00 was employed to examine the CFA.

6. Result Discussion

This study's data was collected from February 5 to March 5, 2023. The total number of responses received in this study was 382. The response rate was 84.9%. According to Sekaran and Bougie's (2019) and Azam et al.'s (2021) recommendation, eight questionnaires that did not provide answers to more than 25% of the items in the questionnaire were not used for analysis. According to SPSS analysis, each variable's missing value in the remaining 374 is less than 5%. Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) recommends that a missing value of less than 5% is acceptable for SEM. However, AMOS doesn't allow bootstrap if the dataset has missing values (Olsavsky et al., 2020). Thus, steps were taken to impute the missing data in the data screening step itself (Nwosu et al., 2022; Shanthi, 2019). Previous scholars have shown that it is possible to remedy up to 20%–30% of missing data with an imputation technique (Azam et al., 2021; Hair et al., 2013). At the present time, there appear to be two dominant model-based strategies: the full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation and the expectation maximization (EM) estimation (Byrne, 2010). Both imputation techniques are based on the ML algorithm (Enders, 2001). Because SPSS offers simple access to EM, and because prior researchers have utilized it effectively (e.g., Lotzin et al., 2022), and because previous academics have suggested it, the EM imputation method was employed to impute missing data in this study. As a result of missing value imputation, 374 responses were referred for further analysis.

The demographic information in this study included gender, age, and education level. Furthermore, whether or not had voted in the last election was questioned. It was also asked whether government or private media is more used for news and current affairs during the election season. Table 2 portrays the demographic statistics of the respondents in this study.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Characteristics	Profile	Frequency	(%)
Gender	Male	178	47.6
	Female	196	52.4
Age	18 - 45 years	153	41.1
	45 - 60 years	165	44.4
	Over 60 years	54	14.5
Education Level	Below O/L	8	2.2
	O/L	43	11.6
	A/L	287	77.7
	University	3	.8
	Postgraduate	2	.5

Other

29

7.8

Source: SPSS Output

Furthermore, 360 (96.5%) of those polled voted in the most recent election. Thirteen persons (3.5%) did not vote. During the election season, 343 (92.2%) respondents looked to private media for news and current events. That question received "state media" responses from 29 individuals (7.8%).

After analyzing the demographic, following previous researchers (e.g., Hewawasam et al., 2022; Jaleel et al., 2022; Maskey & Nguyen, 2018), the researcher for this study examined the reliability of each measurement item. Table 3 shows the reliability test of measurement item in this study.

Table 3. Reliability test results

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
State Media (SM)	.723	8
Private media (PM)	.837	8
Public Opinion (PO)	.795	9
Voter Intention (VI)	.888	8
Overall	.722	33

Source: SPSS output

Table 3 shows that all variables have items reliability values ranging from 0.722 to 0.888, while the overall value is 0.722. It is greater than 0.70. If Cronbach's alpha value is between 0.70 – 0.80, it shows that the variables have good reliability, which is good for exploratory factor analysis (EFA) (Azam et al., 2021).

After analyzing the demographic, the hypothesis test was started. Thus, exploratory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood method with varimax rotation was used to analyze the factor structure and correlation between items included in the scale. However, all 33 items could not be successfully divided into components when performing an exploratory factor analysis for the first time. After removing the 11 items, the remaining items were successfully divided into components, representing the variables state media, private media, public opinion, and voter intention, with the factor loading above 0.5. These four components accounted for a total of 65.84% of the variance. It was acceptable for further investigation because the total variance explained (TVE) for all constructs utilizing the principal component analysis extraction method met the suggested minimum criterion of 60% (Hair et al., 2013). The KMO value was 0.862, and Bartlett's test p-value was 0.000. The KMO index ranges from 0 to 1, with 0.7 suggested as the minimum value for a good confirmatory factor analysis (Azam, 2021). Bartlett's test p-value below 0.05 is also good for confirmatory factor analysis (Pallant, 2020).

After EFA, the next step is Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in SEM. In this study, Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using AMOS version 23. As the first part of confirmatory factor analysis in SEM, the fitness of the measurement model was evaluated. Model fit is mainly divided into three categories. These are absolute fit, incremental fit, and parsimonious fit (Thakkar, 2020). There are different values that are considered under each of these categories. However, there is no agreement among researchers on which fitness indexes to use (Awang, 2012). Hair et al. (2013) and Malkanthie (2018) recommend the use of at least one fitness index from each category of model fit. Thus, the model-fit measures were used to assess RMSEA (Root Mean Square of Error Approximation) for absolute fit, CFI (Comparative Fit Index) for incremental fit, and Chisq/df (Chi Square/Degrees of Freedom) for parsimonious fit, and all values were within their respective common acceptance levels. Thus, the measurement model's estimation confirmed a strong fit for the data. As can be observed from the fit indices, the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio is 1.804, the CFI is 0.965, and the RMSEA is 0.046. As a result, the latent constructs are sufficiently assessed.

In CFA, model fit is assessed, before proceeding with unidimensionality, reliability and validity of model. Unidimensionality is achieved when the measuring items have acceptable factor loadings for the respective latent construct (Awang, 2012). According to Awang (2012), the factor loading for a newly developed scale must be greater or equal to 0.5. For an already established item, the factor loading for an item must be 0.6 or higher (Awang, 2012). In this measurement model all factor loading greater 0.50. Hence, Unidimensionality was established for each construct in the study.

Internal Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability was assessed CR value. Cronbach Alpha for each construct in the study was found over the required limited of .70 (Azam et al., 2020). Composite reliabilities ranged from 0.863 to 0.967, above the 0.70 benchmark (Hair et al., 2010). Hence, internal reliability and Composite Reliability was established for each construct in the study.

The average variance extracted (AVE) was estimated to test convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The AVE values were above the threshold value of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Awang, 2012; Hair et al., 2013) for all the constructs except for state media. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), Lam (2012), and Hair et al. (2013), if the average variance extracted is greater than 0.4 and the composite reliability is higher than 0.6, the convergent validity of the construct is still acceptable (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2013). Thus, it can conclude the state media construct was valid.

Table 4. Loading, Reliability, Convergent validity

Items	Unidimensionality	Reliability		Validity
	Factor Loading	Internal reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)	Composite Reliability (CR Value)	Convergent validity (AVE Value)
SM1	0.621	0.753	0.863	0.441
SM2	0.602			
SM3	0.717			
SM4	0.708			
PM1	0.895	0.913	0.967	0.727
PM2	0.906			
PM3	0.829			
PM4	0.773			
PO1	0.672	0.922	0.965	0.671
PO2	0.851			
PO3	0.859			
PO4	0.854			
PO5	0.868			
PO6	0.795			
VI1	0.713	0.888	0.959	0.511
VI2	0.567			
VI3	0.692			
VI4	0.565			
VI5	0.705			
VI6	0.587			
VI7	0.916			
VI8	0.885			

The Fornell and Larcker Criterion was used to assess discriminant validity in the study. The Fornell and Larcker criteria state that discriminant validity is established when the square root of AVE for a construct is higher than its correlation with the other constructs in the study. Thus, discriminant validity is entirely established using Fornell and Larcker criterion.

Table 5. Discriminant validity

	SM	PM	PO	VI
SM	0.664			
PM	-0.055	0.852		
PO	0.137	-0.133	0.819	
VI	0.05	0.041	-0.116	0.715

To examine the relationship between state media, private media, and voter intention researcher used path analysis in AMOS. As part of hypotheses testing, in this study tested public opinion as a mediator. Following is the graphical representation of the structural model flowed by the result.

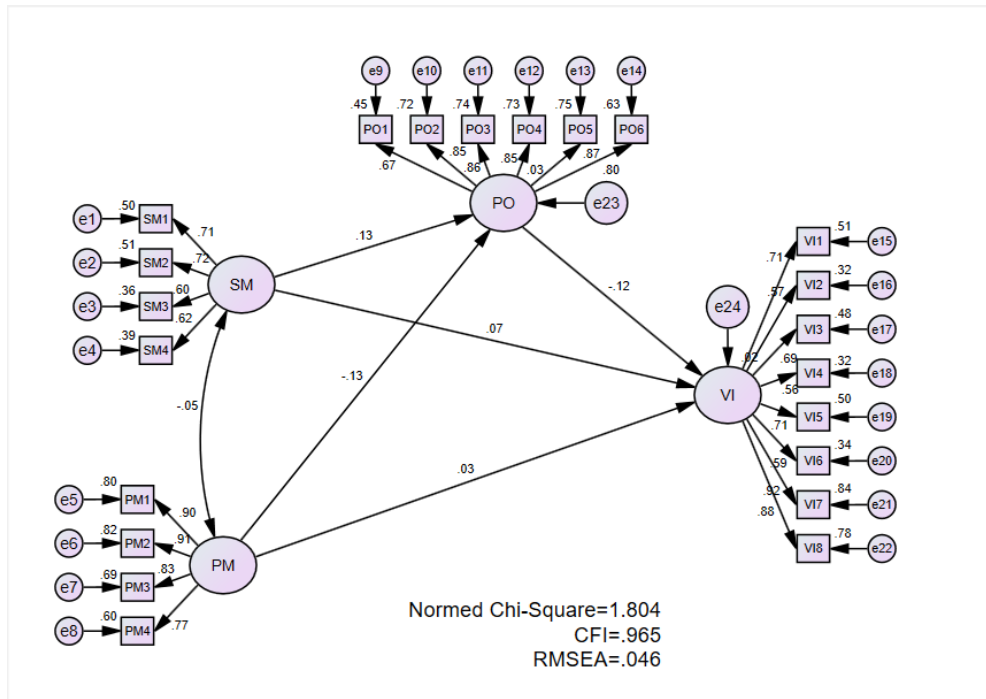


Figure 2. Structural model

Hypothesis testing was done to measure the causality relationship between variables in the SEM model in this study. Table 6 present the findings of the Maximum Likelihood Estimates of the Hypothesis test for the study model, respectively.

Table 6. Results of Path Analysis

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
H ₁	VI <--- SM	.068	.055	1.096	.273
H ₂	VI <--- PM	.029	.043	.515	.607
H ₃	PO <--- SM	.130	.065	2.117	.034
H ₄	PO <--- PM	-.126	.050	-2.268	.023
H ₅	VI <--- PO	-.122	.049	-2.132	.033

Table 6 shows that hypothesis H1 is not supported because the correlation coefficient is 0.068 and the p-value is 0.273. It confirmed the insignificant relationship between state media and voter intention. Also, as indicated in Table 6, H2 is not supported because correlation coefficient is 0.029 and the p-value is 0.607. It confirmed insignificant relationship between state media and voter intention.

According to Table 6, the correlation coefficient for state media in public opinion is 0.130, with a p-value of 0.034. This indicates the significant relationship between state media and public opinion. Therefore, hypothesis H3 is supported. The correlation coefficient for private media in public opinion is -0.126, and the p-value is 0.023. It demonstrates the significant relationship between the two variables. Therefore, hypothesis H4 is supported.

The correlation coefficient for public opinion in voter intention is -0.122, and the p-value is 0.033. It demonstrates significant relationship between public opinion and voter intention. Therefore, hypothesis H5 is supported.

This study assessed the mediating role of public opinion on the relationship between state media and voter intention. To estimate the indirect effects of public opinion, a bias-corrected bootstrapping method with 5000 resamples and 95% confidence interval was used (Collier, 2020). This finding supported H6 by revealing a significant indirect relationship ($b = -.016$, $p = .038$). Furthermore, the direct relationship between state media and voter intention was also found to be insignificant. Hence, public opinion fully mediated the relationship between state media and voter intention.

This study also assessed the mediating role of public opinion on the relationship between private media and voter intention. H7 was supported by this finding, which revealed a significant indirect relationship ($b = 0.015$, $p = .019$). Furthermore, the direct relationship between private media and voter intention was also found to be insignificant. Hence, public opinion fully mediated the relationship between state media and voter intention. The summary of the hypotheses test results for this study is shown in Table 7.

Table 7. hypotheses test results

H _(x)	Hypothesis	Significance	Finding
H ₁	State media affect voter intentions during the election season.	Insignificant	Not sported
H ₂	Private media affect voter intentions during the election season.	Insignificant	Not sported
H ₃	State media affect the shaping of public opinion during the election season.	Significant	Sported
H ₄	Private media affect the shaping of public opinion during the election season.	Significant	Sported
H ₅	There is a relationship between public opinion and voter intention.	Significant	Sported
H ₆	Public opinion mediates the relationship between state media and voter intention.	Significant	Sported
H ₇	Public opinion mediates the relationship between private media and voter intention.	Significant	Sported

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The primary objective of this study was to identify the effect of news media ownership patterns on public opinion and its mediating effect on voter intention. The study's findings reveal that news media ownership patterns, both public and private, do not have a direct effect on voter intention. This finding supports theories of the limited effect of media. Lazarsfeld's two-step flow theory, the pioneer of limited effects theories, argued that news media could not directly change most people's strongly held attitudes or opinions (Chandler & Munday, 2020). Lazarsfeld said in the two-step flow theory that opinion leaders mediate the relationship between news media and the voter. Hovland, who advanced Lazarsfeld's notion, proposed more mediating variables for the relationship between media and receiver. Those are Time, the credibility of the source, and individual differences like intelligence, educational background, temper level, and social standing (Sternberg, 2022; Hovland et al., 1953). As Hovland introduced many mediating variables, Klapper also introduced mediating variables like family, schools, communities, and

religious institutions. According to Klapper, the news media does not act as the sole reason for the change in people. Klapper argued that the only time the news media could influence individuals was when they introduced concepts or new ideas. (Klapper, 1960). However, actually, the news media works through these mediating variables to reinforce the existing opinion (Ranatunga, 2023). This study verifies the addition of public opinion to the list of mediating variables. Simply defined, in the context of elections, public opinion serves as both a dependent and independent variable, as well as a mediating variable. Identifying public opinion as a mediating variable in this study will open a new window to empirical studies of public opinion.

The findings of this study indicate that news media ownership patterns (state and private) have a direct effect on public opinion. Public opinion also has a direct effect on voter intention. It shows that public opinion acts as both an independent and a dependent variable in one instance. If the same variable acts as both an independent and dependent variable, it is a mediating variable (Awang, 2012). This is why it is said that public opinion is a mediating variable. Thus, this study's findings reveal that public opinion plays a mediating role between media ownership patterns and voter intention. This mediated effect was a full effect. Thus, finally, we can conclude that media ownership patterns affect public opinion toward voter intention. Accordingly, the primary objective of this study has been achieved.

There were three basic theories underlying this study. Agenda setting theory, Shoemaker and Reese's ownership theory, and the spiral of silence theory. The findings of this study reaffirm those theories. Especially from the dimension of agenda setting, the results of this study confirm that in an election context, news media shape public opinion in accordance with their media agenda based on the interests of media owners. Most media owners have political views, are members of political parties, and can stand for election. These are their political rights (UNDP, 2016). Even so, the involvement of media owners in the political arena can affect the content of election reporting and coverage. The agenda of media ownership can be the agenda of the media establishment. By transforming the media agenda into the public agenda, news media ownership constantly shapes public opinion according to their expectations (Ranatunga, 2023). In addition, the news tends to be biased when there are media owners with corrupt or political agendas. In such a situation, even professional media reporting and coverage end up being publicly distrusted (IMS, Réseau Liberté, M&DG. 2006). It creates an unfair, uneven playing field in the election. It is not conducive to representative democracy. Actually, news media owners must serve more than just partisan or individual interests. The responsibility to inform the public about issues of public interest comes with media ownership (Commonwealth Journalists Association and the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 2018). Therefore, during the electoral period, it is important that media owners be perceived as objective by the audiences in their media roles. In the Guide for Electoral Practitioners, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) recommended that media owners be careful to avoid conflicts of interest. To that end, UNDP has also recommended that media owners not undermine the provisions of proper impartiality and fairness by interfering with the content of reporting (UNDP, 2016). Although this recommendation can be done under self-regulation, Weerasinghe points out the need for a Co-Regulatory Body to fulfill this recommendation (Weerasinghe, 2021). However, there is still no such regulatory body in Sri Lanka.

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka is vested with the constitutional authority to regulate the news media in Sri Lanka during elections. However, election-regulating bodies conducting elections are not practical for regulating the media. Accordingly, I highly recommend the establishment of a professional oversight body as a Co-regulating Body for news media regulation, and which would remove the onerous task of media regulation during elections from the election regulating bodies. Further, I also recommend that media reforms be introduced to fulfill social functions as well as the openness,

accountability, and professionalism of the news in election reporting. Under those reforms, the most important thing is ensuring transparency in media ownership and reducing the growth of cross-media ownership.

Transparency is an important principle in democratic states (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2021). Thus, the transparency of media ownership is an important feature of media democracy. It strengthens the accountability of news media service providers (European Partnership for Democracy and the Civil Liberties Union for Europe, 2023). The key item in the toolbox for curbing any misuse of news media power in conformity with fundamental human rights is ensuring transparency in media ownership (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2021). Transparency in media ownership also supports the achievement of the watchdog function (Craufurd Smith et al., 2021). A democratic media society requires the public to have access to accurate, comprehensive, and up-to-date data on news media ownership. The people's understanding of the identity of the media owners helps to guarantee that abuses of media power may be assessed, publicized, openly debated, and, in some situations, prevented. Access to information on who owns and influences media companies is required for both the general public and media regulators. It provides politicians and regulators with information to monitor, implement, and enforce ownership limits and media-related competition policies (Craufurd Smith et al., 2021). It becomes more important during election time because it opens the door to identifying the media agendas. However, there are no public windows to reveal the identities of media owners in Sri Lanka. Also, Sri Lanka is seeing a growth of cross-media ownership rather than media pluralism and diversity. News media pluralism and diversity are critical to an independent and free media landscape with diverse opinions and ideas (UNESCO, 2023). Due to this, the Sri Lankan government must introduce new laws to ensure the transparency of media ownership in Sri Lanka and discourage the growth of cross-media ownership.

Information is a public good (UNESCO, 2023). The aim of any election coverage is to ensure that the electorate is empowered to make an informed choice (Raine, 2010). For that, the voter's right to get accurate, fair, impartial, and balanced information about election procedures should be confirmed. For that, it is important to have "freedom of the media" as well as guarantee "freedom from the media". "Freedom from the media" is a new concept that is highly linked with people's (audience) information rights introduced by the researcher (Manju, 2023). This concept assures the people's right to access genuine and true information rejecting misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, false information, harmful information, fake information, and misleading information. 'Freedom from the media' is essential so that the voter does not fall victim to information disorder. 'Information disorder' typically refers to the production and dissemination of erroneous or accurate information shared with the intention to cause harm (Wardle, 2020; 2017).

The main accuser of information disorder is the media owner. Because of this, "Freedom from the media" means, on the other hand, liberating the people from the media owner's dominance. For that, in the Sri Lankan context, it is essential to introduce media reforms in addition to media regulation. These media reforms are ensuring the use of the Code of Media Practice and Ethics, raising media literacy among people, strengthening third-party Fact-checking organizations, encouraging the formation of Professional Journalists' Unions, and encouraging the formation of Media Watchdog groups. Such steps would achieve the democratic objectives of the election by creating a level playing field. However, the Ranatunga (2023) recommends that if such progressive media reforms cannot be put into effect, legislation should be passed mandating that all media outlets publicly state which party and candidate they support.

Media mogul Rupert Murdoch, the owner of the Fox Media network, has openly declared that Fox News produces fake news to support Donald Trump in the 2020 US presidential election (Weerasinghe, 2021). In the 2019 Sri Lankan presidential election, the T.N. L.

Television channel also openly declared on October 1, 2019, in its prime-time news bulletin that it supports the opposition presidential candidate Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. With such a move, the voter gets the opportunity to know the media agenda in the election. However, biased manipulation of the news media in line with the owner's interests in elections is detrimental to media democracy. It is an international standard of civilized media practice that the media outlet should not include its conclusions in the news, according to the UK Communications Act 2003, the 1969 Red Lion court case in the Supreme Court of the United States, and the Commonwealth Radio Association Guidelines. Therefore, I recommend that the most important thing is to implement a co-regulation body for regulating media ownership's electoral behavior. However, I also recommend that media regulation not be media suppression.

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