



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## Editorial Cartoons and Their Impact on Voting Behavior of University Students in Sri Lanka

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### Abstract:

*This research study seeks to find out about the editorial cartoons and their impact on voting behavior of university students. The problem statement is that whether there is an impact on voting behavior of university students by reading editorial cartoons of Sri Lankan newspapers. This research is based on voters, who used their voting power in Presidential election which held on 8<sup>th</sup> of January, 2015. The focus group discussion performed to collect the data required. The research found that the undergraduate students were less affected by the editorial cartoons during the presidential election in 2015. Majority of the students irrespective with ethnicity and gender did not believe editorial cartoon and consumed to entertain the content of the cartoons. Less number of voters believed that editorial cartoon plays a major role in determining voting behavior by shaping the political agenda by focusing upon candidates and political issues and reinforcing the voting behavior.*

**Keywords:** Editorial cartoons, newspaper, impact, voters, voting behavior

### 1. Introduction

An editorial cartoon is a means of communication expresses social or political messages to the readers. An editorial cartoon is a drawing, comic strip, or a single panel containing current political or social message, that depicts a politician, a current event or a situation in a humorous light and in an exaggerated way. Cartoonist use symbols, caricatures, stereotypes and analogies as tools to communicate intended message. It is often found on the editorial page of the newspaper or magazines representing the ideology and viewpoint of the publication. An editorial cartoon is also known as a political cartoon.

The mass media play a significant role in a democratic country. Especially, the forum provided by the media during the election days becomes an important platform to present political ideologies by different political parties (Ward, 2004). Editorial cartoons are used to express opinions, construct valuable arguments and provide specific knowledge on contemporary political issues and candidates. Similarly, it provides an opportunity to the voters to get political information on different political parties and candidates during the election and manifestoes presented and propagated.

Cartooning emerged in sixteenth century in Italy. But cartoons with an editorial nature emerged as part of the Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther 1483-1546 (Walker, 2013). In US newspapers, it appeared in 1884 when Josheph Pulitzer had political cartoon in New York World newspaper, caricaturing a Republican candidate (Walker, 2013). Pulitzer changed the face of the newspaper and tradition was established.

Editorial cartoons are characterized by humorous picture of events, exploiting the ability of irony and satire to unravel, ridicule and attack in a playful, witty and artful fashion (Test, 1991). Political cartoons are used as a powerful weapon for communicating political issues for the fact that cartoon messages can easily be absorbed by audiences and transmitted in mass circulation. The goal of the genre is to provide political commentary, address crucial issues and criticize political leaders and their contemptible practices in an artful fashion. Therefore, the opinions of readers on political parties and voting behavior might be changed through editorial cartoons. Thus, it is worthwhile to find out about this persuasive form of political communication which is visible in newspapers. This research study sought out about the editorial cartoons and their impact on voting behavior of university students. The problem statement is that whether there is an impact on voting behavior of university students by reading editorial cartoons of Sri Lankan newspapers. In this study of editorial cartoons of newspapers, the researcher was more specific on the topic of 'Editorial Cartoons and their impact on voting behavior of university students'. In this attempt, the researcher tried to find out whether there is an impact on voting behavior of university students by reading editorial cartoons of Sri Lankan newspapers, the university students' perception of editorial cartoons published in Sri Lankan newspapers and their impact on voting behavior, the different readings of editorial cartoons by different groups of university students.

This research is based on voters, who used their vote in Presidential election which held on 8<sup>th</sup> of January, 2015. The major candidates of the Presidential election were Mahinda Rajapaksa of the United People's Freedom Alliance and Maithripala Sirisena as a common candidate. Maithripala Sirisena was declared the winner after receiving 51.28% of all votes cast compared to Rajapaksa's 47.58%.

Elections are considered to be the primary and significant part of democracy. Voting is one of the great rights of the human beings and one of the forms of political participation. In this behavior, decision making is significant. People make choices according to their knowledge on the subject acquired from different sources. Among these different sources, mass media is a major means of getting political information. As Curran (2005) suggests that the media assists voters to make an informed choice at election time.

Among the mass media, newspapers both print and online play an active role in disseminating political information, shaping perceptions, changing attitudes and behaviors of the people. Among the types of articles and items published in newspapers, editorial and editorial cartoons take the significant place to persuade the readers giving constructive opinions on current events and incidents.

The voting is an individual choice which is largely affected by the voter's personality and the voter's exposure to the media (Lazarsfeld et al, 1944). The sociological model also states that the decision-making on voting would be influenced most by personality and exposure to mass media. That is, voter's choice of candidates is greatly influenced by the amount of media they are exposed to and the kind of persons they are. Among the different information, editorial cartoons of newspapers are significant in generating humor on political issues and candidates etc. It is a more powerful and persuasive tool to deliver the intended message of public interest through print media.

There are some theoretical views about the importance of newspapers: agenda setting view and the reinforcement view. The agenda setting view suggests that the media can force certain issues into the political agenda by having prominent stories about them. The reinforcement theory says that people are not influenced by the paper.

## 2. Literature Review

According to the literature review, editorial cartoons were examined from various perspectives. A number of studies have explored the power of media messages to produce or change the political opinions of audience members. The voting studies of Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (1948) found only a limited amount of influence from mass media on political opinions of audiences.

Political cartoons are 'a form of media message that harnesses linguistic and nonlinguistic devices used not only as vital instruments of information dissemination reflecting social practices and happenings, but also as a principal means of public access by which the public participates in the societal wider spectrum of debate about a particular event or social phenomenon' (Giarelli and Tulman, 2003).

Editorial cartoons in their essence are sarcastic and insulting of the most famous controversies that caused the world to take a strong and hard look at the effectiveness of the editorial cartoons. Certain aspects may lead to a controversy. There is some truth in arguments but to say that people should accept the cartoon however distasteful is pushing the freedom of expression too far. Editorial cartoonists are given the right to say their say as subtly as possible. Ironically cartoons are considered as least harmful, yet bearing the potential for a riot of epic proportions.

Sani, I., Abdullah, M.H., Ali, A.M. and Abdullah, F.S (2012) found that cartoonists use humor in Nigerian political cartoons to relieve audiences of stressful situations and persuade them towards making an opinion on contemporary issues in society. More specifically, Nigerian cartoonists manipulate aggressive and afflictive humor styles purposely to construct criticisms pointed to political leaders and comment on current socio-political issues of the moment in order to initiate social and political reforms. Lawate (2012) stated that the emotions behind the political cartoons are genuine and although harsh, are taken with a sense of humor. Bailey Lee (2003) identified that political cartoons historically and currently play a significant role in public discourse about serious and important issues.

Keith, T. at el. found that images were conveyed in a moderate tone in that they were more about poking fun at and questioning authority and power, rather than simply describing the issues on one hand, or demonstrating any revolutionary fervor on the other. The cartoons' content represented many of the concerns and issues being voiced by employer, government, opposition, unions and the media at the time. These images were an important part of the wider political discourse.

Yaser, N. at el. (2011) doing a study on effects of Newspapers Political Content on Readers' voting Behavior, found that majority (60.8%) of the respondents having different demographic characteristics significantly never consume content of newspapers published on politics, however, some of them are those who consume newspapers political content very often or somewhat but not at significant level. In general, these results seem to be consistent with other studies which suggest that personal attitudes and perceptions influence voting behaviour and have effect on likelihood to vote among general population.

Sani, I. (2014) revealed that political cartoons can be a powerful weapon in influencing public opinion pertaining to issues of public interest such as audiences' views on candidates especially during campaign and voting period. It indicates the persuasive power of the cartoons, because the point they are making can be quickly transmitted and absorbed by the audience.

Russ Radcliffe identifies the persuasive nature of political cartoons and states as

"If the primary role of the news media is to provide a check on power, cartooning is often its most potent weapon. Free from the normal rules of reportage, cartoonists don't have to provide evidence, be reasonable, or even offer balanced and constructive opinion. They can be as infantile, subversive, absurd, or ridiculous as they wish ... [O]ur cartoonists, in the main, exhibit a strong sense of injustice and seem to follow a few simple rules: cut to the truth; avoid worthiness and self-importance; don't attack the weak; and always hold the powerful to account .... But the first rule, of course, is to be funny — if we don't laugh it hasn't worked." (Radcliffe, 2004)

According to the existing limited number of literature review on editorial cartoons, it is shown that editorial cartoon has been providing a permanent section of the newspaper and it has been popular among readers fast. So, editorial cartoons have a high readership, and a high recall value which keeps the issues alive.

### 3. Objectives

#### 3.1. General Objective

1. To find out the university students' perception of editorial cartoons published in Sri Lankan newspapers and their impact on voting behaviour.

#### 3.2. Specific Objectives

1. To find out the different readings of editorial cartoons by different groups of university students.
2. To find out whether university students change their opinion about political parties by reading editorial cartoons published in Sri Lankan newspapers.
3. To find out whether the editorial cartoons have any impact on voting behaviour of the participants.

### 4. Methodology

Focus group discussion technique was used as the data collection method of this research study. Focus groups encourage 'a range of responses which provide a greater understanding of the attitudes, behavior, opinions or perceptions of participants on the research issues' (Hennink, 2007) and do not aim to reach consensus on the discussed issues. The data gathered from focus group discussions is descriptive and cannot be measured numerically.

Hence, the required data collected through the use of a focus group discussion. Total number of participants was eighty arts undergraduates who used their voting power in 2015 of Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. All students (age range 20-25) from each ethnicity (Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim) used as respondents. The reason for the selection was that undergraduates of the Trincomalee campus represent three ethnicities of in Sri Lanka. The different readings of editorial cartoons by different groups of university students and different voting choices are obvious and visible. For the research the source of the document to be analyzed selected by the method of purposive and convenience sampling technique. Finally gathered data will be coded and analyzed using thematic analysis.

### 5. Results and Discussion

This study explored the undergraduate students' consumption patterns of newspapers political information and its relation to their political participation during Presidential Election 2015. The students acquire political information using different media with a degree of difference. The responses given by the focus groups were different according to their demographic differences.

From the findings of the study, it is revealed that majority of the students of all ethnicities use all mass media to acquire the political information especially consuming television, internet, radio, newspaper, social media etc. Even though, it could be seen that readership of the newspapers has been declined gradually, most of them use newspapers both online and print version irregular basis except few. Some of the respondents revealed that they did not use newspapers but other media; social media and television.

#### ➤ Samali

→ "Normally, I prefer to use internet, social media and television. But sometimes I read both online and print newspapers to get information on politics, economics and so. Especially, to get the more details during the election time"

#### ➤ Nilushika

→ "I don't have time to read newspapers. But during election time, I read online newspapers to get political information on candidates, political campaigns and all. In 2015, I followed my parents when I use my vote."

#### ➤ Puviharan

→ 'I get more information from television and social media. Though newspapers give more details, I rarely use newspapers for this purpose. According to my point of view, television and social media are strong enough to change our political opinion and all.'

Furthermore, above responses of the students revealed that though print media provide political information in detail, they could not motivate the people politically and could not influence their voting behavior as compared to television, social media and interpersonal channels.

Majority of the undergraduates who use newspapers both print and online versions revealed that they went through the news articles, political advertisements, editorial page including editorial cartoons to get the knowledge on candidates and the political context of the country. According to the discussion, it is evident that their level of interest on editorial cartoons is high. Since Editorial cartoons are satirical and simple enough to understand, they give the pleasure and information. This was same to all three ethnicities; **Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims.**

As literature review suggested, voting behavior is determined by a combination of factors with varying degrees of importance. These include mass media, social class, the party leader, age, parents, education, region, ethnicity, gender, opinion polls, and religion (Timbancaya, 2014). In the discussion, it is revealed that the factors that affected voting choice were News of mass media, family influence, Television and newspaper advertisements, party leader, candidates' work and manifestoes, and personal experience. Especially, majority of the participants did not mention the factor, editorial cartoons, but the mass media.

#### ➤ Umesh

→ "In 2015, I came to my voting decision by consuming media, family influence and candidates' works and manifestoes. Especially, I used newspapers and television to get information on politicians."

➤ Sivapriya

→ 'Yes, in 2015 Presidential Election, I thought about the party leader, his manifestoes. And I got the information from mass media. My family also influenced me to vote particular candidate.'

Significantly, there is a significant difference of factors that affected voting decision taken by the students from three ethnicities. Especially, in comparison with Sinhalese community, Tamil and Muslim communities mentioned the factors such as party leader, family influence and then mass media respectively.

Most of the students preferred to go through the editorial cartoons and had different perceptions and readings. As cartoons are enjoyable, the students were more likely to consume them. According to respondents, the purposes for the consumption of the editorial cartoons were entertainment value, informative value, clarity and persuasiveness respectively. They understood them as powerful weapon and as visual rhetoric serve as a persuasive device that cartoonists use to convey messages.

But majority of the students had a negative perception on editorial cartoons and their influence towards voting behavior. According to them, even though editorial cartoons are persuasive, they did not consider messages conveyed as serious. Therefore, editorial cartoons did not change attitudes and behavior of the students on candidates, political parties and issues related to the politics. Since editorial cartoons are exaggerations and satirical, majority of undergraduate students from all ethnicities did not believe editorial cartoons. Another reason was editorial cartoons are endorsed by media ownership and representative of the interest of the media ownership.

➤ Sampath

→ 'I do not have positive perception on editorial cartoons. They try to make humor making harsh criticisms on political parties and candidates. At the same time, these cartoonists influenced by the owner of the publication. So, I don't believe them.'

But less number of the students revealed that they have a positive perception on editorial cartoons. The reason was that editorial cartoons offer balanced and constructive opinion on politics. They stated that their voting behavior changed by the media including editorial and editorial cartoons which in December, 2014 and January, 2015, before the presidential election which held on 8<sup>th</sup> of January, 2015.

➤ Gunarathi

→ 'I have a positive perception on editorial cartoons. Because cartoon might reflect the reality in a deep and fun manner. We can understand the cartoons easily. So, it will persuade the people to think what they want to think.'

Finally, the perception on editorial cartoons of undergraduates of all ethnicities is negative. Therefore, there is no significance difference on perceptions on editorial cartoons in newspapers between different ethnicities on the matter.

Majority of the students revealed that they did not change their opinion by consuming editorial cartoons. But they believe that editorial cartoons reveal the truth of candidate, political parties and the truth is given in a humor form.

➤ Hashani

→ 'NO because we know editorial and editorial cartoons are someones' ideology. That is mostly opinions of the newspaper. We can't depend on editorial cartoons because it is changed newspaper to newspaper.'

➤ Joel

→ 'No, I didn't change my opinion. Because. I had already decided whom to vote and not.'

➤ Gunaradi

→ 'NO, I didn't change my opinion by reading editorial cartoons. Actually, my experience family helped me to take my decision.'

➤ Hithaya

→ 'No. I didn't. No considerable influence from editorial cartoons. But I was able to shape my ideas on candidates and political parties during last presidential elections.'

According to the discussion, most of the students revealed that editorial cartoons did not make them to change their decisions which taken previously. But some of Sinhalese students were confused in this issue. They were influenced by the editorial page. Undergraduate students as young peoples' opinion can be influenced through the cartoons' messages and interpreting multimodal text is often more complex than comprehending verbal texts.

Majority of the students had not changed their voting choice in 2015. But most of them believe that editorial cartoons are manipulating voters' opinion on the candidates captured in a single cartoon message during the election period.

➤ Gunarathi

→ 'According to my idea, editorial cartoons affect the voting choice of the people for some extent. 50% chances are there.'

Editorial page is considered to represent the policy of the newspapers and to play a very important role in opinion formation because these are written by highly experienced and expert journalists. But findings revealed that newspapers' editorial cartoons on political issues could not formulate public opinion with reference to presidential elections 2015.

The review of the findings reveals that majority of respondents irrespective with demographic differences read editorial cartoons to acquire the political information. Very less number of the students revealed that they changed their voting decision by reading the editorial cartoons. But other factors such as interpersonal relationships, advertisements of the media, social media affected their voting choice.

➤ Isuri

→ "yes, I changed my mind because editorial cartoons talk about real political problems in society."

During the presidential election, it is obvious that most of the newspapers were partial to former president, Mahinda Rajapakshe. But Mithripala Sirisena won the election obtaining highest number of votes. Therefore, it is indicated that there is a limited amount of

influence of editorial cartoons. According to the focus group discussion, it is shown that editorial cartoons as means of political information have been reinforced the voting behavior in 2015.

As walker stated in humor as 'tactic' would bring everyone to the same level irrespective with their demographic differences like ethnicity, gender, educational level and so on.

## 6. Conclusion

It is concluded that there is a negative perception of the undergraduates on editorial cartoons, and the impact of editorial on voting behavior was very less. Majority of the students irrespective with ethnicity and gender did not believe editorial cartoon and consumed to entertain the content. It failed in formulating the public opinion on the candidates and manipulating the voting behavior of the public, especially undergraduate students. Therefore, it is concluded that there is a limited amount of influence of editorial cartoons for the undergraduate students who used their votes in 2015.

It is recommended to conduct future research on analysis on content of editorial cartoons on specific events and how editorial cartoons change public opinions in particular time periods in Sri Lanka.

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