ABSTRACT

This research explores the change in party allegiance of the voter during the presidential elections in relation to the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) among the rural Sinhala-Buddhist voter population. By doing so it examines why has there been a visible shift in party allegiance among the voters during the presidential elections in Sri Lanka, contrary to the long established belief of long grassroots party allegiance towards the UNP and the SLFP.

Based on the field of social constructivism, the research employs a post-positivist research approach with in-depth interviews and field observations. The research was conducted in three electoral wards; Matale, Kurunegala and Polgahawela, in two districts; Matale and Kurunegala.

The research finds that during presidential elections, candidates use different methods to reach the voter and change the party allegiance of the voter towards themselves. Constructing national level discourses is the first step in this process, and it is then extended towards a second step which is based on the existing patron-client relationships in the area. Voters use both of these steps to rationalize changes in their party allegiance during the presidential elections both to society as well as to themselves. Furthermore, the research finds out that, based on the social relationships and the economic relationships of the particular community, the space to change one’s party allegiance without being penalized within the community varies.

Overall, the research argues that the change in party allegiance during presidential elections cannot be understood using the existing knowledge on parliamentary and other elections in Sri Lanka. Rather, it is based on a combination of ideological, social and economic factors. The study introduces a qualitative ‘two-step-flow of rationalization’ model to explain the change in party allegiance during presidential elections among rural Sinhala-Buddhist voters.