

Article

Villagers' Preferences for Leadership in Rural Sri Lanka: An Experimental Study

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Abstract

This study uses a conjoint experiment to investigate village residents' preferences for local council candidates in rural Sri Lanka. The experiment examines how candidate attributes—gender, age, education, community contributions, and corruption history—shape voter choices. Through randomized candidate pair evaluations, data were collected from 1,103 respondents in the Millaniya division of the Kalutara district. The findings indicate that gender does not significantly influence candidate selection, suggesting that male and female candidates are viewed equally. Younger candidates are preferred over older ones, while higher education levels significantly increase candidate favorability. Corruption has a strong negative impact, with candidates associated with minor corruption being less favored, while those with major corruption are strongly rejected. Conversely, candidates with a record of substantial community contributions receive strong support. This study contributes to understanding political preferences in rural settings and highlights key factors influencing leadership selection.

Keywords: Candidate selection, rural governance, conjoint experiment, political preferences, corruption, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

This study examines the village people's perceptions of how the leaders' gender, age, education, previous job, party, corruption and contribution to the community influence the selection of leaders in local councils in Sri Lanka. These factors commonly affect the selection of leaders within local government (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Eggers et al., 2018). We conducted a conjoint experiment with 1,103 randomly selected village people residing in a rural area, Kalutara district, Sri Lanka.

Ethical leadership is defined as leaders' behavior that adheres to a set of moral principles, values, and standards, and ethical leaders demonstrate integrity, honesty, fairness, and

accountability in their actions and decisions (O'Leary, 2020). It is critical for the success of local government by providing a clear vision, directive guidance, and inspiration to community members, fostering collaboration with strong relationships within the community, driving positive changes towards program goals, and promoting accountability (Mancini & Marek, 2004; Argaw et al., 2007; Ceptureanu et al., 2018; Schmidt & Pohler, 2018). Understanding how village people perceive leadership attributes is essential for strengthening local governance, as the qualities valued in leaders directly influence the effectiveness, inclusiveness, and accountability of rural development initiatives. First, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by examining how five attributes of leaders' characteristics (i) gender, (ii) age, (iii) education level, (iv) prior contributions to the community, and (v) involvement in corruption—shape villagers' leader selection and sustain their support—an area largely underexplored in rural development research. Although previous studies have examined these factors individually, such as gender and age (Eggers et al., 2018), education, corruption, and community contributions (Wantchekon, 2003), our study offers a more comprehensive approach by investigating the combined influence of these five key attributes within the context of local councils.

Second, literature on leadership often focuses on private, public, and non-profit organizations (Tepper, 2000; Clement, 2006; Pelletier & Bligh, 2008; Tepper et al., 2008; Harris et al., 2007; Zellers et al., 2002; Tepper et al., 2001). However, leadership in local councils differs from NGO and private organizations as leaders are elected, whereas in private firms or NGOs, they are typically appointed. This distinction influences leader behavior: elected leaders face higher accountability, community scrutiny, and a stronger sense of ownership (Ferraz & Finan, 2009), while appointed leaders may lack direct accountability and risk disempowering communities. Local councils, as public organizations, have institutional mechanisms that encourage community monitoring of leaders, unlike NGOs or private firms. Additionally, local council leaders in Sri Lanka are paid by the government, with their salaries and benefits funded through central or provincial budgets. This study examines five leader attributes to contribute to the literature on leadership.

Third, while previous studies have explored these issues using quantitative or qualitative methods (Mesdaghinia et al., 2019; Koot, 2019; Setokoe & Ramukumba, 2020), they often rely on traditional surveys prone to response biases, particularly social desirability bias, as selection of a leader remains a sensitive topic. To address this, our study employs a survey experiment with a conjoint design, presenting respondents with hypothetical leader profiles featuring multiple attributes and asking them to choose between two scenarios. This method minimizes social desirability bias and encourages honest responses (León et al., 2013). Using hypothetical scenarios also reduces the reluctance to share truthful opinions, a significant challenge in rural Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka, with its long-standing focus on rural development and decentralized gover-

nance, provides a compelling context for examining how community members perceive and value leadership attributes in selecting local council leaders. Given Sri Lanka's diverse social and cultural landscape, understanding which leadership qualities—such as gender, age, education, prior contributions to the community, and corruption—are prioritized by rural residents is essential for strengthening local governance. Insights from this context not only address a significant gap in the rural development literature but also offer broader implications for improving leadership selection processes in similar settings worldwide, where local leaders' personal attributes profoundly shape community trust, participation, and development success.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 lays out our hypotheses. Section 3 describes the methods, followed by the presentation of the results in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 provides concluding remarks.

2. Hypotheses

The issue of gender bias in leadership selection has been widely discussed in existing literature. Studies consistently show that societal norms, cultural expectations, and traditional gender roles significantly influence leadership preferences and decision-making processes (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ridgeway, 2001; Schein, 2001). For example, Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory highlights that individuals often perceive men as more suitable for leadership roles due to the alignment between stereotypical masculine traits (e.g., assertiveness, decisiveness) and the characteristics traditionally associated with effective leaders. Conversely, women are often stereotyped as being more communal and nurturing—traits that may not align with traditional leadership expectations, especially in rural settings where cultural norms are more deeply ingrained (Ridgeway, 2001).

In rural communities, traditional beliefs, patriarchal norms, and limited exposure to diverse leadership models often intensify gender biases. Banerjee and Duflo (2011) argue that leadership is commonly associated with physical strength, authority, and dominance—traits stereotypically linked to men. As a result, women seeking leadership roles frequently encounter resistance, as their abilities are assessed against these entrenched standards (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Economic dependency and minimal involvement in decision-making further reinforce perceptions of male suitability for leadership (Jayachandran, 2015). Social and familial expectations confine women to domestic roles, discouraging public engagement (Kabeer, 2001). Moreover, leadership selection through community elections often reflects majority preferences, favoring male candidates based on assumed competence (Beaman et al., 2010). Although appointed leaders may bypass electoral bias, they too face challenges when their gender contradicts traditional norms.

Gendered biases in leadership not only affect the selection process but also influence how leaders are perceived and supported in their roles. Studies indicate that women leaders often face heightened scrutiny, lower levels of trust, and less support from their communities, which may hinder their ability to effectively perform their duties (Eagly et al., 1995). This lack of support can discourage women from pursuing leadership roles and reinforce the cycle of male-dominated leadership. Rural governance structure studies further underscore the influence of gender norms on leadership preferences. For instance, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) found that while introducing gender quotas in India increased the number of female leaders, many villagers initially viewed these leaders as less effective due to ingrained biases. However, over time, exposure to female leadership helped reduce these biases, suggesting that societal perceptions can shift with sustained changes in leadership representation.

Moreover, in many rural settings, male-dominated networks play a crucial role in political and community decision-making, creating additional barriers for women seeking leadership positions (Goetz & Hassim, 2003). These networks not only control access to resources and information but also influence public perceptions about leadership capabilities. Consequently, male candidates are often perceived as more competent and influential due to their integration into these established social structures. The perception that male leaders are better equipped to negotiate with external stakeholders, secure resources, and enforce community decisions further strengthens their preference over female candidates (Beaman et al., 2010). As a result, the intersection of gender norms, social structures, and leadership expectations collectively contributes to the consistent preference for male candidates in rural leadership roles.

Based on these discussions, we hypothesize that village people may prefer male candidates over female candidates in leadership roles due to deeply rooted gender stereotypes, traditional norms, and cultural expectations. These factors are likely to shape the selection process and the community's perception and acceptance of leaders based on their gender

Hypothesis 1: Village people favor male candidates for leadership roles over female candidates.

The preference for leadership candidates often reflects the community's underlying values, priorities, and perceptions of who is best suited to address their needs. Age plays a critical role in shaping leadership preferences, as it is associated with attributes such as energy, adaptability, and innovation on one hand, and experience, wisdom, and stability on the other. However, in many rural communities, the preference for younger candidates may emerge due to changing societal dynamics, evolving expectations of leadership, and practical considerations.

Several studies suggest that younger leaders are often perceived as more energetic, dynamic, and open to innovation (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Mumford et al., 2000). These qualities align with the increasing demand for leaders who can tackle modern challenges such as technological advancement, market shifts, and climate change. For example, in rural areas facing agricultural disruptions or economic stagnation, younger leaders may be viewed as better equipped to introduce new ideas, leverage technology, and adapt to rapid changes. Their perceived willingness to take risks and embrace change may resonate with communities striving for development and growth.

Conversely, older candidates are often associated with stability, experience, and a deep understanding of traditional practices and community history (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). While these qualities are highly valued, they may also be viewed as limiting when communities seek progress that requires challenging the status quo. Some studies have shown that older leaders may be perceived as resistant to change, having limited technological proficiency, and more likely to adhere to traditional methods that may not align with contemporary needs (Judge et al., 2002). Such perceptions can lead to a preference for younger candidates, particularly in contexts where innovation and agility are prioritized.

The leadership selection process also shapes age-related preferences. In rural communities, where leaders are often chosen through elections or community consensus, younger candidates may have an advantage in mobilizing support from their peers and engaging with a broader demographic through modern communication methods such as social media (Bimber, 1998). Younger leaders may also benefit from generational shifts in attitudes, as younger villagers may favor candidates who they feel represent their aspirations and are more attuned to their perspectives (Twenge et al., 2012). Moreover, the challenges of intergenerational dynamics can influence these preferences. While older leaders might rely on their long-standing relationships and reputations within the community, younger candidates can appeal to a sense of progress and inclusivity by advocating for policies that address the concerns of younger generations. This generational alignment may further reinforce the community's preference for younger leadership. Empirical studies highlight these trends. For instance, in a study of local governance, Hambrick & Mason (1984) observed that younger leaders were often preferred in communities undergoing significant economic or social transitions, as their leadership styles were seen as more aligned with future-oriented goals. Similarly, younger candidates are more likely to gain support in contexts where modernization and development are key priorities (Jones & Olken, 2005) on political leadership in developing regions.

Based on these arguments, we hypothesize that village people may prefer young candidates over older candidates for leadership roles. This preference likely stems from the perception that younger candidates are better suited to address contemporary challenges, drive innovation, and represent the aspirations of a changing community.

Hypothesis 2: Village people favor young candidates for leadership roles over old candidates.

Education is often regarded as a key determinant of effective leadership, particularly in communities seeking progress and development. The preference for highly educated leaders reflects a belief that education equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, and perspectives needed to navigate complex challenges and implement strategies for community advancement. This trend is especially pronounced in rural areas, where access to quality education may be limited, and educated individuals are viewed as valuable assets capable of bridging the gap between traditional practices and modern solutions.

Highly educated candidates are frequently associated with superior decision-making abilities, critical thinking, and a broader understanding of socio-economic and political systems (Hillygus, 2005). Their educational background is often perceived as evidence of their competence, discipline, and capability to lead effectively. For instance, educated leaders are assumed to possess better communication skills, enabling them to interact with external stakeholders, government officials, and funding agencies to secure resources and opportunities for their communities (Rao & Walton, 2004). Moreover, their ability to analyze and address complex problems, such as climate change or technological adoption, is often viewed as a critical advantage over less-educated candidates (Krosnick, 1988).

In contrast, candidates with lower levels of education may be perceived as less capable of handling the multifaceted responsibilities of leadership. While they may possess practical knowledge and a deep understanding of local traditions, their limited exposure to formal education can result in doubts about their ability to manage administrative tasks, negotiate with external entities, or advocate effectively for community needs (Besley et al., 2005). These perceptions can create a bias toward favoring highly educated candidates, particularly in communities where development and modernization are prioritized.

The process through which leaders are selected also plays a role in reinforcing this preference. In many rural settings, leadership positions are filled through elections or consensus-building processes, where candidates' qualifications are scrutinized by the community. Highly educated candidates may have an advantage in these scenarios, as their educational achievements serve as tangible indicators of their potential for success. Additionally, the presence of educated leaders can inspire trust among villagers, who may believe that such leaders are better equipped to represent their interests and advocate for their welfare at higher levels of governance (Glaeser et al., 2007).

Empirical evidence supports the notion that education significantly influences leadership preferences. For example, in a study on local governance in developing countries, Besley et al. (2005) found that communities were more likely to elect educated leaders due to their perceived ability to drive development initiatives. Similarly, highly educated leaders were

more effective in implementing government programs and fostering economic growth, leading to a stronger preference for educated candidates among villagers in rural India (Pande, 2003). Despite these advantages, it is important to acknowledge that the preference for highly educated leaders may also create barriers for candidates with lower levels of formal education but substantial practical experience and local knowledge. In some cases, these candidates may be overlooked, despite their potential to address grassroots concerns effectively and build trust within the community.

Based on these arguments, we hypothesize that village people may exhibit a preference for highly educated candidates over less-educated candidates for leadership roles. This preference is driven by the perception that education equips leaders with the skills, knowledge, and credibility needed to address contemporary challenges and promote community development.

Hypothesis 3: Village people favor high-educated candidates for leadership roles over low-educated candidates.

Integrity and trustworthiness are central to leadership, particularly in rural communities where leaders often serve as the primary mediators between the people and external authorities. Corruption, whether minor or major, undermines these qualities and erodes public trust, leading to a strong preference for leaders perceived as incorruptible. In such settings, the perception of a candidate's honesty can outweigh other considerations, as it directly impacts the leader's ability to effectively and equitably serve the community.

Many studies highlight that corruption, regardless of scale, is frequently associated with misuse of resources, inefficiency, and the marginalization of vulnerable groups (Rose-Ackerman, 1978; Treisman, 2000). For rural communities, where resources are often scarce, any diversion of funds or benefits due to corrupt practices can have immediate and significant consequences. Leaders perceived as corrupt may face resistance from the community, as villagers often associate corruption with unequal distribution of resources, favoritism, and a lack of accountability (Olken, 2004). Conversely, candidates with no history of corruption are viewed as trustworthy, ethical, and committed to the community's welfare. Such candidates inspire confidence in their ability to manage resources transparently and advocate for the community's interests without personal gain. This perception of integrity fosters stronger community cohesion and participation, as villagers feel more secure in the knowledge that their leader prioritizes the collective good over individual benefits (Banerjee et al., 2011).

The process through which leaders are chosen can further amplify the importance of corruption-free candidates. In rural elections or consensus-building practices, voters often rely on reputation and community narratives to assess candidates. Leaders with a record

of corruption, even at a minor level, may struggle to gain support due to widespread distrust and concerns over their future conduct (Ferraz & Finan, 2009). In contrast, candidates with a clean record are more likely to gain the community's endorsement, as their integrity aligns with the values and expectations of the villagers.

Empirical evidence underscores this preference. Olken (2004), in a study on local governance in Indonesia, found that corruption significantly reduced community participation in village-level projects, as residents were disillusioned by the perceived misuse of funds. Similarly, studies in India and Africa have shown that leaders perceived as corrupt are less likely to be re-elected or gain public support, even when their actions include beneficial initiatives, because trust and transparency are considered non-negotiable qualities of leadership (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Moreover, the scale of corruption plays a role in shaping perceptions. While small-scale corruption may be tolerated in some cases due to its perceived inevitability or low impact, significant corruption often triggers stronger negative reactions, as it visibly harms the community and reinforces inequality (Jain, 2001). However, even small instances of corruption can damage a leader's credibility over time, as repeated actions accumulate and tarnish their reputation.

Based on these arguments, we hypothesize that village people may favor candidates with no corruption for leadership roles over candidates associated with small or significant corruption. This preference stems from the understanding that corruption undermines trust, resource equity, and community development, making integrity and transparency critical attributes for leadership in rural contexts.

Hypothesis 4: Village people favor candidates with no corruption for leadership roles over candidates with corruption.

In rural communities, leadership is often tied to the tangible contributions individuals have made to the well-being of the community. Contributions, whether in the form of community service, development projects, or social support, are viewed as markers of a candidate's commitment and capability to lead. These contributions not only demonstrate a person's dedication to the collective good but also build trust and respect among villagers. Thus, a candidate with a large and visible record of contributions is often seen as better equipped to lead effectively, as their actions have already shown their capacity to address community needs and improve local conditions.

The idea that past contributions reflect a candidate's leadership potential is rooted in the belief that a leader's actions speak louder than words. A candidate who has actively worked for the betterment of the village, whether by organizing community events, facilitating infrastructure development, or supporting local welfare initiatives, establishes credibility and earns the community's trust (Pennings & Hazan, 2001). Such contributions pro-

vide tangible evidence of the candidate's ability to bring about positive changes, thus making them a more attractive option for leadership roles. In contrast, candidates without prior contributions to the community may be viewed with skepticism. Villagers may question their commitment to the village's needs and their ability to engage in meaningful leadership once in power. Without a history of active participation or service, these candidates may be perceived as disconnected from the village's realities, lacking the practical experience and relationships necessary to lead effectively (Vásquez et al., 2014). For communities that rely heavily on established networks of trust and cooperation, candidates without past contributions may be seen as outsiders or opportunists who are not truly invested in the village's welfare.

The selection process, whether it involves elections or community consensus, often reflects these values. When villagers have the opportunity to choose their leaders, they are likely to favor individuals who have demonstrated a strong track record of contribution to community life. This is especially true in rural areas, where interpersonal relationships and reputation play a crucial role in the decision-making process. A candidate with a large contribution is seen as someone who understands the village's needs, has already invested time and effort into improving conditions, and is likely to continue this commitment if given a leadership role (Banerjee et al., 2011). This perception of reliability and dedication makes them a preferred candidate over someone with no visible record of community service.

Some empirical studies provide strong evidence for this preference. For instance, a study by Dubash & Rajan (2001) in rural India showed that candidates with a proven track record of involvement in social programs or local development projects were more likely to be elected to leadership positions. Similarly, in African rural communities, a candidate's contribution to community health initiatives, education, or economic development was often a key factor in their selection as a village leader (Carlson, 2015). These findings suggest that contributions to community welfare not only enhance a candidate's legitimacy but also foster a sense of loyalty and gratitude among villagers, which increases the likelihood of receiving leadership support. Based on these observations, we hypothesize that village people may favor candidates with a large past contribution for leadership roles over candidates without past contributions. This argument originates from the belief that past actions provide clear evidence of a candidate's commitment, competence, and ability to serve the community's interests, making them the most suitable choice for leadership.

Hypothesis 5: Village people favor candidates with a large past contribution for leadership roles over candidates without past contributions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Conjoint experiment

We conducted a conjoint experiment to investigate village people's preferences for candidate selection in the context of the local councils. In this experiment, respondents were presented with two distinct hypothetical candidate profiles, that were randomly generated from the set of attributes and then asked to choose between them. Multiple attributes of those candidate profiles are jointly varied in the experiment.

This conjoint experiment has two key strengths for understanding how candidate gender affects village residents' evaluations. First, it allows us to compare how much each candidate's attributes influence people's choices, all measured on the same scale. In real elections, a candidate's gender often overlaps with other factors, making it hard to separate its specific impact. By randomizing candidate attributes in the experiment, we can study the effects of gender alone or alongside other traits. This method also helps us see if the same traits influence people's choices differently depending on the candidate's gender. Second, the conjoint design reduces the risk of social desirability bias. Directly asking people about their acceptance of female candidates can lead to biased responses, as some may hide their true opinions to align with social norms. In our experiment, gender is just one of several randomized attributes, making it harder for participants to guess the study's purpose. This approach helps reveal genuine attitudes on sensitive topics, such as how candidate gender influences voting behavior, as participants can justify their choices based on multiple factors. (Hainmueller et al., 2014).

In our conjoint experiment, we primarily focus on seven distinct attributes that characterize candidates for the local councils of Sri Lanka. These attributes are employed to construct comprehensive candidate profiles and include gender, age, educational level, leader's party, previous job, prior records on contribution and corruption. In the survey, after presenting two different candidate profiles to the respondents, we posed the question, "Suppose the two candidates below are contemplating running for the Local council election. Which candidate do you support?"

Each of the seven candidate attributes consists of multiple values, and the candidate profiles are constructed by selecting one value for each attribute. Table 1 provides an overview of the various values associated with these seven attributes. There were seven attributes, which pertain to a candidate's background, encompass gender (male or female), age (25, 40, 55, 70), educational level (Up to grade 10 or no school attendance, Passed G. C. E. (A/L), University degree, Graduate degree), Party (Sri Lanka People's Freedom Alliance, Samagi Jana Balawegaya, National People's Power, United National Party) previous job

Table 1. Conjoint experiment attributes and levels

Attributes	Attribute values
Gender	Male Female
Age	30 40 60
Education Level	Up to grade 10 or not attending school. Passed G. C. E. (A/L) University degree Graduate degree
Party	Sri Lanka People's Freedom Alliance Samagi Jana Balawegaya National People's Power United National Party
Previous Job	Teacher Journalist Business Manager Public Officer Self-employment Housekeeper
Contribution	No records of significant contributions to the region High records of significant contributions to the region
Corruption	No rumour of corruption —Full of service orientation Rumour of corruption —weak monitoring procedures, favor for his relatives in the village Rumour of corruption —bribery, inappropriate use of some project funds for personal affairs.

Note: Each respondent was randomly assigned a level for each dimension. Each respondent was presented with one vignette and asked to report how likely a village resident would engage in the VDP activities the following year.

(teacher, journalist, business manager, government officer, self-employment, housekeeper), contribution (No records of significant contributions to the region/ High records of significant contributions to the region); and corruption (No Rumour of corruption—Full of service orientation/ Rumour of corruption—weak monitoring procedures, favor for his relatives in the village/ Rumour of corruption—bribery, inappropriate use of some project funds for personal affairs).

In Figure 1, we show one pair of candidate profiles used in our experiment. Our research design creates multiple combinations of these candidate profiles. We asked respondents to evaluate these pairs five times, with each pair displayed on a new screen. This allowed us to gather a large amount of data to test our hypotheses. We presented the candidate attributes in a random order to different respondents, but we kept the order consistent across the four pairings for each respondent. This was done to reduce the cogni-

Figure 1.

Suppose the following two candidates are contesting the local council election in Sri Lanka. Which candidate do you support? Select only one candidate to support.

Previous job experience	Housekeeper	Teacher
Age	30	60
Party	United National Party	Sri Lanka Peoples' freedom Alliance
Education Level	Passed G. C. E. (O/L)	Up to grade 10 or not attending school
Rumors of corruption	Rumors of small-scale corruption, such as patronage for relatives and friends	No rumor of corruption - ready to provide full services
Previous contribution	No record of significant contribution to the region	High record of significant contributions to the region
Gender	Male	Female

tive load on the respondents. Since many attributes were changed simultaneously, it is highly unlikely for our respondents to see the same combination of attributes more than once in a series of candidate profiles.

3.2 Sampling procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a conjoint experiment in Millaniya, a typical rural area in the Kalutara district of Sri Lanka. Access to household data in the Millaniya division was granted with approval from the Divisional Secretary (local government). The primary data was collected through a household survey conducted by the first author from March 15 to May 31, 2024.¹⁾ To ensure the sample was representative of the broader rural population, we randomly selected 10 villages out of 44 in the Millaniya division: Arakagoda, Batagoda, Bellanthudawa, Boralessa, Dikhenā, Gungamuwa, Mulkadakanda, Pelpola, Welikala, and Weniwelpitiya. Within each village, proportionate stratified random sampling was used, targeting 8% of the total adult population (over 18 years) as recorded in the divisional secretariat.²⁾ The survey was designed using the Conjointly platform, which randomized respondents across groups to ensure independent observations and eliminate bias (Conjointly, 2016a; Ahmed, 2022).³⁾ Demographic and socioeconomic data, including gender, age, marital status, and education level, were also collected. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with no personally identifiable information recorded. The survey was conducted in Sinhala, the native language of the respondents. After excluding incomplete responses, we obtained a final sample size of 1,103 respondents.

We were interested in understanding what choices our survey participants made. To do this, we examined their answers to a question about which candidate they preferred. We

coded their responses: if they supported the candidate, we gave it a "1," and if they did not, we gave it a "0." In addition to their preferences, we gathered some personal information from our participants, like their gender, age, and education level. Data was estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression.

4. Results and discussion

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the responses in the conjoint experiment and respondents' characteristics. Table 3 presents the ordinary least squares (OLS) estimations of models with and without respondents' characteristics or covariates. In the estimation models, the base cases (control groups) are the 'Male candidate,' '30 years old candidate,' 'educated up to grade 10 or not attended to school,' 'housekeeper,' 'National People's Power Party,' 'No rumor of corruption,' and 'No significant contribution to the community.' Drawing upon the results of the model without the covariates, we generate Figure 2 to visually represent the coefficient plots with their corresponding 95 percent confidence intervals for each treatment. If the confidence intervals cross the zero mark on the x-axis, it indicates that the variable is not statistically different from the control group or the reference category. A positive coefficient value suggests that respondents perceive that village people are more likely to select a leader with those attributes compared to the control condition.

The analysis shows several clear results. First, female candidates have a small negative coefficient (-0.003) that is not statistically significant ($p > 0.1$). This indicates no measurable difference in outcomes based on gender. Thus, our first hypothesis was rejected. The findings of Ono and Yamada (2020) indicate that female candidates in Japan face a significant disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. The perception that male candidates are stronger leaders and are essential for political success is widespread. (Alexander and Andersen, 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993a; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993b; Lawless, 2004). The results of our study failed to provide evidence that the perception of candidate selection in the local councils by village residents depends on the gender of the candidates.

Secondly, the analysis reveals that older candidates generally receive less support compared to the base group. Candidates of 40 years of age (-0.022) are statistically significant at the 10% level, suggesting a small negative effect, and candidates 60 years old (-0.071) are statistically significant at the 1% level, indicating a larger negative impact. Age is a notable barrier, particularly for older candidates, and thus our second hypothesis was supported. Our results provide evidence that younger leaders are often perceived as preferred by the villagers (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Mumford et al., 2000).

Third, the estimated coefficients for education levels are significantly positive at the 1%

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

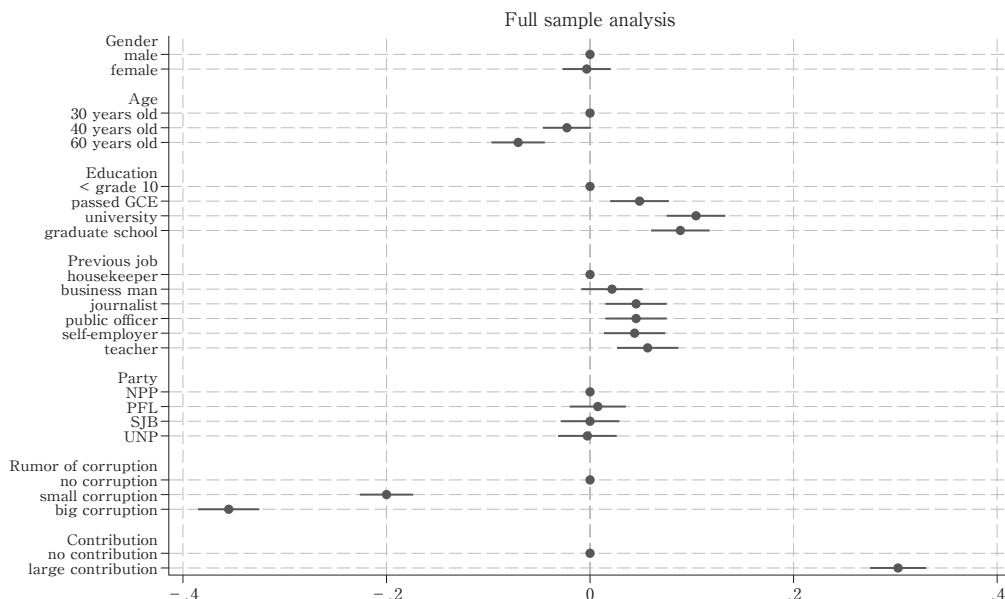
Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max
Gender					
Male	11,030	0.499	0.500	0	1
Female	11,030	0.500	0.500	0	1
Age					
30 years	11,030	0.333	0.471	0	1
40 years	11,030	0.334	0.472	0	1
60 years	11,030	0.333	0.471	0	1
Education					
<Grade 10	11,030	0.250	0.433	0	1
Passed GCE A/L	11,030	0.249	0.433	0	1
Hold a university degree	11,030	0.250	0.433	0	1
Hold a master's degree	11,030	0.250	0.433	0	1
Previous Job					
Housekeeper	11,030	0.167	0.373	0	1
Business Manager	11,030	0.167	0.373	0	1
Journalist	11,030	0.166	0.372	0	1
Public Officer	11,030	0.167	0.373	0	1
Self-employer	11,030	0.167	0.373	0	1
Teacher	11,030	0.166	0.373	0	1
Party					
National People's Power	11,030	0.250	0.433	0	1
Sri Lanka People's Freedom Alliance	11,030	0.251	0.433	0	1
Samagi Jana Balawegaya	11,030	0.250	0.433	0	1
United National Party	11,030	0.250	0.433	0	1
Corruption					
No corruption	11,030	0.333	0.471	0	1
Small corruption	11,030	0.333	0.471	0	1
Big corruption	11,030	0.334	0.472	0	1
Contribution					
No contribution	11,030	0.500	0.500	0	1
Large contribution	11,030	0.500	0.500	0	1
Respondent's characteristics					
Gender	11,030	0.528	0.499	0	1
Age	11,030	0.523	0.499	0	1
Marital status	11,030	0.740	0.439	0	1
Education	11,030	0.511	0.500	0	1
Private job	11,030	0.332	0.471	0	1
Public job	11,030	0.145	0.352	0	1
Self-employment	11,030	0.175	0.380	0	1
VDP membership	11,030	0.084	0.278	0	1

Table 3. The OLS estimations with and without covariates

	Without covariates (1)	With covariates (2)
Candidate's Gender (base: male)		
Female	-0.003 (0.012)	-0.003 (0.012)
Candidate's Age (base: 30 years)		
40 years	-0.022* (0.012)	-0.022* (0.012)
60 years	-0.071*** (0.013)	-0.071*** (0.013)
Candidate's Education level (base: <Grade 10)		
Passed GCE A/L	0.049*** (0.014)	0.049*** (0.014)
Hold a university degree	0.103*** (0.015)	0.103*** (0.015)
Hold a master's degree	0.088*** (0.015)	0.088*** (0.015)
Previous Job (base: Housekeeper)		
Business Manager	0.021 (0.016)	0.021 (0.016)
Journalist	0.044*** (0.016)	0.044*** (0.016)
Public Officer	0.045*** (0.016)	0.045*** (0.016)
Self-employer	0.044*** (0.016)	0.044*** (0.016)
Teacher	0.056*** (0.016)	0.056*** (0.016)
Party (base: National People's Power)		
Sri Lanka People's Freedom Alliance	0.008 (0.014)	0.008 (0.014)
Samagi Jana Balawegaya	-0.001 (0.014)	-0.001 (0.014)
United National Party	-0.003 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.014)
Corruption (base: No corruption)		
Small corruption	-0.200*** (0.013)	-0.200*** (0.013)
Big corruption	-0.355*** (0.015)	-0.355*** (0.015)
Contribution (base: No contribution)		
Large contribution	0.302*** (0.014)	0.302*** (0.014)
Respondent's characteristics		
Female		0.001 (0.002)
Age		-0.002 (0.002)
Marital status		0.003 (0.002)
Education		-0.000 (0.002)
Private job		0.002 (0.002)
Public job		0.002 (0.003)
Self-employment		0.001 (0.003)
VDP membership		0.001 (0.0040)
R-squared	0.186	0.186
No. of obs.	11,030	11,030

Notes: Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01

Figure 2. Full Sample Analysis



Note: The figure plots the coefficients on the binary variables indicating experimental assignments (dots) and the 95% (thin horizontal lines) confidence intervals based on Column 1 in Table 3. For each dimension, one level is used as the baseline category.

level, underscoring the strong association between higher education and leadership selection. Candidates who have passed GCE A/L (0.049), hold a university degree (0.103), or possess a master's degree (0.088) are perceived more favorably by village residents. These results provide robust evidence supporting the importance of education in shaping community preferences for leadership, affirming Hypothesis 3. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that educational attainment enhances leaders' capacity to effectively manage resources and navigate complex social and economic challenges within rural communities (Besley et al. 2005).

Fourth, the analysis provides clear evidence regarding the impact of corruption on leadership preferences. Both small and big corruption are associated with significantly negative coefficients, -0.200 and -0.355 , respectively, at the 1% significance level. These findings suggest that village residents strongly disapprove of candidates involved in corruption, with a greater aversion to big corruption compared to small corruption. This result supports Hypothesis 4, which posits that village people favor candidates with no corruption over those engaged in corrupt practices. This result is consistent with earlier studies indicating that corruption erodes trust and undermines leaders' legitimacy, which is critical in maintaining community engagement and governance in rural settings (Olken, 2004; Banerjee et al., 2011).

In contrast, the analysis reveals a strong and positive relationship between candidates' contributions and leadership preferences. Candidates with large contributions to the com-

munity exhibit a significant coefficient of 0.302 at the 1% level, indicating that village residents highly value candidates who demonstrate tangible support for their communities. This result supports Hypothesis 5, affirming that candidates with substantial contributions are perceived as more favorable than those with no contributions. These findings align with past literature, which emphasizes the importance of visible community engagement and suggests that villagers prioritize leaders who actively invest in their well-being, reinforcing the argument that contributions serve as a critical factor in leadership selection (Pennings & Hazan, 2001).

5. Conclusion

This study provides critical insights into how rural communities in Sri Lanka evaluate key leadership attributes—gender, age, education level, prior community contributions, and corruption—in selecting their local leaders. Examining how these attributes influence leader selection, it addresses critical gaps in rural development and governance literature. The findings offer valuable insights into the role of ethical leadership and the dynamics of gender preferences with potential implications for similar socio-political contexts globally. Our experimental analysis has shown several key results. Higher education significantly enhances the likelihood of leader selection, with candidates holding advanced qualifications like university or graduate degrees being strongly favored over those with lower educational attainment. Age also plays a role, with younger candidates preferred over older ones, as perceptions of effectiveness decline with age. Corruption has a markedly negative influence, as candidates associated with minor corruption are viewed less favourably, and those linked to major corruption are strongly rejected. Prior contributions to the community positively affect leader selection, with candidates demonstrating significant contributions receiving substantial support compared to those without such records. Interestingly, gender does not show a significant impact, suggesting that male and female candidates are viewed relatively equally.

The findings of this study have important policy implications for promoting ethical and effective leadership in rural Sri Lanka. First, the strong preference for highly educated leaders underscores the need for capacity-building programs to enhance the qualifications of local council candidates. Governments and development agencies should invest in educational initiatives and leadership training tailored to rural contexts. Second, the negative impact of corruption on leader selection highlights the urgency of implementing stricter anti-corruption measures, including transparent governance mechanisms, community monitoring, and accountability systems. Third, the positive influence of prior contributions to the community suggests that policies encouraging leaders to engage actively in community devel-

opment projects can build trust and support among villagers. Fourth, the negligible impact of gender on leader selection suggests an opportunity to promote gender equality in leadership by addressing structural barriers and providing targeted support for female candidates, such as leadership mentoring programs and community awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes. These measures can collectively strengthen local governance, enhance public trust, and contribute to sustainable rural development.

While our study offers meaningful insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The research context, focused on rural Sri Lanka, may constrain the generalizability of our findings to other cultural, geographic, or socioeconomic settings. Ethical perceptions and engagement levels might vary significantly in urban areas or different regions, where factors such as economic conditions, political stability, access to resources, and cultural norms could influence community dynamics and tolerance levels. These external factors, along with variations in leadership development strategies, must be considered when interpreting the findings. Additionally, the study relies on village residents' perceptions rather than their actual experiences or actions, which could lead to discrepancies between the perceived and real impacts of leaders' behavior. Studies like Neshkova and Kaleesnikaite (2019) emphasize that perceptions differ from experiences, suggesting a need for further investigation into how unethical conduct, as an experience, influences community engagement. Future studies should expand to diverse settings, such as urban areas or communities with varying economic and cultural contexts, to test the robustness of these findings.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial and non-financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Notes

- 1) In addition to the survey, we collected various supporting documents, such as village profiles, and regulatory documents from local government offices. These additional sources of information and interviews provided us with a comprehensive understanding of the research area.
- 2) To conduct the survey efficiently, we hired several assistants from NGOs or public-related offices. These assistants underwent a one-day workshop before the survey and participated in weekly meetings throughout the survey period to ensure consistency and quality.
- 3) The comparisons at the village and gender levels underscore the similarity between our sample and the target population (Table A1 in the appendix). The alignment observed in these categories provides a substantial basis for asserting that our sample could effectively mirror the target population. This alignment serves as a substantial countermeasure against potential sample bias and bolsters our confidence in the validity of our results. Since the list of residents

provided by the divisional secretariat includes limited information, it is difficult to confirm whether our sample is consistent with the target population in terms of other residents' characteristics. While we recognize that this issue is problematic, the consistency in terms of village and gender categories at least partially justifies our claim that our sample is representative of the target population, which mitigates the possibility of sample bias.

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Appendix

Table A1

Selected villages	Target population		Males	Females	Target samples		
	Household	Adults			Total	Males	Females
Arakagoda	336	937	454	483	78	37	41
Batagoda	386	556	292	264	57	31	26
Bellanthudawa	802	2352	1071	1281	188	86	102
Boralessa	427	1190	605	585	95	47	48
Dikhenā	685	1728	821	907	135	62	73
Gungamuwa	508	1592	746	846	128	62	66
Mulkadakanda	339	928	434	494	78	41	37
Pelpola	433	1021	496	525	83	39	44
Welikala	891	2448	1252	1196	169	73	96
Weniwelpitiya	371	1091	526	565	92	42	50
Total	5178	13843	6697	7146	1103	520	583