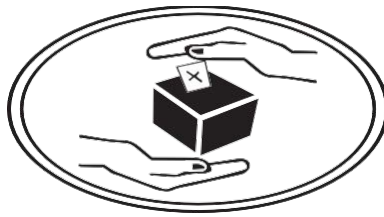


REPORT ON ALTERNATIVE AND ADVANCED VOTING MECHANISMS FOR SRI LANKA



PAFFREL

Report on Alternative and Advance Voting Mechanisms for Sri Lanka



PAFFREL

PAFFREL Publications

30 October 2025

Compiled by : Chamani Prematilake, Attorney at Law

Content

01. Introduction	3
02. Alternative and Advance Voting Mechanisms around the world	6
02.1 Understanding Alternative and Advanced Voting Mechanisms	6
02.2 Alternative and Advance Voting Systems around the World	6
03. Applicability to the Sri Lankan Context	11
03.1 History and Evolution of Sri Lankan electoral Process	11
03.2 Current SL context	12
04. Recommendations and implementations	14
04.1 Strengthening the Voting Process for In-Country Voters	14
04.1.1 Expanding Sri Lanka's Postal Voting System	14
04.1.1.1 Proposed Implementation Process	15
04.1.1.2 Implementation Challenges	16
04.1.2 Adopting a Mobile Polling Booth System	17
04.1.2.1 Implementing Mobile Polling Booth System in Sri Lanka	18
04.1.2.2 Implementation Challenges	18
04.1.3 Expanding the Polling Network Through Alternate Polling Stations	19
04.1.3.1 Implementing Alternate Polling Stations	20
04.1.3.2 Challenges	20
04.1.4 Facilitating Access to Early Voting Opportunities	21
04.1.4.1 Implementation Process	21
04.1.4.2 Challenges	21
04.2 Strategies to Support Overseas Voter Inclusion	22
04.2.1 Online and SMS Voting Systems	23
04.2.1.1 Implementing Online and SMS Voting Systems	23
04.2.1.2 Implementation Challenges	23
04.2.2 Embassy Voting	24
04.2.2.1 Implementing Voting through the Embassy System	24
04.2.2.2 Implementation Challenges	25
04.2.3 Overseas Postal Voting	26
04.2.4 Proxy Voting	27
05. Conclusion	28
05.1 Overview	28
05.2 Reform Timeline	30

01. Introduction

The ability for its citizens to freely elect their representatives, can be identified as the cornerstone of a democratic society. Historically this would indicate in person voting at designated polling stations on the day of election. However, in today's fast paced world, this model of voting is being challenged. Therefore, throughout the world, electoral reform activists, governments and electoral management bodies have been exploring alternative mechanisms of polling and advanced voting mechanisms to address the complex requirements of today's society, in order to protect the inclusivity, accessibility and integrity of elections.

Internationally, methods such as early in person voting, Postal voting and proxy voting has been used to accommodate the requirements of diverse electorates and different communities. The diaspora communities, persons with disabilities and those whose personal or employment circumstances prevent them from voting on the day of election are some of the groups who would be disenfranchised if these alternate mechanisms are not used. Using these mechanisms would also increase voter turnout, protect democracy in instances such as natural disasters or public health crises and also reduce congestion at traditional polling stations. Canada, United States and Estonia offer valuable insights following their successful implementation of these alternative mechanisms.

Sri Lanka, being the oldest democracy in Asia gained universal suffrage for all irrespective of race, ethnicity, language, or gender in 1931. Sri Lanka is home to multi ethnic, multi cultural communities with diverse needs and complexities. Whilst the country has successfully conducted elections for decades using the traditional mechanisms and one single day of election, it has posed many challenges. These challenges include disenfranchisement of several groups including communities living in remote areas without access to efficient transportation, internal and external migrant workers. The existing

advance voting facility is restricted to postal voting for the state employed essential services personnel. In this context the dialogue on electoral reform, specifically on advance voting and alternative polling mechanisms is of utmost importance to Sri Lanka.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of alternative voting mechanisms from a global perspective and assesses their potential applicability and feasibility within the Sri Lankan context. It will examine the various models of advance voting, evaluate their benefits and risks, and analyze the technological, legal, and administrative prerequisites for their successful implementation. By doing so, this report aims to contribute to the critical discourse on strengthening Sri Lanka's electoral democracy, ensuring that every citizen has a practical and secure opportunity to exercise their fundamental right to vote.

Accordingly, this report provides an analysis of alternative voting mechanisms, new trends and challenges from a global and regional perspective and assesses their applicability and feasibility within the current context in Sri Lanka. It will critically evaluate the electoral reform recommendations applicable to advance voting and alternative polling mechanisms presented by Sri Lankan civil society, led by PAFFREL and analyze the risks and challenges as well as the technological, legal and administrative requisites for their successful implementation. Ultimately, this report aims to contribute to the critical discourse on strengthening the electoral democracy of Sri Lanka to secure the fundamental right to vote of every Sri Lankan citizen.

Sri Lanka Parliamentary Election Turnout and Rejected Votes (1947-2020)¹

Election Year	Registered Voters	Total Votes Cast	Turnout (%)	Rejected Votes	Rejected (%)
1947	3,048,145	1,710,150	56.10%	44,570	2.61%
1952	2,990,912	2,114,615	70.70%	37,552	1.78%
1956	3,464,159	2,391,538	69.04%	30,683	1.28%
1960 (Mar)	3,724,507	3,041,420	81.66%	32,040	1.05%
1960 (Jul)	3,724,507	3,076,869	82.61%	22,225	0.72%
1965	4,710,887	3,821,918	81.13%	33,234	0.87%
1970	5,505,028	4,991,798	90.68%	25,828	0.52%
1977	6,667,589	6,243,573	93.64%	32,989	0.53%
1989	9,374,164	5,962,031	63.60%	365,563	6.13%
1994	10,945,065	8,344,095	76.24%	400,389	4.80%
2000	12,071,062	9,128,823	75.63%	481,155	5.27%
2001	12,428,762	9,449,813	76.03%	493,944	5.23%
2004	12,899,139	9,797,680	75.96%	534,948	5.46%
2010	14,088,500	8,630,689	61.26%	596,972	6.92%
2015	15,044,490	11,684,098	77.66%	517,123	4.43%
2020	16,263,885	12,343,392	75.89%	744,373	6.03%
Source: Sri Lanka Election Commission					

¹ PAFFREL, ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ මැතිවරණ ක්‍රියාවලිය සහ විකල්ප ඡන්ද භාවිතය:
විකල්ප ඡන්ද භාවිතයේ දේශීය ප්‍රවණතා සහ අභියෝග p18

02. Alternative and Advance Voting Mechanisms around the world

02.1 Understanding Alternative and Advanced Voting Mechanisms

Alternative and advance voting mechanisms include any formal process that allows voters to cast their ballot apart from the standard procedure of voting in person on a designated election day. These mechanisms are formulated to overcome challenges faced in traditional voting such as time, distance and issues faced due to disability, incapacity and personal or work commitments. The objectives of these systems are universally to accommodate needs of a diverse electorate, expand electoral participation, enhance the efficiency and resilience of the electoral process.

Alternative voting mechanisms include mobile / SMS voting, e-voting, providing mobile polling booths in prisons and trade zones, establishing alternate polling stations and having multiple days of election. Advance voting enables eligible voters to cast their ballots prior to the official election day through various alternative methods such as postal voting, in person voting on a day prior to the day of election for a selected group or community who would be disenfranchised by traditional voting.

02.2 Alternative and Advance Voting Systems around the World

The lack of comprehensive advance and alternative voting channels, such as postal voting for all eligible groups or mobile voting stations, leads to widespread disenfranchisement among citizens unable to participate through conventional means. Those who are quarantined, pre-trial detainees, or Sri Lankans living abroad are also notably excluded from participation in the current system, despite their entitlement to democratic engagement. Expanding advance voting methods in Sri Lanka would be essential to ensuring inclusive and equitable access to the electoral process for all voters, regardless of employment situation, physical ability, or place of residence.

In countries such as South Korea, aboard vessels, including deep-sea fishing boats and outbound passenger ships, may vote at onboard polling stations through “Shield Fax,” the Shipboard Secret Electronic Voting System.² The Maldivian embassy voting system illustrates international cooperation in democratic participation, with foreign embassies serving as polling stations for Maldivian citizens residing abroad. Specifically, the Maldivian Embassy in foreign countries operates as polling stations, with significant numbers of Maldivian voters residing internationally.³ Early voting has fundamentally redefined election participation in the US, eliminating the notion of a single, civic “election day” by providing Americans the flexibility to vote weeks in advance, either in-person or by mail. Since the 1980s, early voting rates have surged, propelled by states relaxing restrictions and the expansion of no-excuse absentee and vote-by-mail systems⁴. Canada provides early voting through advance polls, allowing any eligible voter to cast a ballot at designated polling stations on specific days before election day, as outlined in the Canada Elections Act⁵. Under the 2007 Constitution’s compulsory voting mandate, Thailand conducts advanced voting one week prior to each election, turning 2,350,969 voters (including 115,139 overseas) registered for this procedure in 2023⁶.

As documented by PAFFREL, *“nearly 60 states in the world where elections should have been held constitutionally either postponed their elections or adopted a new approach to traditional methods”* during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷

² People’s Action for Free and Fair Elections, ‘PAFFREL’s Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System’ (2021) p78, Leena Rikkilä Tamang and Antonio Spinelli, *Managing the 20th Presidential Elections under the Omicron Variant in the Republic of Korea*, Technical Paper 1/2022 (International IDEA 2022) p9

³ People’s Action for Free and Fair Elections, ‘PAFFREL’s Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System’ (2021) p78

⁴ Paul Gronke, ‘Early Voting Reforms and American Elections’ (2008) 17(2) William & Mary Bill of Rights Journal 423

⁵ André Blais, Agnieszka Dobrzynska and Peter Loewen, ‘Potential Impacts of Extended Advance Voting on Voter Turnout’ (Working Paper Series, Elections Canada, September 2007)

⁶ ANFREL, 2023 Thai General Election: Democracy at a Crossroads (ANFREL, 2023) p32

⁷ People’s Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), *An Analysis of the Postal Voting Process in Sri Lanka: A Review of the Factors that Lead to Rejection of Postal Voting Applications and Making Recommendations on this Matter* (PAFFREL 2022), Inception

Countries such as Armenia, Canada, Estonia, and Switzerland were already exercising voting using online platforms⁸. The Philippines has recently launched remote online voting exclusively for overseas Filipino citizens participating in the 2025 national elections, enabling voters abroad to cast ballots through COMELEC's secure web portal using computers or mobile devices with internet connectivity after completing digital verification and enrollment processes⁹. Internet voting was piloted at 77 overseas posts, encompassing 98% of overseas Filipino voters.¹⁰ Myanmar's mobile voting system exemplifies targeted accessibility enhancement, with election officials visiting disabled and elderly voters in their homes to facilitate advance voting.¹¹ Similarly, Afghanistan operates mobile polling stations for remand prisoners, demonstrating commitment to universal suffrage even in challenging security environments.¹²

The following table presents the global adoption rate of advanced voting mechanisms across jurisdictions¹³.

⁸ PAFFREL, ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ මැතිවරණ ක්‍රියාවලිය සහ විකල්ප ඡන්ද භාවිතය: විකල්ප ඡන්ද භාවිතයේ දේශීය ප්‍රවණතා සහ අභියෝග

⁹ <https://bernepe.dfa.gov.ph/site-administrator/announcements/1507-step-by-step-guide-on-how-to-enroll-and-vote-online>

¹⁰ ANFREL, 2025 Philippines National and Local Elections: Final Report, p 37

¹¹ People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, 'PAFFREL's Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System' (2021) 78

¹² People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, 'PAFFREL's Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System' (2021) 78

¹³ People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, 'PAFFREL's Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System' (2021) p77-78

Alternative and Advance Voting Systems	Percentage	Regional Scope
Early/Advance Voting System	35 countries globally	Worldwide
Postal Voting System	17 countries (35% of countries using alternative methods)	Worldwide
Mobile Voting System - Europe	59% adoption rate	European Region
Mobile Voting System - Asia	40% adoption rate	Asian Region
Postal Voting System - Europe	32% adoption rate	European Region
Postal Voting System - Asia	19% adoption rate	Asian Region
Postal Voting System - Africa	4% adoption rate	African Region
Postal Voting System - South America	7% adoption rate	South American Region

The following table highlights the key alternative and advanced voting mechanisms adopted globally, together with the respective target populations for each mechanism, as identified in the reform proposals submitted by PAFFREL.

Country	Key Alternative and Advanced Voting Mechanisms	Specific Implementation	Targeted Population
Thailand	Early/Advance Voting for Agricultural Workers	Farmers/workers vote day before election at designated stations	Agricultural workers, farmers and etc
South Korea	Special Maritime Voting System	Methodology for the fishing community to vote while at sea	Fishing community at sea
South Korea	Early Voting Implementation	Exercised during COVID 19	General population during pandemic
Myanmar	Mobile Voting for Disabled/Elderly	Officials visit disabled/elderly at homes for advance voting	Disabled citizens, elderly voters
Afghanistan	Mobile Voting for Prisoners	Mobile polling stations for remand prisoners	Remand prisoners
Maldives	Embassy-based Overseas Voting	Embassies serve as Maldivian polling stations	Overseas citizens/diaspora
Philippines	Overseas Online Voting	Online voting was used for the 2025 national elections	Overseas citizens
United States	State-level Absentee Voting Systems	Varies by state - multiple absentee methods available	Various categories by state
European Countries (General)	Mobile Voting Systems	59% adoption rate for mobile voting systems	General population
Asian Countries	Various Mobile Voting Approaches	40% adoption rate across Asian region	General population

Proportion of Asian Countries Using Different Voting Methods¹⁴

Alternative Voting Method	% of Total Countries (out of 48 Asian Countries)
Early/Advance Voting System	33%
Mobile Voting System	40%
Postal Voting System	19%

03. Applicability to the Sri Lankan Context

03.1 History and Evolution of Sri Lankan electoral Process

Being one of the first Asian countries to adopt universal adult suffrage in 1931, while still under the British colonial rule, Sri Lanka boasts a significantly democratic history. This early enfranchisement, which included all men and women over 21, laid a strong foundation for a vibrant, if often tumultuous, electoral tradition. After gaining independence in 1948, the country initially operated a two-party system, alternating power between the center-right United National Party (UNP) and the center-left Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), largely under a Westminster-style parliamentary model. In 1978 a major constitutional shift transformed the political system into an Executive Presidential system which concentrated a significant power in the elected president, altering the dynamics of electoral competition for decades to come.

The evolution of Sri Lanka's electoral process has also been marked by significant changes to its parliamentary voting system and a recent, dramatic political realignment. In an effort to promote broader representation and break away from the politics of ethnic and regional polarization, the country moved from a first-past-the-post system to a Proportional Representation (PR) system in 1989. While this ensured minority parties gained a voice, it also led to intra-party rivalry and

¹⁴ People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, 'PAFFREL's Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System' (2021) p78

was criticized for weakening the direct link between MPs and their constituencies. The most recent and pivotal evolution occurred in the wake of the devastating 2022 economic crisis, which triggered widespread public protests (the Aragalaya) and a profound loss of faith in the traditional political establishment. This culminated in the historic 2024 elections, which saw the landslide victory of the previously marginal National People's Power (NPP), shattering the decades-long duopoly of the SLPP and UNP and signalling a powerful public demand for "system change" and a new kind of politics.

03.2 Current SL context

Sri Lanka runs five major types of elections which include Presidential Elections, Parliamentary Elections, Referendum, Local Government Elections and Provincial Council Elections. The different election types in Sri Lanka serve to choose representatives who will represent both national and regional and local areas while determining governance at every administrative level. The Registration of Electors (Amendment) Act No. 22 OF 2021 controls voter registration in Sri Lanka through its modifications to the Registration of Electors Act No. 44 of 1980.¹⁵

Within Sri Lanka, the current electoral framework is not governed by a singular law relating to elections. There are different laws governing different elections. For example the parliamentary elections are governed by the Parliamentary Elections Act and the presidential elections by the Presidential Elections Act. These legislation offer limited alternative avenues. The only available alternate model of voting is the postal vote which is restricted to public officials, members of the armed forces, and personnel in essential services who are unable to be present at their registered polling division on election day. While this mechanism is a critical enabler for these groups, its narrow eligibility criteria mean it fails to address the needs of the wider populace. Key demographics, including the estimated two million Sri Lankans working abroad, fishermen who are away in sea during elections. internal migrant laborers, students studying away from home, and many individuals with mobility issues, remain effectively disenfranchised.

¹⁵ Registration of Electors (Amendment) Act No. 22 OF 2021

According to the Fisheries Statistics 2023 published by the Ministry of Fisheries, Sri Lanka, the number of active marine fishermen and fisherwomen was 223,490, while the fishing household population stood at 804,340 as of 2022.¹⁶ Adopting a system comparable to South Korea's shipboard electronic voting mechanism could serve to mitigate existing impediments to electoral participation faced by Sri Lanka's marine fishing population.

Data from the Department of Agriculture (2022/23), approximately 2.1 million farming families rely on agriculture as their primary livelihood¹⁷. Furthermore, 347,402 candidates applied for the Advanced Level Examination¹⁸, most being over 18 years of age and thus eligible voters, while the population aged over 60 was estimated at 3.4 million in 2020¹⁹. These figures collectively demonstrate that the introduction of early voting mechanisms would substantially improve electoral accessibility and inclusivity for these distinct demographic groups.

As of 2020, 2,455,283 Sri Lankans were officially recorded as being abroad, based on data obtained through RTI requests to the Foreign Employment Bureau. This excludes those who left during the war or through irregular means. Despite universal suffrage, the continued exclusion of this large migrant group from voting undermines democratic representation. While their remittances are crucial to the national economy, state efforts to protect their electoral rights remain limited and inadequate²⁰.

¹⁶ Ministry of Fisheries, *Fisheries Statistics 2023* (Ministry of Fisheries 2023) s 1, 4

¹⁷ Department of Agriculture Sri Lanka, Rice Research and Development Institute https://doagov.lk/rrdi_rice_introduction-2/ accessed on October 7, 2025

¹⁸ Department of Census and Statistics, Statistical Data Sheet 2024 (Department of Census and Statistics 2024)

¹⁹ World Health Organization, *Sri Lanka: Ageing and Health* (WHO 2023) https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/searo/ageing-and-health/sri-lanka.pdf?sfvrsn=c8ab77dc_3 accessed October 7, 2025

²⁰ PAFFREL, ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ මැතිවරණ ක්‍රියාවලිය සහ විකල්ප ඡන්ද භාවිතය: විකල්ප ඡන්ද භාවිතයේ දේශීය ප්‍රවණතා සහ අභියෝග p34

Category	Current Status	Potential Impact	Implementation Challenge
Disenfranchised Voters	Nearly 2 million unable to vote on election day	Major democratic participation gap	Complex logistics for broad coverage
Private Security Personnel	Not covered under current system	Large workforce requiring coverage	Employer cooperation needed
Public Transportation Workers	Not covered under current system	Essential service workers need access	Coordination with transport companies
Healthcare Sector Workers	Limited coverage (emergency extension in 2020)	Critical during health emergencies	Integration with health system needed
Hospitalized Patients	Not covered under current system	Vulnerable population needs support	Medical verification processes
Urban Workers	Not covered under current system	Growing urban workforce needs access	Workplace coordination required
Essential Services Workers	Partially covered if government employees	Essential for election integrity	Identification and verification systems
Election Observers	Not systematically covered	Important for transparency	Accreditation and registration systems

04. Recommendations and implementations

04.1 Strengthening the Voting Process for In-Country Voters

04.1.1 Expanding Sri Lanka's Postal Voting System

The expansion of Sri Lanka's postal voting system to include private sector workers and essential service providers represents a necessary reform, which civil society organisations, independent election monitors and policy reports have consistently advocated for²¹. In Sri Lanka, postal voting is granted to certain government officers and employees, including the armed forces, officers and employees of the Sri Lanka Police,

²¹ PAFFREL, 'Proposals for Electoral Law Reforms' (Proposals submitted to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Sri Lanka's Electoral Law Reforms, 14 July 2021) 14

Department of Prisons, Sri Lanka Railways, Department of Posts, Department of Telecommunications, Sri Lanka Central Transport Board, and Regional Transport Boards, etc. It also extends to those employed in public service or by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, who are likely to be engaged in election duties on polling day.²² The voting rights remain inaccessible to essential private sector workers who include factory personnel in free trade zones, healthcare staff at private hospitals, security personnel, retail and logistics staff, tourism, hospitality and communication sector employees²³.

The present voting system creates substantial obstacles for essential private sector workers to exercise their voting rights. The existing statutory voting leave policy provides insufficient time for workers who maintain extended shifts at distant locations from their designated polling stations. ANFREL documented that thousands of workers in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zones, including those in Katunayake, Biyagama, Wattupitiwala, and Mirigama, were unable to vote in recent elections due to their inability to return to registered areas²⁴. The voting process becomes unappealing to people who need to travel extensive distances if election day does not match their weekly rest days.

04.1.1.1 Proposed Implementation Process

Reforms should enable private sector employees to apply for postal or advance voting in a process similar to that used for public officers by submitting a certified application, ideally through their employer, with reasonable timelines before the election. The application process should be made more user-friendly, possibly with digital options, standardised forms, and clear, accessible instructions.

Deadlines should be sufficient to allow corrections and resubmissions, reducing rejections due to technical or procedural errors, which have been a major problem in existing practice. Also, the options may include delivering ballots directly to the private sector

²² PAFFREL, 'An Analysis of the Postal Voting Process in Sri Lanka: A Review of the Factors that Lead to Rejection of Postal Voting Applications and Making Recommendations on this Matter - 2022' (compiled by Manjula Gajanayakage, PAFFREL 2022) p4

²³ Introducing Advance Voting for Sri Lankan Elections' (Democracy Reporting International, Briefing Paper 110, September 2020)

²⁴ Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), *ANFREL-SL-Parliamentary-Elections Interim-Report* (2024) 20

workplace, a secure postal address, or via drop-off depots, ensuring ease of access and reliability.

04.1.1.2 Implementation Challenges

The system has remained unchanged since the 1940s, resulting in frequent technical and procedural errors such as incorrect or incomplete forms, missing signatures, and a lack of proper certification, which collectively led to the rejection of over 51,000 applications in the 2020 Parliamentary Election. In reducing the rate of rejected votes in advance voting, it is essential that relevant institutions conduct comprehensive voter education campaigns in partnership with organisations advocating for electoral reforms.

Additionally, applicants receive no opportunity to correct mistakes due to short windows between application and polling, resulting in further disenfranchisement. Also, the resource demands on administrators are high, costs are rising, and many issued postal ballots remain unmarked, reducing effective participation²⁵.

It also includes increased risks of voter intimidation, various forms of electoral fraud, and potential loss or damage of voting materials. The framework must guarantee secrecy, transparency, and integrity on par with in-person voting to maintain public trust; failure in these areas can erode confidence in election outcomes. It is essential to prioritise robust legal safeguards and voter education, while ensuring that policy decisions remain free of political influence.²⁶

The Election Commission's expenditure on postal voting, currently estimated between LKR 6,000 to 10,000 million per election²⁷, could see a significant increase if eligibility for postal voting is expanded. This potential rise in costs would likely necessitate the

²⁵ PAFFREL, 'An Analysis of the Postal Voting Process in Sri Lanka: A Review of the Factors that Lead to Rejection of Postal Voting Applications and Making Recommendations on this Matter - 2022' (compiled by Manjula Gajanayakage, PAFFREL 2022)

²⁶ 'Introducing Advance Voting for Sri Lankan Elections' (Democracy Reporting International, Briefing Paper 110, September 2020)

²⁷ People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, 'PAFFREL's Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System' (2021) p81

reallocation of funds from other election related functions or an additional budgetary provision. Furthermore, according to the Election Commission, a total of 21,160 postal voting applications were rejected for the 2024 General Parliamentary Election. Despite the existing limitations of the system, this rejection rate highlights the challenges in processing applications, indicating that expanding eligibility could exacerbate these issues significantly.

04.1.2 Adopting a Mobile Polling Booth System

Mobile voting booths represent an effective solution for Sri Lanka to serve voters who face challenges reaching traditional polling stations due to health issues, mobility problems, geographic location or work obligations. During 2024 Parliamentary elections, through its International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), with 30 observers to all 22 electoral districts, ANFREL noted serious challenges that limited effective voting by vulnerable groups. This included essential workers, people with disabilities, and those living in institutional care.²⁸ The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) noted that some quarantined voters were directly enquired about their ability to vote, which raised concerns about how accessible and inclusive the electoral process was during the COVID-19 pandemic²⁹.

Therefore, mobile polling units could serve as vehicles and temporary facilities to enable voting access for residents in distant villages, hospitals, elderly care facilities, quarantine centres, pre-trial detainees and people with severe disabilities³⁰.

Mobile ballot boxes are predominantly used in Europe with 26 countries (59%) implementing this system, showing the highest adoption rate globally compared to other continents. The distribution varies significantly within Europe, with Eastern Europe leading at 90% adoption, Northern Europe at 62%, Southern Europe at 42%, while Western

²⁸ Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), *ANFREL-SL-Parliamentary-Elections_Interim-Report* (2024) 7, 20

²⁹ Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV), *2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary General Election: Election Observation Report* (2020) 26

³⁰ PAFFREL, 'Proposals for Electoral Law Reforms' (Proposals submitted to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Sri Lanka's Electoral Law Reforms, 14 July 2021)

Europe has minimal usage with only Austria permitting mobile ballot boxes among Western European nations³¹.

04.1.2.1 Implementing Mobile Polling Booth System in Sri Lanka

When it comes to Sri Lanka, it would deliver the most significant benefits to voters living in rural estates/areas, urban slum communities, hospitalised patients, institutional residents, workers at shift-based factories and remote work sites. Election officials who bring sealed voting materials under tight security to designated sites can enable pre-registered voters to cast their ballots near their residences or care facilities. The returned ballots from mobile voting sites would consolidate with standard ballots at respective district counting facilities.

04.1.2.2 Implementation Challenges

The nationwide implementation of mobile voting booths needs specific legal frameworks, detailed operational plans and strict security measures to prevent fraud. The system faces three main obstacles, which include protecting ballot secrecy, maintaining voting integrity & managing complex mobile team operations and maintaining accurate voter lists with real-time data to stop duplicate voting attempts.

The existing administrative network of Sri Lanka across challenging areas makes mobile voting booths a highly practical solution. The system would enable thousands of disenfranchised citizens who stay in hospitals or work or face legal restrictions to vote through proper funding which eliminates their need for difficult travel or administrative obstacles. The establishment of this system would demonstrate Sri Lanka's commitment to democratic inclusion and trust in elections while following international standards for accessible voting.

³¹ 'Modernising Voting: Mobile Voting' (UK Electoral Commission)
<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/modernising-voting-flexible-voting-feasibility-studies/modernising-voting-mobile-voting>

04.1.3 Expanding the Polling Network Through Alternate Polling Stations

The establishment of alternate polling stations on Election Day, permitting voters to cast their ballots at sites within their electoral districts of employment, would constitute a substantive measure to address the longstanding disenfranchisement of Sri Lanka's mobile and shift-based workforce. Unlike the current system, which restricts voting to one's residential polling division, this reform would enable employees of factories, private security services, hospitals, and other continuous-operation institutions to vote at a conveniently located alternate station within the same district, irrespective of the divergence between their home and workplace³².

Having considered the views expressed by the Election Commission, registered political parties, and key stakeholder organisations, the Parliament Select Committee considered the creation of supplementary polling stations within each electoral district³³. These stations shall serve those who are unable to vote at their designated polling station on the day of the election including;

1. Essential service personnel, including healthcare workers, airport and highway staff, water and electricity suppliers, and customs officials - whose duties preclude travel to their designated polling places on election day, and who do not qualify for postal voting.
2. Accredited observers and their representatives similarly constrained by operational commitments.
3. Employees of investment zones, media outlets, pharmacies, the tourism sector (including hotels and restaurants), and supermarkets, as well as domestic workers residing at locations distant from their assigned polling stations.

³² People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, 'PAFFREL's Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System' (2021) p80

³³ Parliamentary Publication Series No 175, *Ninth Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (Second Session), Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee to Identify Reforms in the Structure and Rules of Elections and Polling and to Propose Necessary Amendments in this Regard*, submitted by the Hon Dinesh Gunawardena (Chairman of the Committee) p14

4. Voters with mobility impairments who cannot access their registered polling places.

04.1.3.1 Implementing Alternate Polling Stations

The Sri Lankan government needs to pass a minor yet essential law which enables the Election Commission to create special polling stations for voters who work away from their home stations according to their employer verification. The Election Commission would receive lists of qualified staff from company HR departments and union representatives before election day. The creation of special voter lists would enable employees to receive directions to polling stations which are situated near their workplace. The voting stations would receive additional security measures and dedicated personnel and strict identification protocols on Election Day to stop fraudulent activities and duplicate voting through digital electoral roll verification.

04.1.3.2 Challenges

The system faces challenges which involve maintaining data accuracy, achieving real time synchronization between employer submitted lists, the central voter register and implementing effective age and identity verification processes at non-standard voting sites. The certification process faces risks from employers who might issue improper certifications which could be addressed through election observer random checks with severe penalties and audit systems. The facilities management team must ensure that the substitute centres provide proper accessibility and sufficient staff and security measures particularly when located in industrial areas or healthcare facilities.

The program will continue to encounter these obstacles until high-demand districts finish their strategic planning and test their programs in stages before expanding across the nation. The voting rights restoration would create a major effect as it would allow essential workers who need to work during elections to vote without risking their employment.

Also, the system would deliver the most benefits to women working in garment factories, shift nurses and security guards who would become more active participants in the electoral process. Employers and unions engaged in discussions to create an updated voting system which modern inclusive democracies require while making sure all citizens can vote without restrictions based on employment or residence.

04.1.4 Facilitating Access to Early Voting Opportunities

In Sweden, early voting allows any eligible voter to cast their ballot at designated early voting locations, such as libraries, shops, schools, or public offices, starting 18 days before election day, without needing to provide a specific reason. Voters may vote at any approved site nationwide, and sometimes more than 40% of Swedish voters used this highly accessible and flexible system.³⁴

04.1.4.1 Implementation Process

In each electoral district, a designated number of polling stations may be kept open for several days prior to Election Day, allowing voters who know they will be unable to attend their polling station on the official day, owing to work obligations, personal commitments, or other justifiable reasons to cast their ballots after completing early registration. This operational arrangement ensures that eligible voters facing scheduling or logistical conflicts can participate in the electoral process without being excluded due to their inability to be physically present on Election Day³⁵.

04.1.4.2 Challenges

Early voting requires amendments to existing statutes and greater administrative resources for successful implementation. However, the challenges extend beyond legal and logistical adjustments. One key issue could be the potential for early voters to miss important political information, campaign developments, or late breaking issues that emerge closer to Election Day, which could affect their decisions. Furthermore, some researches indicate that increasing the

³⁴ 'What characteristics affect early voting? The case of Sweden, John Högström1, *European Consortium for Political Research 2020*

³⁵ PAFFREL, 'Proposals for Electoral Law Reforms' (Proposals submitted to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Sri Lanka's Electoral Law Reforms, 14 July 2021)

number of early voting locations is directly associated with higher participation, underscoring the importance of broad, accessible infrastructure for early voting to fulfill its inclusivity promise³⁶.

04.2 Strategies to Support Overseas Voter Inclusion

04.2.1 Online and SMS Voting Systems

The first internet voting pilot in Switzerland took place in January 2003 at Anières which is a small Geneva commune after conducting thorough research on legal aspects, technological and social system evaluation. The subsequent growth of online voting systems introduced Basel-Stadt as a canton which granted voting rights to its citizens who resided outside the canton. This development established a new phase of expanded voting accessibility. The Swiss federal government enabled online voting for citizens from twelve cantons during the November 2010 federal ballot³⁷.

Recently, the Philippines has launched internet-based online voting for overseas Filipinos who want to participate in the 2025 national elections. The online enrollment process allows eligible voters to get secure access to the COMELEC (The Commission on Elections) online voting portal through their computer or mobile device with internet connection after digital verification. Voters access the voting portal on election day to verify their identity electronically before making their selections online and receiving confirmation of their vote through the web platform. The registration process requires SMS notifications or OTPs for identity verification purposes, although actual voting is not conducted by SMS³⁸.

Although nearly one million voters completed registration, actual participation remained significantly below anticipated levels, notwithstanding COMELEC's extension of the enrolment period.³⁹ The Philippines has studied SMS voting through research projects but

³⁶ PAFFREL, 'Proposals for Electoral Law Reforms' (Proposals submitted to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Sri Lanka's Electoral Law Reforms, 14 July 2021)

³⁷ Alexander H. Trechsel and Urs Gasser, 'Casting Votes on the Internet: Switzerland and the Future of Elections' (2013) 34(4) Harvard International Review 53

³⁸ 'Step-by-Step Guide on How to Enroll and Vote Online'

³⁹ ANFREL, 2025 Philippines National and Local Elections: Final Report, p 73

it has not implemented this method for national government elections.. The Philippines has tested these concepts but they do not function as part of its official overseas voting system.

04.2.1.1 Implementing Online and SMS Voting Systems

These two methods would establish better voting access for rural residents, workers abroad, factory employees who work shifts, and healthcare staff who cannot visit standard polling stations due to their location, work requirements, or disabilities. The mobile channels would maintain their operational capacity during emergency situations such as pandemics and natural disasters, thus protecting democratic processes.

The successful operation of Sri Lanka's system requires established dispute resolution methods and scheduled audit protocols and specific laws which define both fraud detection procedures and technical system failure management.

04.2.1.2 Implementation Challenges

Both online and SMS voting systems face different obstacles during their implementation. The main security issue requires sophisticated encryption methods, robust identity authentication systems and continuous cyber surveillance to defend against hacking attempts, vote manipulation and impersonation attacks. The security of Online/SMS voting depends on stable network connections, yet remains exposed to SIM card fraud and delayed message delivery while online voting requires dependable internet access and voter proficiency with digital systems. The systems need to solve two major problems which involve protecting voter privacy and ensuring result auditability through methods that protect ballot secrecy in uncontrolled spaces and enable vote verification and recounting. The success of digital and mobile voting depends on public education because some citizens who lack technical skills need extensive multilingual outreach programs to learn how to use these systems.

The introduction of secure SMS or online voting systems would lead to major benefits including increased voting participation from absent and underrepresented groups, lower election expenses, quicker election results and easier vote counting. Sri Lanka has the

potential to lead the region in modern democratic processes through secure system design and robust legal frameworks and sustained security funding and public awareness initiatives.

However, it should be also noted that SMS or online voting systems present a major risk as they could diminish the sense of importance and civic responsibility that comes with voting. The traditional voting process at polling stations creates a collective atmosphere which makes elections seem important and builds public involvement and social unity between citizens. Remote voting convenience might diminish voter perception of election importance as people may view ballot casting as an ordinary digital or text based process instead of a significant civic practice. Further, online voting has lost its credibility in South Asia following the misuse of the system during 2025 Indian elections which resulted in challenging the integrity and independence of the Indian Election Commission.

04.2.2 Embassy Voting

Approximately 55 countries globally using personal voting at diplomatic missions as their primary out-of-country voting method⁴⁰. The Maldives operates embassy voting in countries with sizeable populations, including Sri Lanka, India, and Malaysia, where they establish polling stations when there are over 150 registered voters.⁴¹ Embassy voting serves as a secure alternative to postal voting while providing greater accessibility than requiring voters to return to their home country. The PAFFREL indicates this as a widely accepted international practice for enabling overseas citizen participation in democratic processes⁴².

04.2.2.1 Implementing Voting through the Embassy System

The implementation of the embassy voting mechanism necessitates significant amendments to the existing electoral legislation to accommodate provisions for external voting. PAFFREL has

⁴⁰ International IDEA, Voting from Abroad: The International IDEA Handbook (International IDEA 2007) p7

⁴¹ International Foundation for Electoral Systems, Election FAQs: Maldives Parliamentary Election, April 21, 2024 Asia-Pacific p5

⁴² People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, 'PAFFREL's Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System' (2021) p78

recommended that, as part of a comprehensive electoral reform initiative, “overseas polling centres” and “polling centres located in proximity to workplaces” be established to enhance accessibility and promote broader voter participation.⁴³

The legislative framework must also comprehensively address several critical components to ensure the integrity and effective administration of embassy voting. First, clear and objective criteria for voter eligibility and registration must be established, accompanied by streamlined procedures that account for the practical circumstances and legal status of citizens residing abroad. Second, specific legal provisions must be enacted to guarantee ballot security and transmission, ensuring that the preparation, distribution, and return of ballots through diplomatic channels are conducted with codified safeguards against tampering, duplication, or loss. Finally, legislative clarity is required regarding the authority and responsibilities of embassy and consular staff engaged in electoral activities, including the establishment of mandatory training requirements to ensure procedural compliance, neutrality, and accountability throughout the overseas voting process.

Additionally, the implementation of embassy voting requires careful consideration of both infrastructural needs and procedural frameworks to ensure the credibility and smooth operation of the process. Embassy premises must be appropriately adapted to function as polling stations, equipped with secure ballot boxes, standardised voting booths, and adequate facilities to guarantee voter privacy and accessibility. These modifications must, however, be undertaken in a manner that upholds diplomatic protocol requirements and ensures the continued security and operational integrity of the embassy environment.

04.2.2.2 Implementation Challenges

One of the primary challenges in implementing embassy voting lies in securing the permission and cooperation of host countries. Diplomatic missions are required to engage in complex negotiations with host governments to obtain authorisation for conducting electoral activities within embassy or consular premises. Such arrangements must balance respect for the host country’s sovereignty with the sending state’s obligation to facilitate the electoral rights of its citizens abroad, necessitating clear bilateral agreements and adherence to international diplomatic conventions.

⁴³ People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, 'PAFFREL's Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System' (2021) p77

Embassy voting also presents substantial operational challenges concerning capacity, accessibility, and the equitable allocation of resources. Notably, it has been observed that a significant proportion of Sri Lankan citizens residing abroad belong to the category of unskilled migrant workers, many of whom are employed as domestic workers or drivers⁴⁴. This demographic reality underscores the importance of designing an overseas voting mechanism that accommodates the practical constraints faced by these groups, particularly in relation to travel distance, working hours, and access to embassy facilities. Also, the time zone coordination poses a logistical challenge, requiring the synchronisation of electoral activities conducted simultaneously across multiple jurisdictions.

With regard to embassy staff, specialized registration and voting procedures are required to account for their distinct employment conditions and frequent mobility. While the eligibility criteria for embassy staff voting generally align with those applicable to other overseas voters, additional considerations arise due to the nature of diplomatic postings. Registration mechanisms must accommodate frequent relocations between missions and ensure the continuity of voter registration across different jurisdictions without administrative disruption.

Furthermore, embassy staff voting procedures must maintain a clear separation between their facilitative responsibilities in managing overseas voting operations and their participation as individual voters. To preserve impartiality and avoid potential conflicts of interest, embassy personnel should not serve simultaneously as polling officials and voters within the same electoral process. Accordingly, administrative arrangements should provide for the complete separation of embassy staff voting from public voting activities, including the possibility of conducting staff voting at distinct times or locations to safeguard the integrity and transparency of the overall electoral process.

04.2.3 Overseas Postal Voting

Finland implemented overseas postal voting in 2017 after a 15-year lobbying and preparation process, aimed at enhancing ballot access for the 250,000 Finnish citizens abroad (5.6% of all eligible voters in 2019). Initially considered undesirable due to concerns about removing voting from official oversight and potentially compromising electoral system integrity, the reform ultimately represented a calculated tradeoff where legislators

⁴⁴ People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, 'PAFFREL's Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System' (2021) p79

determined that improved citizen access outweighed potential risks to ballot secrecy. To address secrecy concerns, Finland adopted a distinctive witness requirement, whereby two witnesses must attest that voting was conducted properly, essentially serving as proxies for absent electoral officials⁴⁵.

Finland's witness-based postal voting model presents significant implementation challenges as the system would require reliable international mail delivery to millions of Sri Lankan overseas workers, raising concerns about postal service consistency across diverse host countries, and the Sri Lankan migrants work in isolated conditions with limited social networks and restricted mobility, making it challenging to secure two trustworthy witnesses. Additionally, the model cannot adequately ensure genuine witness presence during voting or guarantee freedom from undue influence, particularly concerning, given the vulnerable employment circumstances of much of Sri Lanka's overseas workforce.

04.2.4 Proxy Voting

Countries such as France have traditionally practised proxy voting, making this mechanism available to any voter unable to cast their ballot at their designated precinct. However, international electoral monitoring organisations have raised significant concerns regarding this practice. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has consistently recommended that France to cancel proxy voting due to its potential compromise of vote secrecy, noting that this practice fails to uphold OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ Marjukka Weide, 'Practicing Ballot Secrecy: Postal Voting and the Witness Requirement at the 2019 Finnish Elections' (2021) *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 1, 22 July 2021

⁴⁶ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *France Presidential Election, 10 and 24 April 2022: ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report* (ODIHR 2022)

05. Conclusion

05.1 Overview

For Sri Lanka, the expansion of advance voting presents both an urgent necessity and a strategic opportunity. While the current postal voting system has successfully enabled 648,000 public sector employees to participate in elections, the exclusion of private sector workers, people with disabilities, overseas citizens, and other vulnerable groups creates significant democratic deficits that undermine the principle of universal franchise. The comparative analysis reveals that Sri Lanka's advance voting provisions lag considerably behind international standards, with countries like Sweden achieving over 40% early voting participation and the United States fundamentally redefining electoral engagement through flexible voting options.

Further, there have been several parliamentary committees and three cabinet papers on electoral reform presented by various members of parliament to the cabinet throughout Sri Lankan history.

The parliamentary select committee to identify appropriate reforms of the Election laws and the electoral system and to recommend necessary amendments chaired by Hon. Dinesh Gunawardene MP, in its final reports suggested ;

1. Amending election rules to expand voting access for three key groups who cannot reach their designated polling stations, as follows;
 - Essential Service & Other Employees: Allow postal voting for employees in essential services (healthcare, airports, utilities, customs, etc.), observer organizations, investment zones, media, tourism, and other sectors who are ineligible under the current postal vote system.
 - Employees Working Far From Home: Enable the setup of alternate polling centers in the electoral district where they work. This would apply to domestic servants, hotel staff, and other workers who live far from their registered polling station.

- Immobile and Institutionalized Individuals: Facilitate voting for hospital patients, people in quarantine or long-term care, completely immobile voters, and remand prisoners by setting up mobile polling stations that can come to them.
- 2. Introduction of an electronic voting system with a view to reducing considerably the heavy expenditure incurred by the Election Commission for the manpower during elections and averting any delays in releasing election results whilst preserving the secrecy of the ballot and public confidence on election process.

Among the cabinet papers presented to the parliament, the paper presented in 2023 resulted in a Gazette dated November 02nd issued by then president, Hon. Ranil Wickramasinghe, appointing a committee to inquire into the following;

- Provide an opportunity for electronic voting using modern technology instead of the printed ballot paper.
- Provide facilities for voting by Sri Lankans in overseas.
- Provide an opportunity for voters serving in Public Corporations/ State Owned Enterprises/ Private Sector, who are engaged in provision of election related services on election day, to use postal voting.

In July, 2024 this committee appointed by the aforementioned Gazette, chaired by former Chief Justice Priyasad Dep presented a final report of the committee proposing, among other recommendations ;

- the introduction of a system where migrant voters and those in the foreign service attached to diplomatic missions can vote.
- Recommending an advanced voting system for the disabled and those with special needs

However, these recommendations have not yet been implemented.

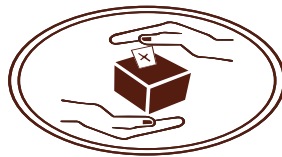
The next chapter discusses the reforms proposed by PAFFREL categorized as immediate, medium- and long-term reforms. It is important to note that Presidential elections offer a unique opportunity for implementing internal reforms since the whole country is

considered as one electorate. Therefore, implementing reforms would incur minimal logistical and financial preparations.⁴⁷

05.2 Reform Timeline

Phase	Key Reforms Objectives	Target Population	Implementation and Challenges
Immediate Reforms	Expand postal voting to essential private sector workers	Essential private sector workers	Address most pressing disenfranchisement issues
	Establish mobile ballot box systems	Remote populations	Build institutional capacity
	Create alternate polling stations	Institutionalised populations	Implement within existing electoral districts
		Shift workers	
	Casting vote through the embassy	Overseas citizens	Securing the permission of the host country, arrangements for unskilled migrant workers, specialised voting procedures for embassy staff
		Embassy staff	
Medium term Goals	Pilot secure online voting for overseas citizens	Overseas citizens	Follow successful models from Philippines and other regions
			Balance accessibility and security
	Explore SMS based voting	Overseas and local citizens	Address convenience and civic engagement tensions
			Maintain technological innovation and democratic integrity
Longterm Objective	Establish Sri Lanka as regional leader in electoral accessibility	All eligible citizens	Implement universal, secure, multichannel advanced and alternative voting systems
			Guarantee fundamental voting rights for every eligible citizen
			Become global exemplar in electoral accessibility

⁴⁷ People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, 'PAFFREL's Proposal to the Parliamentary Select Committee for Reforms to the Electoral System' (2021) p78



PAFFREL

No.16, Byrde Place, Off Pamankada Rd, Colombo 06, Sri Lanka.

Tel: 0112558570/11 Fax: 0112558572

Web: www.paffrel.lk