

DO POLL SURVEYS IMPACT THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

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Attorney-General of India Soli Sorabjee should be credited for poll-eve surveys galore (over two dozen) in 2004. For by advising the Government that banning exit polls and pre-poll surveys amounts to violation of Article 19 (a), he facilitated a free for all for polls. But Sorabjee rightly argued earlier at the Supreme

Court that allowing political ads (although of acrimonious/surrogate types) on TV amounts to "distorting the electoral process". How can they be viewed differently. Is it not the case with polls too!

The all-party meeting held on April 6th at the instance of the Election Commission reached a consensus to the effect that exit polls could be broadcast only after all the phases of voting were over. While there was no ambiguity in this regard on exit polls, the outcome on pre-poll surveys was not clear. One view was that pre-poll surveys should not be carried by the media after the Election Commission issues a notification. However, it is not clear whether it is the first notification announcing the elections or the second notification with actual schedule of polling. The other view was that pre-poll surveys should not be carried in the media once campaigning comes to an end 48 hours before the polling.

But in a staggered poll schedule across 4 or 5 phases, which should be the cutoff point for stopping media, use of pre-poll survey 2004 offers new insights. We can now take a dispassionate view of the role of poll surveys.

Going by its experience of 1999, the Election Commission did not take chances towards bringing

some order. For, consensus at an all-party meeting does not amount to a legal sanction. That is how the EC wanted the Government to promulgate an ordinance immediately empowering the Commission. But even after that an Ordinance would have been questioned on the same lines as in 1999.

That would not have put an end to the controversy on media coverage of poll surveys. The applicability under Sections 126 and 132 of the Representation of People's Act in this regard is yet to be pursued by the Election



Commission. The Election Commission should have at least come up with some "guidelines" before the first phase of 2004 polls.

THE IMPERATIVES OF SURVEYS

Notwithstanding the debate, poll-eve surveys have become part of the poll process and they have come to stay. In fact, they could help enhance the quality of poll campaigns. The proposed restriction is on media coverage of the results of such surveys, even before voting

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is complete everywhere. The need is even more in 2004 for three reasons: first, proliferation of television news channels across the country; second, increased competitiveness in the very contests and, third, such poll surveys are not necessarily objective but could be part of party campaigns as seen recently.

Presenting findings of exit poll and even pre-poll surveys in the midst of a poll schedule could be misleading. Certain hype in the coverage of exit polls by TV channels, even before the completion of a staggered poll schedule, may vitiate the poll process by influencing undecided voters in the remaining phases in whatever direction or extent it may be. The Attorney-General's idea of a "regulatory mechanism" in this regard is interesting, but it can not be outside the purview of the Election Commission. In the interest of free and fair elections some guidelines, more by way of self-discipline are desirable, both for the media and polling agencies. For both "freedom of speech and expression," as well as holding of "free and fair polls," are paramount for a vibrant democracy. Proliferation of poll-eve surveys of all kinds are just like surrogate ads.

Do poll surveys influence voting choice. This basic issue is nevertheless relevant to pursue. Does avoiding media coverage of poll surveys in between polling phases imply curbing fundamental rights? Since these issues are raised at every election time, and since polling for the general election will continue to be a staggered affair over two or more phases, we need to understand the pros and cons of media coverage of poll surveys in between the phases. But there cannot be any dispute that, for a vibrant democracy, both freedom of information and free and fair elections under Article 324, are as important, and neither can be sacrificed for the other.

JOINING THE 'LIKELY WINNER'

If poll surveys, both pre-poll and exit poll, have no influence on voters and campaigns, why are so many of them being highlighted in the news media? And why are political parties conducting or sponsoring them at various times and getting them covered (by whatever means) and even hyped in the news media? And why are political parties quick to debunk survey findings

when not in their favour? The more the gap between the phases, the higher the scope of their use for electoral advantage.

To maximize influence, often poll surveys are being presented as if they are independent or objective without even giving minimal information about methodology, sponsorship and giving those findings which are advantageous to a particular candidate/party at that point of time. That being the case, a rethink on media coverage of poll surveys in between the phases of a staggered poll is called for in the interest of free and fair polls.

My analysis of field surveys for over 30 years, both for Lok Sabha and Assemblies, amply indicates that two to five per cent of voters eventually end up voting for the "likely winner", notwithstanding their initial intention prior to actual casting of vote.

That is what "bandwagon" effect is all about. That is when party workers and voters may change their voting preference from one to another party (or candidate) closer to the voting day.

This is based on their perception of the poll scene and about the "likely winner".

Such perceptions get accumulated in the minds of voters based on the poll campaign and its coverage in the news media. Otherwise why are news media often accused of "trying to influence" the outcome of a poll overtly (by openly endorsing) or covertly (by preferential coverage in terms of time/space). Post-poll studies recently have indicated that the percentage of voters who decide

closer to the polling day are on the increase.

Choice in Indian elections is not based on any single factor, or always on individual voter's assessment. Family and community often matter in the choice. This is true not only in the case of certain weaker sections or minorities, but also in the case of relatively well off or powerful communities (as in the case of Jats). News media by the extent and nature of their coverage of election campaigns facilitates voting decisions one way or other, and that cannot be objected to - as long as objectivity and transparency are ensured in that process.

'DECEPTIVE' COVERAGE

Political parties also try to use poll surveys to pep up

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the morale of their cadres, and demoralize the cadres and campaigns of the rivals. In that process some voters may "migrate" from one party or candidate to another. Depending upon the keenness of the contests, the effect may be decisive when the difference is marginal. Another aspect that needs to be taken note of is increasing competitiveness in the contests in more and more constituencies. The margin of victory has been on the decline in more constituencies now than ever before. As such a marginal shift in votes is good enough to change the fortunes of a particular candidate/party. The issue here is about "deceptive" or "innocent" coverage of poll surveys in the media.

Pre-poll surveys, nevertheless, have good potential to improve the quality of poll campaigns. But have they? And to what extent? Campaigns continue to be personality-centred, accusation-oriented, and acrimonious. Simultaneously, party manifestos have lost their seriousness and significance. No wonder pre-poll surveys are more concerned about bringing out who wins or loses, or the seats they are likely to get, rather than the undercurrents and the linkage to voting behaviour. More recently, however, some political parties have been using pre-poll surveys to strategize their campaign and make it more focused and localized. But to understand voter behaviour and changing trends in the process, we need independent field surveys at various times before an election, including exit polls and post-poll surveys. We need compatible data from time series studies.

SNUFFING OUT MOTIVATION

Despite proliferation of news media and their reach in recent years, and efforts made by some of them to motivate voters to go out and cast their vote, what difference have they made on the percentage of voter turnout? Curiously, voter turnout has remained more or less at the same level in the last couple of decades. In fact, there is a decline in some pockets where voters are exposed to news media more intensely.

While prominently promoting pre-poll surveys in 2004, some channels maintained that their poll was "definitive," and that voters see the evening programme "for the results of next months" election. If the

outcome of a poll is a "foregone conclusion", as news media often tend to make out with poll surveys, where is the motivation for voters to go and cast their vote? Frankly this aspect had not occurred to me until eminent editor Girilal Jain posed it some 20 years ago.

Is that the reason why voter turnout has not been increasing despite dramatic change in the demographics of voters, proliferation of news media, and also in the number of poll surveys recently? And to what extent do they empower voters with objective information? Can one say that the media hype of poll surveys does not enthuse and enlighten voters to go out and vote? This aspect needs to be pondered over as we are inundated with poll surveys these days.

Given the peculiar poll and political dynamics in India, and fast changing loyalties and stand of leaders and parties, drawing parallels with other countries as to the relevance of surveys is not pertinent. And, concluding that any change in voter behaviour is "difficult to prove and in any case (effects) are minimal" is mischievous. For, evidence for any effect or otherwise is possible only when specially designed studies for that are carried out within the country to trace voting behaviour at various points of a poll campaign.

A CMS post-poll survey in 1996 indicated that pre-poll surveys do influence voting preferences, although neither similarly or uniformly across a State, or even within a constituency. Even post-poll surveys carried out by CSDS have indications to that effect.

We need more such research.

The issue is not merely a question of relevance or reliability of poll surveys, but about the very intention of surveys whose findings are often hyped as independent or objective, and as if more the size of the sample, the more reliable they are.

Media coverage of poll surveys, both pre-poll and exit poll, in between the phases of a staggered schedule, need to be viewed from the point of view of a free and fair election.

We need to reposition poll-eve surveys in the media much beyond the who wins or loses aspect. They are hyped by the media to sustain themselves in the new competitive scenario, vitiating a free and fair electoral process.

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