

Media hype of poll surveys – How much do they empower voters?

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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 if they are independent or objective and as if more the size of sample, the more reliable they are. The issue of media coverage of poll surveys, both pre-poll and exit poll, in between the phases of a staggered schedule, needs to be viewed from the point of view of a free and fair election.

ATTORNEY-General of India Soli Sorabjee should be credited for poll-eve surveys in 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 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 cake with polls too! The all-party meeting held on 6th April 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 are 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 once 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 after 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 surveys? 2004 offers new insights. Now that the campaign phase is over we can take a dispassionate view of role of poll surveys.

Going by its experience of 1999, the Election Commission did not take chance 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 Ordinance would have been questioned on the same lines as in 1999. That would not have put to an end the controversy on media coverage of poll surveys. The applicability under Section 126 and 132 of Representation of People's Act in this regard is yet to be pursued by Election Commission.

The Election Commission should have atleast come up with some “guidelines” before the first phase of 2004 polls.

Poll surveys have come to stay

Notwithstanding the debate, poll - eve surveys have become part of 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 is complete everywhere. The need for such a view in my opinion is even more in 2004 – for three reasons—one, 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. Attorney-General's idea of a "regulatory mechanism" in this regard is interesting, but it cannot be outside the preview of 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. Realizing proliferation of poll-eve surveys of all kind same way as surrogate ads. in 1986, I suggested guidelines for the agency as well as media.

Do they influence the outcome?

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 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.

If poll surveys, both pre-poll and exit poll, have no influence on voters and campaigns, why so many of them are being highlighted in the news media. And why political parties are conducting or

sponsoring at various time points and getting them covered (by what ever means) and even hyped in the news media. And why political parties are quick to debunk survey findings when not in their favour? More the gap between the phases, the higher the scope of their use for an electoral advantage. To maximize the 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 2 to 5 percent 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 poll campaign and its coverage in the news media. Otherwise why news media are often accused as "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. I wrote more than a decade ago how poll surveys influence in three different ways.

In Indian elections is not based on any single factor or always based on individual voter's assessment. Family and community often matter in the choice. This is true not only in the case of certain weaker or minority section of voters but also in the case of relatively well off or powerful communities (as in the case of Jats or farmers in some regions). News media by the extent and nature of their coverage

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of election campaigns facilitates voting decision one way or other and that cannot be objected - as long as objectivity and transparency is ensured in that process.

Poll surveys cater to whose interests?

Also, political parties try to use poll surveys to pep up the morale of their own cadres and demoralize the cadres and campaign of opposing party. In that process some voters may "migrate" from one party or candidate of initial preference to another one. Depending upon the keenness of the contests in a given situation, the effect may be good enough when the difference is marginal. Another aspect that needs to be

taken note is increasing competitiveness in the contests in more and more constituencies. That is the margin for win/lose has been on the decline in more constituencies now than ever before. As such a marginal shift of 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.

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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 his or her vote?. Is that any 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?.

Campaigns continue to be personality centered, accusation oriented, and acrimonious. Simultaneously, party manifestos have lost their seriousness and significance. No wonder pre-poll surveys are more concerned in 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 are 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 time points before an election, including exit polls and post-poll surveys. We need compatible data from time series studies.

What difference surveys made?

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 turn out remained more or less at the same level in the last couple of decades. In fact, there is a further decline in some pockets where voters are exposed to news media a lot more and more intensely even in the 2004 poll. While prominently promoting pre-poll surveys in 2004 some channels maintained that their poll was "definitive" and that voters see "the results of next months election today". 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 his or her vote?. Frankly, this aspect had not occurred to me until eminent editor Girilal Jain posed it to me some 20 years ago. Is that any 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 they empower voters with objective information?. And enrich our electoral process?. Can one say that media hype of poll surveys does not enthuse and enlighten voters to go out and vote?. This aspect needs to be pondered about as we are inundated with pre surveys and exit polls 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 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 time points of a poll campaign. A CMS post-poll survey in 1996 has indicated that pre-poll surveys do influence voting preferences of voters, although neither similarly or uniformly across a State or even within a constituency. Even post-poll surveys carried out by CSDS has 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 if they are independent or objective and as if more the size of sample, the more reliable they are. The issue media coverage of poll surveys, both pre-poll and exit poll, in between the phases of a staggered schedule, needs 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 who win or lose aspect. They are hyped by news media beyond a point to sustain themselves in the new competitive media scenario, vitiating the very free and fair electoral process.

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