

Exit polls: pros and cons

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Exit polls are not the final verdict as they are not "official" nor are they based on actual counting of votes polled. Nevertheless, exit polls are indicative of things to come on counting day and their findings cater to the curiosity and anxiety of a large section of people. Because of the unusually staggered poll scheduled this time, exit polls have attracted more attention. Unlike pre-poll surveys, exit polls are expected to be more accurate though there are instances of their going wrong.

An exit poll is conducted, as in the case of pre-poll surveys, on a systematic sampling of polling booths and constituencies. Theoretically, an exit poll is conducted as a voter steps out of a booth after voting. The voter is presented with a dummy ballot paper with names of candidates and symbols and asked to mark his or her preference and put it in a dummy ballot box. However, going by the presentation format of the exit poll, it is perhaps better to describe the exercise as "post-poll survey".

This 1999 election to the Lok Sabha has witnessed more surveys than ever before. While pre-poll surveys have been there for some years, exit polls are a recent phenomena in India. And given the competition in the media in the country between television channels more specifically, such poll surveys have come to stay.

Based on the experience of the general elections in 1996 and 1998, when pre-poll surveys as well as exit polls proliferated and some went wrong, the Election Commission had come up with certain restrictions on publish-

ing or broadcasting them. In fact, in most democracies, some restriction is there on announcing the findings as they were found to influence voters. If they have no influence on voters and poll campaigns, as some argue, they would not have received the kind of attention they have.

Such surveys affect voters and campaigns in four different ways. The bandwagon-effect is one wherein voters tend to go along with a winner. The findings can also boomerang on the projected winner as they can generate a certain repulsion. The underdog effect is the third fallout — a certain sympathy is evoked for a likely "loser". The fourth effect is the complacency phenomena — where the one

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projected as winner takes things for granted as if he or she has already won the election.

The concern about poll surveys today arises for different reasons. These include: Proliferation of poll surveys, often without transparency about the poll itself and the methodology used; use of such surveys by political parties as part of their campaigns; the way the media itself has been using poll surveys, giving "authenticity" and all out prominence; and the fact that findings of poll surveys, by their very origin and usage, cannot be treated the same way as any other "information".

That is why I say that by making the Election Commission withdraw its directive, restricting

poll surveys and exit polls to certain timings, the Supreme Court has gone more by the book than by the spirit of the Election Commission's guidelines. The Election Commission took the initiative with an understanding that such a measure facilitates free and fair election.

"Banning" poll surveys is, however, not the right course. In fact, it is not feasible to implement a ban even otherwise with globalisation of the media as well as the emergence of newer media — such as the Internet.

I do not think banning media coverage of pre-poll or exit poll surveys is the right solution. However, in the interest of free and fair elections, some guidelines, more by way of self-discipline are desirable. They are needed both for polling agencies and the media who use findings of such surveys. Self-imposed discipline is far better.

Both freedom of speech as well as holding of free and fair polls are important. As the elections this time are spread over five phases, matters have been complicated, giving scope for interpreting that any restriction on publishing or broadcasting surveys amounts to tinkering with the fundamental rights of citizens and freedom of press.

Although poll surveys have the potential to make election campaigns more need-based and better qualitatively, they have instead become more commercial propositions and business opportunities for the media as well as psephologists.

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