

PRE-POLL AND EXIT POLL SURVEYS HAVE COME TO STAY

Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao

CERTAIN innocence in media coverage of electoral surveys, both pre-poll and exit polls, deserves to be understood better now that they have come to stay and have become part of our electoral process.

An exit-poll is expected to be more reliable than a pre-poll survey. An exit-poll result is not expected to be in the "reverse direction" of the actual result, as happened in the case of MP and or Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu earlier. And, when it does, it makes "news".

In fact, an exit-poll becomes news for the media only when it goes off the mark, not when it is right. Particularly against a background where pre-poll surveys had already indicated the outcome of the election with better sensitivity, as in the case of Delhi and Rajasthan in November last.

On the other hand, a pre-poll which is expected to indicate the direction of outcome, makes news when it ends up closest to the election results it makes "news".

KEY CRITERIA :

For an exit-poll one and only criterion for evaluation is its accuracy. In the case of pre-poll surveys, the criteria would be multiple, including : (a) how well ahead of the poll was the likely overall outcome indicated, (b) how close are its predictions to the final outcome, (c) what was the sample size of the constituencies and of voters for conducting the pre-poll survey and, (d) more importantly, how well the issues involved in the context of the polls were brought out and how detailed and desegregated the voting preferences were given

A CMS Pre-poll survey, as early as end of August 1998, brought out that Congress Party was heading for a clear majority in Delhi and Rajasthan and that price-rise was an issue bothering voters. The second round of CMS polls, end of September, in Delhi and Rajasthan had indicated that the margin between the two contending parties was on the increase. And at least two other pre-poll surveys had also indicated this trend.

Against such a background, if an exit poll does not go beyond the level of pre-poll survey in precision, obviously the very idea of an exit poll and the methodology followed deserve critical consideration.

Two Tests :

Accuracy of a sample survey is expressed and measured in two different ways. One is in terms of "margin of error" and the other is in terms of "level of confidence". A "90 percent confidence" does not mean that a survey prediction could be plus or minus 10 percent of the projected figure as one chief of a news service had interpreted the results of an exit-poll on the night of counting day, 28th November. Rather, it implies that such a survey, with given methodology, would yield same result 90 times if the survey is repeated 100 times.

In an electoral context, however, such statistical confidence level is irrelevant, since such criteria apply more in controlled experiments/situations. In an electoral context what is more pertinent is "margin of error" in the projections.

To be worthy, the margin of error expected and allowed in such surveys should be within 4 percent plus or minus. That is, if the projected number of seats of a party by an exit-poll is 100, "it is ok" even if the final result is between 96 and 104. Here again, the larger the spread and more the regional distinctions, as in the case of MP, the margin of error could be within plus or minus 5 percent.

However, when an exit-poll is preceded by pre-poll surveys, it should have even smaller margin of error.

How relevant ?

CMS has brought out during the last decade that two or three small but well dispersed sample based pre-poll surveys are far more useful and relevant if they are done at different time points, like as soon as the election dates are announced, soon after the finalisation of the candidates by the contending parties and of course one closer to actual poll date.

Relevance of an exit-poll is only when there is a time gap between the poll date and the counting date. Exit polls by their very nature add or intensify and even prolong certain speculation and guessing about a poll outcome. Anxiety of voters and parties would of course be there to know the outcome the same day of the poll. But then given the kind of complexities and accuracy track record of exit polls recently, they have caused more agony - to the cadres and political parties. The beneficiaries being the news media - by way of advertising revenue - and the psephologist involved by way of quick money.

All this apart, an exit poll has the potential of vitiating the voting pattern of "re-poll" in certain booths/constituency, particularly when the number of booths involved in the "re-poll" the next day or the following day are many. The "band-wagon effect" in such cases could be detrimental for the final outcome when the contests are too keen as in some constituencies of Delhi last month.

Whereas pre-poll surveys, on the other, are relevant both to parties and voter equally. Parties could get the pulse of voter and help select the right kind of candidates and take up the issues bothering the voters for the campaign. The voter too will feel comfortable that he or she had been enlightened about the dynamics and what others were feeling about.

For example, CMS pre-poll surveys recently had brought out well ahead of the electoral process, that voters prefer a "fresh face" as their candidate and the issues concerning them. CMS in fact had brought out that chances of winning are more when the candidate in context is (a) a new face, (b) a woman, (c) professional, and is, (d) of younger age. Congress party in M.P. this time had more new faces than ever before. So also, in fact, in Delhi and Rajasthan.

Dr. N. Bhaskar Rao is the founder Chairman of the Centre for Media Studies (CMS)