

GETTING THEM RIGHT

Opinion polls conducted in the context of elections are often better remembered than those carried out in any other regard. With general elections now due in only a few months' time, there is bound to be a plethora of such polls. As such it would be relevant to examine opinion polls in both contexts separately since the criteria for evaluation have to be different.

Opinion polls that are sponsored by newspapers are generally meant to bring to the fore the mood of the people, in this case the reading public. They can be used in an effort to supplement news and source of views and as snap-shots. Capturing a trend more objectively, rather than the accuracy level of prediction, is often the primary concern.

A poll should indicate at the outset whether it is meant to capture opinions and beliefs, or preferences and practices, or values and perceptions. A combination of these, if capable of being accommodated, will make better sense and be more relevant. But often, this is not the case.

Opinion polls, in regard to elections, are often perceived as indicators of not just the dimensions of victory or defeat, but also the differences and margins at micro- and macro-levels. Generally speaking, such an exercise reflects at best the trend, mood and direction at any given point of time. Of course, by using the voting trends in the past in similar or related elections, one can go much further. And then, opinion polls are not always conducted by newspapers in such a larger perspective although that would certainly be

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much more relevant.

Nevertheless, the relative correctness of the results would depend on the kind of methodology that has been employed and the methods applied in the field-work. Distinct factors that matter in this process relate to the very electoral process, the methodology and publication-specific policies.

Election-specific Considerations

- * Whether the elections are at the national or at the state level or at both;
- * how well in advance the election schedules are known;
- * whether the distinction between candidates is sharp enough in terms of party/symbol identities; and
- * against what background elections are being held.

An opinion poll conducted much prior to the actual poll schedule would neither elicit the same kind of response nor would it be able to attain the degree of reliability as one conducted after a formal announcement of an election is made.

Considering the campaign-related complexities of the Indian electoral system, opinion polls conducted at various stages leading up to the election would aid the accurate prediction of the result. For instance, polls held soon after the announcement of the election schedule and later during the campaign would be desirable. But then such "rolling polls" are not always feasible for newspapers because of the resource constraints involved.

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FORUM

OPINION POLLS

Methodological Issues

In any opinion poll, the sampling strategy and the method of interpretation are of crucial importance. Some of the components which are vital to the methodology of opinion polls are:

- Sample selection;
- techniques of investigation;
- data analysis and estimation; and
- methods of interpretation.

Sample Selection

An important aspect of sample selection is the representativeness of the universe. The method of sample selection and the sample size should have ample room to accommodate attributes of heterogeneous dimensions. The sampling plan should also capture temporal attributes like political affiliations, campaign phenomena and other configurations. Such selection procedures have to be uniform and consistent across homogeneous clusters or states.

The prevailing sample selection procedures include street-corners, voters' list, physical settings and broad economic criteria-based classifications. Street-corner interviews, of course, cannot be expected to possess the same attributes and degree of reliability as those which are conducted at the household-level.

Any election-time phenomenon, like the contents of a boiling pot, changes continuously.

A Times of India poll by ORG prior to the Haryana assembly elections was correct in 13 out of 16 constituencies. This, however, was more a coincidence than anything else since the sample size and selection were not meant to make predictions for individual constituencies.

Techniques of Investigation

Different methods of investigation are required if one is to gauge the actual and considered opinion of the respondent rather than merely momentary reactions to questions. The techniques include cross-checking answers by direct and indirect reference to

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important points in the questionnaire.

Procedures followed in conducting field-work include checking and cross-checking the investigator's work and matching the interviews obtained in different locations. Uniformity in the mode of inquiry, given the language differences and interviewer characteristics, is also critical to this delicate exercise. Most market research agencies engage part-time investigators on a freelance basis, although the reliability of the results would certainly be better if full-time, experienced investigators are deployed.

The gap between the field-work period and the actual voting day also determines the accuracy of the final results. The last few days of a campaign in Indian elections are especially crucial. The shorter the process of field

work, analysis and publication in terms of time, the more relevant the results. Only an agency with a network of permanent investigators can afford to cut off time when the poll is at the national or state level.

Equally important is the kind of questionnaire that is used to elicit voter intentions and images. One with both open-ended and pre-structured questions will yield better results than another containing interrogations of the Yes-No objective type. A questionnaire should

invariably have in-built checks to detect inconsistencies in the response pattern. Quite often, the questionnaire canvassed is of the Yes-No type with no in-built checks. When the contest is close, the dangers of this kind of questionnaire become embarrassingly evident.

The interaction of the person analysing the results with field investigators can prove to be a major advantage. If the analyst is himself involved in the field-work, it greatly enhances the credibility and accuracy of the results.

Also, when surveys are conducted in various parts of the country, the questions may carry different connotations in the several local languages and dialects. This is a problem that is, to a large extent, peculiar to India. The manner in which the questions are

formulated and posed by investigators is, therefore, important.

Data Analysis and Estimation

Any statement about the attributes of the universe has to be backed by sample data. In statistical terms, it is the extent of the error margin and the percentage confidence that ultimately speak of the representative character of the sample and, in turn, the accuracy with which it predicts the attributes of the universe. The error margin and the confidence level will vary for different questions or attributes of the universe even in the same survey. Most of the opinion polls neglect to indicate these aspects.

Method of Interpretation

This is probably an area which requires utmost care and a high level of skill to convert dumb data into articulate information. Specifically, for an opinion poll on elections, one should be able to grasp both the numbers and the political mood in the context of issues dominating the given scene.

To give an example, The Times of India survey of June 14, 1987 revealed that the Lok Dal-BJP alliance had improved its position by about 7 per cent in urban votes and 5 per cent in rural votes as compared to the previous round at the end of May. The Congress (I)'s position, meanwhile, had deteriorated by 10 per cent in urban and 8 per cent in rural votes.

Although the results matched reasonably, these figures by themselves did not suggest that changes in voting intentions would proportionately reflect on the number of seats won or lost. This is an area where the expertise required goes beyond the specific poll and statistics, and calls for an understanding of the existing political scenario and campaign strategies.

Newspaper-specific Aspects

Quite often, newspaper policies determine the fate of opinion polls. While some of our

mainline dailies - like The Times of India, The Hindu and The Hindustan Times - are innovative and enterprising in this respect, other prominent periodicals tend to adopt a "let-

loose-as-it-suits" approach. India Today, in contrast, deserves credit for the manner in which it approaches election-time polls.

Some newspapers publish hard results in percentages, some others leave it totally to the pollster and, in a few cases, the final version is a collaborative output between the newspaper and the researcher.

Poll results when published with a clear by-line for the researcher reflect a higher degree of confidence in the project and are also perceived that way. This practice also ensures higher responsibility - on the part of both the publication and the researcher - and helps achieve improvements in subsequent efforts.

The actual date of publication after the field-work is done also reflects the velocity of the poll findings as such. If the newspaper does not publish the story promptly, and in the meantime there are

new turns in the campaign, then obviously the relevance of findings will be that much less.

A knowledge of trends in the response pattern in the earlier field surveys would help avoid embarrassment particularly when the poll is conducted in scattered locations and the subsequent variations in the response are glaring. Illustrations of this can be found in recent polls conducted in several magazines in the country.

In the Indian context, getting the results of our elections absolutely correct can only be a coincidence. But an opinion poll would be futile if it failed to bring out the trend, the mood and the direction of the outcome. Unless a poll brings out glaring and sustained trends - as was the case with the Haryana elections - it cannot be considered either reliable or systematic.



The quicker the process of field-work, analysis and publication, the more relevant the result.