

# Rights & wrongs of pre-election opinion polls

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Opinion polls are increasingly becoming part of our public affairs. More and more newspapers are carrying reports on such polls. It is time we understand the complexities that are involved.

The impact of opinion polls on campaigning and even on actual voting needs to be examined. Research in the U.S., for example, shows that poll results shape the voting behaviour of many citizens. The sudden decision of Telugu Desam leader N.T. Rama Rao to jump into the campaigning in Haryana on the eve of assembly elections was attributed to the opinion poll of a leading daily.

As opinion polls become professional in their methodology and acquire more credibility, they are bound to

make greater impact on the campaign and even on the actual voting trend.

Hence the urgency for professional ethics and *Media Monitor* continues the initiative towards such a debate.

N. Bhaskara Rao with his experience of conducting opinion polls over the last 16 years confirms the increasing tendency "to vote for a winning candidate or party" rather than for the "preferred or favoured". He calls for formulation of basic guidelines as safeguards to prevent distortion of opinion polls. This would serve the interests of newspapers which have faced accusations on poll reporting. Readers should also be made conscious of the pitfalls of poll methodologies and results.

**S**HREESH CHAUDHARY's article (March/April 1987) on the subject of reporting opinion polls was timely, relevant and raised significant issues. Opinion polls conducted in the context of elections are often remembered more than the ones conducted in other contexts. It would be useful to examine the phenomena of opinion polls in such contexts separately, since the criteria for evaluation had to be different.

Opinion polls sponsored by newspapers are meant more to bring to the fore the mood of the people, constituting mainly the reading public, as a systematic effort to supplement news and source of views in specific contexts 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 more relevant. But often confusion is evident.

Opinion polls in the context of 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. Opinion polls in general reflect at best the trend, the mood and direction at a given time point. Of course, using past voting trends in similar or related elections, one could go much beyond. But then opinion polls are not always conducted by newspapers in such a larger context although that is more relevant.

Nevertheless, the relative correctness of the results of opinion polls would depend on the kind of methodology that has gone into the design and the methods followed for field-work. Several distinct factors that matter in this process relate to: a) the very electoral process, b) methodology, and c) publication-specific policies.

## I. Election-specific considerations

- ▶ Whether the elections in context are for the state assembly or for parliament or for both;
- ▶ How well in advance the election schedules were known;
- ▶ Whether the distinction between candidates was sharp enough in terms of party/symbol identities, etc; and
- ▶ Against what background or specific context elections are being held.

An opinion poll conducted much prior to the actual poll schedule, or even irrespective of such a schedule, would not elicit the

same kind of response and reliability as the one conducted after a formal announcement was made.

Considering the campaign-related complexities in the Indian electoral system, opinion polls conducted at different time points as *Times of India* (TOI) did recently in Haryana, soon after the announcement of the election schedule and during the course of the campaign, would add to the predictability of the outcome. But then such "rolling polls" are not always possible for newspapers because of resource constraint.

## II. Methodological issues

In any opinion poll conducted amongst a sample of individuals, from a universe of such vocal diversities as in every part of India, sampling strategy and method of interpretation are of crucial importance. Some of the components which are vital to the methodology of opinion polls are referred here.

- ▶ Sample selection—representativeness of the universe;
- ▶ Techniques of investigation—tools to capture an elusive trend, mood, perception or behaviour;
- ▶ Analysis of data and estimation—vital link between the sample and the universe; and
- ▶ Method of interpretation—attributing meaning to bare statistics.

### (a) Sample selection

An important aspect of sample selection is 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/states.

The prevailing sample selection procedures include street-corners, voters' list, physical settings and broad economic criteria-based divisions. Street-corner interviews obviously cannot be expected to possess the above attributes and reliability as the household-level interviews.

Any election time phenomenon is continuously changing like the contents of a boiling pot. At each time point the attributes of the universe itself are changing.

However, it should also be pointed out, the fact that TOI poll was right in the case of 13 out of 16 assembly constituencies covered in the survey was more a coincidence since the sample size and selection was



not meant for predicting at individual constituency level. Of course, an opinion survey which fails to bring out glaring trends in the electoral scene, as in the case of Haryana, cannot be considered systematic particularly when such a poll was conducted more than once.

### (b) Techniques of investigation

Different methods of investigation are required to arrive at the actual and considered opinion of the respondent rather than momentary reactions to questions. The techniques of investigation range from cross-checking of answers by direct and indirect reference to important questions in the questionnaire.

Procedures followed in conducting the field-work include the content of checks and counter-checks on the investigators' work and matching of field-work between different locations in terms of interviews obtained. Uniformity in the mode of enquiry, given the language differences and interviewer characteristics, is also very critical. Most agencies engage part-time investigators on a piecemeal basis, although reliability level of the results would certainly be better when full-time experienced investigators are deployed.

The gap between the field-work period and the actual voting day also determines the final results; particularly the last few days of campaign in Indian elections are more crucial. The shorter the process of field-work, analysis and publication, the better the relevance of results. Only an agency with a network of permanent investigators can afford to do such a task 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. A questionnaire with both open-ended and pre-structured questions will yield better results than the one with only Yes-No type questions. A questionnaire should invariably have built-in checks to detect inconsistencies in the response pattern. Quite often, the questionnaire canvassed is Yes-No type and with no built-in checks. When results appear too close such checks come to risk.

The interaction of the person who writes about the likely poll results with field investigators and his involvement in the design greatly enhance the relevance and reliability of results. The mood prevailing before the Haryana elections could never be missed even from a class-room exercise-type survey. To the extent the author himself is involved in field work as in the case of TOI Haryana poll, to that extent the story will acquire credibility and accuracy.

Also, when surveys are so often undertaken in different parts of the country the concepts being enquired may have different connotation in local languages or dialects. The way the questions are formulated and posed by investigators is important.

### (c) Data analysis and estimation

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

### (d) Method of interpretation

This is probably an area which requires utmost care and high level of skill to convert dumb data into articulate characteristics. Specifi-

cally, 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, TOI survey of 14 June, 1987 revealed that the Lok Dal-BJP alliance had improved by about 7 per cent in urban and 5 per cent in rural votes as compared to the previous round at the end of May, while the Congress (I) position had deteriorated by 10 per cent in urban and 8 per cent in rural votes. Although the results were quite matching, these figures by themselves do not suggest that changes in voting intentions would proportionately reflect on the number of seats won/lost. This is an area where the expertise required goes beyond the specific poll and statistics and calls for an understanding of the political scenario and campaigning.

## III. Newspaper-specific aspects

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

The actual date of publication after the field-work was done also reflects the velocity of poll findings as such. If the newspaper does not publish the poll story promptly and in the meantime there are new turns in the campaign, then obviously the relevance of poll findings will be less.

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

Quite often, newspaper policies determine the fate of opinion polls. While some of our mainline dailies like TOI, *The Hindu*, and *The Hindustan Times* are innovative and enterprising in this respect, even prominent periodicals tend to adopt a "let-loose-as-it-suits" approach despite their lack of time constraint for sponsoring a more systematic poll. *India Today* deserves credit for going

beyond a mere poll approach in some of its election-time polls.

Knowledge of trends in response pattern in the earlier field-surveys would help avoid embarrassment as in the one during Haryana election, particularly when the poll in context is for scattered locations and variations in the response are glaring and inconsistent. Several examples of this could be seen from many recent polls in various magazines.

In the Indian context an exact tally at both micro-and macro-level between the actual outcome of an election and the opinion poll could only be a coincidence. But an opinion poll is futile if it cannot bring out the trend, the mood and the direction of outcome. A poll which fails to bring out glaring and sustained trends, as in the case of recent Haryana elections, cannot be considered reliable or systematic.

*The Times of India* opinion poll conducted in Haryana perhaps is a good example of a somewhat better conceived, coordinated and executed opinion poll.

These are some of the added complexities of an opinion poll in the specific context of elections.



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