



Prannoy Roy, the psephologist who earned instant fame with his uncanny prediction of the 1984 elections spoke on the different aspects involved in conducting a poll.

Q. When did you conduct your first poll?

A. The first opinion poll we did was in 1980 which I still feel as the most accurate. And then we did Andhra in 1983 where we went completely wrong. We learnt a lot from it. Immediately after that we did Delhi where we were one seat up. Then we did the 1984 general election.

Q. You went wrong on the Andhra polls. Now what is it that makes polls go totally wrong?

A. I don't have any hard figures for international polls but I would say with what I call a gut feeling that polls are right 75 per cent of the times and wrong 25 per cent of the times. May be it is a little higher or lower than this but I feel polls are right three out of four times, worldwide. They are wrong by and large, internationally, because they are either done too early or even if done close to the date of election some major occurrence takes place between the poll and the election. In England when unemployment figures came out two days before the election most polls went wrong.

Another factor is when there is very little difference — say 1 p.c. — between the parties contesting then a poll has a greater likelihood of going wrong.

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POLLS APART

The last few years have witnessed a sudden spurt in opinion polls and psephology has become a popular, if fashionable, word. But does this scientific game of percentages and numbers present a clear picture of dynamic reality or does it also manipulate and obfuscate the truth giving credence to the adage that statistics lie. SAROJ NAGI who spoke to PRANNOY ROY, the wonder boy of psephology, and BHASKARA RAO, director of Operations Research Group, reports on the different dimensions of this new and rapidly growing trend.

The last decade, particularly the last three years have seen a spate of opinion polls on political issues ranging from political corruption to election projections. Not that there were no opinion polls either earlier or on different issues, but it is only recently that they have begun to find their way into print. So much so, that today it seems as if the status of a newspaper or a newsmagazine depends to a considerable extent on its ability to commission and/or publish a poll. This in turn has spawned a number of polling agencies and market research organisations, each seeking to purvey its own brand of truth. In the event, opinion polls and surveys have suddenly been plucked out from the discussion centres of the academia and launched into the high profile world of the communication media, revealed in all their scientific glory and thoroughly exposed when they stand disproved by events, particularly by election results.

Why is it that well-known pollsters undertaking opinion polls in the same region around the same time come up with diametrically opposite results? When the ground reality is the same how is it that one polling organisation is uncannily right in its projections (the "rightness" being proved by the election results) while another is completely wrong in assessing it. The findings of the Haryana pre-election scene was a case in point. While the *Sunday Observer* poll showed a clean sweep for the Congress I in Haryana, the *ORG Times of India* survey came up with the assessment that the Congress was in for a rude shock in the state. Earlier while Roy's findings for *India Today* proved incredibly correct in giving Rajiv Gandhi a landslide victory in the 1984 general election, the *Telegraph* survey of the findings for the West Bengal assembly election in 1985 went completely askew in projecting the Left Front as battered losers. And yet it is not as if these polls were undertaken by greenhorns and novices in the field; some of the agencies involved had, in fact, built up a reputation for themselves over the years.

Several factors account for these. And these range from small sample sizes ("the smaller the sample, the greater the chances of error," says Prannoy Roy) to the handling of the sample ("even a small sample, evenly distributed and handled properly can give good and accurate results," asserts Bhaskara Rao), timing of the poll (the closer it is to the election date, the lesser the chances of something happening to disturb the accuracy of the findings) and, among other things, the interpretation of the data brought in by the poll.

Unless the data is placed in perspective or is comparable both within the sample area and across other polls and time, the percentage figures not only become meaningless but may lead to



N. Bhaskara Rao, director, Operations Research Group, identifies some of the factors a reader should take into account while reading the poll data.

Q. What is the role of opinion polls in a developing society and what impact does it have on the people as such?

A. It brings the people together. Instead of thinking that they are atomistic beings, each with his own views, an opinion poll helps consolidate opinion, bring togetherness among people and make them aware of the problems and issues seizing the country. For example, a man in the remote village may not have heard of Bofors but the very fact that an investigator is asking him a question on that—even if his response is "don't know"—makes him aware of it.

At Operations Research Group, our concern is for current issues, social developments and trends. Our basic interest is therefore much larger: it is not merely seeking an opinion on Bofors or other political issues but on an entire range of issues and their effect and impact on the society at large. Research here is not an end in itself; it is a means which should lead to something more in terms of human psychology, political strength or development forces as such. Our pursuit therefore is towards methodological improvements and how to study a particular phenomenon.

Q. What are the factors a reader should take into account while interpreting the poll data which is often presented to him in a chart?

Generally polls get land-slides right; I would say 95 per cent of the time. Since most elections are land-slides, polls are right more often. When it is a close fight, it is very tough. Anybody doing a poll in Kerala would find it difficult to get it right because of the very narrow margins between the two parties.

Q. What is unique or special about our opinion polls. How do opinion polls in India differ from those in other countries?

A. All over the world opinion polls apply the theory of uniform swings. But India is more diverse so we have swing zones or what we call homogeneous swing zones. England has one swing zone but here in India even within a state like UP we may have as many as three swing zones the swing zones are determined on the basis of an analysis of the past elections.

We apply Index of Opposition unity which measures how united the Opposition is for example, the 100 tells you that the opposition was most united in 1977 and the least in 1980. We combine the swing and the change in this index to calculate the impact on seats.

In all election analyses the main thing we try and focus on is the percentage margin of victory. The margin of victory is changed by the swing (when the swing goes from one side to the other, the margin goes positive or negative) and the extent of Opposition unity. There is a simple formula for this which indicates what caused a change in a percentage margin of victory—the swing for or against or a change in the level of Opposition unity. Let us say the margin of victory goes down from +10 to +2 per cent. The person still wins but the drop in the margin of victory has been eight per cent. Out of that seven per cent could have been due to a swing away and one per cent due to a change in opposition unity.

This, I feel, is a slight improvement in methodology, used internationally. It has been now published and acknowledged in international journals.

Q. Have opinion polls ever been manipulated to serve some political interests?

A. Not to my knowledge. But the whole thing may backfire. If you want to induce the bandwagon effect, the underdog effect may actually dominate or vice versa.

Q. Do we require a code of ethics in India?

A. I think we do, particularly on sample sizes and in terms of making clear on what the sample size is, when it was taken, where it was taken and other information on the date base. I am strongly in favour of setting up a non-governmental apex body which overlooks all this and sees that these standards are maintained. This is a long term development. There is no point fly-by-night operators coming in and doing small and cheap samples and discrediting the entire



erroneous conclusions whereby percentages are taken as absolutes. A score of 55 per cent in terms of support for Rajiv Gandhi, for instance, does not necessarily mean an overwhelming support for him unless the 55 per cent is, wrongly, taken as an absolute figure. In the interpretation or reading of data if V.P. Singh scores 45 per cent support, his score will be of far greater significance, although his score, taken in absolute terms is lower than Rajiv Gandhi's in this example. This is because while Rajiv Gandhi has been a prime minister with a support base, V.P. Singh is a new phenomenon on the national scene who started out with the proverbial scratch. So the 55 per cent on the chart has to be read in relation to the 45 per cent of the new contender as well as to the percentage polled, if any, earlier and the difference in the two percentages. And the whole thing has to be seen in the context of the brewing — or ebbing, as the case may be — controversy which, in the first was accountable for the poll being conducted. Interpreting and reading the poll data in perspective has therefore become of crucial significance.

GIVEN the growing popularity reach and spread of opinion polls, what impact do their findings have on the public and their leaders. Do they influence, help change or mould their thinking so that if the polls shows a margin in favour of a candidate, a larger number will veer round the "winning" candidate or does it boomerang and help channel support for the weaker candidate in what pollsters call the underdog effect. The issue remains debatable as to which dominates; but its influence on the reader's mind is definitely acknowledged even though the extent of this influence is unclear. This explains to a large extent why in countries like the USA or the UK politicians sponsor opinion polls to bolster, reinforce or create their image in the public mind. After Lyndon B. Johnson made the historic decision to stop the Vietnam bombings in 1968, Richard Nixon, the presidential aspirant, promptly had an opinion poll conducted to fathom and then work on his prospects.

Back in India, the 1984 general elections which gave an unprecedented mandate in favour of Rajiv Gandhi, were preceded by a survey on the basis of which the brilliant electoral strategy was honed to a thumping success. Earlier, during the Emergency, was survey conducted to assess its impact. It came up with an adverse report about the erosion of support for the Congress and its leader and the popular resentment against family planning. Aware of the findings of the report, Indira Gandhi still opted for an election and took a gamble on the effectiveness of a conglomeration of parties ruling from the Centre. In another and more recent example NT Rama Rao reportedly decided to plunge into the Haryana campaign only after an opinion poll.

With the stakes proving high, it is not surprising that nearly everyone from the politician to the press is jumping onto the bandwagon.

ONE impact of the floodgates being thrown wide open is that organisations of doubtful skill, expertise and professional integrity come to be commissioned to conduct polls for the smaller and less affluent publications. The law of percentages wreaks its own havoc here and very often there are diverse results, the findings of one organisation at complete variance with the other. By projecting wrong or far-off-the-mark findings, they have tended to lower the credibility of opinion polls, giving rise to suspicions that opinion polls are a fashionable, and not serious, exercise in identifying friends and truths.

If earlier the names of organisations like the Indian Institute of Public Opinion, set up in 1955, or Operations Research Group, established in 1960, were identified with the scientific and academic exercise in conducting surveys and polls, today there is a plethora of organisations ranging from the well-known and long standing MARG (Marketing and Research Group) and the new and famous Policy Group to a host of other small time organisations who cut

corners and costs by taking street corner interviews of very small samples usually in the metropolitan clusters and purvey their lop-sided reality in percentages.

This raises the issue whether there should be a code of ethics guiding the conduct and presentation of the findings of opinion polls. The international code specifies that the publication of every opinion poll should give the sampling method used, the size and distribution of the sample, the dates of the fieldwork and also the proportion of those who were actually contacted from the

particular phenomenon.

Q. What are the factors a reader should take into account while interpreting the poll data which is often presented to him in a chart?

A. Essentially the reader has to be cautious about a few things. He must see whether the survey gives details of the kind of samples. Percentage opinions of the chances of winning of a political leader may be given without stating whether the sample was taken from the voter's list or from the general public. The reader must also look for what kind of people were interviewed by the poll. In other words, he should know the kind of respondents used in the poll.

He must be told how the sample was distributed and how the respondents were interviewed and by whom. He should also be told the time span they were interviewed in. This is particularly important because political domain and opinion is so dynamic and keeps changing.

Differences between the responses of males and females or between rural and urban populations should be given. Often, the "don't know" answers also make an important revelation. They indicate significant trends. Sometimes they tell more than the other answers depending of course on the subject. Also, they explain the way regional variations occur from one state to the other. Presentation and interpretation are therefore two different issues. That is why it is necessary to sensitise people as to how to absorb these so-called public opinion studies.

Q. Can the same data, being used by different interpreters come up with diametrically opposite results.

A. Not different results, but certainly with different write ups. For instance, if 35 per cent feel that the poverty level has decreased, 25 per cent maintain that there has been no change and yet another 30 per cent say that things have improved—the question is which of the findings is of greater significance. The ability to identify this depends on the background of the interpreter of the data, and his awareness of the background and situation of the country and how these percentages convert to people in terms of actual numbers.

The second aspect is to go deeper into the figures and seek specifications as to whether these 35 per cent come from the rural or urban sectors or from among men or women. Again, for instance, if 45 per cent say that V.P. Singh will get more votes than Rajiv Gandhi and 55 per cent say it is the other way round, which figure is more important? Obviously, the figures relating to V.P. Singh since he is a new phenomenon whereas Rajiv Gandhi has been a prime minister, even though he scores higher. Percentages therefore do not stand on their own. They are not absolutes, independent or isolated. They are interrelated. So a perspective is needed all the time at every stage.

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An opinion poll is a very, very delicate issue; it is a double-edged instrument and can act both ways.