

Understanding polls and predictions

OPINION and exit polls remained at the centre of media attention both during the 2004 election and after, though for different reasons and with a difference in our attitude towards them. The media attention on polls was heightened by the attempt initiated by the Election Commission to ban opinion polls and exit polls. It witnessed on the one hand a unanimous agreement among various political parties in favour of the ban and, on the other, a near unanimous expression of disapproval of the ban from the media houses.

The Supreme Court's refusal to ban the exit poll in the recently concluded elections notwithstanding, many have suggested that media must exercise restraint in publishing them during the election process. However, both the visual and print media in the country was vying with each other to inform the public with the latest status of each political party with respect to the seats they would eventually win. It was precisely for these predictions that the pollsters were once again in the spotlight, though this time as the underdogs.

In the above context it may be worthwhile to critically examine the implications of opinion and exit polls for democracy. Though there was some debate on this in the media itself but sadly most arguments seem to centre around the primacy of 'evidence' and 'facts' in support of either the camps that condemn the purported ban or welcome such a ban, reflecting a 'positivist' prejudice that worships 'facts' as a 'holy cow'. It is not that there were no theoretical justifications for the arguments; for instance the media took up cudgels on behalf of the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech and expression in protesting against the move. However, with regard to opinion and exit polls there is more at stake in a democracy than what is captured by factual 'evidence'.

The political parties as well as the Election Commission were of the opinion that in a polity where the electoral process gets completed not in one stretch but in different phases, the publication of exit polls considerably affects the outcome in those segments of the polity where

the electoral process is still underway. While this apprehension may not have the backing of empirical evidence, it nevertheless cannot be easily dismissed. In a recent survey on behalf of NDTV-Indian Express, it was pointed out that around 9% voters decided whom they should vote for only on the polling day and close to 20% voters made their decision during the week before polling day. It is possible, at least in these cases, that the decision to vote for a particular candidate or a party was influenced by the result of exit polls.

One argument in defence of the opinion polls was that the net effect of polls on election results is negligible as the 'bandwagon effect' is counterbalanced by the 'underdog' effect.¹ The evidence for this is based on a survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies during the 2003 assembly elections in Delhi. To arrive at a firm conclusion on the basis of a 'meticulous' survey in one region, however representative of the electorate that region may be, is unscientific precisely because the 'initial conditions' that have a role in effecting such a net result need not always obtain in a dynamic electorate.

Other arguments exonerate polls by claiming that voters are more influenced by other conditions like party loyalty, quality of the candidate and certainly caste and religion (also ethnicity!) than what the exit poll or opinion polls state.² So eventually polls seem to be a harmless curiosity of the psephologists. Arguing positively, some claim that opinion polls deepen democracy by opening up channels of communication and information among voters who are otherwise entirely dependent on what the politicians say³ and thus enrich our understanding of the democratic process in terms of why people vote the way they do.⁴ Of course, those who vouch by evidence will not buy these arguments as only a minuscule proportion of the voters are aware of these opinion polls.⁵ This suggests that evidence in itself is inconclusive and we may need to go well beyond 'facts' to understand the implications of polls.

Unlike an opinion poll, the forecast of election results seems to be integral to an exit poll as its very purpose is the projection of a particular party as emerging victorious or another party as likely to lose well ahead of the actual declaration of the results. In a state where the voting is yet to be

completed, such forecasts can be considered as interfering with the electoral process. The seriousness of this interference in fact is derived from the presumed scientific status of exit polls. If akin to mere speculation of columnists or wishful thinking of politicians, the public would have treated such claims with the contempt they deserve.

Besides the bandwagon and underdog effects, such exit polls may also cause ‘voter indifference’. If voters were to know that how they vote is of little consequence to the final outcome (given that the exit polls have already declared the winner) it is likely that many of them may think of their efforts as futile and choose not to exercise their right to vote. Of course, this does not affect the voter whose loyalties are primarily with a particular contestant than with a particular party, since it is not always that party loyalty translates into loyalty to a candidate who contests on the party ticket or vice versa.

Those who still insist on ‘evidence’ for voter indifference may turn to the 1980 presidential elections in the United States, where the eastern and central parts had already voted while the polling was in process on the West coast. The exit polls in the U.S. predicted that Ronald Reagan would win the election, irrespective of the voting pattern on the West coast. When the voters heard this news, widely published in the media, many decided not to exercise their franchise.⁶

However, this line of argument leaves the issue of opinion polls, which are different from exit polls, completely untouched. Though both types of polls are primarily based on *sabda pramana* (verbal testimony), between opinion and exit polls there is many a slip as ‘intending to do’ something is not the same as ‘doing it’. The argument of those who oppose opinion polls – that the publication of the same once the election process commences would distort the electoral choice – does not cut deep enough. It presumes that only political parties and their agents have the right to influence the electoral choice of voters. Similarly, the argument that such surveys do not correctly reflect the opinion of the electorate too is not good enough to demand a ban as one could always improve the methodology to better capture, of course within a probability limit, the opinion. This prompts one to think about what is really wrong with the

opinion polls. One interesting view expressed in the media invites us to look at the entire issue in the light of the possibility that opinion polls may eventually formally replace elections once the objectivity and scientificity of such surveys is granted.⁷ I wish to argue that even if polls do not replace elections, they may offset the electoral process. My argument essentially has to do with understanding opinion and exit polls as part of a 'technosocial science'.

The entire exercise at prediction of election results on the basis of opinion and exit polls may be understood as the expression of a branch of one social science discipline, namely Political Science, to be as rigorously 'scientific' as possible. Of course, the criterion of being 'scientific' is dictated by Positivism. This explains the craze for polls and predictions even among reputed political scientists in the academia and not just in the media. The threat to democracy caused by predictions on the basis of scientific polls, they may well argue, ensues only if we replace elections with surveys; but surely one may be allowed to predict the election results if there is no such provision for replacing elections with surveys. After all, they may ask, is it not the prerogative of a discipline to be 'scientific'?⁸

Here then is the central point. Even when elections are not formally replaced with surveys, such surveys may hamper a crucial aspect of elections, namely its characteristic of spontaneity and status of concrete reality as an event. The life-world reality is a social construction by the agents/actors. The everyday life of people as played out in the social world is spontaneous in the sense that it is self-generated. This is not to deny that in the life-world there are no structural or institutional constraints; rather they must be understood as generated by the social actors, both intentionally and unintentionally. In order to understand social reality one must also reckon with the unintended consequences of action. A survey/poll, as against an election, is an abstraction of the 'life-world' reality. A Phenomenological understanding of science claims that every science is a theoretical construction by way of abstracting from the life-world. With this process of abstraction through 'mathematization,' science replaces the life-world reality.⁹ Here it is pertinent to recall the Feyerabendian concern of 'defending society against science'.¹⁰ The

rationale for doing away with polls and predictions echoes the concern to protect the life-world reality especially when it threatens to sideline democracy. ‘In a democratic society,’ Feyerabend remarks, ‘scientists may be consulted on various important issues but the final decision must be left to the people.’

With regard to the eagerness of pollsters to predict the election results, I wish to suggest that what hampers elections are not predictions *per se* but what may be termed, following the sociologist of science Bruno Latour, as ‘Technosocial Science’. If Latour’s notion of ‘technoscience’¹¹ is one that takes shape inside a laboratory, the new ‘technosocial science’ is one that has been created with the help of statistical tools applied to the data culled from the social world and displayed in the ‘media labs’. The product of technoscience is not a ‘natural’ object. The object thus produced in the laboratory acquires the status of reality. As Latour says, laboratories now define reality. One just has to look around to see how scientists have created ‘virtual realities’ all over the perceptual world. It is this aspect of defining reality by the surveys that endangers the election process. In other words, what the surveys collect are the ‘opinions’ and ‘beliefs’ of voters with regard to the approaching election and what the opinion poll does eventually is to define the election and thereby create ‘reality’. It indeed is to pre-empt an event which otherwise is brought to existence by the voters and in that process scuttle a crucial aspect of elections in a democratic set up. The irony is that it happens in the name of democratic ideals like freedom of expression and the right to practice any profession.

Koshy Tharakan

* I wish to thank my colleagues Dr. P.K. Sudarsan and Manish Kumar Thakur of Goa University, besides Professor Peter R. DeSouza of CSDS, Delhi, for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The usual caveat that the errors, factual and conceptual, if any are solely mine, remains.

Footnotes:

1. Yogendra Yadav, ‘The case against banning exit and opinion polls’, *The Hindu*, 9 April 2004.
2. Niraja Gopal Jayal, ‘Voters are moved by other considerations’, *The Economic Times*, 28 April 2004.
3. Rajeev Dhavan, ‘Opinion polls sustain democracy’, *The Hindu*, 1 May 2004.

4. Amrit Lal, 'Should election-time opinion polls be banned?', *The Times of India*, 3 April 2004.
5. Yogendra Yadav, op cit. According to him such polls reach only one-third of our citizens as the majority live beyond the reach of the media.
6. Rammanohar Reddy, 'The case against exit polls', *The Hindu*, 2 May 2004. The same event has been referred to in arguing against the proposal to ban the opinion polls and exit polls by suggesting that in spite of this nobody had asked for a ban on polls in the U.S.A as they uphold the value of freedom of speech. See in this regard, Dorab R. Sopariwala: 'What's wrong with polls?', *The Times of India*, 11 April 2004. This underscores our characterization of 'evidence' as indecisive.
7. Mary E. John, 'Are surveys eclipsing elections?', *The Hindu*, 13 April 2004.
8. In any case, they may retort that opinion polls are better than mere speculation and gossip or going to an astrologer to know the future outcome.
9. According to Husserl, the crisis of sciences result from this severance of its relation with the life-world. cf. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, (Tr.) David Carr, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.
10. Paul Feyerabend, 'How to defend society against science' in Hacking (ed.), *Scientific Revolutions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 156-167.
11. Bruno Latour, *Science in Action*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.