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Should exit polls be banned?

They influence undecided voters

THIS is the second time in five years that the issue of media coverage of exit polls is being reviewed. Although exit polls have not gained new ground for their relevance, we have now many more television channels going for exit polls in a competitive mode. That is how poll surveys have come to stay and, in fact, have become part of the poll process. The more is the time between counting day and the final phase of poll schedule the more is the curiosity angle of exit polls.

Presenting the findings of an exit poll, and even pre-poll surveys in the midst of a poll schedule, could be misleading. The general impression in any case is that exit polls are not reliable as often. Certain hype in the coverage of exit polls by television channels even before the completion of a staggered poll schedule, is bound to vitiate the poll process by influencing undecided voters in the remaining phases and facilitating a bandwagon effect.

Nevertheless, I do not think banning exit polls or the media coverage of exit polls, or even pre-poll surveys is the right option. But, in the interest of free and fair elections, some guidelines, more by way of self-discipline are desirable. Self-imposed ones are far better. Both "freedom of speech" as well as the holding of "free and fair polls" are paramount for a vibrant democracy.

By making the Election Commission (EC) withdraw its directive restricting exit polls to certain timings, the Supreme Court in 1999 had gone more by the book than by its spirit. The Election Commission took the initiative with an understanding that such a measure facilitates free and fair elections. The restriction was on publishing or broadcasting the results of such surveys even before voting is complete everywhere. The need to reconsider such a view is even greater in 2004 - for three reasons - one, proliferation of television news channels across the country; secondly, increased competitiveness in the contests and, thirdly, such poll surveys are not necessarily objective but, as seen recently, could be part of party campaigns.

People have right to information at all times

THE most common argument levelled against exit polls is that they influence voter preference and can lead people to change a choice previously made regarding a candidate. There is no data that supports this and the absence of information to the contrary would suggest that this notion is not backed by hard evidence. Moreover, the act of isolating exit polls, or singling them out, should be avoided. Why should they be accused of influencing voter behaviour any more or any less than pre-poll forecasts? Exit polls are in essence a retrospective snapshot of how the electorate has voted.

The existence of exit polls themselves is easily and obviously explained by the notion that in a democratic society people have the right to the free flow of information at all times. This allows for an honest representation of public opinion and is not meant in any way to decide or influence personal action on the part of voters. Internationally, too, there has been a lot of debate over the subject, but it has not arrived at any conclusive verdict; most governments allow exit polls. This treats the public's right to information as a far superior need than the suspicion that exit polls may have some remote chance of influencing voter behaviour.

Most importantly, voters who finally fill out the ballot paper are likely to be very clear about why they have chosen to vote for the candidate who has their favour. Coupled with such conviction, it is safe to assume that their personal assessment about a candidate's capabilities — and not the information output of an exit poll — will decide their choice. Indeed, research indicates that voters very often don't have a second choice and will not vote for any party other than the one which they have decided on initially. In India the result of the polls conducted for a given constituency are announced only at the end of the day, after the day's polling. This, therefore, cannot influence the voter for that constituency, and is certainly unlikely to have an impact on the voter of a different constituency where polling is yet to take place. A multi-country study by WAPOR & ESOMAR, two of the largest market research bodies states that any effects (of change in voter behaviour) are difficult to prove and in any case are minimal.

FACE-OFF



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