

Essay on Should Opinion/Exit Polls be Banned ?

"Exit polls be banned, Opinion polls be banned, every political party clamoring, trying to find one or the other excuse, searching one or the other logic, legal, ethical or political to get the exit/opinion polls banned."

Almost all national and regional political parties are unanimous on the point that the opinion and exit polls must be banned once elections are announced or the result of opinion or exit polls should not be made public till the voting process is over. All the political parties find these polls an obstacle to free and fair elections and a threat to a healthy democracy. All the political parties met the Election Commission for a ban on the opinion and exit polls in order to have fair and unbiased polling which is the basic requirement for the functioning of a healthy democracy in our country.

At a first glance, those opposing exit polls seem to have a reasonable point. It is feared and presumed that the opinion or exit polls generate a bandwagon effect among voters who go to the booths at a later date. This sounds fine theoretically but there is no evidence to prove this theory of 'Induced cause Effect'.

The political parties are so puzzled that they are talking to get an ordinance promulgated to ban the opinion and exit polls from the date of notification of the election till the last ballot is cast. Let us examine, the reasons given, in favor of banning the opinion and exit, by several political leaders and analysts.

(a) One important argument for banning the opinion or exit polls is that these polls have a bandwagon effect. It means these polls make a

motivating effect on voters to cast the votes in favor of the winning party which distorts the political process, so opinion and exit polls must be banned. The argument looks pretty good theoretically, but there is no evidence in support of the assertion. Take the example of the State of Rajasthan where assembly elections were held in Dec. 2003. All the exit/opinion polls published before the elections projected the congress, the winning party but the result was totally against the opinion /exit polls. The BJP won a clear majority winning the first time 120 seats and the congress got merely 56 seats out of the 200 total. As such the theory of the bandwagon effect does not hold true.

(b) Our more plea against the Opinion and, Fikit Polls is that these polls encourage tactical voting, meaning thereby, these polls induce the voter to judge the way the wind is blowing and to decide what he should do or in the words of Kapil Sibbal, spokesperson of the Congress party, "Opinion polls are opinion-making polls so these should be banned."

Though there is no evidence of any significant impact of these polls yet if these polls help the voter to decide to whom he should vote even then what is wrong with that anyway? Every political party tries their best to woo or influence the voters by their manifestos, speeches full of promises and assurances, many of which are just a part of the paperwork, with no intention of fulfilling them. If all these things are OK then why not the opinion or exit polls are not?

(c) Another argument is that opinion or exit polls are based on small samples and may not be inaccurate. A sample of 20,000 to 40,000 in a country of 650 million voters? So these polls are banned.

Statistically, if the universe (means the total electorate) is large, the size of the sample does not depend on the size of the universe.

In the USA with an electorate of around 200 million, a sample of 1200 does work, then why a sample of 20,000 to 40,000 not enough in the Indian context. It is said that India being a country with much more diversity, needs a larger sample. Most of the opinion polls have based on error (the good ones have a range of 3-4%) and they measure opinion at the time when the polls are conducted, so the size of the sample is sufficient to get the approximate results.

(d) A presumed fear of political parties is that the result of exit polls is likely announcing the result, which is not fair, as elections still have to be conducted in many States, and it could influence those voters, so these polls are banned.

Paradoxically, in previous arguments, politicians wanted to ban these polls, because they are inaccurate but sometimes it is felt that they want to ban these polls because they are accurate. If the exit polls provide some guidance to the intending voters, what is wrong with that? In the USA nobody argues to ban the exit polls, as they knew the right of freedom of speech available to the citizens. Similar freedom is also guaranteed in our Constitution under Article 19 (1) (a) then why clamor?

(e) One more funny argument is given to banning these polls, is that in our country we have a multistage election, so the publication of opinion and exit polls results may demoralize the cadres of the losing political party so these polls be banned.

It appears that the political parties are suffering from some psychic problems. Whether it is the job of the opinion polls to inform the public or be concerned about the morale of political workers? Do articles written by journalists, speeches made by politicians, forecasts made by astrologers, all based on imaginary things without concrete evidence, not demoralize the cadres?

(f) It is also argued that some opinion polls are conducted in a biased manner, and on the behest of some political party which is not fair and could mislead the voters so these polls are banned.

We can find some rotten apples in any profession, but most organizations in India conducting opinion polls or exit polls are market research organizations. Most of these organizations are not exclusively busy in opinion or exit polls, it is not more than 3 to 4% of their business, that is too during the election period. In case they are biased or unprofessional has a major impact on their commercial business, the good ones normally drive out the bad in course of time. Among politicians, on the other hand, the bad normally drive out the good once! Could we trust the politicians in any way even in respect to their allegiance with any political party, no... not at all. We could find a number of politicians changing parties in every election just to get the ticket or to get some other lucrative post etc. So why not a perfect ban on these nefarious political activities be there?

Conclusively, all the arguments given/advanced in favor of banning the opinion or exit polls, do not hold water. Moreover, our Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression [Article 19 (1) (a)] and the right to practice any profession or to carry on any occupation, trade, or business [Article 19 (g)], so it is totally unreasonably against the spirit of Constitution to ban the opinion and exit polls.