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Indian Elections 2009: What the Forecasts Say

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Preface

India is holding its 15th general elections from 16 April to 13 May 2009. The elections are taking place in challenging circumstances. A variety of cross-cutting political, security, economic and socio-cultural issues are influencing the elections. The exercise is impacted by multiple parties, personalities and positions from India's vast political spectrum.

The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) is bringing out a series of papers analysing different aspects of the elections. These include, among others, an analysis of key national and regional parties and their strategies, key political personalities, and issues dominating perceptions of the electorate.

ISAS had earlier prepared eight papers, providing an overview of India's political parties; the role of the youth in India's elections; the economic backdrop to the general elections; the major domestic issues likely to dominate the elections; India's key foreign policy concerns and their impact on the elections; the role of women and importance of women leaders in Indian politics and elections; geographical distribution of India's regional parties, their areas of influence and regional electoral outlooks; and the prospects for economic reforms following the elections.

The ninth paper in the series takes a close look at the different surveys and opinion polls carried out on the elections and tries to identify the key messages emanating from these surveys.

Introduction

The elections of 2009 are unique for a number of reasons. These include the lack of discernible popular waves favouring any political formation led by the two main national parties; the enhanced significance of regional parties; selective influences of diverse political leaders; and the intensity with which the elections are being fought over five weeks.

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An important feature of these elections has been the ban imposed by the Election Commission of India on the conduct of exit polls² until the last phase of voting is over. During the last general elections in 2004, the Supreme Court had refused to ban exit polls. This time, however, such polls have been banned till 13 May 2009, the last day of the polling.³

As a result of the ban on exit polls, newspapers, television channels and other media agencies have been projecting the likely outcomes of the polls through surveys conducted among specific samples of the electorate. With four phases of the polling completed, votes have been cast for 457 of the 543 seats. This paper looks at the different surveys that have come out so far, including the ones that were conducted before the elections began on 16 April 2009.

Pre-poll Surveys

The first survey was conducted by the *CNN-IBN* in the third week of February 2009. It projected that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) will win between 215 and 235 seats; the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) will win between 165 and 185 seats; and the Third Front will win between 120 and 150 seats.

In another pre-poll survey conducted by India's leading daily, *The Times of India*, in the first week of March 2009, the UPA was shown marginally ahead of the NDA, with both formations falling well short of the required 272 seats to obtain a simple majority. While the survey projected the UPA to win 201 seats, it put the NDA at 195 seats.⁴ The projections for both the UPA and the NDA were done before the occurrence of several key developments with respect to constituents of both combines such as Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Mr Ram Vilas Paswan of the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) joining hands. The trio has entered into an electoral understanding on the 120 seats in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.⁵ An updated assessment of the survey was presented a month later. The new projections gave 198 seats to the UPA, 176 to the NDA and 109 to the Third Front.⁶ Thus, between the two time periods, the survey found the UPA gaining more ground at the expense of both the NDA and the Third Front. However, it also noted that there were parties outside these three combines who could significantly influence the outcome of the elections.

The first *Star News-Nielsen India* pre-poll survey gave the UPA 210 seats. These seats did not include those of the RJD, the SP and the LJP. If one were to include their seats, the total tally of the UPA was expected to go up to 257. The Congress was projected to win 144 seats, according to this survey. On the other hand, the NDA was expected to win 184, with the BJP winning 137 seats, and the Third Front 96 seats. Interestingly, while this survey projected more seats for the UPA just as the other surveys, it also expected the SP to win more seats (30) than Ms Mayawati Kumari's Bahujan Samaj Party (21).⁷

² Exit Polls are based on responses received from voters after the latter have cast their votes and are leaving the booths.

³ The Business Standard, "EC bans opinion, exit polls by media", 14 April 2009.

⁴ The Times of India "TOI estimate: UPA ahead but just only", 6 March 2009.

⁵ The Indian Express, "Lalu, Mulayam, Paswan form 'secular alliance'", 26 March 2009.

⁶ The Times of India, "Congress best placed to lead next government: BJP Left lose ground in TOI estimates", 10 April 2009.

⁷ The Hindu, "UPA to get 203 seats, NDA 191: Opinion Poll", 12 April 2009.

The second *Star News-Nielsen* survey, conducted all over India from 26 March to 3 April 2009, showed a marginal decline in the UPA's prospects, though it was still ahead of the other combines. The UPA was projected to win 203 seats, down by seven seats from the first survey. The NDA was now placed at a higher level of 191 seats, seven up from the first survey.⁸ Interestingly, the survey showed both the Congress and BJP improving individually with their seat tallies increasing to 155 seats and 147 seats respectively. These gains were arguably at the expense of the other constituents within their respective combines. This survey also gave the Third Front 104 seats, eight more than in the first round.

The leading television channel, *NDTV*, carried out a pre-poll survey just on the eve of elections on 14 April 2009. This survey gave a clear edge to the UPA by projecting between 205 and 215 seats for the combine, while forecasting between 160 and 170 seats for the NDA. It also predicted a bigger tally of between 120 and 130 seats for the Third Front. The survey also took the Mulayam-Laloo-Paswan combine as the 'Fourth Front' and projected it to win between 30 and 40 seats.

While all the above surveys put the Congress-led UPA in the lead, only two assessments gave an edge to the NDA over the UPA. The first of these was a survey by *India TV*. It projected 187 seats for the NDA, with the BJP alone winning 144 seats. On the other hand, the UPA was put at 178 seats, with Congress winning 133 seats. The survey, however, stated that if the UPA could woo back erstwhile allies such as the SP and the LJP, it would be able to muster 235 seats.⁹ It projected the Third Front to win a sizeable 121 seats. The second assessment which gave an edge to the NDA was an internal assessment of the BJP. This survey predicted 217 seats for the NDA, with the BJP getting 160 seats and 180 seats for the UPA, with the Congress winning 135 of these seats.¹⁰

The survey that projected the maximum number of seats for the Third Front was that by *India Today*. It gave the UPA between 196 and 205 seats, and the NDA between 172 and 181 seats. On the other hand, it gave the Third Front as much as 169 to 178 seats, projecting it to become as sizeable a combine as the NDA.¹¹

Post-poll Surveys

The latest *NDTV* survey was conducted after the end of the third phase of polls on 20 April 2009. With elections at the half-way stage, the survey projected the UPA to win 219 seats, followed by the NDA with 170 seats, the Third Front with 113 seats, and the Fourth front with 35 seats. The forecasts were, by and large, similar to what *NDTV* had predicted before the polls.

According to the latest internal assessments of the Congress, the party is expected to emerge as the single largest party, winning between 140 and 160 seats.¹² The BJP has not released any mid-poll analysis till now.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The Indian Express, "NDA may have a minor edge over UPA", 5 April 2009.

¹⁰ The Times of India, "BJP survey gives it slight edge in race against Congress", 27 March 2009.

¹¹ The India Today, "The battle cry of the satraps", Ashok K. Damodaran, 3 April 2009.

¹² NDTV website "Elections 2009: The war room assessments", 24 April 2009. Weblink: http://www.ndtv.com/news/india/elections_2009_the_war_room_assessments.php.

In a survey conducted after three phases of polling and released on 6 May 2009, *The Times of India* has projected the Congress to emerge as the single largest party with 152 seats while the UPA is expected to end up with around 195 seats. Interestingly, the NDA is right behind with 187 seats, with the BJP projected to win 145 seats.

The survey opined that the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, led by Ms J. Jayalalitha, may sweep Tamil Nadu while the Telegu Desam Party may do better in Andhra Pradesh than expected earlier, along with the Janata Dal (United) in Bihar. In the key state of Uttar Pradesh, both the BJP and the Congress are expected to gain and win up to 30 of the 80 seats between themselves. In Maharashtra, the BJP and the Shiv Sena are expected to take a slender lead over the Congress.¹³

Conclusion

All the surveys – pre-poll and post-poll – are unanimous in predicting a fractured verdict for the elections. No party or political combine is expected to win 272 seats required for a simple majority in the Lower House of the Indian Parliament. Most of the surveys expect the Congress-led UPA to emerge as the largest political combine. However, the BJP-led NDA is not far behind, at least as far as the latest *Times of India* survey is concerned. All surveys are unanimous in underlining the pivotal role of the Third Front in forming the next Indian government.

As India gears up for the last round of polls on 13 May 2009 and the announcement of election results scheduled for 16 and 17 May 2009, the forecasts point to uncertainty looming large on India's political front.

The configuration of the next Indian government is now anybody's guess, unless the forecasts are completely off the mark.

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¹³ The Times of India, "Polls head for photo-finish as BJP plays catch-up", 6 May 2009.