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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

# Beyond the Exit Poll — What India's Election Forecasting Industry Gets Right and Gets Badly Wrong

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# Beyond the Exit Poll — What India's Election Forecasting Industry Gets Right and Gets Badly Wrong

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## THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

At 6:30 PM on April 29, the curtain on India's five-state election cycle lifts — not for the results (those come on May 4) but for the exit polls. For the next 4+ days, the country's political discourse will be shaped by seat predictions derived from exit surveys conducted at booths. These predictions will be treated with a mix of credulity and suspicion they have not consistently earned. A clear-eyed understanding of what exit polls can and cannot tell us is essential before the May 4 verdict.

## HOW EXIT POLLS WORK — AND DON'T WORK

An exit poll surveys voters as they leave polling booths — asking who they voted for. In theory, this eliminates the problem of election day prediction (people say they intend to vote one way but actually vote another). In practice, Indian exit polls face three structural challenges:

- 1. Sampling bias.** Exit pollsters cannot survey every booth — they sample a fraction. In a state like West Bengal (72,000+ booths across 294 constituencies), even a well-funded poll samples a small percentage. Constituency-level accuracy, where margins are often 3,000-10,000 votes, requires far larger samples than exit poll budgets allow.
- 2. Social desirability bias.** In states with known political violence and party intimidation — West Bengal being the primary example — voters may be reluctant to truthfully disclose they voted against the ruling party. This systematically biases exit polls toward incumbents in coercive political environments.
- 3. Seat conversion error.** Converting vote share to seat counts in FPTP (First Past the Post) is notoriously difficult. In West Bengal, a 5% swing in vote share can produce a 50+ seat swing in assembly outcome depending on where votes are concentrated. Exit polls that get the vote share right often get the seat count substantially wrong.

## INDIA'S EXIT POLL TRACK RECORD

ELECTION	EXIT POLL PREDICTION	ACTUAL RESULT	ACCURACY
2021 WB Assembly	Most: TMC majority	TMC 213, BJP 77	Reasonable — called TMC win correctly
2022 UP Assembly	Most: BJP majority	BJP 255/403	Broadly correct
2023 Rajasthan	Most: Congress win	BJP win	<b>Wrong</b> — major miss
2023 MP	Most: Close contest	BJP landslide	<b>Significantly underestimated BJP</b>
2024 Lok Sabha	Most: NDA 350+	NDA ~293	<b>Wrong</b> — substantially overestimated NDA

The 2024 general election exit poll failure — where virtually every major agency predicted NDA 350+ seats and the actual result was approximately 293 — is the most recent and dramatic illustration of systematic bias. The exit polls captured national sentiment but missed the ground realities of competitive marginal seats where opposition vote consolidation had occurred.

## WHY BENGAL AND TAMIL NADU ARE HARD TO CALL

**West Bengal:** The political violence dynamic creates a specific problem. If voters in TMC-dominated rural areas are reluctant to disclose BJP votes at exit polling points (where local party workers can observe who talks to which surveyor), exit polls will systematically underestimate the BJP's actual vote share. The 2021 result, where TMC outperformed most exit poll predictions, may partly reflect this phenomenon.

**Tamil Nadu:** The three-way TVK contest (Vijay's party) creates a genuine forecasting challenge. Exit polls are calibrated to two-party or clear alliance dynamics. When a third force — TVK — has uncertain vote share and unpredictable constituency distribution, converting to seat predictions is nearly impossible. Exit polls that get TVK's vote share right may still get its seat count completely wrong.

## WHAT EXIT POLLS ARE LEGITIMATELY USEFUL FOR

Despite their limitations, exit polls serve a democratic function:

- 1 **Direction of verdict** — even inaccurate exit polls usually indicate which party is ahead. A 70-55% exit poll advantage for one party rarely reverses on counting day.

- ② **Turnout analysis** — exit pollsters collect useful **demographic** data (age, gender, caste breakdowns of voting patterns) that provides analytical value beyond the seat predictions.
- ③ **Real-time political response** — exit polls force parties to begin their coalition calculations, concession planning, or victory preparations before May 4, which is democratically healthy.

## THE BAN — AND ITS LOGIC

The Election Commission of India prohibits exit poll publication until all phases of all ongoing elections are complete. The logic: if exit polls are published in a multi-phase election, they might influence voting in later phases. The 6:30 PM prohibition on April 29 is legally grounded in the Representation of the People Act and serves this anti-influence function.

Whether the ban is fully effective in the social media age — where exit poll predictions circulate informally on WhatsApp and encrypted platforms hours before the 6:30 PM release — is a separate question. The formal legal prohibition exists; its practical effectiveness has eroded.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — Polity	Exit polls; Representation of People Act; election media regulation; ECI
GS2 — Governance	Electoral reforms; digital media regulation; political communication
GS1 — Indian Society	Political surveys; caste-based voting; identity politics measurement

**Mains Keywords:** Exit polls, Representation of People Act, ECI, election forecasting, FPTP seat conversion, sampling bias, social desirability bias, political violence and exit polls, 2024 Lok Sabha exit poll failure, West Bengal exit poll

### Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
Exit poll ban ends	6:30 PM, April 29, 2026
Legal basis	Representation of the People Act
2024 Lok Sabha prediction	Most exit polls: NDA 350+; actual: ~293 seats
2021 WB exit polls	Broadly correct — called TMC majority
2023 Rajasthan	Most called Congress win; BJP actually won
Key bias in WB	Social desirability bias in coercive political environments
FPTP challenge	Small vote share swings produce large seat swings
States with exit polls April 29	WB, TN, Kerala, Assam, Puducherry (all 5 simultaneously)

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