

# Exit Polls and Exact Polls



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

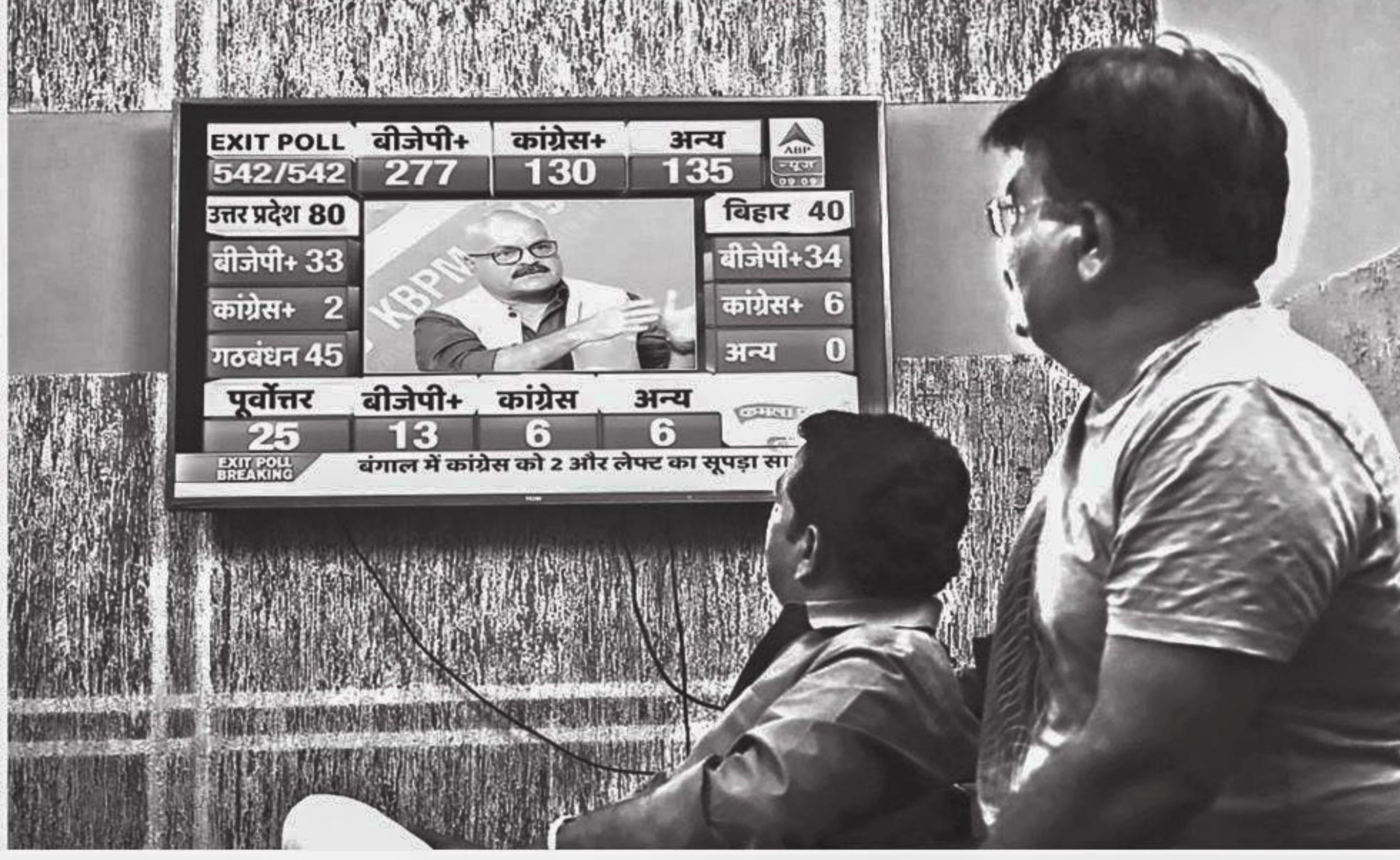
MINUTES after the buttons on the Electronic Voting Machines were pressed for the last time on May 19 in the Indian national elections, the people were flooded with a flurry of exit polls

broadcast over TV channels. This was accompanied by high-decibel debates in TV studios analysing the exit poll forecasts in spite of the recognition that they are not exact official results as vote-count takes place on May 23.

After a 39-day voting process, suspense has been building up about the possible list of victors and the vanquished. Naturally, Indians were glued to their TV sets for the exit polls, trying to get a sense of what kind of government may be formed. But the question is: did they get an accurate picture?

The reactions of the parties on both sides of the political divide to the exit polls have been on predictable lines: the opposition dismissing them with the lone discordant voice being that of National Conference leader Omar Abdullah, who opined that not all exit polls are wrong, while senior Bharatiya Janata Party leader Arun Jaitley said the actual results will be "in consonance" with the exit poll results, almost all of which predict that the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) will get a comfortable majority for a second successive term.

How reliable are the exit polls? To what degree are these polls credible? Should one go by the brand name of the agencies the TV channels hire to conduct the exit polls or of the



Men look at a television screen showing exit poll results after the last phase of the general election in Ahmedabad, India, May 19, 2019.

PHOTO: AMIT DAVE/REUTERS

channels that put them out? Poll experts tend to believe that a lot of the reliability of the exit polls depends on the sample size of voters who are interviewed about their choice of candidates soon after coming out of the polling booths. However, what is the guarantee that the voters have spoken the truth to the survey agency as to who they have voted for, even if their identities are not disclosed? It is quite possible that the selection of voters interviewed by exit poll agencies depends on the latter's choices as per their biases towards the candidates and

parties they would like to win. Should one reject outright the exit polls or take them with a pinch of salt? These questions are directed against the very basis of exit polls and raise a fresh debate about their desirability.

Sanjay Kumar, Director of Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), a New Delhi-based think-tank, writes in an article in *The Indian Express*: "The science of surveys, which includes exit polls, works on the assumption that the data have been collected after interviewing a large number of voters using a structured

questionnaire." Kumar points to some basic requirements of surveys: (1) a big sample size of the electorate and (2) a structured questionnaire.

Indian exit polls are known to often be way off the mark—failing to predict the final result with a fair degree of accuracy. However, there have also been occasions when they have succeeded in pointing towards a broad direction as to which way the wind is blowing as revealed later by the official results.

Indian Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu, a senior leader of the BJP, was quoted as saying just a few days ago

that most of the exit polls since 1990 have turned out to be wrong. In 2004, all exit polls had forecast a majority for the BJP-led combine. But the actual results led to a hung parliament with the Congress emerging as the single largest party and forming an alliance government under Manmohan Singh as prime minister. In the national poll in 2014, most of the exit polls had predicted the BJP to win but none of them projected the BJP to get a majority on its own. In fact, five years ago, there was such a strong wave in favour of the BJP that one did not even need the exit polls to predict the election outcome.

According to Kumar, the methodology of conducting exit polls in India has evolved since it began in 1957, with the sample size of voters having expanded from the thousands used by well-known psephologists like Prannoy Roy and Yogendra Yadav through the 1980s and 1990s to lakhs at present. But Kumar also says the CSDS exit polls were not off the mark in the 1998 and 1999 parliamentary elections. At the same time, he admits there were occasions when CSDS exit polls were inaccurate (for instance, wrongly predicting the winners in Chhattisgarh assembly polls late last year when the Congress Party trumped the Bharatiya Janata Party). In the case of Uttar Pradesh assembly polls in 2017, the actual results proved all exit polls wrong as far as BJP's stunning victory was concerned.

From these examples, Kumar comes to the conclusion that "there is no thumb rule for how to get the (exit poll) prediction correct." If that is the case, should we give a thumbs up or thumbs down to the trend of exit polls?

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for *The Daily Star*.

## US-IRAN STANDOFF

# Will good sense prevail?



White House National Security Adviser John Bolton listens as US President Donald Trump holds a cabinet meeting at the White House in Washington, US, August 16, 2018.

PHOTO: KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

indeed—and that too from one of the closest advisers of the most powerful office on earth.

The words echo an era of the 1950s and early '60s when McCarthyists in America, followers of Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy from Wisconsin, believed that the only good communist is a dead communist. It is this that led the US to bomb communist North Vietnam relentlessly for over a decade and a half. We all know how that episode ended. The communists won that war. Chaotic scenes of American diplomats, residual military personnel and their South Vietnamese collaborators climbing over each other as they frantically tried to board the last military Huey helicopter taking off from the roof of the US embassy in Saigon, as Ho Chi Minh's communist forces from across the 17th Parallel closed in, are etched into everyone's memory. To add to the irony, President Trump travelled to Vietnam's capital Hanoi in an attempt to make peace with another Asian communist adversary from across the 38th Parallel.

The more recent painful experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria are stark reminders of the material, moral and political costs of war. Importantly, very few wars are justified.

The number of brave American servicemen needing psychiatric counselling for the trauma inflicted

while fighting the enemy in Afghanistan and Iraq is far too high. Any misadventure on the Persian Gulf will only add to that number.

One would not offer a certificate of good governance to the current theological regime in Tehran. But it did demonstrate a sense of responsibility by agreeing on a deal with key global players, including the United States, to not develop nuclear weapons. European co-signatories to the treaty believe that Iran has stuck to its commitment so far and are urging restraint and calling for diplomacy to be given a chance.

For the Trump administration, therefore, to arbitrarily pull out of the

agreement, impose punitive sanctions and deploy an aircraft carrier and bomber planes to the Persian Gulf, a highly volatile region, do not make sense to the saner minds, unless such actions are aimed at pleasing America's closest ally. Only time will tell to what extent the current political dispensation in Washington is willing to listen to the voices of sanity.

It is important to remember that Iran sits on the strategically important Gulf of Hormuz. A military conflict here would most certainly have far-reaching economic and political implications not just for the region but far beyond. Besides, one would

recall that Iraq's Saddam Hussein's military misadventure in Iran, backed by the Gulf countries and encouraged by Washington, just as the Iranian revolutionary forces were settling in, ended with Saddam eating humble pie with more than a million deaths on both sides. As the saying goes, "We learn from history that we do not learn from history."

It may be pertinent here to study the contrasting positions the Trump administration has on North Korea's declared nuclear weaponisation programme versus those on Iran, which does not have a declared nuclear weaponisation programme. Some

analysts suggest that the threat of nuclear deterrence from Pyongyang and the absence of it from Tehran make all the difference.

But there are other factors that very likely explain the divergence. One may be personal: Donald Trump himself. He has staked far too much on the North Korean venture to risk his reputation by seeing it fail through military action. Having brought Kim Jong-un to the global centre-stage himself, Trump cannot afford to be seen as the one to have pushed him away. It would be a loss of face for him with no such loss for Kim. In fact, Kim would be seen to have stood his ground and gotten away with it.

The second has to be geopolitics. Any US military action, or even the threat of it, on North Korea will bring China directly into the equation. It will most definitely make the South Koreans, US allies, unhappy and the Japanese uncomfortable. One doesn't see any of the Asian countries even remotely acquiescing. Washington would seriously be isolated here. That's too much of a risk that Trump knows he cannot afford to take.

On the other hand, his ratcheting up the rhetoric on Iran and backing it up with visible deployment of military assets in the Persian Gulf serve his ego well, play to his ideological base at home and please his most trusted ally, Israel, and some others in the region. He could claim not to be isolated there and get away with it in 2020.

One fervently hopes cooler heads will eventually prevail in Washington and another Iraq-like quagmire will be averted. But a bolt(on) from the blue cannot be ruled out.

Shamsheer M Chowdhury, BB, is a former foreign secretary of Bangladesh.

## ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### MAY 22, 1960

#### THE MOST VIOLENT EARTHQUAKE IN RECORDED HISTORY HITS CHILE

The Great Chilean Earthquake rated 9.5 on the moment magnitude scale. According to estimates, between 2,230 and 6,000 people were killed.

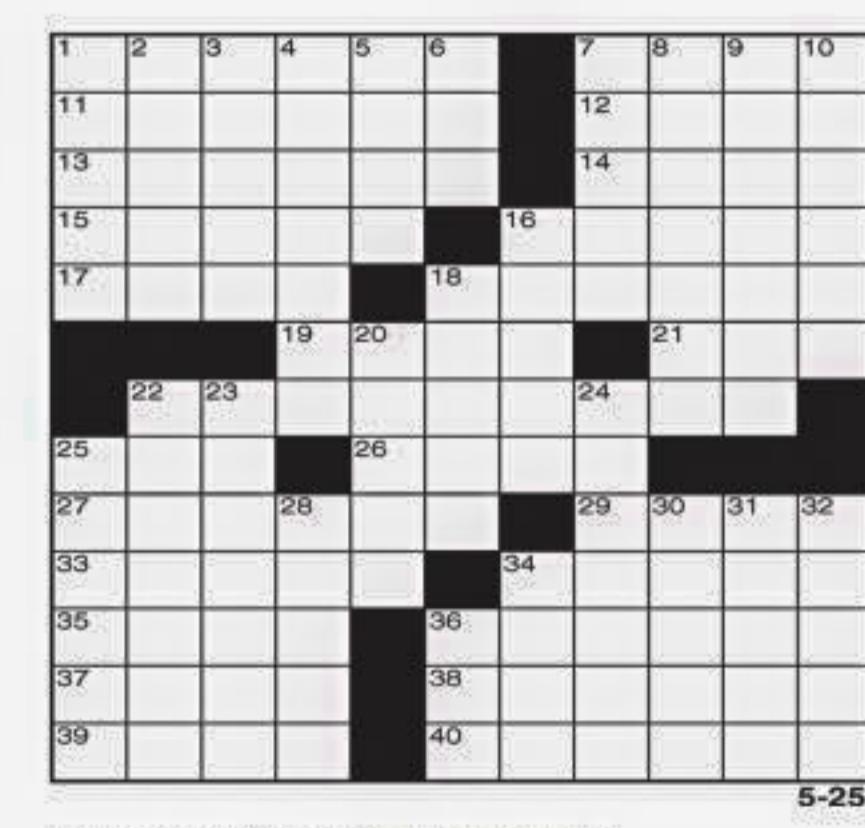
#### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

- 1 Packs for emergencies
- 7 Decree
- 29 Party leader
- 33 Steep drop-off
- 34 Pound parts
- 35 Miami team
- 36 Damascus native
- 37 Writer Rice
- 38 Baltimore player
- 39 Scorch
- 40 Sun protection
- 41 Amused looks
- 42 Tampa team
- 43 Light wind
- 44 Seoul setting
- 45 Homer's neighbor
- 46 Party snack
- 47 Supply with staff
- 48 Cincinnati team

**DOWN**

- 10 Detected
- 11 God of light
- 12 Merchandise
- 13 Tried out
- 14 Heaps
- 15 Welles of "Citizen Kane"
- 16 Tampa team
- 17 Light wind
- 18 Seoul setting
- 19 Homer's neighbor
- 20 Party snack
- 21 Supply with staff
- 22 Party snack
- 23 Party snack
- 24 Herald
- 25 Coffee shop
- 26 Following
- 27 Leek's cousin
- 28 Map ratio
- 29 Firebug, for short
- 30 Cry loudly



#### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



#### BEETLE BAILEY



#### BABY BLUES



by Mort Walker



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO [dsopinion@gmail.com](mailto:dsopinion@gmail.com)