**Ive never seen evidence of opinion polls influencing voters… making people go with the winner or deciding to back the underdog | The Indian Express**

Ive never seen evidence of opinion polls influencing voters… making people go with the winner or deciding to back the underdog Summary. In this Walk the Talk on NDTV 24X7,renowned psephologist Sir David Butler talks to The Indian Express Editor-in-Chief Shekhar Gupta about how he coined the words swing and psephology,the reason he remains optimistic about India after studying its elections for so long,and why bad opinion polls get driven out on own. Related. In this Walk the Talk on NDTV 24X7,renowned psephologist Sir David Butler talks to The Indian Express Editor-in-Chief Shekhar Gupta about how he coined the words swing and psephology,the reason he remains optimistic about India after studying its elections for so long,and why bad opinion polls get driven out on own. At a time when politicians are debating whether pre-election opinion polls are a good idea or an evil that distorts our elections,we are lucky to be talking to the guru of gurus when it comes to opinion polling,Sir David Butler. You explained to the world what a swing means. Yes I suppose I have two words that I have been responsible for I didnt invent either of them. The first is swing. People talked about the swing of the pendulum between one election and next. They said it in the past,but they hadnt made it systematic. When I was a very young man,I wrote an article which talked about swing and it caught on. It became absolutely central to the interpretation of elections,particularly when you had two dominant parties. So thats one word. The other word I am responsible for is psephology. Now,it was an Oxford joke. Somebody said they are making a habit of the systematic study of elections. So we should have a word for it. And a classical scholar said,well the Greeks voted by dropping pebbles in urns. Psephos is the Greek for pebble. And so we made a joke of it,psepho-itry,psepho-analysis and other things,while working on elections in the early 1950s,and it just caught on… Im rather embarrassed,I dont think of it is a science,but quite a lot of gimmicks. Studying elections is not a science at all,its rather pompous. I rather regret having put it into currency. But you have made a science out of it,for you have explained British elections to British viewers for 60 years now. Yes,I was very lucky. They put on a programme,the first time a British election results programme,in 1950,and I was asked to take part in it. I had hardly ever been in front of the camera. But people were interested in somebody who could make,in reasonable,simple terms,sense of quite complicated statistics… For 30 years I did the basic quantitative analysis of what was happening in the country as the results came in over a 24-hour period… I travelled the world,I went to Australia and came to India. Prannoy Roy invited me to come and talk about the study of elections in 1983,and then invited me to come back in 1984,before the election… And I worked as a backroom boy for 20 years with Prannoy and his colleagues and others in NDTV,helping on election nights. The three of you developed the index of opposition unity you,Prannoy Roy and Ashok Lahiri. Can you explain this index. Well,that was a simple way to deal with a situation when you had many parties. The Congress was the dominant party… had been for long,still is. I had come from a world where swing was quite simple because we had had for 30-40 years,Conservatives or Labour other parties didnt really matter. In India,it was always other parties that mattered. So you made the Congress the basis,and then you assumed that the others were against the Congress and you had some measure of how that worked out. But Narendra Modis rise has divided the Opposition. You should now be talking of an index of opposition disunity!… There is also a big controversy this time because many politicians are attacking the opinion poll industry. It is being called evil,induced by bribery,non-science. Well people have always been sceptical about it. Some polls can be attacked,they can be done dishonestly,but there is no substitute. People in old times would say lets go out and get the pulse of the nation. But it was dubious,much more dubious than people trying to go about it systematically. Banning of polls,I think,is a misguided idea. Then you would get leaks,secret private polls,and they may be much more misleading than polls,if you have public polls. In Britain,we have five significant polling companies and they actually are an association,which guarantees that they can be inspected,their sample size,their method of work can be explained. I dont think in Britain really anybody suggests banning polls. Some countries have banned them,like in Australia they are banned for the last three days (before elections). But by that time,things are settled. I think it is more or less impossible to prevent people talking to other people about what happens. If you want to call it a poll,you must do it systematically. It obviously can be manipulated,but if there is enough publicity,good polls drive out bad polls. And in Britain,they reveal their data. So effectively it is about submitting your data for peer review. Yes. It is not that British pollsters havent been wrong. In 1992,all the major polls grossly estimated Labour strength… But there was not a suggestion of corruption. Other countries tried to ban polls,but it just doesnt work. You get the stories,by secret polls,sources…. In India we say Intelligence Bureau polls. So pollsters going out is much better than spooks going out… I just know that in western democracies,banning (opinion) polls is,one,offensive in terms of civil liberties and,two,probably ineffective because people would do secret polls or say they have done secret polls that are not public ones and open to scrutiny. When politicians attacks pollsters,TV channels in India,how do you feel? I dont like it… In a free society,people can say what they like,but the test must be openness and how well the polls actually do. And if polls come unstuck badly,it will teach people to be sceptical about polls in the future. And if these polls come out well,they will be more respected… Take the poll that has the largest sample or has a better track record in recent times. Can you recount the story of your meeting with Winston Churchill?… It was a very drunken Churchill you met. In 1950,I had written an article in The Economist about the election and how one might judge it. Suddenly I was summoned by Winston Churchill,whom I had no contact with. And I had this extraordinary experience as a 25-year-old of spending four hours alone with him 10 days before the elections. He had no business wasting his time on a totally unimportant young man but he talked and he kept on forgetting why he had invited me and kept reminiscing. At one moment Anthony Eden,his deputy,made a broadcast and he said,What did you think of that?. I said it might have been a good speech at the Oxford Union but it was not a good broadcast for the great British public. He said Ah,he was not talking down to British people. I could do it,he said. He then imitated a union leader talking down to the people,and then said,Ive never talked down to the British people. He went back to his career and said,Why,in the dark days of 1940,when Britain stood alone,I did not mince my words. I told the people how it was. Then he gave me the blood,toil,sweat and tears speech of June 1940. And I said,Well in 1940 I was only 15 and it never occurred to me that Britain could be defeated. He said,What? Only 15 in 1940!. And he counted on his fingers,Why,you must be only 25 now! Better hurry up young man,Napoleon was only 25 when he crossed the bridge of Lodi… I have never been able to be terribly in awe of anyone since I was in the presence of a man I regarded not because I supported his politics but he was the greatest man in the world in his own way,suddenly giving me this romantic view of the whole panoply of history. We seem to have an interesting leader rise in India now,Modi,very interesting,very polarising. And I would say something that Arun Jaitley,the leader of the Opposition in our Upper House,said that Modis rise is about chemistry,not arithmetic. And whats happening across India will prove arithmetic,pollsters wrong. I am sceptical about that. But what struck me during this visit to the country is how the reputation of Manmohan Singh seems to have gone down I knew him when he was a student of Oxford. And the reputation of Modi seems to have recovered from what was a very bad reputation 10 years ago. In 2014,it will be 30 years since any party won a majority in India. In a society or polity as divided,what would it take for any party to win a majority? I dont know that there is any answer to that. A grave national crisis can bring people along. Well there was a majority in 1984,there was also a huge swing back between 1989 and 1991,after Rajivs death. So you can get a big emotional swing in a short space of time to some unforeseen event. But I dont think that is very likely. The central question in Indian politics today and I will put it in what you may call simplistic terms is that this contest is between two groups. One believes that religion and nationalism can unite what caste divides. The other believes that socialism can unite whom caste divides. Which one do you think has a better chance? What does history tell us? If I give an academic hedge,a bit of both. I mean nationalism,socialism,care for people,the generality of people,it can be a very valuable force against crude individualism. On the other hand it does seem that a good deal of individualism goes down well in the markets,like enterprising people doing it their own way and trying to avoid too much government regulation. I am just a middle-of-the-world kind of person who believes compromise works and who,on the whole,believes that over time things get better. Studying Indian politics for so many years,what has fascinated you the most about it? The most moving moment Ive had in India was in 1984 when I had just flown in and Prannoy Roy took me to a small womens group,with a girl who had just joined his staff. We were looking at the poll she had done. The poll was very primitive and she had brought in cyclostyled sheets of paper. One of the questions was,What is the most important issue for you in this election?. Unity of India was one of the five choices. And over 50 per cent were choosing unity of India… in Indian villages all around the country. That moved me and made me an optimist about India. All sorts of traumas had come up in the last 30 years,but India stays united. And you will likely get as good a result from a poll now as you did then,just after the death of Mrs Gandhi. In fact,as our politics has got more divided,India has got more united… On the decline of the Gandhis as a national power… The basic thing is India was united,relatively speaking,by the Congress. Pandit Nehru was the head of the Congress and symbolises the legacy of the Independence movement. It just dies away over 50 years… What Nehru did nobody can do again. Nobody could emerge into that socially dominant position. Or what Indira did,for that matter. There she was. She had her name and her reputation and she could pass it on to Rajiv,and I suppose there is still some legacy of it. But I believe it must be a terrible burden,the inheritance of the awful deaths and the brutalities against them. Do you reflect on the loss of control or power of Dr Manmohan Singh,whom you knew as a student? I dont know enough about what is going on. I know him to be a good man and an honest man. And one hears a lot about an awful lot who are not honest in Indian politics. What he has done or failed to do in a very difficult task,I dont know. He has the incredible achievement of actually surviving for 10 years. Nobody except the Gandhis has had 10 years in office. Even more remarkable is how you stay so fit and so interested. I see your eyes light up when you confront a complexity of politics. I still get excited by politics. I still get excited by elections in almost any country of the world. I am an old man now,I spend a lot of time just watching television and following particular individual election stories… Next May,or whenever the results come in,I dont think I will be able to come out here,but I will certainly be glued to the television. Whats got you going is just this curiosity,because its easy to dismiss you as an election junkie… Elections are fun. Opinion polls are also a part of that fun,isnt it? Little bit entertainment,little bit knowledge. And you dont believe they influence voters minds or corrupt the election process. I have never seen any evidence. They never know whether its an underdog effect or a bandwagon effect. Both the theses are possible,but nobody has produced any solid evidence. I have seen lots of articles,but I just dont believe this. They can,in some electoral systems,serve a purpose saying,This party has no hope,so dont waste your vote there. It will simplify elections. I wont say they have no influence,but I really do not think there is any solid evidence that there is a bandwagon lets go with the winner or an underdog effect that the winner is winning too big.