

INTERVIEW | PRANNOY ROY

# ‘Women voters now matter much more than before’

The veteran journalist on opinion polls, the index of opposition unity, vote transfers, anti-incumbency, and the Congress’s misreading of Uttar Pradesh

N. RAM & SRINIVASAN RAMANI

Veteran journalist and psephologist Prannoy Roy recently co-authored a book, ‘The Verdict: Decoding India’s Elections’, with Dorab R. Sopariwala. In this interview, Mr. Roy talks about opinion polls, landslide victories and the problem of missing women voters in India. Edited excerpts:

You are an economist, a chartered accountant, a psephologist and also a journalist. What do you think these roles bring to the table for your journalism?

■ It is an important question. There is a qualitative and quantitative aspect to these roles and these shouldn’t be bridged. For example, when I am doing opinion polls, that’s quantitative work, and as journalists we need to do qualitative work. Many journalists tend to try to forecast the elections, which is not their job. The job of journalism is qualitative; it’s to talk about stories, issues. These cannot be simply translated into numbers by an opinion poll. Pollsters try to be qualitative too, by asking people to list issues of priority, but this is not simple. It takes time to understand issues.

One of the findings in your book is that most often pollsters get the winner right, but they invariably underestimate the scale of victory in terms of seats for the winners. Why?

■ Pollsters tend to try to play it safe. It is important for them to get the winner right rather than the seats. If they get the largest party wrong, it is very tough for them to play it down. It is also because respondents, which is particularly true in this election, try to play it safe. They tend to reaffirm that they support the ruling party as they do not always trust the pollster. How much is the fear factor among the respondents... this is very tough for pollsters to assess.

One of the most interesting

findings of your book is that of landslides. Can you explain this phenomenon at the national and State levels?

■ The Lok Sabha elections are a federation of State elections. And invariably, each State votes differently and the final result in an election is the combination of landslides and results at the State level that could counteract each other. So, we may have a landslide one way in Tamil Nadu, another way in Maharashtra, and so on. We find that 77% of the Lok Sabha elections at the State level have been landslides.

Tamil Nadu is a classic case?

■ It’s 94% in Tamil Nadu. It is always one way – huge victories for one party or coalition. Landslides happen because in our first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, a small change in vote share gives a huge number of seats. The combination of the FPTP system and a fragmented Opposition results in a landslide.

There is a talk in the media about narratives – say, BJP on populist nationalism, Congress on something else in the past. Does this work nationwide or is it a myth?

■ It is a bit of a myth. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, we didn’t hear of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, or of majoritarianism or nationalism at all. But in some States, such as U.P., these narratives do exist to some extent. We find over time that voters vote based on their life conditions. We went to a village in U.P. where voters said they



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are going to vote against the government because a bridge had not been fixed. A respondent did mention Pulwama, but he rated it lower than livelihood in his priorities.

Maybe there is no one narrative that dominates across States, but we have had a government that has been in campaigning mode since 2014. Has there been any such government in the past that has been so keen on getting its message across? Does this matter in setting the narrative?

■ It does matter a lot. This government and the BJP are extremely efficient in booth management and turnout management. Globally this is seen as the focussed way to win elections. The BJP is superb at that – they have *panna pramukhs*, booth *prabharis*, and so on. It has social media apps, which the top leaders in the party use to reach out to *panna pramukhs*, who get messages in seconds and then everybody gets them. We have seen that lower turnouts tend to help cadre-based parties like the BJP because they make sure their voters turn out. Non-cadre

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parties hope that people will voluntarily turn out.

There is a worry. A turnout management ploy also includes rumour mongering that makes people worry about going to vote in elections fearing violence. In America, voter suppression prevents certain categories of voters, such as African Americans, from voting. Suppression methods make it complicated for them to even be registered as voters. We have a similar problem.

Ashok Lahiri and you had developed an index of opposition unity. Can you tell us about its significance? You speak about David Butler’s work on uniform swings and how this does not apply to all-India equations, and say that the index of opposition unity is a big determinant in India.

■ Yes. We learnt a lot from

the work of Butler, who originated the uniform swings theory, but this worked largely in a two-party system. When he came to India, he found that it doesn’t quite apply here because we have so many parties here. So, we had to work out an equation, which is a definition of what determines the change in margin. A margin of victory due to change in votes and a change in opposition unity is what determines the winner. If there is a perfect two-party system, the index of opposition unity is 100/100. The more fragmented it is, it goes down to 70, 60, 50, and that determines the margin of victory as much as swings.

People often ask, is there a Modi wave? We say, that is a misnomer because he won with 31% of the vote. He won due to the divided Opposition vote. Therefore, we must ask, how divided is the Opposition vote this time?

So how good is the index of opposition unity this time for the BJP both State-wide and nationwide?

■ The actual number can only be assessed by opinion polls. For example, we found that Yadavs vote with the Da-

lits in U.P. This is not only additive, but there is a boost beyond the arithmetic too. Because voters tend to believe this could be a winning coalition and it has momentum. So, if two parties bring 20% each, they could get a boost of 5% more votes due to this factor.

Do you have data on vote transfer? People say some parties transfer less of their votes than others in a coalition, right?

■ It is conventional wisdom among journalists, and not just true. We find that vote transfer is almost 100% plus a boost. Journalists say that Yadavs might not vote for [BSP chief] Mayawati, while Dalits might vote for the SP. That is just not true. Yadavs are voting for Mayawati, we find. We hear that Muslims vote tactically. But the Muslim vote does split. In fact, no section is voting 100% for one party.

The index of opposition unity is higher compared to 2014. Isn’t that so?

■ Yes, much higher. It is going to make a huge difference, especially in U.P. In U.P., even if the vote shares are exactly as in 2014, just a combination of these two parties, the BSP and SP, could reduce the BJP’s tally from 73 to half of that. If the Congress was part of the coalition, the seat tally could have dropped to 20. The fact that the Congress, with only 6% of votes in U.P., is contesting the elections separately is giving the BJP an extra 14 seats based only on 2014 numbers. The Congress has misread the situation in U.P.

Your book’s significant finding is about 21 million missing women voters in 2019. It came down from 25 million in 2014. But first, the positive thing. You are predicting in this book that

in this election women voters may actually outnumber male voters at the all-India level in the Lok Sabha.

■ Yes. Out-participate in the sense that the turnout figures may be higher, but because of the missing numbers, the absolute figures may be less.

Women are coming out to vote more than men in every State, and more so in south India, where the women are much more proactive. As pollsters we found that in the south, the woman inside the house will see you and come out and say, what questions are you asking? In U.P., they will be standing at the door and they will rush inside. They don’t want to interact. That is changing though. In the south, the husband also comes and we ask the woman, do you vote independently or do you listen to what he says? They say, listen to him, who is he? Sometimes we ask him, do you listen to her? Which they don’t do either. Men and women make up their own mind.

Is there a correlation between turnout of women and representation in terms of candidacy?

■ Unfortunately, so far there has not been. The percentage of women candidates the parties have nominated has been appallingly low. But because of this increasing turnout of women overtaking men, now the policies of parties are becoming women-focussed. The policy of gas cylinders [Ujjwala scheme] has worked well. Unfortunately, that has lost a lot of steam because now they have to pay for a second cylinder. That is just one area where parties are focussing on women. But you look at the manifestos and what they do during election time, you see a lot of leaders saying, will all the women please come to the front?

They are talking to women because women now matter much more than before. And that is a heartening sign.

In your book, you have a historical discussion on three periods. The first period is pro-incumbency, from 1952-1977. Then you have a period of distinct anti-incumbency, 1977-2004.

■ ...2002, yeah. 25 years.

And then 50-50.

■ In the first 25 years, over 80% of the governments were voted back. So it was pro-incumbency. The next 25 years, when they found that the politicians had failed them, they just threw out everybody. Good or bad, over 70% of the governments were thrown out. And since 2002, 50-50. Half the governments are thrown out, half have come back. And the governments that are voted back tend to be governments that have worked on the ground. They are doers. It is clear now that the voters are not taken in by pure oratory and great speeches.

Let us look at issues. Usually, livelihood issues come right at the top. They are the most important.

■ For an issue to be an election issue, it has to fulfil two criteria. One, it has to be important in my life. Corruption is important to most people. Corruption is always high everywhere. Two, one party must be seen to be better at solving it than the other. Take corruption. There must be a clear distinction in the parties for it to become an election issue. The AAP once swept Delhi because that is the distinction it had at the time that it was not a corrupt party, while all the others were seen as corrupt.

The full version of this interview is available on [www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com)

SINGLE FILE

## Clouds on the horizon

The deteriorating trade climate and the U.S.-China conflict are holding back global growth

GARIMELLA SUBRAMANIAM



At the recent spring meeting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, Finance Ministers and central bank Governors by and large played down fears about a slowing global economy. Their optimism was based on the pause in the U.S.’s interest rate policy in February, ease in the country’s trade tensions with China, and receding risk of a hard Brexit.

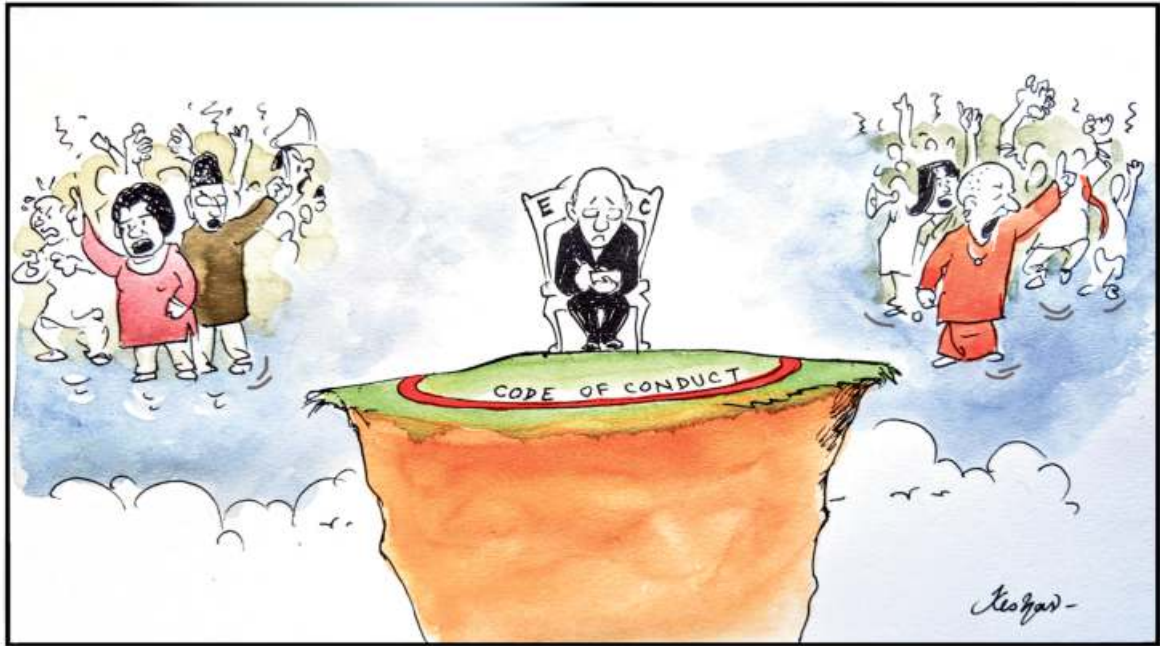
However, in stark contrast, the IMF has consistently emphasised a cautious stance on the current growth trajectory for some months. As the ultra-low interest rates of the post-crisis years have come to stay in many economies, the IMF has highlighted the limits of monetary policy in a future downturn. Its latest economic forecast cuts the outlook for growth in 2019 to 3.3% from estimates of 3.5% in January and 3.7% in October, when it had cited concerns over trade protectionism and the flight of capital from vulnerable emerging economies.

These projections were echoed by the IMF chief at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce earlier this month. Christine Lagarde said that whereas two years ago, 75% of the global economy experienced an upswing, the expectation this annum is for a slump in 70% of the world economy. Contributing to the overall deceleration is the deteriorating trade climate of the last two years. The pace of exports and imports was 4.6% in 2017, the strongest since the rebound after the 2007-08 financial crisis. But the 2018 figures were a modest 3% and could fall much further this year, says the WTO.

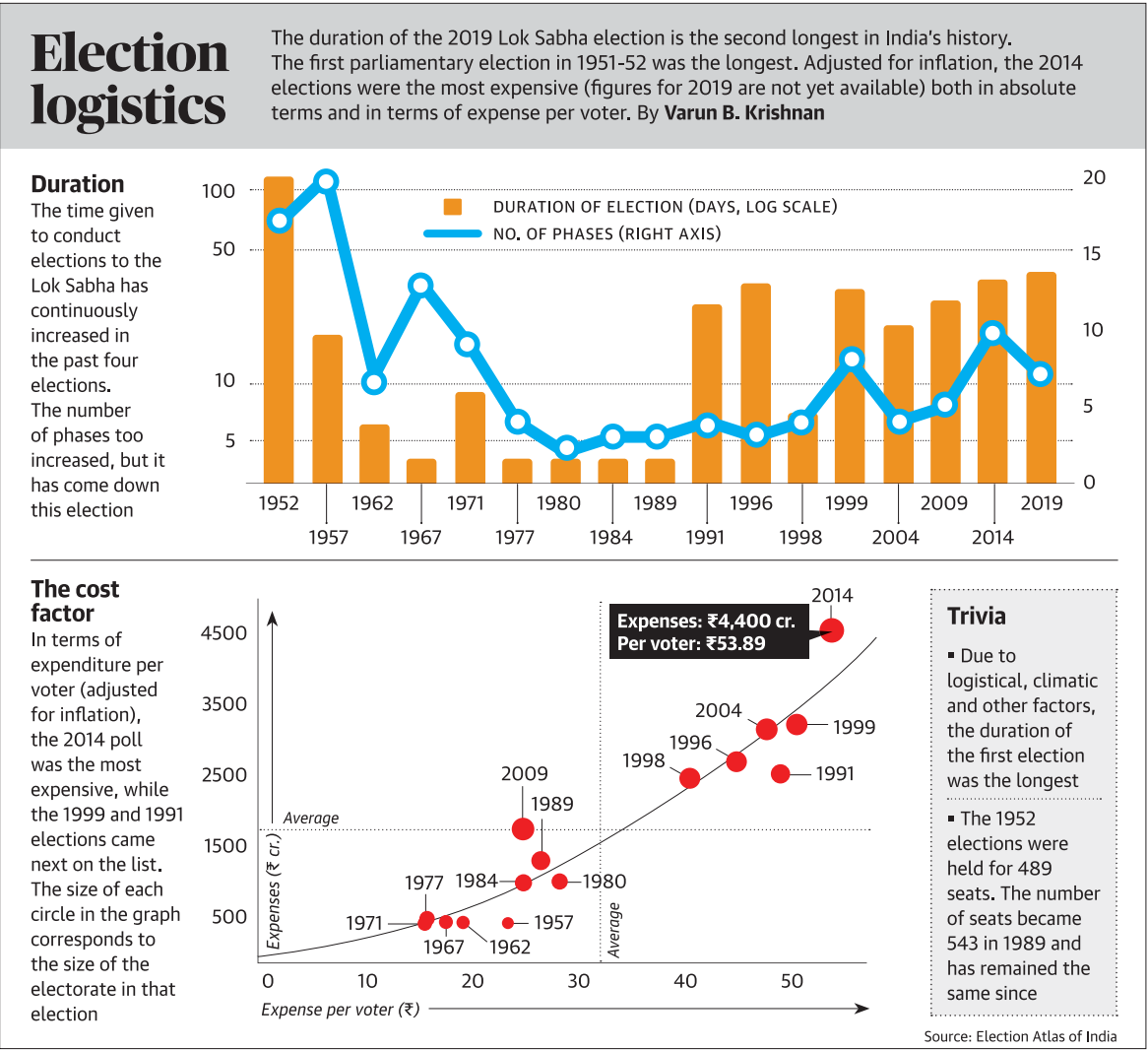
In the U.S., where year-on-year growth touched 2.9%, the fund’s forecast is 2.3% in 2019 – a far cry from the 4% rate in the second quarter last year. The Federal Reserve has also lowered its estimate from 2.3% to 2.1%, a sign possibly of the fading impact of President Donald Trump’s 2017 corporate tax cuts. A more than anticipated fall in recent German imports and exports is said to reflect, among other things, the impact of the trade friction between the U.S. and China and growing uncertainty over Britain’s exit from the European Union.

While stopping short of projecting a global recession, the IMF forecasts growth to touch 3.6% in 2020, lower than earlier estimates. That would be underpinned by tepid growth in the advanced world and hopes of a stable Chinese environment. The potential for an acceleration depends on Argentina and Turkey climbing out of a recession, besides a precarious rebound in other emerging and developing economies. During last week’s meeting, the view among Finance Ministers was that the IMF was painting a rather grim picture of the world economy. The hope is that their optimism will be borne out by evidence. Equally, a lasting resolution of the U.S.-China trade dispute would revive momentum in the global economy.

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DATA POINT



FROM The HINDU. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 17, 1969

### Wheat zones for regions

The Union Government to-day [April 16, New Delhi] announced the creation of large wheat zones in the Southern and Eastern regions along with the enlargement of the Northern wheat zone. A gazette notification issued today [April 16] gave details of the reorganisation of the wheat zones which the Food Minister Jagjivan Ram had announced in Parliament yesterday. The Southern Zone will comprise Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Mysore, Kerala and Pondicherry while the Eastern Zone will include Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura. Besides the Southern, Eastern and Northern zones, three other smaller zones are being constituted. They are: Maharashtra and Goa; Orissa; and Gujarat and the Union territory of Daman, Diu, Dadar and Nagar Haveli. The Northern Zone will comprise Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal (excluding the statutorily rationed area of Calcutta).

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 17, 1919.

### Satyagraha Movement. Mr. Gandhi’s Speech.

A huge mass meeting was held yesterday [April 15] evening at Sabarmati [near Ahmedabad] when Mr. Gandhi delivered an address in Gujarati, thousands of copies of which were distributed to the crowd. He said he was sorry that he had over-calculated the chances of Satyagraha being understood by the masses. It was a serious question for him, whether he could at all, whilst the spirit of violence continued, seek rearrest by going to Delhi. It was a matter of shame for them that the English residents were obliged to leave their bungalows and confine themselves to a few well protected houses. It was their duty to treat them as their brothers and assure them of their absolute-’bona fides’. It was necessary to do penance for the past deeds. Some people consider that his release was due to the deeds of lawlessness and violence. Mr. Gandhi himself did not think so at all. After all, what was burnt was national property and it was national loss. Mr. Gandhi himself felt his responsibility was greater than anybody else.

### POLL CALL Landslide victory

When a party or coalition receives an overwhelming majority of the seats to an elected body, such as the Lok Sabha or Legislative Assembly, this is called a landslide victory. For example, in the 2015 Delhi Assembly election, the Aam Aadmi Party won 67 of the 70 seats, which was a landslide victory. Such a victory could indicate mass support for the party/ candidate that won or immense anger against the incumbent government or party.

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When Notre-Dame burned

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