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Transforming Nepal's political system: party positions and public opinion (2004-2012)

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Citation

Sen, P. K. (2025, April 24). *Transforming Nepal's political system: party positions and public opinion (2004-2012)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4212957>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Methods and Data

4.1 Genesis of Public Opinion Polls in General and in Nepal

Since a main role of political parties in a democratic system of governance is to represent the people, it is important for them to know what public opinion toward a particular issue is. As V. O. Key, Jr (1961: 7) argued: *'Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense'*. At the beginning of his *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries*, Arend Lijphart states that an ideal democratic government should always work perfectly in accordance with the preferences of its citizens (Lijphart 1984: 1). However, he acknowledged that such a perfect correspondence between citizens' preferences and the government's actions has never existed.

Some scholars say that politicians responsible for drafting a bill should listen to the voices of ordinary people without ignoring the desires of minorities and marginalized groups (see e.g. Eisinger 2008). Whether public opinion is duly reflected in the formulation and implementation of their policies, plans and programmes is, however, a different issue.

One of the conditions for such congruence between public opinion and policies to materialize is that politicians (and policymakers) are aware of the general public's preferences. Public opinion polls provide a means for communicating the public's views and concerns by offering input and feedback to policy- and decision-makers (Mattes 2008: 119; Oberschall 2008: 83-84). A series of public opinion polls - if conducted scientifically - can be a valid and reliable means to gauge the general people's view on contemporary issues and identify ruptures and continuities in their opinion toward particular issues over time. Once a poll result on a major policy issue is made public, it likely draws the attention of political parties, politicians, government, planners, and of citizens themselves.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Many academics found that what others think or believe, and how those opinions are changing, have an effect on an individual's subsequent opinion and behaviour (Traugott 2008).

United States and United Kingdom

Surveys or opinion polls have different ancient ancestors – from a straight population count in ancient civilizations to a landmark statistical study by Charles Booth on the life and labour of poor inhabitants of London conducted between 1893 and 1903 (Converse 1987: 11). However, it was in the United States that this tool was introduced in an attempt to predict the outcome of a presidential election in the early part of the nineteenth century. Two newspapers *The Harrisburg Pennsylvanian* and *The Raleigh Star* conducted public opinion polls on the presidential race between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams in 1824. The event went down in history as the first known (modern) public opinion polls in the world (Bethlehem 2018: 20). The polls predicted that Andrew Jackson would win; Jackson indeed received more votes than any of his opponents.⁵⁹

Public opinion polls conducted during those days were not only unscientific, at least from a contemporary perspective, but also extremely limited in being concentrated in cities. It was only in 1916 that a nation-wide public opinion poll took place. This was organized by a weekly magazine, *The Literary Digest Magazine*, and correctly predicted Woodrow Wilson's election as US president in that year (Oberschall 2008: 86). It went on to also correctly predict the next four presidential elections. Even though *The Literary Digest Magazine* obtained correct results, its polling technique was unscientific.⁶⁰ The failure to predict the presidential election of 1936, despite a huge sample size of 2.3 million voters, contributed to the magazine's demise (Oberschall 2008: 87; Bryson 1976: 185) and, more importantly, resulted in a major development in scientific polling.⁶¹

At the same time, the American Institute of Public Opinion, founded by the statistician George Horace Gallup, conducted a poll with a far smaller sample size of 50,000 respondents interviewing a demographically representative sample of the voters representing genders, various age groups and various income groups of the voters. The Gallup Poll, as it became known, correctly predicted Roosevelt's landslide victory over Alf Landon in 1936 (Oberschall 2008: 87; Zetterberg 2008: 107; Bethlehem 2018: 20). It is considered as the most immediate ancestor of a public opinion poll (Converse 1987: 87). An important lesson from the Gallup Poll was that it

⁵⁹ Even though Jackson received more votes, he did not receive a majority in the Electoral College, nor did any other candidate. As a result, the election went to the House of Representatives which decided in favour of John Quincy Adams (World Book International 1997).

⁶⁰ These polls were unscientific in the sense that their sampling was not done properly. For instance, in mailing out sample ballots to 10 million persons selected primarily from telephone books, automobile registration lists and from the list of its own subscribers in the presidential poll of 1936, and in making a prediction by simply counting the voting preference of 2.3 million returned mails, *The Literary Digest* assumed that its readers and the telephone owners of that time represented the American voters, but actually its sample was biased and did not represent a cross section of the American voters. The sample only represented a subset of the population with a relatively intense interest in the politics (Bryson 1976: 185), and was biased to upper income groups (Oberschall 2008: 87).

⁶¹ Squire (1988: 130-131) cites the very low response rate rather than the sample behind the failure of the Literary Digest Poll. He concludes that the poll would have, at least, correctly predicted Roosevelt a winner if everyone who received a sample ballot had returned it.

empirically showed that the size of the sample was not as important as the method used to select the sample.

The success of the Gallup Poll became an inspiration for the promotion of public opinion research throughout the world. Gallup conducted a poll in the United Kingdom in the 1945 general elections correctly predicting Labour's victory. At the time, many commentators had expected an easy victory for the Conservative Party led by the then popular British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (Grolier Incorporated 1996). The Gallup Poll, however, suffered a major setback when, in 1948, its prediction of a victory by Republican presidential candidate Thomas E. Dewey proved wrong. Upon introspection the Gallup Poll recognised that the error was mainly due to the failure of quota sampling as a method for getting truly representative samples. Unlike random sampling, quota sampling can have serious flaws resulting in a failure to select a sample that validly represents the population, i.e., the electorate.

India

By the 1950s, the polling exercise had spread to most Western democratic countries. Other parts of the world followed. For instance, in India, even though speculative election forecasting started during the late 1960s, the first scientific public opinion poll was held in 1980 with a joint effort by the magazine *India Today* and the Marketing and Research Group (MARG). They first identified the swing zones for the dominant party, the Indian National Congress, to measure shifts in votes.⁶² Next they selected constituencies from the swing zones for their sample. It was the first survey-based opinion poll ever conducted in India. The two institutions continued to work together in the opinion polls of 1984, 1989, 1991 and 1996, using the same methodology. Their predictions in 1989 and subsequently were more accurate, particularly in predicting the seats for the Congress Party, but they failed to predict the seats for other parties accurately (Karandikar et al. 2002: 77). Nevertheless, the opinion polls of Indian voters conducted by *India Today* and MARG made significant contributions to Indian electoral studies since they succeeded in delivering the message that a survey-based election forecasting is more valid and reliable than speculation-based forecasting. It also signalled that the use of this survey or polling instrument is not confined to highly developed countries only.

From 1998 onwards, many other institutions and magazines entered the opinion poll scene in India. A significant contribution to the public opinion polls was made by a team from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDC) and *India Today*, because this was the first team that disclosed its methodology and made it available in the public domain (see Karandikar et al. 2002).

⁶² The swing zones were those areas where the voters tended to swing i.e., vote for one party during one election and for another party during the next election. This is in contrast to other zones which tended to be consistent i.e., vote for a particular party consistently.

Nepal

The history of opinion polls in Nepal goes back to 1991, when the Political Science Association of Nepal (POLSAN) and the Institute of Integrated Development Studies (IIDS) separately conducted opinion polls on the 1991 parliamentary elections, i.e. the first general elections after the restoration of the multiparty democracy (see chapter 2). POLSAN conducted a poll of 1,004 individuals in 10 districts using a quota sampling technique while IIDS applied a purposive sampling technique to solicit responses from 445 people in 9 districts (POLSAN 1991; Hachhethu 2004: 6). In 1993, the Nepal Opinion Survey Centre (NOSC), employing a multistage random sampling technique, conducted an opinion poll of 522 respondents from the three districts of the Kathmandu Valley (NOSC 1993). Though limited to only three districts, this was probably the first opinion poll in Nepal that used a random (probability) sampling technique.

A large scale nation-wide opinion poll with a sample size of 7,841 individuals distributed across 29 districts representing every ecological and development zone was undertaken by the Himal Association in 1999 on the eve of the third general election; the data collection fieldwork was carried out by ORG-MARG Nepal. The Himal Association used a stratified random sampling technique at the district level and a quota sampling technique (which is a type of non-random sampling) to select respondents (Himal Association 1999: 3-4). The objective of this poll was to predict the popular vote for the parties – not the numbers of seats political parties would occupy in the next parliament. This was the first poll conducted in Nepal that could be validated based on the actual election results. The poll results showed that the Nepali Congress, CPN-UML, RPP, CPN-ML and RPP Chand would obtain the highest popular votes respectively. The actual election results listed the party sizes in the same order as the opinion poll had predicted, but with some deviation in the actual percentages of the popular vote. The Nepali Congress obtained 36.3 percent while the poll predicted it to get 39.7 percent. The popular vote of the CPN (UML) was 30.7 percent while the prediction was 39.3 percent. The popular vote of the RPP was 10.1 percent while the prediction was 8.6 percent. In the case of the CPN (ML), the popular vote was 6.4 percent while the prediction was 4.8 percent. The popular vote of the RPP (Chand) was 3.4 percent while the prediction was 3.7 percent. So, the differences were not huge.

With the beginning of the new millennium, mass public opinion polling occurred quite often in the country. Since 2001, the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies (NCCS) and the fortnightly magazine *Himal Khabarpatrika* jointly with the Himal Association, for example, have been conducting public opinion polls regularly on participatory democracy and other contemporary issues. The NCCS carried out its first public opinion polls in 2001, which was one on elections. It used a purposive sampling technique to select 500 respondents from 5 districts (Hachhethu 2004: 6). In 2001 *Himal Khabarpatrika* entered this field with a large-scale opinion poll including 3,902 randomly selected respondents in its sample from 20 districts (Himal Association 2001: 2).

In 2004, a survey entitled 'State of Democracy in Nepal' was undertaken by State of Democracy in South Asia/Nepal Chapter in collaboration with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). This opinion poll covered the entire country using a systematic random sampling technique at each of three stages: the constituency, the polling-

centre (i.e. the sub-constituency) and the voters. A sample of 3,249 respondents was drawn from 163 polling centres in 39 constituencies spread over 38 districts (Hachhethu 2004: 5-6).

Also in 2004, The Asia Foundation Nepal (TAF Nepal) conducted a nation-wide opinion poll called ‘Nepal Contemporary Political Situation’. The poll included 3,059 respondents from 35 districts representing the five development regions and three ecological zones of the country. Among others, the poll included a booster sample of victims of the ongoing armed conflict from both sides – the state security forces and the Maoists⁶³ (Sharma and Sen 2005: 342; Interdisciplinary Analysts 2005: 13). Since then, TAF Nepal has been regularly conducting large scale nationwide public opinion polls on the country’s contemporary political and social issues. The TAF Nepal’s polls have become one of the most important sources of quantitative time series data on public opinion in Nepal. This study has used these poll data collected between December 2004 and April 2012. They are discussed in detail below.

4.2 Longitudinal Public Opinion Polls Used in This Study

4.2.1 The Public Opinion Polls

By analysing longitudinal data from public opinion polls conducted when major political changes occurred in Nepal, we can examine ruptures and continuities in people’s opinions at important historical junctures, re-examine Nepal’s political transition in light of mass public opinion, and reflect on the relationship between mass public opinion and elite political decisions. It would not be possible to do so if we had not conducted longitudinal public opinion polls.

The ‘Nepal Contemporary Political Situation’ (NCPS) was a series of nationwide public opinion surveys that mapped changes and continuities in the opinions of the public as these related to the country’s contemporary politics. Nine public opinion polls have been carried out in this series between 2004 and 2012, eight of which are used in this study.⁶⁴ In addition, this study uses three nationwide public opinion polls in the ‘People’s Perception on Safety and Security’ (PPSS) series, undertaken between 2007 and 2010.⁶⁵ See Table 4.1 for an overview.

⁶³ A booster sample targets respondents from specific groups that have a high possibility of being excluded in a standard sample. In the case of Nepal these could be groups like Dalit women, a small Janajati community, people internally displaced by the conflict, etc.

⁶⁴ Data obtained from the fourth survey in this series (i.e. NCPS IV that was conducted in 2007) are not used in this research, because this survey was based on purposive sampling and not on random sampling. Since generalization is not possible from a survey which is based on purposive sampling, this study excluded this survey from the analysis. Since the first wave of another survey series, the People’s Perception on Safety and Security (PPSS), was conducted in 2007 which also measured public opinion on the state restructuring issues, this study could still examine data from 2007.

⁶⁵ The People’s Perception on Safety and Security (PPSS) surveys were primarily conducted to measure public opinion on community safety and armed violence. However, some questions relating to the state restructuring were included in the questionnaires of these surveys.

The non-response rates in these surveys were negligible. Very few people refused to be interviewed. In a third-world country like Nepal, people generally give time if somebody wants to talk to them.⁶⁶ Consequently, no records of non-response were kept and the sample sizes mentioned in this table are actual or gross sample sizes as well as principally realized sample sizes. The opinion polls from both the NCPS and PPSS series geographically covered every part of the country and employed random (probability) sampling techniques at all stages. Also, every wave of polls in these series more or less followed the same design and methodology, because of which their findings are comparable and a trend analysis can be conducted on the basis of the data (see e.g. Hellevik 2008).

⁶⁶ In large-scale surveys like Nepal Demographic and Health Surveys 2011 and 2016, household response rates were 99.4 percent and 98.5 percent respectively. Similarly, Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys 2010, 2014 and 2019 had household response rates 99.7 percent, 98.5 percent and 98.6 percent respectively. These indicate that non-response rates were very small in these surveys. Therefore, there is a reason to believe that non-response rates in the surveys used in this study were negligible.

Table 4.1: Brief Description of the Longitudinal Opinion Polls

Title of the Poll	Sample Size	No. of Sample Districts	Sampling Technique	Fieldwork
NCPS I	3,059	35	Districts: Stratified random sampling VDCs*: Simple random sampling Wards: Simple random sampling Households: Right-hand-rule Respondents: Kish grid	26 Nov–16 Dec, 2004
NCPS II	3,000	28	Identical to NCPS I	5 Jan – 25 Jan, 2006
NCPS III	3,000	32	Identical to NCPS I	18 Aug – 10 Sep, 2006
PPSS I	3,010	30	Identical to NCPS I	8 May – 2 June, 2007
NCPS V	3,010	30	Identical to NCPS I	23 Dec 2007 – 12 Jan, 2008
PPSS II	3,025	30	Identical to NCPS I	3 Aug – 30 Aug, 2008
PPSS III	3,004	32	Identical to NCPS I	24 Jun – 23 July, 2009
NCPS VI	3,000	35	Identical to NCPS I	19 Aug – 11 Sep, 2010
NCPS VII	3,000	35	Identical to NCPS I	31 Jan – 22 Feb, 2011
NCPS VIII	3,000	35	Identical to NCPS I	10 Jun – 30 June 2011
NCPS IX	3,010	30	Identical to NCPS I	27 Mar – 23 Apr, 2012

* VDC stands for Village Development Committee, which are smaller administrative units than districts. Nine wards, which are the smallest administrative units in Nepal, constitute a VDC.

4.2.2 Methodology of the Public Opinion Polls

Before the new constitution was promulgated on 20 September 2015, Nepal was administratively divided into five development regions along the east-west axis, namely the Eastern Development Region (EDR), Central Development Region (CDR), Western Development Region (WDR), Mid-Western Development Region (MWDR) and Far-Western Development Region (FWDR). Along the north-south axis three ecological regions are distinguished: the mountains, the hills and the Tarai. Considering these two parameters – ecological region and development region – Nepal is divided into 15 distinct eco-development regions (i.e., 3 ecological regions x 5 development regions), namely eastern mountain, eastern hill, eastern Tarai, etc. In addition, the Kathmandu Valley was treated as a separate sixteenth region given the fact that it contains the capital city of the country,

not to mention its big population size. These 16 eco-development regions constituted the 'strata' of the sample design. Each stratum has distinct features (i.e., physical, cultural-linguistic and social) and within a stratum there is a relatively high degree of homogeneity, while across strata there is generally a high degree of heterogeneity.

In the first stage, sample districts were selected using a stratified random sampling technique, i.e. representing all 16 distinct strata.⁶⁷ The number of districts from a particular stratum in the sample was decided by employing a proportional allocation. Also, the total sample size of respondents was proportionally distributed across these sample districts.

In the second stage, proportional numbers of village development committees (VDCs) and/or municipalities were selected from each sample district by simple random sampling. The numbers of sample VDCs varied according to the size of the sample districts. One VDC was selected for every 20 respondents: for example, if 40 respondents had to be selected from a sample district, two VDCs, each with around 20 respondents, were selected.

In the third stage, a sampled VDC was further distributed into wards. For a VDC of the sample size of 20, two wards were selected by employing simple random sampling, and then for each ward 10 households were identified.

In the fourth stage, households in each sample ward were selected randomly by employing the Right-Hand-Rule random walk method. The starting points for the random-walk were recognizable locations such as schools, crossroads, *chautaras* (raised platforms of earth and stones with a tree at the centre made beside roads and used as resting places), bazaars, temples, mosques, etc. In this method, interviewers started to walk towards any direction randomly from a starting point counting the number of households on the right hand side of his/her route. He/she returned the same way from the point where the settlement ended – again counting number of households on his/her right hand side. In this way, households located on both sides of the road or path were included. Based on the number of households available there and the number of interviews to be conducted, he/she selected the households by skipping a certain number of households (i.e., systematic sampling).

Finally, in the fifth stage a member of the selected household was selected using a Kish-grid (i.e. a table of random numbers) and the selected respondent was interviewed face-to-face⁶⁸. In this method, one individual is randomly selected from the household to be interviewed from a list of all household members of 18 years of age and above. Using the grid ensures that each eligible

⁶⁷ Stratified random sampling is more representative of the population than simple random sampling (Snedecor and Cochran 1980: 434).

⁶⁸ Though there are many ways to collect public opinion data, the history of polling has made clear that one of the ways to gauge public opinion is to ask them directly using a face-to-face interview mode (Weisberg et al 1996). This interview mode allows the adoption of more complicated selection methods like the Kish-grid method excluding those who are younger than 18 years, and yields a better cooperation from respondents than a telephone survey or a post card survey. In addition, visual aids such as show cards, 10-point scales, smiley scales and pictures etc. can be used effectively in face-to-face interviews (Dykema et al 2008).

member in a selected household has an equal chance of being selected. Equal numbers of male and female respondents were selected for an interview in each of the sample wards. In this way, the surveys followed random (probability) sampling techniques at every stage so that the findings of these surveys can be generalized to the entire population under study (see e.g., Patton 1990; Sayer 1992; Weisberg 2008). Random (probability) sampling is arguably the only scientific basis that allows drawing inferences from a sample to a population, although there inevitably remains a (small) margin of error between sample statistics and population parameters (Kumar 1996; O’Muircheartaigh 2008).

Field supervisors and experienced interviewers were deployed in the field to interview respondents at their homes. The survey teams were as inclusive as possible in terms of language, ethnicity, region, and gender. Before deploying the teams, two-day orientation trainings were conducted to acquaint them with survey research methodology, their roles and responsibilities, and the field operations plan. They also had the sampling techniques explained. They were also acquainted with the structured questionnaire format, so that they became fully familiar with the intention and wording of each of the questions. The Nepali language was used to administer the questionnaires. However, interviewers were allowed to translate the questions into local dialects without changing the meaning of the questions.

The samples of these surveys indeed truly represent the national population. The sample composition in terms of ethnicity, sex, age group, region, religion etc. is very much consistent with the population composition as per Nepal’s 2001 national census (See Interdisciplinary Analysts 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2008 and 2011a for comparisons between sample compositions and the population composition). Therefore, findings of these surveys are likely to closely mirror the opinions of the entire adult Nepali citizenry (with the usual margin of error, of course) and not only of the sample respondents. In other words, the findings of these surveys are generalizable to the entire population.

4.2.3 Risk Measures

Some sampled sites were not easily accessible, particularly in the mountain region, due to the lack of road infrastructure. The field researchers had to reach such sites on foot. It obviously took a long time to reach such places. In addition, the mountain sites were prone to bad weather. Sleeping bags and medicine were provided to interviewers to cope with adverse weather conditions or its consequences (e.g. natural calamities such as heavy snow falls, landslides, floods, etc.). If the roads were inaccessible, they had to spend more days than anticipated in such locations. Therefore, they were provided additional funds and working days to mitigate the situation.

Sometimes, the interviewers had to confront problems during the fieldwork due to political turmoil. Various political parties or groups used to call highway blockades or closure (*bandh*) to compel the government to fulfil their demands. In such situations, the field researchers were not able to reach some places on time. Sometimes, they were restricted in conducting interviews with respondents at specific locations in the Tarai by Madhes based armed groups. Sometimes,

cadres of the CPN (Maoist) hindered the field activities. The principal researchers were fully aware of the situation prevailing in the country. They had taken on board all the Madhes based political parties as well as the CPN (Maoist) from the beginning. They were in regular contact with Madhes based leaders and the CPN (Maoist) leaders, had convinced them of the rationale of the survey, and got cooperation from them.

4.3 A Political Elite's Opinion Poll and Its Methodology

It is important to also measure the value-preferences of the political elites in order to compare them with those of the general public, and if they do not concur, to identify the issues on which the opinions of the political elites differ from those of the general public.⁶⁹ One study conducted in Nepal documented the opinions of the Nepali political elites (in this case the members of the Interim Parliament) on the major reform issues. This was the Nepal Democracy Survey, undertaken by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) in 2007.

This political elites' opinion poll (hereafter referred to as the Elites Opinion Poll 2007) was conducted between 1 July and 31 July 2007, i.e. about one year prior to the elections of the Constituent Assembly. Interviewers were deployed to interview as many members of the Interim Parliament (MPs) as possible during a period of one month. The interviewers were able to obtain interviews with 300 MPs out of a total of 330 MPs (International IDEA 2008: 11). Unfortunately, the original data are not available, and I was confined to using the published results. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to discuss the findings of this political elites' poll and compare these findings with mass public opinion polls because it not only illustrates the wide chasms in opinions held by the political elites and the general public, but also may help explain why the Interim Constitution of 2007 declared Nepal a secular and a federal democratic republic (with the fourth amendment in December 2007) and why the elected Constituent Assembly endorsed the resolution declaring Nepal a secular and federal republic in its first sitting held on 28 May 2008.

⁶⁹ A detailed comparison between the political elites' opinions and the general public's opinions on the major reform issues is presented in Chapter-10.