

If correct, exit polls augur well for Indian politics

These are early days, and exit polls/post-poll surveys have a habit of getting it horribly wrong. Notwithstanding the strenuous defence put up by CNN-IBN's editor on Monday, exit polls called it totally wrong in 2004 when they said the NDA was coming back to power; and in 2009 when they gave the NDA and the UPA an equally good shot at forming government—as it turned out, the NDA had over 100 seats less than the UPA. So, when Monday's exit polls suggest an NDA government, the wise won't punt all their money on it.

In any case, even if the exit polls are right, it would be too early to pronounce a decisive shift in Indian politics, away from the old caste-religion formula, though there clearly has been a steady chipping away at it over the years. If growth was indeed the new religion, then the exit polls wouldn't show Nitish Kumar getting near wiped out in Bihar, or Lalu Prasad making a comeback in the state. You could argue, as some have, that while Nitish brought back growth to Bihar, this has been trumped by the aspirations that Modi is promising to fulfil. That's a plausible argument, but if that is indeed true, then Modi should have got a lot more votes than the exit polls suggest ... in other words, the results are complex, not cut and dried.

What is relatively clearer even if, say, the BJP doesn't get as many seats as the polls suggest in Uttar Pradesh—a very bad show for both BSP and SP—is that the UPA's dole game doesn't seem to be adding up to much. This, by the way, is pretty much the point finance minister P Chidambaram made the other day when he said the UPA had read the 2009 election result all wrong—it had got more votes from aspirational urban India, but it continued with its pro-dole rural strategy. Which means that, as long as he is able to deliver on more growth and more jobs, a Modi can very easily execute a strategy of cutting back on subsidies without any likely impact on votes. In the long run, even UPA politicians agree, subsidies can be dispensed with, once there are enough jobs for everyone; it is the interim period that frightens the political class, and that is why subsidies don't get removed. If the Congress is doing as badly as the exit polls suggest—and this is something most reporters/analysts have also put out in their despatches over the past several weeks—then it is very clear that whatever India is voting for, more dole is not one of them.