

EDITORIAL

STATISTICAL SURVEYS: POLITICAL TOOLS

Statistical Surveys of public opinion on social issues have become an increasingly significant feature of the political scene. Many political battles have been lost or won as a result of the impact that surveys can have on the way people vote. I remember in Jamaica some years ago when a few politicians went as far as to suggest that political statistical surveys be banned altogether because of their peculiar quality of influencing public opinion. The debates that ensued in Jamaica and in other countries in which such surveys are deemed a necessary part of the democratic process entailed discussions about the dynamic of self-perpetuating prophecy and the less problematic question of the veracity of surveys as sources of information based on certain assumptions about human behaviour. Surveys have constantly won out during such debates because politicians have an understandable ambivalence about surveys. The fact is that any politician who is certain that s/he is doing well in public opinion welcomes surveys that confirm this because statistics have an uncanny capacity to lead a measure of authenticity to any information. Politicians who are less fortunate and who force unfavourable press in surveys often resort to their own surveys which miraculously differ from the other surveys. The point is that while surveys appear to be extremely accurate, even survey notes themselves indicate the margin of error that exists in representative sampling. However, few people take the time to question, through careful examination, the limitations of surveys and the elements of error that they are invariably subject to. People simply note the figures and assume them to be accurate because the material is published in the public media.

Do people then change their attitudes because of surveys? If so, what are the psychological acrobatics that are going on to make this happen? Is it that people who are undecided and neutral tend to gravitate towards the stronger and more "popular" faction, thus guaranteeing that the survey results influence and shape reality? For instance, if someone were to put out a survey that was totally fictitious, would it in anyway alter the thoughts and opinions of the public despite its inaccuracy?

The challenge is to approach surveys with a critical attitude which appreciates that surveys are not necessarily objective or accurate. Their failure to be objective has more to do with who the people surveyed are, the way question are shaped and presented; and the kind of questions that are asked. Secondly, surveys must be regarded first as "help" rather than clearly verified indicators of reality. At best, surveys show trends. To credit them with more authority would be dangerous.

These comments have significant relevance to the recent survey sponsored by the Student Union at UNB concerning student opinions about a number of things including the campus media and the Student Union itself. Of great interest to The Brunswickan are, of course, the figures on the campus media. The Brunswickan fairs quite well in the survey as it is estimated that some 80% of students read the paper. This is encouraging news but it is not entirely surprising as students are likely to read their own paper as long as the paper is accessible and in some way relevant. However, it is unfair to compare the "popularity" of the Brunswickan (print media) with the comparatively low level of interest shown to the CHSR (radio media). The survey indicates less than 30% of people listen to the radio station at some point.

My problem is that the survey does not ask a more fundamental and related question concerning the radio station listeners. The question is, how many students listen to the radio at all? My suspicion is that the percentage would be quite close to the figure indicated for CHSR listenership. I may be wrong but I am confident that unless that question constitutes a part of a survey on the listenership for CHSR, such a survey would be incomplete. CHSR has far more competition from other radio stations than the Brunswickan has from other newspapers in the province. This fact must be taken into consideration when the figures in the current survey are analysed.

The Brunswickan will be publishing the details of this survey in next week's issues with comments from the Student Union and other relevant groups. We hope that the positive and brave step taken by the Union to know what students think about them will not be hampered by misguided and misinformed analysis of the material.

Kwame Dawes
Editor in Chief

The Brunswickan

Canada's oldest official student publication

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