

STATISTICAL SURVEY OF PUBLIC OPINION

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VOTES AND THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

THE late Lord Bryce, whose fervent advocacy as well as keen analysis of democratic government would be difficult to match, stated in his celebrated work, *Modern Democracies*, that what constituted the vital impulse of democracy was "the conception of a happier life for all, coupled with a mystic faith in the People, that great multitude through whom speaks the voice of the Almighty Power that makes for righteousness." As is evident from the context, Bryce wrote these lines with reference to the growth of the democratic idea in the post-French Revolution period. But the mystic faith in the people that he mentions was no new sentiment, as he was well aware, for he starts on his study of the actual working of democratic governments with a description of the self-governing communities of ancient Greece. Even his language seems to have imbibed the atmosphere of antiquity, echoing as it does what was a stock political formula in Republican Rome.

But granting that the deification of the people is the essence of the democratic idea, how is the god, once enthroned, to exercise his powers? The ancient Greek and Roman republics provided an answer to the question by inventing the Vote, an instrument for counting rather than breaking heads as J. R. Lowell described it. In the tiny city-states of the ancient world, heads were few and counting them presented little difficulty whenever an issue arose upon which the citizens were called upon to express an opinion. If the same procedure were to be followed in a modern state with its vast size, there would be so many millions of heads to count almost daily that the business of government would become a perpetual census operation. So the modern states have sought refuge in indirect democracy, calling upon their god to reveal his will, once in a while, through the General Election and then putting him to bed with the assurance that his will shall be faithfully worked out by his trusted agents—the members of the popular assemblies. In between General Elections, particular issues may crop up requiring an immediate solution and then the voice of the people may be invoked through such devices as the Initiative or the Referendum.

The principle is the same in all cases: it is the citizens exercising a direct control upon the government by voting either upon a given question or for a candidate. But the business of government is a continuous one, while opportunities for exerting such direct control occur at more or less long intervals. And during these intervals circumstances may change so materially as completely to alter the balance of political views. A popular government can remain indifferent to such changes only at its peril. That is why politicians set such great store by Public Opinion—the influence of which upon the conduct of the administration constitutes the dynamic of democratic government.

"Public Opinion," says Bryce, "when and so far as it can be elicited, is an organ or method through which the people can exert their power more elastic and less pervertible than is the method of voting."

It is to be noted that Bryce was careful to introduce after "Public Opinion" the qualification, "when and so far as it can be elicited": his acute mind did not overlook the difficulties in the way of ascertaining it. He discusses in turn and dismisses the press and the platform—neither of them is a sure index of what the people really think. He warns us against opinion that is the result of local circumstances, rather than that of a general movement of political feeling, as also artificially created and factious opinion. "Against all these sources of error," says he, "the observer must be on his guard"—words which might well be uttered from the presidential platform of a statistical conference.

MASS-OBSERVATION

But how, then, is Public Opinion to be ascertained? Bryce recommends that the best way this can be done is by "moving freely about among all sorts and conditions of men and noting how they are affected by the news or the arguments brought from day to day to their knowledge." He thus enunciates the principle of sociological enquiry developed in England, about two decades later, under the name of "Mass-Observation," a phrase which has become known the world over as the title of a Penguin Special in which the joint authors, Charles Madge and Tom Harrison give a

popular account of the experiment, which they themselves initiated.

EXPERIMENTS IN GREAT BRITAIN

The first Mass-Observation experiment was started in Great Britain in February 1937, by thirty people who participated in it. A report on the first year's work (1937-38) edited by Charles Madge and Tom Harrison (Lindsay Drummond, 3/6d) gives a general description of the movement the object of which is primarily scientific and sociological. The work is carried out entirely by voluntary observers drawn from all classes of people. Any one can be an observer. Mass-Observation is not a whole time job—most of the observers are busy people with jobs of their own; and no expert training is demanded.

Three different types of surveys have been undertaken so far :—Day Surveys, Area Surveys and Specific Surveys of selected social habits and institutions such as smoking, reading, going to public houses, church attendance and religious activities, voting at elections, etc. In the Day-Surveys starting from February 12th, 1937, observers were asked on the twelfth of each month to give a careful and factual description of what happened to them in the course of their normal activities during the whole or a part of the day. The original purpose of the Day-Surveys was to collect a mass of data, without any selective principle, as a preliminary to detailed studies of carefully chosen subjects. In 1937-38 a total of 1,730 reports were received, containing approximately 2,300,000 words. This work was continued in 1938; later the surveys on the twelfth of each month were suspended, but surveys of special days, e.g., Easter, Bank Holidays, Armistice Day, Coronation Day, etc., were continued.

In the Area-Surveys the object is somewhat different. In 1937, for example, half a dozen observers went to live in a working class quarter of a big Lancashire industrial town. Instead of observing the details of their own daily lives the observers set to work to record human activity in this town. A parallel survey was started in B'ackpool. These were primarily experiments in social recording, the object being to collect first-hand information (on the lines of surveys of primitive populations) for anthropological and sociological studies of civilised people.

In Specific-Surveys a particular social habit or institution is selected and information is gathered either through a detailed questionnaire or through personal interviews. Preliminary reports have been published on such subjects as

smoking habits, going to public-houses and beer drinking, "Football Pools" in industrial centres, popular entertainments, religious activities, etc.

As already stated observers are drawn from various strata of society. It is admitted that opinions given by the observers are bound to be subjective. It is, however, contended that for sociological (and psychological) purposes the more sincere and spontaneous and hence the more subjective the observations the more valuable they are for scientific analysis and classification. In other words, the Mass-Observers in this movement are supposed to function as what is technically known in Ethnology as "Informants." Their statements and observations furnish the primary material on which all subsequent scientific analysis must be based. Here the first and foremost emphasis is on the inner consistency of the documents.

SURVEY OF PUBLIC OPINION

Systematically conducted experiments in Mass-Observation will, it may be expected, yield results of great sociological value, especially among the proverbially mute masses of a country like India. Mass-Observation has however its limitations. While invaluable as a method for revealing aspects of the minds of individuals as well as groups, that remain ordinarily hidden from the view, it is inadequate as an instrument for the quantitative measurement of public opinion on specific issues. But since popular government is government by the sovereign majority, it is numbers that rule political affairs. But is there any method for the numerical assessment of public opinion apart from elections, which, because of their expense, must needs be held at long intervals? The answer that Bryce gave to this question in his classic volume, *The American Commonwealth*, was in the negative. The first drawback to the rule of public opinion, he declared, was the impossibility of ascertaining it on specific questions of public policy.

EARLY EXPERIMENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

The American Commonwealth was published in 1888. As early as five years before that the editor of an American newspaper was using the principle of sampling, not indeed as the statisticians understand it today, but in a crude though effective way, to speed up his reporting of election returns. Referring to this fact, George Gallup, who has given his name to the world famous American Institute of Public Opinion, observes: "But even as Bryce wrote, the germ of an idea had been grasped by a few American newspapermen."

This idea caught on, as ideas have the habit of doing in the United States, and was soon being widely applied by newspapers all over the country for sampling public opinion in between elections or immediately before them as a forecast of their results.

THE FAILURE OF STRAW VOTES

The technique consists in inviting opinion on specific questions or groups of questions which are widely circulated through the post, the press or over the radio. In the case of questions circulated by the post, or through newspapers and journals, it is usual to provide voting papers which every recipient is requested to fill in and return to the issuing office; hence the name of "straw votes" often used in this connexion. In the United States the method of straw votes has been used by big newspapers like the *New York Herald*, the *Columbus Dispatch* and the *Cincinnati Enquirer* for forecasting results of elections for more than thirty years. In 1920 the *Literary Digest* started nationwide canvasses on such questions as prohibition and the soldiers' bonus, and on presidential candidates. In these polls ballots were distributed to millions of people all over the United States, and the returns were liberally reported in the newspapers and over the radio which attracted a great deal of attention and served to bring this method into prominence in the public eye. Similar methods are used by many broadcasting corporations to ascertain public opinion regarding radio programmes and other questions by classifying and tabulating the replies received.

One advantage of the straw vote or questionnaire method is the possibility of securing replies from a very large number of individuals at a small cost. Its great disadvantage is that it may become highly selective in case the persons who actually send replies do not represent an accurate cross-section of the whole universe but merely a particular segment. This defect was revealed in a dramatic manner on the occasion of the *Literary Digest* poll at the time of the 1936 presidential election in the United States. Over ten million ballot papers were posted by the *Digest*, and it was expected that the very large size of the sample would overcome the lack of scientific selection. Unfortunately, as only owners of automobiles and users of telephone were consulted, the sample developed a definite bias in favour of high income with the result that anti-New Deal opinion was introduced and reflected in the poll's conclusion that Governor Landon would win. As is well known, Landon was defeated by Roosevelt by a record margin.

of votes, and the statistician once again was demonstrated to be the superlative liar that he is popularly supposed to be.

STATISTICAL OR SAMPLE SURVEYS

But there is just one fact that we should pause to consider before we accept this condemnation of the statistician. Whatever the popular notion may be, the statistician, so far as he is a scientist and not a demagogue, is interested not merely in numbers but in their analysis, not only in the size of the sample but also in its quality. The *Literary Digest* poll was a failure not because of the use but rather because of the flagrant abuse of statistical methods. The *Fortune Magazine*, also published in the U.S.A., made a successful prediction of the results of the same presidential election on the basis of interviews with only 3,000 people—an achievement which is explained not by the name of the periodical but by the fact that it worked on scientifically sound lines. That is to say, the *Fortune Magazine* was using what is known to statisticians as the method of "Stratified Sample Survey."

In this method trained workers are employed to elicit information by direct interviews or occasionally through correspondence from carefully selected subjects. It is on the degree of this carefulness that the success of this method depends. The sample must be of a representative character and this is sought to be achieved by classifying the population into a suitable number of strata (each strata being more or less homogeneous in regard to its opinion) and by selecting at random a suitable number of subjects from each. The success of the *Fortune Magazine* was due to the fact that the small size of its sample was more than compensated for by the very careful selection and inclusion of representative economic groups in the population.

THE GALLUP POLL

Today the sampling technique is used widely all over the United States to elicit public opinion on all manner of political and social issues. So much so that it may be regarded as an integral part of the American scene. Notable instances of its operation are provided by the American Institute of Public Opinion which began experimenting with the problem of nationwide polling in November, 1933. In October, 1935, it started its series of weekly polls and, since that date, has been rendering an opinion news service to about sixty daily newspapers in the United States with a circulation of several million readers. Editorially these papers are of

all shades of opinion—left, right and centre : this itself is a guarantee of the confidence enjoyed by the Institute. The Institute works through a nation-wide staff of interviewers : and every effort is made to maintain an impartial organization. In the 1936 presidential election the American Institute of Public Opinion sent out 275,000 ballots (against ten million ballot papers of the *Literary Digest*), and predicted Roosevelt's victory with an average underestimate of about six per cent per state, and about one or two per cent for the whole country. In other elections the Institute has succeeded in forecasting the correct result with a margin of error of the order of two or three per cent of the votes recorded.

UTILITY OF OPINION SURVEYS IN POLITICS

It may be asked, what is the utility of such sample polls, what service do they render to the life of the nation? For answer, George Gallup says that it is only by means of sampling referenda that programmes can be separated from personalities and the mandates of the leaders defined. And he mentions how the polls of the American Institute of Public Opinion have shown in instance after instance that in spite of President Roosevelt's tremendous personal popularity, the people were definitely opposed to many of his radical legislative measures.

Another function that the sampling referendum performs is described by George Gallup as gauging the true strength of pressure groups that swarm in and out of Congressional halls. In other words, the sampling referendum enables us to distinguish genuine public opinion from artificially created and factious opinion against which Bryce asks us to be on guard. The polls of the American Institute of Public Opinion succeeded in at least one instance in giving the quietus to mischievous and unscrupulous propaganda carried on by interested persons with the object of making their selfish programme appear as the national demand.

George Gallup also reminds us that an election is itself a sample, but owing to the variability of turn-out among different classes of voters, it may not be quite so representative of public opinion as a Stratified Sample Survey in which attention is paid to every economic and social group. But the greatest service rendered by sampling referenda is that they help to make the masses articulate on issues of the day.

UTILITY IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

Opinion polls are also of great value in framing policies of social reconstruction. The

trend and stratification of public opinion in regard to such questions as inter-caste marriages, untouchability, widow remarriage, divorce, women's rights, birth control, etc., can be assessed on an objective basis only with the help of properly organized sample surveys. Opinion can be canvassed on broad questions of policy or specific issues relating to education, public health, social hygiene, or economic reconstruction. Sample surveys are also the most powerful method of ascertaining consumer preferences for different commodities, foods, drink, clothes, etc.

FIRST EXPERIMENTS IN INDIA.

During the last two or three years the Statistical Laboratory of Calcutta has organized a number of sample surveys on a small scale but with considerable success in studying consumer habits and preferences such as the prevalence of drinking tea, habits of reading newspapers, preferences for different systems of medical care such as allopathy, homeopathy, *ayurveda* or *yunani*. The results obtained were extremely encouraging and showed a high degree of accuracy. I hope to be able to give some account of this work in another article.

Very little, however, has been so far done regarding the assessment of public opinion. Until recently there has not been much interest shown in this matter by our public men. A rare exception was Pandit Jawahar'lal Nehru. During a conversation at Allahabad in April, 1940, he not only showed a keen interest on the subject, but asked me whether the Statistical Laboratory could not undertake surveys of public opinion on the lines of the Gallup polls. Since this talk with Panditji we have been seriously thinking of doing something in this line. And, very recently we made small scale experiments of "Mass Observation" with 8 or 9 observers belonging to the Statistical Laboratory. Encouraging results have been obtained, and we intend to proceed with the work on a larger scale.

FUTURE WORK IN INDIA

In India where the masses are hardly ever aware of the nature of the problems that the government grapples with day by day the sampling referendum should no doubt be used with due caution. The very ignorance of the people is an argument in favour of opinion polls. But in view of the difficulty of getting definite opinions on matters of which the people are ignorant, what is called for in India is a combination of Mass Observation by trained observers working in selected areas and among carefully selected cross-sections of the public with the method of

Stratified Sample Surveys as conducted by the Gallup Institute. Everything will depend on securing random samples in correct proportion from all classes in the universe of opinion and on including enough cases to enable chance variations to cancel out. The actual technique can be evolved only by careful experimentation on scientific lines in accordance with modern statistical principles; but given proper facilities and sufficient time for field trials it should not be difficult to develop a method for eliciting public opinion on general issues on an objective basis.

NEED OF CO-OPERATION FROM THE PUBLIC

Success in this matter, however, depends primarily on the co-operation of the public. This may be given in two ways. For Mass-Observation we want voluntary observers who will undertake to report their observations on particular subjects or general impressions on "day" or "area" surveys. I have already stated that the whole Mass-Observation movement in England was organized on an entirely voluntary basis. The observers were drawn from all strata of society and in most cases were not known to one another; and in sending reports, names or identity of persons observed are not disclosed.

It is not only necessary but desirable that the observers should be as representative of society as a whole as possible. This means that both men and women from all economic, communal, or cultural groups should participate in the movement. This is the only way in which a correct perspective can be obtained. The actual observation can be done in leisure hours just whenever it is convenient for the observer. Observation work may be done, for example, for a short period on a number of days in the

week or one or two days in a month. Any observer is at liberty to discontinue the work at any time. The only obligation is to try to carry out the work on certain co-ordinated lines. Any one interested in the work is requested to write to us at the Statistical Laboratory, Presidency College, Calcutta.

SURVEY OF PUBLIC PREFERENCE

The sample survey may be used with great advantage in ascertaining the preferences of the public in such matters as sports and amusements, radio broadcast, cinema films, music, literature and other cultural pursuits. Such surveys are not only useful in showing the general trend of public opinion, but may be of direct value in improving the quality of shows and entertainments by supplying necessary guidance to the proper authorities.

We intend in the near future to carry out such sample surveys from time to time. Broadly speaking our method will be to pick up at random a number of house-holders in Calcutta and its neighbourhood, and to send round trained investigators from the Statistical Laboratory to interview the head or some other representative of the family. Our investigators will carry identity cards; and will also be supplied with standard printed forms for recording a summary of the interview. Besides voluntary mass-observation, a second way in which the public can co-operate is by helping our investigators in this work. Here also no names will be taken down, and every opinion will be treated as strictly confidential. We are confident that with the help and co-operation of the general public it will be possible to build up in India an efficient and scientific organisation for the survey of public opinion and preference.



SCIENTIFICALLY CONDUCTED SURVEYS OF PUBLIC OPINION

All who worship at the altar of democracy admit that Public Policy should be a true reflection of Public Opinion. But when confronted with the question as to how this is to be achieved, most of them have little practical advice to offer except uttering the usual shibboleths of representative government and universal suffrage. It is well-known to all serious students of politics that, while representative government based on universal adult franchise is the only practicable policy for a country with a large population, it is at best an imperfect instrument for interpretations of the popular will on all questions of public import. Realization of this fact has inspired attempts at devising methods for ascertaining public opinion in between General Elections. So far as these attempts have been successful, they owe it to the scientific use of statistical methods, as described in an interesting article, published elsewhere in this issue. Prof. P. C. Mahalanobis, Hon. Secy. of the Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta, who contributes this article, is not content to describe experiments conducted in America but also discusses their applicability in India. We believe with Prof. Mahalanobis that scientifically conducted surveys of public opinion serve both to sift genuine public opinion from the spurious variety of propaganda and to stimulate the interest of the masses in the larger issues of public life.

Such surveys, we believe, will help in throw-

ing revealing light on many of the baffling problems of our life. For instance, on the question of middle-class unemployment, there is much talk of vocational education. But have our middle-class young men any vocational bias? Are they, if given the opportunity, prepared to handle jobs in which the pay is good but which are supposed to detract from "gentlemanly status"? Answers to such questions may be furnished by a survey designed to ascertain occupational preferences among middle-class young men.

Other topics may be mentioned which such surveys might tackle. What is the attitude of the people or particular sections of it to inter-caste marriage, to khaddar, to industrialization in general, to arrangements for religious instruction in schools and colleges, to socialization of public utility services? Some or all of these or even more vital questions may be taken up for surveys, and the results will be, we believe, eye-openers to many of our politicians and publicists who are too often apt to arrive at sweeping generalisations on all too meagre data. But a properly conducted survey requires trained men as well as, we are afraid, some money. If the latter is forthcoming and willing workers are found, there exists in the Statistical Laboratory an organization which, we are sure, will give profitable employment to both.

K. N. C.