

Understanding Student Protest in Canada: The University of Toronto Strike Vote

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ABSTRACT

A behavioural indicator of student protest – voting in favour of a student strike referendum – is shown to be positively associated with two social discontinuities accompanying the student role: the weakening of ties with the family of origin and an uncertain future. Also, a student's commitment to the social order as measured by a variety of items is shown to be inversely related to favouring the strike. An argument is made that recent student protest in Canada and the United States differed in terms of the major issues involved and that the difference can be explained by variation in the valued means of social participation in the two societies.

RESUME

L'article démontre que la question d'un référendum de grève – mesure de comportement typique dans les contestations estudiantines – est en rapport positif avec deux discontinuités intrinsèques dans le rôle d'étudiant: le relâchement des liens de famille et un avenir incertain. De plus, l'engagement de l'étudiant à l'ordre social se présente en rapport inverse avec un vote positif pour la grève. L'article soutient qu'il existe une différence entre les raisons principales des récentes contestations au Canada et aux Etats-Unis. Cette différence s'explique en variant les formes idéologiquement établies de la participation sociale dans les deux pays.

While the uproar of student activism and protest which swept across the college and university campuses of North America during the late sixties and early seventies has subsided, the need for informed interpretation of the phenomenon persists. Because very little pertinent scholarly material has been published on the topic, activism among students in Canada during that period continues to deserve attention.¹ This paper con-

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1. As far as can be determined, the following list exhausts the publications in English: McGuigan, 1968; Reid and Reid, 1969; Roussopoulos, 1970; Quarter, 1972; Lehtiniemi, 1972; Bissell, 1974.

tains an empirically based interpretation of protest by Canadian university students together with some remarks about a difference between student activism in Canada and the United States.

The data examined herein bear directly on a referendum conducted under the auspices of the University of Toronto's Student Administrative Council (SAC) during March, 1971, on the question of the willingness of the students to strike — essentially, to boycott their classes — in protest against a refusal to grant them equal representation or parity on the University Senate then in the process of being reconstituted. The data were gathered by circulating a questionnaire to 302 undergraduates enrolled in intro-

Table 1

**Percentage of Students Voting for the Strike
by Various Questionnaire Items**

| Item | % Voting for the Strike |
|--|---|
| (1) <i>Location of Respondent's Home</i> | Metro Toronto 38% (131) Other 46% (81) |
| (2) <i>Respondent's Current Residence</i> | University Housing 57% (47) With Parents or Other 35% (172) |
| (3) <i>Plans After Leaving University</i> | Employment or Housewife 34% (71) Professional School 33% (45) Graduate School 49% (41) Not sure 48% (61) |
| (4) <i>Decision Regarding A Career</i> | Specific Career Choice Has Been Made 32% (56) Specific Career Choice Has Not Been Made 46% (123) |
| (5) <i>"How certain are you what you will be doing in five years?"</i> | Certain 28% (92) Uncertain 49% (127) |
| (6) <i>Desired Standard of Living</i> | Better Than Parents' 32% (56) Same As Parents' 37% (75) Makes No Difference 48% (84) |

61 Understanding Student Protest

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|--|--|
| (7) "How different would you say your outlook on life is from that of your parents?" | Different 54% (85) Not Different 31% (134) |
| (8) Frequency of Church Attendance | More Than Once or Twice A Year 25% (92) Less Than Once or Twice A Year 51% (127) |
| (9) "A women's place is in the home." | Agree 24% (67) Disagree 47% (152) |
| (10) "Students are an oppressed people." | Agree 53% (79) Disagree 33% (137) |
| (11) "Was the government right in using the War Measures Act to deal with the FLQ?" | Yes or Maybe 28% (144) No 66% (50) |
| (12) Attitude Towards FLQ Goals | Sympathetic 49% (112) Unsympathetic 30% (103) |
| (13) "Would you live in Rochdale College?"** | Yes or Maybe 58% (64) No 33% (155) |
| (14) Attitude Towards Bilingualism | Favour 40% (187) Do Not Favour 42% (31) |
| (15) Family Income | More Than \$14,999 47% (76) Less Than Or Equal To \$14,999 37% (132) |
| (16) Sex | Male 44% (75) Female 38% (143) |

*A counterculture residence and learning center. See Lee, 1968.

were gathered by circulating a questionnaire to 302 undergraduates enrolled in introductory sociology courses. As is the case for most surveys focusing upon student activism, the respondents were not drawn from a random campus sample (Lyons 1965; Lehtiniemi, 1972.) Given the nature of student protest, questionnaires usually must be constructed and circulated in a short period of time which precludes the use of normal sampling procedures. The questionnaire used in this study was designed and administered to a set of readily accessible respondents in order to make the most of a short-lived opportunity to assess the meaning of student protest at a leading Canadian university.

Survey Results

The questionnaire was given to classes of students in introductory sociology courses at the University of Toronto (St. George campus) during regular lecture periods. More than 99% of the distributed questionnaires were returned with usable responses. The dependent variable in the study was measured by asking students how they voted on the student strike referendum. Of the 302 respondents 29% said they voted in favour of the strike, 44% voted against the strike, 26% did not vote, and 1% gave no answer to the voting question. *Table 1* contains crosstabulations of the voting question with other questionnaire items.

An hypothesis tested in this study is that the transitional nature of the student role in Canadian society with its attendant uncertainties explains much student protest. To the extent that the student's links with the past have been severed or attenuated and his future is not clear, the student will be disposed to protest. The relationships between **Items 1 to 5** in *Table 1* and voting for or against the strike support the hypothesized connection between the transitional nature of the student role and protest. The farther a student is removed physically and, thereby, socially from his family of origin, the more likely it is that he voted for the strike (**Items 1 and 2**).² Regarding the future, the voting patterns associated with **Items 3 to 5** indicate that the more uncertain a student is about the future, the more likely it is that he voted for the strike. Questioned about specific plans after leaving university, those students who were not sure what they were going to do or indicated a desire to go to graduate school were more likely to have favoured the strike than students looking towards employment, being a housewife, or enrolling in a professional school. The fact that those who say they are going to pursue graduate studies are even slightly more prone to protest than those who are not sure about their futures may be explained in two ways. Unlike attending a professional school, graduate work in the arts and sciences has a precarious relationship with specific future employment. Attrition rates are high and securing a position as a university professor frequently depends upon the unknown vicissitudes of sponsorship.

2. According to Hurtubise and Rowat (1970), 85% of the students enrolled in Canadian universities during the academic year 1968-69 came from the provinces in which their respective universities were located. Since the homes of most students are located in the same urban area in which their university is located, it is unnecessary for the student to leave home in order to attend university. This may partially explain why student protest in Canada was not as severe as it was in the United States.

Furthermore, it probably is the case that graduate students and those electing to pursue graduate studies are more radical in general than other students.

A second set of items (6 to 14) measures certain aspects of a student's orientation and commitment to the established social order. All of the items except **Item 14** (attitude towards bilingualism) are associated with how the students voted on the referendum. The more a student is positively oriented to the established social order, the less he favoured the strike. The fact that the evidence leads to that conclusion is not surprising. What is somewhat surprising, however, is the strength of the relationship between orientation to the social order and voting for or against the strike. With the exception of **Item 14** and **Item 6**, the smallest difference in the dependent variable categories for categories of the independent variable is 19% (**Item 12**) representing a correlation (Gamma) of 0.38. These strong relationships indicate that recent student protest was associated with serious questioning of the established order and was not a superficial prank. What the implications will be for the social order when the activists of the 1960's reach positions of power in their careers remains to be seen.

The other findings are: the higher family income, the more a student favoured the strike (**Item 15**); males were slightly more favourable to the strike than females (**Item 16**.) The relationship between family income and protest is consistent with that found by other researchers (e.g., Flacks, 1967) and appears to be a structural characteristic of recent student protest in North America. The association between sex and protest (males being more favourable to the strike than females) is in agreement with Lehtiniemi's (1972) finding of a relationship between being male and involvement in protest among a sample of respondents from two unspecified Ontario universities. The agreement of some of our findings with those of other researchers argues for the reliability of the Toronto data.

As a whole, the data in *Table 1* strongly indicate that the looser a student's ties are with the established arenas of social control, the more prone he will be to protest. The stronger a student's ties are with the established social order, the more he will be subject to cross-pressures, e.g., home vs. university peer groups, which lessen the likelihood of activism.

The Issue of Parity

So far our analysis has focused upon the characteristics which separate the activists from those who remained silent. While that analysis is important, it is only one part of the task of interpreting student protest. An examination of the social sources of the issues which are the focus of activism also deserves attention and is especially useful in distinguishing protest in Canada from its counterpart in the United States.

While the consequences of the sixties for the United States as a society are not well understood yet, it seems likely that some basic changes occurred in American life and that student activism contributed to those changes. A major difference between many of the protests in Canada and protest by American students is that the former can be linked with a redefinition of the student status whereas the latter appears to have more complex causes. In the United States both the range of issues from civil rights to the Vietnam War and the intensity of student protest at its height suggest that more than

an adjustment within an institutional sector of the society was occurring. On the other hand, in Canada and particularly in Ontario, parity and similar issues directed at the governing and administration of the universities were the major concern of students indicating, as we shall argue, that protest here had its roots in the expansion of the system of higher education.

During the late fifties and continuing into the next decade, education in Canada and to a lesser extent in the United States was symbolically redefined as more central and important to the goals of society. In the United States the critical event was the orbiting of Sputnik by the Soviet Union. As result, education was defined as more important for achieving national objectives than it had been in the past. That redefinition was accompanied by an increase in the allocation of funds to the educational sector and especially to graduate education.

While the United States was emphasizing qualitative improvement in education, Canada concentrated upon a large scale expansion of post-secondary education.³ A redefinition of the student status accompanied that expansion. Higher education ceased to be a perquisite of the offspring of elites and became an integral part of the strategy of nation building being made available on a mass basis. *As a result, the student status was redefined as more important to the ongoing concerns of society than it had been in the past.*

When a status is redefined, protest may result because the importance of the status in the eyes of its occupants becomes inconsistent with its incorporation in society. The incorporation of a status refers to rights, duties, expectations, that is, to the terms of participation in the collectivities in which the status is embedded (Meyer and Rubinson, 1972.) Given the persuasiveness and ubiquity of the mass media, the ideological redefinition of the meaning and importance of a status can be accomplished rather quickly in modern societies. However, changing the incorporation of a status in order to bring resources into line with newly defined importance may take time since it involves reorganizing the social context where the status is located. Status occupants may find themselves lacking the means of social participation which they believe are commensurate with their new social definition.

When a status is redefined, the means of social participation in a society provide clues to the issues around which protest is likely to be organized. In addition to other value differences (Lipset, 1968), there is a difference between the United States and Canada in terms of the ideal model of social participation. For the United States the ideological motto "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" suggests that those who are fully incorporated into the system have the right to pursue their own individual interests unhindered. The society, itself, and its constituent units are constructed, ideally, to serve the special interests of members. On the other hand, for Canada "peace, order, and good government" suggest the importance of the exercise of authority and the process of governance. In Canada the pursuit of special interests is subservient to maintaining and governing the society and its constituent collectivities

3. Documentation of the need for expansion is found in Bissell, 1957. Statistics describing the magnitude of expansion are in Economic Council of Canada, 1970. Expansion in Ontario is discussed in York/U of T Higher Education Seminar, 1974.

Table 2

Reason For Voting In Favour Of The Strike

| | |
|--|----------|
| My favourable vote was a contribution to the ongoing struggle against imperialistic capitalism | 2% |
| My favourable vote was a protest against bourgeois values and the middle class style of life | 1% |
| My favourable vote was part of the effort to reform the university in order to bring it more into line with the needs of contemporary society. | 31% |
| My favourable vote was a protest against the faculty's unwillingness to seriously consider the opinions of students | 66% (87) |

with participation in the structure and process of governance in any collectivity being valued as an end in itself.

At the University of Toronto student protest during the late sixties and early seventies had parity as its central and abiding issue.⁴ Similar demands were made elsewhere – McGill, Glendon College of York University, and Simon Fraser, to name a few. With the possible exception of the computer incident at Sir George Williams, the small body of evidence which exists contains the strong suggestion that many protesting students in Canada were striking out against what they considered to be the undemocratic, authoritarian manner in which the universities were governed and the educational process conducted (McGuigan, 1968; Reid and Reid, 1969; Roussopoulos, 1970; Bissell, 1974.) In their eyes the solution to the problem was participation in the governance of the university.

The data at hand suggest that the meaning to the students at the University of Toronto of a vote in favour of the strike is consistent with our argument. Clearly, a vote to strike is a protest against the existing distribution of power. However, a distinction can be drawn between protests designed to completely change a system and those which have as an objective the adjustment of a system. It seems clear that the student strike vote and the events surrounding the struggle for parity were not expressions of revolutionary intent. Rather they represented an attempt to alter the distribution of power by acquiring an equal voice in the decision-making process hitherto reserved for faculty and administration. When questioned, the students, themselves, endorsed non-radical explanations for voting in favour of the strike. Respondents who voted for the strike were asked to choose among a number of alternative reasons for why they voted as they did. *Table 2* contains the results.

4. See *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, 1974; Conacher, 1974; Kanowitch, 1974.

Almost none of the respondents who voted in favour of the strike expressed radical political views. A minority viewed the issue as institutional reform (31%). A sizeable majority (66%) voted in favour of the strike because they thought that the faculty did not take into consideration what students think. We interpret this result as a plea on the part of students for the importance of the student role in contemporary Canada. More specifically, the students' goal was to be treated as "citizens" of the university and to be recognized as persons whose opinions should count within the institution which effects their lives so drastically. The roots of the student desire for "citizenship" within the university are to be found in the redefinition of the student status associated with the expansion of higher education. Parity and similar concerns became issues because social participation in Canada is, ideally, participation in the governing of collectivities.

In the United States student protest seldom involved parity or similar considerations as the major issues around which protest was organized. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement is a case in point.⁵ Its objective was to overturn a series of administrative decisions which were interpreted by the protagonists as imposing serious limitations upon the free exercise of public expression. At no point was the legitimacy of the decision-making structure, itself, seriously called into question. What was at stake was the worthiness of the decisions being made by those who occupied important positions in the university. The same theme was part of the mass protests against the war in Southeast Asia. The objective was to change the decisions being made by elites. Little attention was paid by the majority of the protesters to revamping the structures within which those decisions were taken. Thus, the critical issues around which protest was organized in the United States and Canada were not the same. While the behaviour and social and personal characteristics of protesting students in the two countries were frequently similar, the central issues were different.

Summary

Our analysis suggests that the University of Toronto strike vote of 1971 had fairly narrow social implications. Far from representing a flood of revolutionary sentiment, it focused upon a demand that students be accorded rights commensurate with the redefinition of their status which accompanied the expansion of the higher educational system during the sixties. Furthermore, our research indicates that two organizational arrangements were associated with favouring the strike: student uncertainty as to the future, particularly as to having a viable career, and the absence of links with the family of origin. Finally, the data suggest that the strength of a student's commitment to the established social order apart from the university is a good predictor of whether or not he will engage in protest in the university setting.

5. It is our impression that many University of Toronto students believed that the issues at Berkeley and Toronto were identical. Feuer (1969:498) documents the grip which Berkeley had upon the minds of activists at the University of Toronto.

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