

Why opinion polls fail in Sri Lanka?

We Sri Lankans are peculiar political creatures. Unlike in the west where the average party member's opinion is reflected faithfully in the political party's action, in Sri Lanka, personal opinions expressed in polls do not always seem to relate to the party's actions as a group. Hence, it is no surprise that Dayan Jayatilleka, recently lamented that none of our main political parties operates like a liberal-democratic party in the west even though polls reflect a moderate pragmatic nature of public opinion (Politics of wining in the Wanni, Island features, 2008.09.09). We are quite comfortable with these ambiguities while social and political scientists may find it disturbing as they fail to find a relationship between the party and its constituents. Parameters that describe individuals are different to parameters that describe groups of individuals. How one determines the value of later from the former is not well established in social sciences but in thermodynamics, physicists have formulated it in the context of systems of particles. Interestingly, the social scientists' way of inferring from polls is fundamentally not much different to what physicists do in thermodynamics to predict the system's variables (e.g. temperature, pressure) based on the statistics of its constituent elements. However these statistical methods seem to fail in Sri Lankan society not because of the greater complexity in human organizations but because of a fundamental limitation in the western sciences.

A central problem of thermodynamics is to find the probability that a given system be in a specific quantum state of energy. This probability depends on the number of quantum states accessible to the system which in turn depends on the number and the quantum nature of its constituent particles. When we can count the quantum states accessible to the system, we know the entropy of the system. From entropy we can derive other thermodynamic properties of the system such as temperature and pressure. As evident, the epistemology of thermodynamics is structured in such a way that knowledge of constituents of a system relates linearly (and unidirectionally) to the knowledge of the system as a whole (constituent \rightarrow whole). In other words, thermodynamics predicts the values of macroscopic variables in terms of the micro states of the constituents of a system, but can not predict the micro states of the constituents in terms of macroscopic variables. *Therefore thermodynamics like most other western sciences is not equipped to consider the effects that the system as whole has on its constituents (Vidya kathandara, Nalin de Silva).*

Granted that, formulations of thermodynamics may not be directly applicable to complex human organizations such as nations and political parties. However, social scientists and political scientists alike draw inferences about the state of human systems using a similar methodology as in thermodynamics: by using statistical information about the number and nature of its constituents. As in thermodynamics, the predictions social scientists make about the whole system are linearly related to the knowledge about the constituents gathered in polls (constituent \rightarrow whole). This linear methodology will work only if the constituents behaviour is unaffected by the system as a whole, like molecules in a gas. Interestingly, in societies where individualism is promoted in place of collectivism, one could argue that humans do behave like molecules in a gas i.e. independent of the

system's behaviour. Therefore in societies where individualism is promoted in place of collectivism, linear relationships could work and the system's (in this case political party's) behaviour may be predicted linearly from the information gathered in opinion polls.

It follows that in societies where collectivism is promoted in place of individualism, constituent's behaviour could be predicted linearly from the information gathered from the system (whole → constituent).

However, in a society like ours where both individualism and collectivism are given equal importance, both the system and its constituents have a potential to influence each other. Here we could argue that the system has a cyclic relationship with its constituents (constituent ↔ whole). Since thermodynamics does not take into consideration the effects that the system as whole has on its constituents, the linear methods of thermodynamics (and opinion polls in social science) fail in a cyclic relationship. This is probably why opinion polls fail to predict the behaviour of the party as a whole in Sri Lanka. To make accurate predictions about cyclic systems we need to develop a science that relate knowledge of the whole system to the knowledge of it's constituents in a cyclic manner. This type of science is most likely to be developed within Sinhala Buddhist Chinthanaya where cyclic relationships are inherently understood. Certainly, ordinary Sri Lankans need no such theories to understand how their political parties work, but pundits may need to advance their thinking.

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