THE IMPACT OF OPINION POLLS

THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION: ARE SURVEYS USEFUL?

We are regularly confronted with opinion polls on immigration. Unfortunately, these surveys are not very useful in terms of their contribution to both public debate and migration policy formulation.

Let's take as an example the latest IPSOS survey (September 2017) which has been widely reported in the media recently. This survey focuses on the effects of immigration, particularly its economic effects. This is a very complex question which is indeed reflected in the answers: almost 40% of respondents say they have no idea about the question (they remain neutral) or say they do not know. Nevertheless, 60% of respondents have some ideas on the matter.

When you look closely, you can see that the results presented can be subject to several interpretations. Thus, to the question "What is the effect of immigration in general?", one could headline: "Only a minority (21%) think immigration is positive". But the title could also read: "Only a minority (42%) think that immigration is negative". It is clear that the two titles do not give the same impression to the reader. The first number can be used by opponents of immigration while those who are more open to immigration will use the second number.

When the questions are more specific, the answers are a little less clear-cut and negative opinions decrease significantly. For example, to the question "Do you agree or disagree that immigration is good for the economy, 36% answer "No" while 28% answer "Yes". To the question 'Do you agree with the statement that immigration makes it more difficult for the native-born to find a job', 31% answer "yes" and 27% "no". On these more specific issues, it can be seen that a solid third of respondents neither agree nor disagree (in addition to the 5% who say they do not know). So, when the questions refer to concrete situations (economy, employment), we see that public opinion is divided and that we cannot talk about polarization, as the answers to the more general question would suggest.

In addition, the level of negative responses (between 35 and 40%) can be interpreted in several ways. For many people, this percentage may seem high. But it can be interpreted differently: indeed, given the avalanche of negative discourses on immigration at the moment, whether in the media or in the words of politicians, it is perhaps even surprising that this figure is not higher.

What can we say about the differences in opinion from one country to another? For example, positive responses to the economic impact of immigration range from 50% in Saudi Arabia to 9% in Hungary. In Canada, this proportion is around 43% (Canada ranks 5th out of 24 countries), while the percentage for France is 16% (20th). Without an understanding of the specific political and economic contexts, these figures do not make much sense.

In addition, the differences could also be explained by the impact of public discourse, whether negative or positive: where public discourse is positive to immigrants, public perceptions will follow. And vice versa. It is not an accident that France finds itself in 20th place, with the politicization of immigration by right-wing and far-right parties, and that Hungary finds itself almost in last place. It should be remembered that this country has completely closed its borders to refugees and that many reports have documented police brutality at the borders.

In closing, let us quote a very important result that goes against preconceived ideas: indeed, the survey shows that there is a positive link between immigration levels and perceptions: the higher the level of immigration, the more positive the perceptions. This would explain why immigration countries (e.g., Britain, Canada, Australia and the United States) rank highly in rating the positive impact of immigration.

In short, responses to opinion surveys on such complex issues as the impact of immigration don't shed much light to deepen our understanding and assist in public policy development. On the other hand, opinion polls could be useful in guiding information and awareness programs on the real effects of immigration. Unfortunately, very few governments are moving in this direction.

A SURVEY IN SUPPORT OF ACTION

I have already had the opportunity to write about how opinion polls (see above) on immigration are not very useful for some topics when they are not confronted with real facts. For example, respondents may well estimate that immigration has a negative impact on the economy or society, but it should also be remembered that this goes against the many studies that say otherwise.

On the other hand, a survey can be useful in developing measures that take into account the opinions of the people with whom we want to work. This is the case with the Léger survey sponsored by the Bureau d'intégration des nouveaux arrivants à Montréal (BINAM). This is an immigration survey, conducted between November 23 and December 2, 2017, among 1096 people aged 18 and over from the Montreal area. The BINAM is an organization attached to the City of Montreal and aims to develop an anti-rumour strategy (see update).

Several findings can already inform future actions. First, the survey shows that overall the results are very positive. Examples:

- few negative mentions of immigration (about 10%);
- 64% consider newcomers to be an asset to the city;
- 61% think that relations between Montrealers and newcomers as quite harmonious;
- the majority of respondents do not agree with the prejudices concerning inferior work skills of new immigrants (e.g., their lower productivity).

This rather positive picture is all the more surprising since more than half of the respondents (56%) say they do not have newcomers in their immediate circle, despite the fact that nearly 70% of them come from the island of Montreal where immigrants are concentrated. However, we know that negative perceptions are more widespread in regions where there are few immigrants.

It would be interesting in more in-depth analyses to see whether the perceptions of the group with immigrants in their environment are indeed more positive than others. If this is the case, actions could be concentrated in geographical areas with low immigrant representation.

Second finding: it seems that respondents' opinions are generally more positive than those circulating around them. Rumours heard by respondents over the past year would indicate that those around them are relatively more hostile to immigration. Some examples of rumours heard:

- "There are too many immigrants in Montreal".
- "Immigrants are a threat to the French language".
- "Immigrants are job thieves."

This result is difficult to interpret. This question will need to be further explored to see where these rumours come from, how they circulate and on what they are based.

Third finding: there is little mention of discrimination when it comes to labour market integration. The main reasons given for the difficulties of economic integration are language and non-recognition of diplomas. For a minority of people, the wearing of religious symbols is also mentioned as a factor that can negatively affect labour market integration. Racism and xenophobia do not appear as such as factors, even if respondents could give up to three answers. On the more general question concerning the welcome extended by Montrealers, only 6% of the sample mentions racism and xenophobia as reasons for apoor welcome.

This result is sobering. It seems surprising given the many recent debates about discrimination and racism in Quebec. It could be argued that if we asked the question directly — 'do you think there is racism and xenophobia?' — many people would answer 'yes'. But when respondents are allowed to give their own reasons for integration difficulties, as in this survey, very few mention discrimination and racism 'spontaneously'. This result, combined with positive perceptions about immigration, should influence the content of anti-rumour messages. Overly negative messages giving the impression that discrimination is widespread or that immigration is perceived negatively are often overwhelming and counterproductive.

Finally, the survey should make more targeted interventions possible. There is no need to intervene with people who are already convinced. Two groups should be particularly targeted. The first group concerns people who answer 'don't know'. Depending on the questions, this group can range from 10% to 20%. This is the group most likely to respond positively to anti-rumour interventions. Simply influencing this group would in itself represent an important outcome of the strategy.

The second group is more problematic and includes people who have negative perceptions based on 'rumours'. If they are intractable, interventions may be less effective. Nevertheless, the biggest challenge for the anti-rumour strategy is to reach out to this group and try to influence it.

In both cases, an essential first step would be to characterize them: age, gender, national origin, social class, place of residence, education, etc.

A final usefulness of the action survey deserves to be highlighted. Indeed, any strategy must include evaluation mechanisms. The survey is a good starting point for monitoring actions undertaken. In this case, the survey should be repeated with the same methodology as much as possible.

ANOTHER SURVEY THAT IS DIFFICULT TO INTERPRET

IPSOS, an international opinion marketing company, has just delivered a new survey with some questions about immigration. One result in particular puzzled me and suggests that the negative perception of immigration, as measured in the survey, would be somewhat exaggerated.

Let's take a closer look. This survey, reported in La Presse on May 27, was conducted between April 29 and May 2, 2018 among 2001 people. As reported by La Presse, 76% of those interviewed responded that 'immigrants too often impose their values and religion'. This figure is surprising to say the least.

In another Léger et Léger survey conducted for the Bureau d'intégration des nouveaux arrivants à Montréal, only 42% of respondents from the Montréal region agreed with the following statement: "immigrants are trying to impose their culture on us". It is the word 'impose' that makes the two issues very similar. However, if we retain this 42% for the Montreal region, even assuming that the rest of Quebec answered 'yes' to 100% (which is unlikely), we do not arrive at the percentage of 76%.

How can this difference be reconciled? Let us assume that both surveys are valid. Three factors can be used to explain the differences:

1. These are two different survey companies with their own methodology, in particular with regard to the choice of respondents (sampling).

2. The vocabulary is different: in one case (IPSOS), we speak of 'too often'; in the case of Léger & Léger, we do not mention frequency. It may be thought that the notion of 'too often' is very subjective and is understood differently by different people.

3. Opinions may change over time: there is a delay of about 5 months between the two surveys (23 November — 2 December 2017 versus 29 April — 2 May 2018).

Even if all three factors may have played a role, I would personally choose the second factor. With regard to sampling, both survey firms are generally recognized for their rigour. And I don't think opinions can change that much in 5 months, unless there was a catastrophic event that could harden opinions. I don't see any. That being said, I would not want to downplay the importance of negative perceptions about immigration in Quebec. These exist and concern a sufficiently large part of the population to be taken into account.

Another result also struck me in the IPSOS survey. The rate of trust in scientists (researchers and university professors) is 85%, compared to 18% for politicians! How to interpret the fact that perceptions are so negative when we see that scientific analyses generally give a positive view of immigration? Can we assume that political discourse presenting immigration as a problem rather than an asset had a major impact?

One point is reassuring: Montrealers' perceptions of immigration are generally positive. Shouldn't they be left with the initiative to 'manage their diversity'?

OPINION POLLS OR THE MIRROR EFFECT

According to the latest CROP survey sponsored by Radio-Canada, a majority of Quebecers (about two-thirds) would support a reduction in immigration and a law banning the wearing of religious symbols for people in positions of authority, including teachers.

Should we be surprised? Not at all. It's the mirror effect that plays out to the fullest here. With two major political parties — one of which is in power — telling us that there are too many immigrants and veiled women, it is no wonder that public opinion reflects the image shaped by political speeches. It is even surprising that one third of the people surveyed do not agree.

However, the facts do not justify this speech. Quebec is in a period of labour shortage. The francization rates of immigration have improved. Recent studies, with new and more appropriate data show that the economic effects of immigration are positive. The proportion of Muslims in Quebec is very low (about 4%). The wearing of religious symbols affects a very small part of the population. In short, there is no justification for the fear conveyed by the dominant political discourse.

In a previous blog, I asked about the usefulness of opinion polls in terms of their contribution to our understanding of immigration issues and public policy development. If these only aim to reinforce the dominant discourses, to the detriment of the facts, we enter a vicious spiral.

That said, opinion polls could be useful in guiding programs to inform and raise awareness among populations about the real effects of immigration. Unfortunately, this is not the path chosen by the current government.