Government by the pollsters

The Maine Campus
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The ‘Good German’ syndrome seems to have struck the Student Senate.

The Campus received a number of letters this week from so-called student leaders blasting an editorial we published comparing the Senate’s refusal to give money to the gay Wilde-Stein Club to certain Maine GOP legislators who said they will refuse to vote funds for the Super-U if a homosexual conference is permitted here. The student senate and the state legislators claim their constituents oppose the group. And, as elected officials, they say duty compels them to acquiesce to majority demands.

The Campus says such thinking is simple sparrow shit. Blaming the constituents is copping out.

It is a signal failure of the educational system that so many persons, including college students, have little or no understanding of democratic institutions. For student senators to claim (as several do on the letters page) that they have no choice but to bow before the prevailing public opinion, demonstrates ignorance. What’s worse, it’s cloaked in the guise of “republican government.”

Was Gov. Ross Barnett upholding our highest ideals when he blocked the doors of the registrar’s office at Ole Miss to bar James Meredith from enrolling—certainly no one would argue that the majority of Mississippians opposed segregation. According to the logic of majority rule the Senate employs, Barnett was right. Yet, is there no case for conscience? for minorities? for civil rights?

One senator calls the tryanny of majority rule “elected responsibility.” This warped and twisted rationalization of bowing to the largest segment sounds more like “elected irresponsibility.” Numbers alone seems the criterion by which the Senate judges how representative it is. Yet any form of government which does not tend to the concerns of all its constituency can hardly claim to represent anyone but one group—in this case, the largest.

Even if public opinion were as easily ascertained as the Senate claims, it would be a fickle indicator to build a stable government on. Opinions on issues vary by the day, by the hour. If the Senate predicated its votes on public opinion, it should stay in continuous session to deal with the shifts.

One wonders why political parties hassle with such things as platforms and planks, why they put up opposing candidates at considerable expense, mount such fantastic campaigns, if the elected representatives are supposed to blow hot and cold with every shift in the wind. Why have student elections? Let Howard Neville appoint senators from Ken Hayes’ public opinion class.

Is government of the people merely an elaborate opinion poll? Or are democratic institutions committed to certain ideals? And among these ideals; certain of them pertain to the rights of unpopular minorities. The function of elected representatives is far more than to be whipsawed by the smallest prejudices of the largest group.

Student government, elected by about five per cent of the student body, can hardly claim to be “representative” if it judges by numerical criteria. In the case of the Wilde-Stein Club, it can only claim to be the ready tool of reactionaries.

The Maine Campus holds critiques of each week’s issues every Friday at 1 p.m. in 102 Lord Hall. If you would like to meet the editors to discuss stories or issues, all interested persons are invited to attend. Comment and criticism are welcome.