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PUBLIC OPINION AND THE MEDIA

THE CONCEPTS

- What is public opinion?
- What is the public agenda, and how is the agenda shaped?
- How is public opinion measured?
- What role does the media play in shaping public opinion?
- What effect does the media have on individual political beliefs and voting behavior?

THE TERMS

- saliency
- intensity
- stability
- public opinion
- random sampling
- exit polls
- Gallup poll
- political socialization
- liberal ideology
- conservative ideology
- news media
- public agenda

Public opinion, simply put, is how people feel about things. Pollsters measure the public's opinion of everything from television programs to commercial products to political issues. Networks, companies, and politicians commission these polls because they seek the approval of the public.

Obviously, public opinion is not uniform: Even the most popular television shows attract a minority of all Americans. Furthermore, many programs are designed to receive favorable ratings from a specific subgroup of society rather than from the public at large. Networks, for example, seek high ratings from young, middle-class audiences, as these are the audiences most sought after by advertisers. Because advertisers are less interested in senior citizens, networks seek their approval less aggressively.

The same holds true for political issues. Most Americans—the **general public**—care more about the political issues that affect their day-to-day lives directly. A political issue does not have to interest the majority of Americans, then, to be considered important by politicians. If an issue is of enough importance to a smaller group—the **issue public**—to cause those voters to become more politically active, that issue may well become an important political issue. Furthermore, very few politicians seek the approval of the general public as a whole. With the exception of the president, all politicians have much smaller constituencies, and they measure the public opinion of these constituencies in order to appeal to them. Members of the House of Representatives, for example, are interested primarily in the concerns of their home districts, which are often quite different from the concerns of the general public.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PUBLIC OPINION

Those who measure public opinion are not just interested in the direction of public opinion—that is, how the public is feeling at a given moment. They also want to know how strongly the public feels and how likely people are to change their minds. That is why they try to gauge the following characteristics of public opinion:

- **Saliency.** The saliency of an issue is the degree to which it is important to a particular individual or group. For example, Social Security is an issue with high salience for senior citizens. Among young voters, Social Security has a much lower salience.
- **Intensity.** How strongly do people feel about a particular issue? When the intensity of a group's opinion is high, that group can wield political influence far beyond their numbers. For example, the majority of Americans have favored some form of gun control for decades. However, the intensity of that opinion is not high, and most Americans consider other issues when they vote. The National Rifle Association (NRA) represents a minority position. However, the intensity of their opposition to gun control is high. As a result, its members are likely to decide how they will vote based primarily on a candidate's position on gun control. This, in turn, has made the NRA one of the nation's most powerful lobbying organizations.
- **Stability.** Public opinion on issues changes over time. Some dimensions of public opinion, such as support for democracy and a controlled free-market economy, remain relatively stable. Others can change quickly, as was the case during the last two years of George H.W. Bush's administration. During the Gulf War (January 1991), President Bush recorded the highest approval ratings of any president since 1945. Less than two years later, the majority of Americans showed their disapproval of his performance as president by voting against him.

In the United States, public opinion is measured regularly through elections. Elections measure public opinion indirectly, however, because votes for—or against—candidates can rarely be translated into clear and specific opinions. Referenda measure the public's opinion on specific issues but do so infrequently (a referendum submits to popular vote a measure passed by a legislative body). Public opinion is measured most frequently and directly by **public opinion polls**.

POLLS MEASURE PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion polls are designed to determine public opinion by asking questions of a much smaller group. Pollsters achieve this through **random sampling**, a method that allows them to poll a representative cross-section of the public. When polling by phone, pollsters use a machine that dials numbers randomly. When conducting **exit polls** at polling places on election day, they target voting districts that collectively represent the voting public and randomly poll voters who are leaving the voting place. This method prevents bias, which may occur if pollsters were to approach only those voters who seemed most friendly or anxious to participate. When performed correctly, polls can measure the opinions of 300 million Americans by polling a mere 1,500 of them.

For a poll to accurately reflect public opinion, its questions must be carefully worded. A poll that asks, "Do you approve or disapprove of the death penalty?" would likely yield a very different response from one that asks, "Would you want the death penalty imposed on someone who killed your parents?" Most pollsters try to phrase questions objectively. Polls generally ask multiple-choice questions, which are closed-ended, as opposed to open-ended questions (such as, "Explain why you approve or

disapprove of the death penalty"). Closed-ended questions yield results that are more easily quantifiable, providing a more accurate read of the direction and intensity of public opinion.

Even with those controls, polls cannot be 100 percent accurate. Polling organizations know how accurate their polls are and include this information with the poll results. The accuracy is measured as a sampling error and appears as a percentage with a plus and minus sign to the left (example: ± 4 percent). The **sampling error** tells how far off the poll results may be. Suppose a poll indicated that 60 percent of Americans favored the death penalty. If that poll had a sampling error of ± 4 percent, the actual percentage of Americans favoring the death penalty could be anywhere between 56 and 64 percent. Generally, the more respondents a poll surveys, the lower the sampling error.

The best-known polls are the Harris poll and the Gallup poll. Many major newspapers and television networks conduct public opinion polls, as do academic and public interest institutions.

WHERE DOES PUBLIC OPINION COME FROM?

Public opinion is made up of the views of individuals. Individuals develop their political attitudes through a process called **political socialization**. Why, and when, do they change? What factors influence a person's political beliefs?

The first factor that influences individual political beliefs is **family**. Most people eventually affiliate with the same political party as their parents. Children's political beliefs are also greatly affected by the moral and ethical values they learn from their parents. Political values learned in childhood stay with many Americans throughout their entire lives. Also important is their **location**—people born in rural states may develop political views that are more socially conservative than those of city dwellers.

As children grow, other factors influence their political socialization. In **school** they learn about history and government and are exposed to the political perspectives of teachers and peers. **Religious institutions** have a similar influence on many Americans. **Mass media** such as television, radio, magazines, and the web further influence political attitudes. In general, however, youth is a time when many Americans pay relatively little attention to and have little interest in political issues. This is because most political issues have little direct impact on their day-to-day lives.

Those who progress to **higher education** often find themselves questioning their social and political assumptions for the first time. As a result, college can be a time of radical change in an individual's political beliefs. This is particularly true of students at campuses that are heavily politicized and that lean strongly in one political direction, either conservative (such as Texas Christian University) or liberal (such as Reed College). Studies have shown that students retain throughout their lives many of the political attitudes they acquire in college.

As individuals reach adulthood, **real-life experiences** become the primary influence on their political beliefs. Family responsibilities and property ownership tend to make people more conservative. Conversely, individuals who experience bias based on their earning power, race, or gender may grow more liberal or more cynical about government. Adults continue to be influenced by participation in religious organizations, by the attitudes of their peers, and by what they learn through the news media.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

The terms *liberal* and *conservative* in the previous paragraph refer to the predominant **ideologies** in the United States. An ideology is a coherent set of thoughts and beliefs about politics and government. The three most common political ideologies in the United States are the following:

- **Conservative.** Conservatives stress that individuals should be responsible for their own well-being and should not rely on government assistance. As a result, they tend to oppose government interference in the private sector. They also oppose most federal regulations, preferring that the market determine costs and acceptable business practices (*laissez-faire* economics). Social conservatives, who make up a powerful wing of the conservative movement, do support government action on social issues. In a 2009 Gallup poll, 40 percent of Americans considered themselves to be conservatives.
- **Liberal.** Liberals believe that the government should be used to remedy the social and economic injustices of the marketplace. They tend to support government regulation of the economy. They also support government efforts to redress past social injustices through programs such as affirmative action. Most liberals believe the government should strictly enforce the separation of church and state, and therefore oppose school-sponsored prayer and proposed bans on abortions, which they perceive as motivated by religious beliefs.
- **Moderate.** The beliefs of moderates do not constitute a coherent ideology. Instead, moderates view themselves as pragmatists who apply common sense rather than philosophical principles to political problems. Moderates once made up the largest part of the American public, but with the financial crisis of 2008–2009, the number went from more than 50 percent to 35 percent of the American public.

Compared with citizens of other Western democracies, Americans have fewer main ideological groups. The many extreme political parties that exist in Europe, ranging from right-wing nationalists to left-leaning communists, are practically nonexistent in the United States. Furthermore, perhaps because of the paucity of viable groups, Americans readily vote outside of their self-professed political beliefs. In 2008, for example, 20 percent of self-identified conservative voters chose the more liberal Barack Obama over conservative Republican candidate John McCain.

Americans who are strongly ideological tend to be the most politically active citizens. They are more likely than other Americans to join political organizations and participate in political activities, such as rallies and boycotts. One result of this phenomenon is that candidates in the presidential primaries must perform a balancing act. To win the primaries, they must first appeal to the more ideological party members. Then in the general elections, candidates must move back to the political center or risk alienating the general voting public.

See the next chapter for a more detailed explanation of political beliefs by party.

DETERMINING FACTORS IN IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

Although there is no one-to-one correlation between people's backgrounds and their political beliefs, people who share certain traits tend to share political beliefs. Here are some of the factors that influence people's ideological and political attitudes.

- **Race/ethnicity.** Racial and ethnic groups who disproportionately populate the lower income levels tend to be more liberal than other Americans. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely than other Americans to support liberal social programs, for example. There are exceptions to these rules, however: Cuban Americans, for one, tend to be very conservative.
- **Religion.** Among the various religious groups in the United States, Jews and African American Protestants are generally the most liberal. Catholics also lean toward the political left, although many are conservative on social issues. Devout white Protestants tend to be more conservative. This is particularly true in the South, where white Protestants who attend church regularly are among the nation's strongest supporters of the Republican Party.
- **Gender.** Women tend to be more liberal than men. They are more likely to vote Democratic, more likely to support government social welfare programs, and less likely to support increases in military spending.
- **Income level.** Americans in higher income brackets tend to be more supportive of liberal goals such as racial and sexual equality. They also support greater international cooperation. However, they tend to be less sympathetic to government social welfare goals and are fiscally conservative. Poorer Americans, conversely, are generally more conservative on all issues except those concerning social welfare.
- **Region.** Regional differences arise from different economic and social interests. In the heavily unionized Midwest, for example, Democratic candidates and goals are generally successful (making these "blue states"). In the more religious South, conservatism is predominant (making these "red states"). The ethnic and racial mix of the East Coast has made it the most liberal region of the country. The West Coast, toward which many Americans continue to migrate, is the most polarized, with strong liberal and conservative contingencies scattered up and down the coast. Liberals tend to congregate in the cities; elsewhere, small town and more rural voters are generally conservative.

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE MASS MEDIA

The news media play an important role in the development of public opinion. News media include all of the following:

- news broadcasts on television, radio, and the Internet
- newspapers
- news magazines, such as *Time* and *Newsweek*
- magazine broadcast programs, such as *60 Minutes* and *20/20*
- newsmaker interview programs, such as *Meet the Press* and *Larry King Live*
- political talk radio
- websites, blogs, and online forums, such as *Huffington Post* or *Politico*