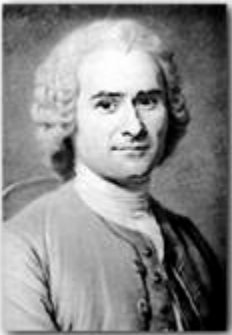


## Chapter 6

# Defining and Debating Public Opinion

What do you think about certain issues? About specific candidates? About events in politics? Scholars in the field of public opinion have presented a great variety of definitions of “public,” “opinion,” and “public opinion.” A short and simple definition by Erickson and Tedin defines public opinion as “the preferences of the adult population on matters of relevance to government.” Adults have opinions on many matters other than government and these are excluded from the definition. Regarding “preferences,” Erickson and Tedin point out this involves more than just a like or dislike. It means the ability to link one political concept with another. Of course, those with more political information and better reasoning skills are able to do that more effectively. A broader definition might be, public opinion is any attitude or belief held by the public or subgroup of the public which is or may become an issue of government or political concern.



As early as the 1740s, the French philosopher Rousseau was using the term “public opinion” to refer to the opinions of the general population, in contrast to the opinions of the elite. To him, public opinion was a kind of mass force that potentially could influence public policy. In the period following adoption of the United States Constitution, “public opinion” was limited to a small number of educated people who could communicate their opinions to government. Many of the framers sought to put in place mechanisms to guard against what they feared would be the passions of mass public opinion. For example, they opposed the popular election of the President and the direct election of Senators. As universal male suffrage developed in many European countries and in the United States, governments by the mid-nineteenth century needed to consider the views of working-class citizens.

Although some twentieth century political scientists continued to believe that mass opinion could be largely ignored by public officials because it could easily be influenced by elite propaganda, democratic theorists put more faith in the willingness and ability of the general population (the mass public) to make informed judgments about public affairs.

### Open to Debate: Quality of Public Opinion

*The extent to which public opinion is informed is open to debate. In particular, some argue that Americans have little knowledge about, or interest in, foreign affairs. After all, how many people in 2000 (or maybe 2010) could locate Afghanistan on a map of the world? In policy areas where public interest is low, intense interest groups, especially those that stand to benefit economically, can play a strong role in forming public policy. As a result, in some cases public opinion has little impact on policy decisions. However, there is survey information showing an*

*increase in public interest in foreign affairs in the past twenty years. A better informed public should take more interest in foreign policy decisions. But even if this is true, it remains open to debate how much attention elected officials will pay to public opinion and how much they will be influenced by the demands from those who make large campaign contributions. In this chapter we will look more closely at the debate concerning the extent of public awareness about political issues and the impact of public opinion on public policy. In a democracy, power rests with the people but are the people informed to the degree necessary to carry out their democratic responsibilities responsibly? Should politicians pay more attention to public opinion? Perhaps the Framers were correct, should we treat public opinion with some degree of skepticism and insulate them as much possible from the actual levers of power? The answer remains open to debate.*

Often, public opinion is difficult to discern. The public can be evenly divided on some issues and only slightly aware of other issues. In a democracy we expect that politicians will pay attention to public opinion, but to what extent do they pay attention, and to what extent do they need to follow it? That is, will they suffer at the next election because of their votes on certain issues? There is considerable debate regarding the ability of public officials, especially the President, to manipulate public opinion. Likewise, debate exists regarding the ability of the mass media, especially television, to influence public opinion. That subject is discussed in Chapter 9.

The polling process and the use of polls by public officials raise various questions. How well can we depend on the accuracy of the major polls? What makes them “scientific?” Do politicians rely too heavily on polls, when they should be leaders, not followers? Can the polling process “push” respondents to give answers sought by politicians? Even with the most responsible polls, how does the wording of questions influence answers? Do exit polls taken on Election Day and media projections of winners based on those polls affect voting in other parts of the country?



**“Public Opinion in Our Democracy (Highlights) 1950”**

## **Assessing Public Opinion: The Polling Process**

In the past, elected officials could roughly gauge public opinion by reading their mail, looking at letters to the editor of newspapers, judging crowd responses, or having friends report to them about their sense of public support for certain issues. Obviously, each of these techniques had serious drawbacks. But, as we will see later in this chapter, each is still used, in part, by legislators to get a sense of what people back home are thinking. Today we know that if you want to discover what the public thinks

about an issue or candidate, you take a poll. Versions of polling have existed in the United States since the early nineteenth century when newspapers began to conduct what were called straw polls to see what their readers thought about political matters. Some form of ballot was printed in the newspaper and readers would answer questions and return them. Poll results were printed as “news” and they were an effective means to increase circulation at a time when the newspaper business was very competitive.

While poll results occasionally were accurate, most were far off the mark. Because they largely ignored advances in academic knowledge about sampling, polls taken in the 1920s and 1930s continued to miss most actual election results by about 12 percent. These straw polls continued to have some legitimacy because strong public support for the Republican Party allowed polls to be off the mark and still pick the correct winners of elections.



### “The New Deal”



History’s most famous polling error occurred in 1936, marking the end of straw polls and the beginning of scientific polls. The *Literary Digest*, the largest-circulation magazine of its time, predicted that Republican Alfred Landon would get 57 percent of the presidential vote in 1936. Instead, Franklin D. Roosevelt won in a landslide, getting 62.5 percent of the vote. What went wrong with the *Literary Digest* poll? The basic reason was that the procedure for determining whose opinions would be included (the sample) in the poll was seriously flawed. Questions were sent to 10 million people (a very large sample), but the names were taken from telephone directories

and lists of automobile owners. In the midst of the Depression, this resulted in a skewed sample that excluded the large number of people who could not afford a telephone or an automobile. In addition, the surveys were mailed in early September, well before the November election. Of the 10 million people contacted, only 2 million responded. This kind of self-selection added to the disproportionate number of responses from upper-class people.

In 1936 a more scientific poll done by the young George Gallup correctly predicted that Roosevelt would win; but it still was off by about seven percentage points. While the procedures for polling improved after 1936, Gallup and most other pollsters classically predicted that Thomas Dewey would defeat Harry Truman in the 1948 presidential election. Reminiscent of the *Literary Digest* poll, the Gallup poll of 1948 included too many upper-class voters and it stopped



polling too early, thus missing a late surge by Truman. So, how should a poll be conducted in order to assure the greatest degree of accuracy? This is a concern to pollsters and to consumers of polls. When we as consumers have a better understanding of proper polling procedures, we can make informed judgments about which of the many polls we see are trustworthy and which should be viewed with skepticism.

First, scientific polls must get an accurate, or representative, sample of the population. Samples are representative to the extent that they accurately mirror everyone in the population. In a random sample everyone in the population has an equal chance of being selected. Most reputable national polls will include the opinions of 1,000 to 1,500 people. As we would expect, sampling error declines as the sample size increases. National polls often use a sample of 1,500 people because the sampling error at that point (plus or minus 2.5 percent) is low and costs in terms of time and personnel to survey larger numbers of people are prohibitive.

Rather than conduct a random sample of the entire United States, pollsters use multistage cluster samples. A national survey with people scattered across the country would make in-person interviews impossible. With multistage cluster sampling, the country is divided into four regions and sets of counties and metropolitan areas are randomly selected within the regions. Using compact areas saves time and money. Then four or five blocks, or their rural equivalents, are selected and within those blocks four or five households are questioned. To save money and time, telephone surveys often are used instead of in-person interviews. The main problems associated with telephone surveys used to be just the large percentage of unlisted numbers and the high rate of refusal (perhaps one-third) of the people to answer questions when phoned. However, nowadays, far fewer people have landlines at all and cell phones are much harder to randomly call. About 95 percent of households nationwide used to have a landline telephone, which, of course, meant that some poor people were missed in polls, but now the situation is much worse due to widespread cell phone use. In addition, researchers have found that the poor, elderly, and minorities are the most unresponsive to any sort of telephone interviews. Still, telephone surveys using random-digit-dialing can be representative of a total population.

Curiously, the proportion of the sample size relative to a given population has very little effect on the accuracy of the poll. For example, a sample of 1,000 statewide in California will be as accurate as a sample of 1,000 in the city of Chico. National and state samples tend to be larger than local samples because pollsters are interested in the opinions of subgroups, such as Hispanics and African-Americans, and they need larger numbers among subgroups to prevent sampling error. Generally, though, a sample size of 1,000 is adequate to accurately predict representative results in most polling situations.

A second fundamental factor affecting the accuracy of polls is the wording of questionnaires. In many cases, questions are direct and unambiguous and don't present any problems. For example, the monthly poll that asks, "Do you approve or

disapprove of the way the president is handling his job?” But in many unprofessional polls or polls which have a political position to push, wording can lead respondents to desired answers or clearly bias the responses. For example, we get vastly different responses to a question which asks about “the murder of unborn babies” and one which asks the same people about the “rights of women to control her own body’s reproductive capacity.”

A study by Kenneth Rasinski (see Table 6.1) showed that when survey questions used positive verbs (for example, “solving the problems of big cities”) they tended to get more positive results than when such verbs were not used. Results showed that Americans were likely to respond conservatively when asked about spending for “welfare,” but their responses were much more liberal when asked about spending to “assist the poor.” These data show us how easy it is to manipulate polling results.

**Table 6.1 Impact of Wording in Polls**

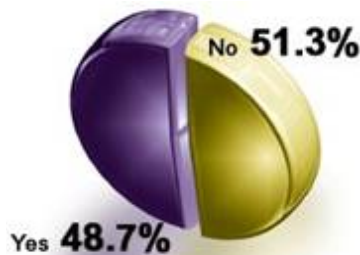
“Are we spending too little or too much on ...”	Percent “too little”
Halting rising crime rate	66.8
Law enforcement	52.0
Assistance to the poor	62.8
Welfare	23.1
Solving problems of big cities	48.2
Assistance to big cities	17.7
Protecting Social Security	68.2
Social Security	53.2
Improving conditions of blacks	36.5
Assistance to blacks	27.8

Source: Kenneth A. Rasinski, “Research Note: The Effect of Question Wording on Public Support for Government Spending,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Autumn, 1989), pp. 388-396.

Sometimes answers to surveys may reveal what seem like contradictory opinions when questions move from the abstract to the specific. This is especially true in the area of civil liberties. For example, in one poll 75 percent of respondents agreed with the statement: “Professors in state-supported institutions should have freedom to speak and teach the truth as they see it.” But 75 percent of the same group also agreed with the statement: “Professors who advocate controversial ideas have no place in a state-supported university or college.” Good questions are carefully written and pre-tested to make sure they are not biased.

Then it is important that the interviewer reads the questions exactly as written, that she does not influence the answer by the tone of her voice, and that she correctly records answers to open-ended questions that permit a variety of responses. An interviewer on the phone or in person can sway a response by the look on her face, the tone of her voice, or by volunteering personal information. An Interviewer should be seen as a standardized instrument and show none of her own thoughts about the issues.

Non-attitudes are another problem that pollsters and those who interpret polls need to be aware of. Non-attitudes arise when people are asked their opinions about subjects about which they really have very little information or even any opinion at all, and to avoid sounding stupid or ill informed, they will give an opinion anyway. These “opinions” are not real genuine thought out opinions, but are what we call non-attitudes. We screen out non-attitudes by first asking the person if they have thought much about the topic or if they have a view on the topic. The respondent should always be given the “no opinion” out.



The next time you are asked to complete a survey or to answer in interviewer’s questions, check to be sure the questions are not biased. Notice if questions permit more than one answer. For example, when asked: “Do you favor gun control?” more people will respond positively than if asked: “Do you favor or oppose gun control?” And the respondent should be given the option of “no opinion,” especially on more obscure issues. Don’t be embarrassed to say you don’t have an opinion or you are unaware of an issue (or you too may be giving non-attitudes to the pollster). Read the fine print at the bottom when poll results are reported in the press to learn the size of the sample, the statistical margin of error, and the dates when the poll was conducted. Remember, especially during an election year, even well conducted polls only present a snapshot of opinion at a particular time. In many cases it may be helpful to know the *intensity* of opinion on an issue, that is, how strongly people feel about an issue. Oftentimes an intense minority in opposition can have a greater impact on policy making than a majority that mildly favors the policy.

## The Process of Political Socialization

Beginning as small children and continuing through adulthood, we develop political values and beliefs through our contacts with other people, our exposure to the media, and our reaction to political events. The study of political socialization brings together sociologists, who focus on the influence of groups on their members; psychologists, who focus more on behavior stages of individual development; and political psychologists, who combine group and individual approaches. Regardless of the academic perspective, there is a strong assumption that what we learn at a young age makes a strong impact on our thinking and this affects later learning. All political systems attempt to influence children to be loyal to their country and accept the

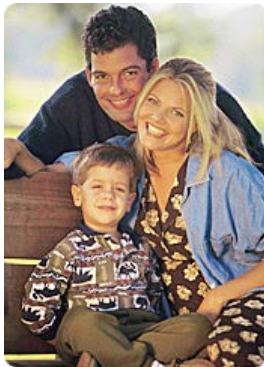
prevailing political/economic order. As you read this section, think about your own socialization process and how well it fits generalizations made by academic researchers.



## “Nature v. Nurture”

### *Family*

To the extent that parents spend time with their children and discuss political issues with them, children learn parental attitudes and they begin to form opinions about public figures, such as the President and police officers. Most preschool children have a sense of political community and they can identify the American flag among flags of various countries. As we would expect, when there are two parents in the house and they are interested in politics and they have a close personal relationship, there is a greater likelihood that parents will be influential in the political socialization process than if, for example, there is one parent, politics is seldom discussed, and books and newspapers are not present in the home. Young children learn basic attitudes from their parents towards their neighbors and their government and these attitudes shape later, more specific opinions that they develop as adults.



Given this developmental process, adolescent child-parent agreement on specific issues is clearly evident, but not overwhelmingly strong. For example, Jennings and Niemi reported virtually no relationship between parents' and children's attitudes about allowing speeches against churches. Most adolescent children favored allowing speeches regardless of what their parents thought. However, psychological studies have identified a strong link between authoritarian personalities in parents and their children. This is likely to impact children's attitudes about civil liberties issues. In contrast to attitudes about specific issues, studies of high school students show a much stronger transmission from parents to children in terms of political party identification. Jennings and Niemi found that when both parents agree on political partisanship (about three-fourths of parents agree), about three fourths of children follow them. When parents have different party identifications, the children more often take the party ID of the mother. Although most parents don't hold strong views on particular policy issues that they communicate to their children, party identification (good guys and bad guys) often is more apparent to children and more easily transmitted by casual conversation.

To the extent that adults share many of the same social economic status (SES) characteristics of their parents, partisan agreement is likely to continue. This helps account for the continued dominance of the majority party over time. Partisan change

may occur when young adults experience cross-pressures from their peers that weaken family ties. For example, the daughter of working-class, Democratic parents who gets an MBA, marries a Republican, moves to an up-scale suburb, and joins a country club may switch her party allegiance and voting behavior at some point along the way. Erickson and Tedin note that the partisan connection between parents and children has been decreasing since the 1970s. In part, this is a result of growing cross-pressures that have pushed the next generation to be independents or to switch parties. As the number of independents has grown, there are fewer partisans influencing their children. Still, partisan connections between parents and children are much stronger than issue orientation.

## ***School***

Although elementary and secondary school teachers seldom try to push a partisan agenda on students, schools play a role that is thought to be nearly equal to parents in terms of conveying basic attitudes about the political system to children. Curiously, studies have found that American schools in the 1960s spent more time on “political education” than did schools in the Soviet Union. Currently, for example, the state of California requires that students in public schools have some kind of patriotic experience each day. Think about your own experience when your day in elementary school probably began with the Pledge of Allegiance and patriotic songs were sung on special occasions. Perhaps you helped make a special bulletin board for Veteran’s Day or President’s Day. Despite Supreme Court rulings, in some schools daily prayers might have been said. At some point, the Supreme Court will decide if the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance violates the First Amendment’s ban on an establishment of religion. In addition, you likely were taught to respect authority figures, including the principal and police officers and there undoubtedly was an emphasis on the accomplishments of historical figures, such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.



In junior high and high school, students learn more about how the government works. There usually is emphasis on “being good citizens” and fieldtrips are taken to see government in action. By eighth grade, studies show that most students can distinguish between national leaders as personalities and the offices they hold. The political beliefs of junior high and high school students also are strongly influenced by the fact that, on average, they spend about 24 hours a week watching television. Even as younger children, they are exposed to a large amount of adult programming that helps them form attitudes about politics. When asked, teenagers cite the mass media, largely television, as the main source of information on which they base their attitudes about economics, race, and politics. Much of what they learn from the media is indirect

in the sense that parents and teachers interpret media messages and pass them along to children.

We need to remember that about 2 million children are being home-schooled in some 500,000 households. Although this is a very small percentage of all school-age children, nearly two-thirds of the parents in those households are evangelistic Christians who often have a strong cultural agenda they want to convey to their children. Since the 1980s, increasing numbers of conservative parents have home-schooled their children because of their dislike of what they consider to be a secular, irreligious culture in public schools where prayers are banned and evolution is taught.

Despite recent improvements in the quality of civics books and the quality of social studies teachers, knowledge about government remains remarkably low among high school graduates. Nor does high school have the effect of increasing political participation. The Organization Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement reports that since 1972, when the voting age was dropped to 18, the percentage of people voting in presidential elections who were age 18 to 24 steadily declined from forty-eight percent in 1972 to forty-one percent in 2004. However, a record forty-nine percent of 18 to 24 year olds turned out for the 2008 presidential election. In addition, there is evidence that high school and college students are more socially tolerant than grade school students. High school graduates, for example, are more supportive of the positions of atheists and homosexuals than are those people with only a grade school education. People with a college degree are more socially liberal than people with a high school diploma.

Not surprisingly, middle and upper-class white students are much more likely than minority and lower-class students to view government in a benevolent way. Upper-class students have greater trust in political officials to act in the public interest and they are more likely than lower-class students to believe that they have the ability to influence public policy. In general, college has the effect of liberalizing students in terms of making them more tolerant of differences among people (such as race and ethnicity) and more accepting of different political points of view. Because college prepares students for careers in such fields as business, engineering, and medicine, it plays a part in making them more politically conservative in terms of seeking to protect their personal economic interests.



Among many in the general public there is the belief that “liberal” (or “radical”) college faculty succeed in indoctrinating students with a political point of view. While many faculty in the social sciences, humanities, and the arts are more liberal than their students, it is not false modesty to say that most faculty question their ability to influence student thinking about any issues. To the extent that education encourages students to be open to new ideas and tolerant of differences, college may

liberalize the attitudes of some students. A strong argument can be made that students are more likely to be influenced by their peers than by faculty. Rather than change attitudes, college more likely may reinforce already existing attitudes. For example, in selecting a college, few students are unaware that liberal arts institutions such as Oberlin College (Ohio) and Reed College (Oregon) historically have attracted liberal students and faculty. Likewise, conservative, religious-affiliated colleges usually go out of their way to advertise the conservative environment that students will find on their campuses. In the New York Times story cited above, it was reported that the recently established Patrick Henry College in Virginia is the first college primarily for home-schooled evangelical Christians. About two-thirds of their 240 students in 2004 were majoring in government. The purpose of the college is to train students “who will lead our nation and shape our culture with timeless biblical values.” Of course, there is a great range of shading among the nation’s hundreds of colleges from very liberal to politically neutral (almost apolitical) to very conservative.

### **Open to Debate: The Impact of Family and School**

*The impact of family and school on public opinion remains open to debate. It is always difficult to make generalizations about all families. To what extent did family experiences influence your thinking about political issues? As a family, did you listen to the news or watch major events on television and then discuss them?*

*Do you agree with survey data that show a strong link between parents’ attitudes concerning civil liberties and the attitudes of their children?*

*Do you agree that high school education typically does not encourage students to register and vote? By the time you graduated from high school were you more tolerant of differences among people than when you were in middle school? Do you see evidence that being enrolled in college courses has changed, or just reinforced, your political beliefs? If your beliefs have changed, why is that the case? Do you agree with many conservative commentators that a substantial number of college faculty have liberal views that they seek to “force” on students? What should be the proper role of high school and college government teachers? The answers remains open to debate.*

### **Adult Socialization**

Although the influences of family and school continue, as adults a variety of other sources impact on our political thinking. In Chapter 9 we will discuss the impact of the mass media on public opinion – particularly how newspapers and television shape our views. We have noted that peers – neighbors, co-workers, and relatives – influence how we think about political issues and candidates. For some, churches may play a

significant role. For example, candidates (usually Democrats) for public office may speak from the pulpit on Sunday morning in predominantly African-American churches. Some fundamentalist “megachurches” distribute political literature and televangelists, such as Pat Robertson, are openly partisan. Robertson has reported that God told him George W. Bush would get reelected by a large margin in 2004.

In some instances, national circumstances that occurred during the period in which people were adolescents and young adults continue to strongly influence their political thinking throughout life. This can be seen in the lives of people whose most impressionable years were the 1930s (the Depression Era) and the 1960s (civil rights, Vietnam War, feminism). In many cases these people have continued to support liberal social policies throughout their lives. In contrast, those who became young adults in the 1980s (the Reagan-Bush administrations) have helped move the country to a more politically conservative position. As we will see later in this chapter, once core values have been established in many people by about age 30, they tend to remain stable throughout life. For example, many in the generation that grew up in the Depression have continued to support social welfare programs throughout their lives. As a result, changes in public opinion occur more because older generations are replaced by newer generations than because individual people become more conservative as they age.

## **Differences in Public Opinion among Social Groups**

Analysis of public opinion polls allows us to distinguish differences in opinion among income, education, racial, gender, age, regional, and religious groups. As we would expect, different groups see political issues differently. In many cases, economic circumstances help to explain these differences in opinion, but this is not always so. For example, upper-income Jewish voters have been among the strongest supporters of welfare. We also need to remember that the same persons will be in several groups, making it challenging to determine which factors have the strongest influence on political behavior. For example, which factors are most likely to affect the beliefs of a Hispanic woman who is a medical doctor living in Utah? In the next section, we will examine trends in public opinion over time. That is, how American public opinion has changed over the last fifty years and why this has happened. As we look at group differences, we need to guard against stereotyping and over-generalizing. Never do *all* members of a social group think alike.

### ***Income and Education***

Although nearly 90 percent of Americans identify themselves as “middle-class,” or “working-class,” income in the United States is more concentrated in the upper-class than in any other Western democracy. And the degree of concentration has been increasing over the past twenty-five years. Still, voting behavior and public opinion in the United States are not as divided along class lines as it is in Europe. For example, many lower-income whites in the South vote Republican and they share opinions with the upper-class on many social issues. A majority of upper-class, white Democrats support more government spending for social welfare. But on strictly economic issues, those

with lower incomes (who generally have lower levels of education) differ from the well-off and the well-educated in their strong support for government programs that would create jobs.

When we look at class differences on non-economic issues, a different pattern emerges. Here the upper class is more liberal on a majority of civil liberties issues, ranging from their pro-choice position on abortion to their support for gay rights. As we noted earlier, more education tends to make people more accepting of individual differences, but more conservative on economic issues. Since the same people are often well-educated and wealthy, we would expect a pattern of opinion in which an individual is both liberal and conservative.

## **Race**



We only have to look at beliefs about the guilt or innocence of O.J. Simpson to know that African-Americans and white Americans can have dramatically different opinions about the same set of circumstances. This difference of perspective carries over to politics, where African-Americans voting behavior and opinions on certain issues are the most divergent from the over-all political behavior of the American people of any subset in our society. As expected, African-Americans are much more supportive of affirmative action and government programs to provide jobs than are whites. Of course, income and education levels, as well as race, influence African-American opinion about these issues. Another rational case of self-interest was African-American opposition to the Vietnam War in which they suffered proportionately more casualties than whites.

On questions about the role of race in contemporary America there is a curious convergence and divergence in opinions between African-Americans and whites. On the one hand, whites have moved from overwhelming opposition to interracial marriage and an unwillingness to vote for qualified African-American candidates in the 1950s to majority support for both at the present time. On the other hand, African-Americans and whites have different perspectives on the extent of racial progress in the United States. In the mid-1990s a Washington Post survey showed that 68 percent of African-Americans said race was a “big problem” in the United States. Only 38 percent of whites agreed that race was a “big problem.” Nearly four times as many African-Americans as whites thought there was discrimination against African-Americans in education. However, the perception of racism has been dramatically affected by the 2008 election of Barack Obama to President of the United States. Shortly after the 2008 election, polls indicated that about 40 percent of Americans feel that the Obama presidency has improved race relations, with African-Americans more likely to see real positive change. But then the Republican Congress and conservative commentators started a drumbeat of negativity and hostility toward the new president, and prevented much of what he wanted to accomplish from becoming law. By the end of Obama’s two terms, race

relations had deteriorated all over the country, fed in part by racist police actions and extreme Congressional hostility to the first Black president. By 2015, nearly 60% of all Americans believed race relations were “bad.” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/24/us/poll-shows-most-americans-think-race-relations-are-bad.html? r=0>)



### **“Barack Obama Speech on Race”**

### ***Gender***

Based on anecdotal experience throughout our lives, most women and men would conclude that although women may not be from Venus and men from Mars, the genders clearly see many things in life differently. As recently as the 1960s, when a slight majority of women voted for Richard M. Nixon in the presidential race against John F. Kennedy, survey research found few differences in political opinions between men and women. This pattern changed by 1980, when the term “gender gap” appeared to describe a voting gap in which men were much more likely than women to vote for Ronald Reagan in that year’s presidential election. Although the extent of a gap in voting by men and women in presidential and congressional elections since 1980 has varied, women consistently have favored Democratic candidates, while men have favored Republicans. In 1996, Bill Clinton captured more votes from women than men by a margin of 11%; 54% of all women voted for Clinton compared to 43% of all men. In 2000, women gave 43 percent of their votes to George W. Bush and 53 percent to Al Gore. In 2008 and in 2012, Barack Obama received the highest percentage yet of the total female vote with 56%.

A gender gap exists on a variety of policy issues. The gap is greatest on issues that deal with the military (women tend to oppose military action) and with social programs (women tend to support government spending for education, welfare, and health). Surprisingly, the gap is nonexistent on gender-related issues. In fact, men were more likely than women to support the Equal Right Amendment. We need to be careful not to overestimate the significance of a gender gap in American politics. First, differences by race, income, and religion are greater than policy differences based on gender. Part of the gender gap in voting is caused by the overwhelming tendency of minority women, who vote in greater numbers than minority men, to vote Democratic. Significant differences in political behavior exist among white women. Younger women and unmarried white women tend to have more liberal opinions than older and/or married white women. In the 2008 election, according to CNN exit polls, unmarried women with children voted 74 to 25 in favor of Obama. Unmarried women without children also voted 69 to 31 in favor of Obama. However, married women supported McCain by a narrow margin. In 2012, the gender gap was largest in history, with Obama winning female votes by a 12% lead and Mitt Romney winning male voters by 8 points.

## **Age**

There are significant differences in opinion between younger and older Americans. In general, younger people take more liberal positions on social issues and they are less supportive of military deployment than are older people. This will not surprise any younger readers. Those over 55 years old are much more likely to pay attention to the news and to political campaigns than are those under 30. We have noted very low and declining voter turnout of 18- to 24-year-olds.



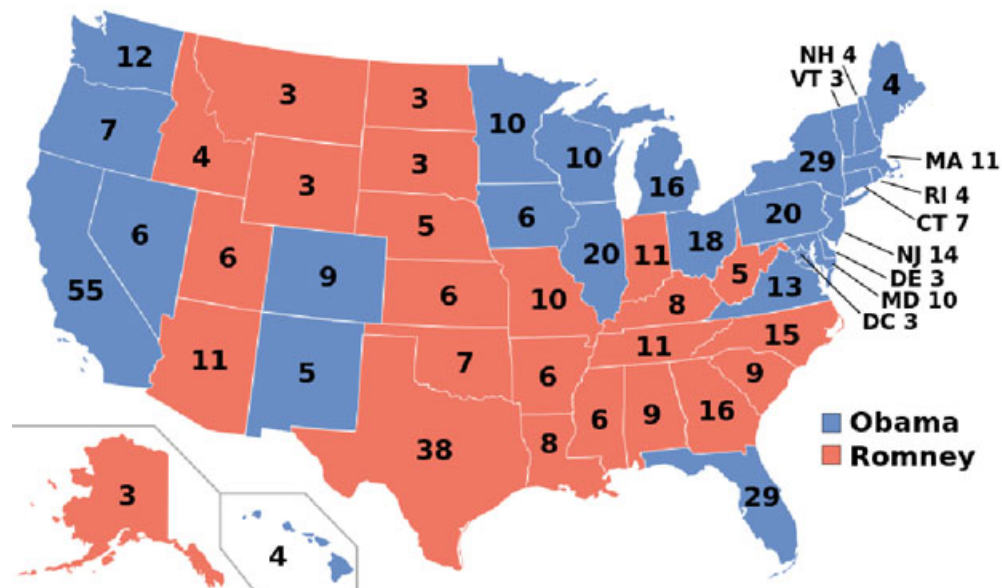
As noted earlier, data on issue positions should not be interpreted to mean that people become markedly more conservative as they get older. There is evidence of some life-cycle effects that show people becoming more conservative in middle age and then more liberal later in life as they begin to receive Social Security and Medicare benefits from the government. Still, the age gap exists largely because those under 30 have been socialized under conditions that differ from those over 55. For example, no one under 30 today has lived when racial segregation was legal in many American states. Legalization of marijuana has been seen in a much different context by those socialized in the 1960s and later than in those who are older. This reflects the changing attitudes on this issue over time. As the older, less supportive of marijuana people die off, the population is increasingly filled with those who have tried the drug and who find legalization a reasonable idea to contemplate. Thus, we have seen several states in recent years legalize or decriminalize marijuana, and more will no doubt be coming in the near future.

## **Geography**

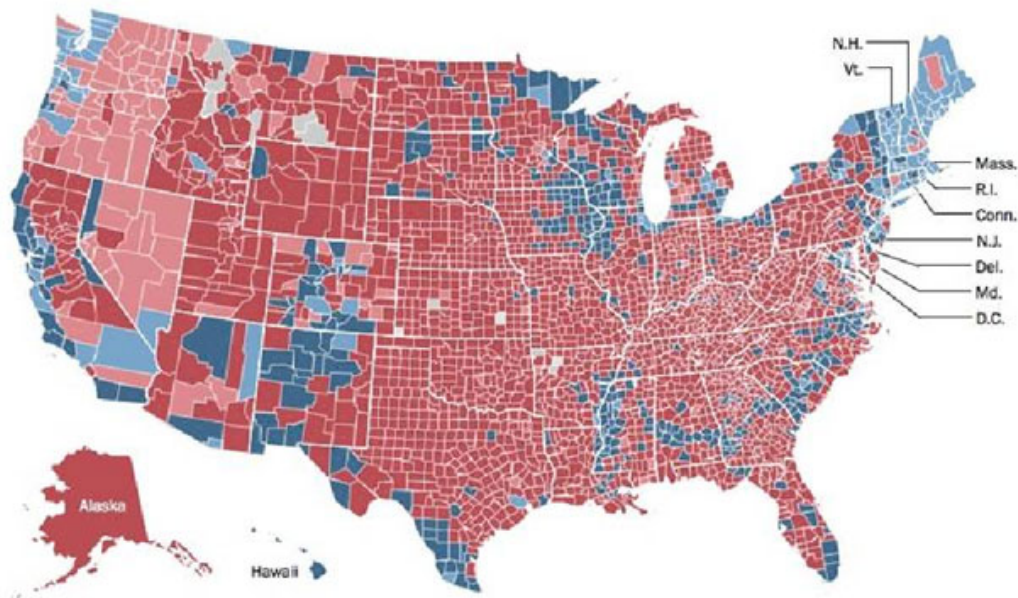
Historically, the South has been the most distinctive region in the United States. Much of its distinctiveness can be attributed to the issue of race and to lower levels of income and education than in any other region. In recent years the South has become less distinctive as income levels have risen, race has become a less central issue, the population of Hispanic residents risen steadily, large numbers of whites and blacks have moved there from the North and West, and the reach of national media, especially television, has made all regional differences across the country less distinct. Despite these changes, the South remains more conservative than the rest of the country on most political issues. As we can see in recent presidential campaigns, Republican primary candidates play to public opinion in the South by stressing opposition to gun control, opposition to gay rights, opposition to abortion, support for the death penalty, and support for the use of military force. On economic issues, despite its higher poverty rate, the South was much more conservative on most economic issues and more hostile to President Obama and his agenda. In the 2016 election, the South voted overwhelmingly for Republican Donald Trump.

Other regions are less distinctive than the South. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Northeast is only marginally more liberal than the rest of the country. Some New England states are conservative and occasionally have Republican governors (although these Republican governors are considerable less conservative than their party peers in other regions). In the West, Pacific states are somewhat more liberal than the rest of the country, while most Mountain states are more conservative. As with most cultural measures, the Midwest is the least politically distinctive. Across the country, we can identify differences in political opinions between rural/small town residents and those in central cities. Because of their heterogeneous populations in terms of race, ethnicity, and religion, urban residents tend to be more tolerant of differences and more liberal on social issues than those who live outside central cities. As we will see in the next section, there is a strong religious element in the sense that urban residents, including those in many suburbs, tend to be more secular, and thus more socially liberal, than those living in rural areas.

As in previous elections, rural-urban differences were clearly evident in the 2012 election of Barack Obama. The Electoral College determines the presidential election and, as you can see by the map below, Barack Obama carried the more urban coastal and Northeastern states “blue” states while Mitt Romney carried the relatively more rural “red” states. The number of Electoral College votes is marked for each state.



However, when we look at a breakdown of the vote by county, the urban-rural divide becomes even more apparent. Within blue states, Romney still carried more rural counties and, within red states, Obama carried the more urban areas.



## ***Religion***

About 47 percent of Americans are Protestant, 22 percent Catholic, not quite 2 percent Jewish, 0.9% are Muslim, 0.7% Hindu and another 0.7% Buddhist, and the rest do not give a religious preference or list some other faith. As members of the dominant religious denomination through history, Protestants have enjoyed higher socio-economic status than Catholics and they have had more conservative opinions on economic issues. Catholics, especially those in urban, union-member households, have had liberal views concerning the redistribution of income in the United States. But Catholics have more conservative views on many social issues than do mainline Protestants. Although Jews have higher economic status than any other religious group, their history of persecution has caused them to have liberal opinions, especially on civil liberties issues.

Among Protestants, there are major differences of opinion between those who are members of so-called mainline denominations (Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, etc.) and the growing number of members of fundamentalist/evangelical churches that often are not affiliated with a national denomination. Within mainline churches there are many people who consider themselves to be fundamentalists. For example, former President Bush identified himself as a born-again Christian who is also a Methodist. Religious fundamentalists are much more likely than other Protestants to support prayer in public schools, oppose abortion, oppose gay marriage, support Israel, and support the use of military force. Because they are especially numerous in the South, fundamentalists have a strong impact on over-all measurements of conservatism in that region.

Many political analysts argue that the most significant division in America is between those who are religiously observant (regardless of religious denomination) and those

who are not religious. We call this religiosity, the frequency with which someone attends religious services or prays strongly predicts their political views. The more religiously



active, again, without regard to what religion or what version of that religion, tend to be far more conservative on all sorts of issues than those who are only nominally religious. As we would expect, those who report attending church at least once a week are more tradition-minded and moralistic than those who seldom or never attend church. The so-called “God Gulf” divides churchgoing Republicans from relatively secular Democrats and has helped lead to the nearly 50-50 margin of voting for President and Congress in recent years.

A few voting statistics from recent presidential election illustrate this divide. In 2004, Republican President George W. Bush beat Democratic Senator John Kerry among weekly churchgoers by 61% to 39%. In 2008 the Republican candidate, John McCain, still easily carried this group but by the smaller margin of 54% to 44%. While John McCain easily carried the evangelical and born-again Christian vote; Barack Obama, the Democrat, carried only 25% (Kerry carried only 21%). The big difference from earlier elections seems to have been the Catholic vote. Obama won 54% of the Catholic vote compared to 45% for Senator McCain. By contrast, in 2004, Bush won the Catholic vote 52% to 46%. President-elect Barack Obama made a concerted effort to reach out to people of faith during the 2008 presidential campaign, and this outreach paid off on Election Day. Among nearly every religious group, the Democratic candidate received equal or higher levels of support compared with the 2004 Democratic nominee, John Kerry. Still, a sizeable gap persists between the support Obama received from white evangelical Protestants and his support among the religiously unaffiliated. Similarly, a sizeable gap exists between those who attend religious services regularly and those who attend less often. In 2012, Obama lost ground among white evangelical Christians and white Catholics, but he still did very well with Black Protestants, Jews, Hispanic Catholics, and the non-religious. The 2016 Presidential election showed little change in the alignment of religious groups and how they voted. White Evangelicals and Catholics strongly supported Trump and African Americans and the religiously nonaffiliated strongly rejected Trump. Before the election, many people wondered how a thrice married dirty talking and rude acting man could capture the conservative Christian vote, but they picked Trump 80% to 16% for Clinton. (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>)



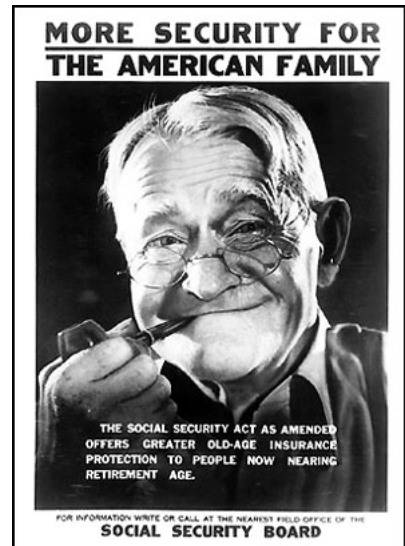
**“Democrats and Religion – E.J. Dionne”**

## Trends in Public Opinion

As noted earlier, polling allows us to identify historical patterns of opinions on issues and candidates among groups of people. In this section we will look at trends in opinions on several social issues and comment on how the government responded at various times to changes in opinion. Even though more Americans identify themselves as conservatives than as liberals, few people want to reduce federal spending for most specific social programs. Indeed, many favor more spending for a variety of programs.

As noted earlier, when asking people whether the national government should spend more or less money for social programs, the way in which polls are worded can have a significant effect on the direction of responses. When polls ask about spending “for welfare,” few respondents favor spending more money; when the phrase “assistance to the poor” is used, a majority support spending more money. As a result, while Congress may periodically make some efforts to cut programs for the “undeserving poor,” virtually all members stay clear of even hinting at cuts in Medicare or Social Security.

A majority of Americans consistently favor increases in the federal minimum wage. In June 2014, a full 71% of Americans favored raising the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour, a position favored by then President Obama. By late 2016, 52% of Americans favored a minimum wage of \$15 an hour, but there are clear partisan and class divisions in this support. Only 20% of Trump supporters support this versus 80% of Hilary Clinton supporters. Public opinion was strong for federal aid for health care (this became Medicare), “old age pensions” (Social Security), and protection of collective bargaining by unions (the Wagner Act) long before any of the bills were approved by Congress. As we have noted, in the second half of the twentieth century white Americans became much more liberal on civil rights issues. For example, in 1942 only 30 percent of white Americans said white and black children should attend the same school; in 1956 this percentage was 49 and by 1985 an overwhelming majority (93 percent) favored same school education. The percentage was so high that pollsters stopped asking the question. In contrast, the percentage of whites agreeing that “the government in Washington should see to it that schools are integrated” declined from the 1960s to the 1990s.



As the rate of violent crimes rapidly expanded in the 1970s and 1980s, support for the death penalty grew from about 40 percent in 1965 to 80 percent in the 1990s. Although a solid majority still favors the death penalty, support has declined in the 21st century. African-Americans are less likely than whites to support the death penalty, however a majority of African-Americans still favor its use. State legislatures across the country responded to the public’s fear of crime and support for getting tough with criminals by enacting tough sentencing laws in the 1980s. Since the 1990s, both

Democratic and Republican presidential candidates have supported the death penalty. See capital punishment laws of the world.

In Chapter 9 we will examine the steep decline in public support for the Vietnam War that occurred in 1968 and the impact of the mass media on changing public opinion. Prior to sending military forces to Vietnam, there was a high level of support for American intervention in problem areas around the world. By 1971 over 60 percent of Americans thought it was a mistake to have sent troops to Vietnam. The percentage of Americans agreeing that we should “stay out of world affairs” nearly doubled from 1965 to 1975 (to about 36 percent) and it has remained fairly constant since then. Public opinion played a key role in President Johnson’s decisions to increase troop withdrawals from Vietnam in 1968 and to withdraw from the presidential race that year. Following Johnson’s decision not to seek re-election, his public support increased.

Since the 1960s, the public’s hesitancy to support intervention in foreign affairs has influenced the decisions of several presidents to refrain from sending troops into hostile situations. In the 1991 Gulf War, a major objective of the George H.W. Bush administration was to get troops out of the area quickly to avoid casualties and an expected drop in public support. As a result, troops pulled back from an invasion of Iraq. The Clinton administration acted contrary to public opinion (46 percent of men and 36 percent of women supported the action) when it sent ground troops to Kosovo in 1999. But those troops did not encounter strong opposition and there were few casualties. President George W. Bush’s approval rating soared to about 90 percent after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. His approval rating remained high after it appeared that warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq had been short-lived and successful. However, when large numbers of American troops remained in post-war Iraq and problems mounted, Bush’s approval rating dipped to less than 50 percent by the early months of 2004 and public dissatisfaction with the war is widely credited with the Republican loss of Congress in the 2006 elections and likely played a role in the Republican loss of the White House in 2008.

Some policy issues divide Americans almost equally, with extreme elements on both sides opposing any compromise. But there usually is a large group in the middle that has mixed feelings, even on the most controversial issues. Gay rights is one of those issues. Regarding same-sex marriages, polls as late as 2008 showed that Americans were divided on this issue. Males, Republicans, those over 50, Catholics, African-Americans, and Latinos were likely to oppose same-sex marriage. Women, whites, and college graduates were evenly split. The more dramatic division is generational. A clear majority of those 18 to 27 approve same-sex marriage while an ever greater majority of those over 65 opposed it. Overall, acceptance of same-sex marriage among Californians has increased since 1977 when a Field Poll reported that 60 percent of respondents were opposed. It would appear that attitudes toward rights for homosexuals, like the history of other civil rights issues, are going to



change generationally. As of the middle of 2014, however, the clear majority of Americans now state approval for same sex marriage (55%) which as recently as 1996, only 27% were in favor. This issue is one which has seen phenomenal change in a few years. As is true for most social issues, laws codifying social issues reflect what is acceptable to the average citizen. At any one time, half of the population will feel government is going too far, and half will feel that we, as a society, have not gone far enough.

### **Open to Debate: Same-Sex Marriage**

*Few issues are as open to debate in the U.S. as gay nuptials. Should states legalize same-sex marriages? Or should they instead legalize same-sex unions? Should no same-sex couplings be legalized by states? Should Congress enact a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages? Should the Supreme Court recognize the right to same-sex marriages when only one or two state legislatures have approved of them? Should the government stay out of the marriage business altogether?*

*Proponents of same-sex marriages contend that it would impose a responsibility on gays to act as responsibly as straight married couples are supposed to act. It also would extend the same legal, financial, and medical rights to gays as are now available to all married people. Opponents often offer religious reasons why same-sex marriages should not be legalized. They contend that same-sex marriages would alter the meaning of marriage and undermine the traditional expectations of behavior by a husband and wife.*

*More generally, debate will continue regarding the right of government to interfere with any number of personal decisions people freely choose to make. For example, it was not until 1967 that the Supreme Court ruled against state laws that prohibited marriage between blacks and whites. Only in 2003 did the Court strike down anti-sodomy laws that existed in thirteen states. Should same-sex marriage be legalized? The answer remains open to debate.*

Abortion is another issue that has narrowly divided Americans, with one extreme supporting abortion under all circumstances and the other extreme opposing it under all circumstances. As with same-sex marriages, there is a strong religious element. Nearly 60 percent of secularists would always permit abortions, while less than 10 percent of fundamentalists would always permit it. Still, there is a large middle group (about 55 percent) that believes abortion should be legal under some circumstances. Of course, there is disagreement regarding the nature of those circumstances. Although many Americans oppose abortion on moral grounds, a majority opposes government efforts to outlaw abortion and they oppose overturning the historic *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision

that legalized most abortions. Or, as one popular saying goes, “most Americans want abortion to be safe, legal, and rare” or “most Americans oppose abortion in the case of rape, incest, or their own personal circumstances.” However, antiabortion advocates have been more political active than pro-choice advocates. This helps explain why several states have enacted laws that place restrictions on the right to abortion.

## Government Responses to Public Opinion

In the previous section we noted several instances in which Congress and the President have responded positively to public opinion by enacting legislation or taking certain actions. For example, public officials at all levels of government responded quickly to public concern about crime by passing tough sentencing laws in the 1980s and the number of executions increased in many states. But in other cases, such as enactment of Medicare, government response lagged behind public opinion by many years. In the Vietnam War withdrawal of troops began in 1968, but despite decreasing public support, the war continued for the next four years under President Nixon.

When public opinion is strongly divided on an issue, officeholders may seek to avoid taking any action. For example, Congress largely has been content to let the abortion battle take place in the states. In some cases members of Congress may act against national public opinion because a strong majority of their constituents favors an opposite position. In this regard, many Republican House members voted to impeach President Clinton, in part, because their constituents strongly favored his removal from office. They voted to impeach knowing that it was highly unlikely that the Senate would vote to remove Clinton from office. There are numerous examples of Congress and the President clearly acting contrary to public opinion. A classic case has been gun

control. Nearly 75 percent of Americans favor the registration of all handguns. Some 80 percent believe that all guns sold should be equipped with trigger locks and 70 percent favor requiring a special license to purchase a gun. Still, only modest gun control legislation has been approved by Congress, due to the power of an intense, well-organized minority represented by the National Rifle Association. When the Senate failed to approve a gun control bill in 2004 that included extending the ban on the sale and importation of assault weapons, Senator Dianne Feinstein (D, CA) said the NRA had “the power to turn around at least 60 votes in the Senate.” Another often cited example is delay in establishing Medicare and Medicaid. Both programs had public support over the years, but there was strong opposition by the well-financed American Medical Association.





## “Constructing Public Opinion”

In other instances, many political scientists would say there is an upper-class bias in government to support the interests of corporate America, often at the expense of average citizens. The degree of bias has been a matter of debate among political theorists and among candidates for public office. Presidential candidate Ralph Nader was an especially strong voice contending that Democrats and Republicans both are controlled by corporate interests. Regardless of the actual power of corporate America, there is a strong institutional bias in favor of the status quo. This makes any fundamental change difficult to accomplish in Congress. Despite this built-in bias and obvious cases where public opinion has been ignored, it may be that Congress members *overestimate* the need to follow public opinion. This is because most Americans pay little attention to how their Representatives and Senators vote. Nearly half don't even know the name of their Congress member. Even if some constituents are bothered by a vote or series of votes by their Representatives, few House incumbents have serious opponents. In 2008, 94 percent of House members seeking reelection were successful. With six-year terms, it is difficult remember how a Senator voted several years ago, and Senatorial reelection rates range from roughly 85-90%.

So, why do Congress members follow public opinion? Most fundamentally, it is because most of the time members agree with the opinions of the majority in their districts. Predominantly liberal districts elect liberal members and predominantly conservative district elect conservatives. Although legislators are better educated and have greater wealth than most people they represent, most resemble their constituents in terms of race, ideology, and a background of living in the district. Members' views may diverge from their constituents on specific issues, but for the most part their attitudes are quite similar. Surveys show that most congressional voters can place their representative on a liberal-conservative scale.

Of course, some incumbents lose elections. Even the small number of losses in any given election year is a reminder to other members that long-time legislators who become out of touch with majority opinion in their districts can lose. An extreme example was the defeat of House Speaker Tom Foley, a Democrat, in 1994. Foley spent twice as much money as his opponent in the campaign and he argued that as Speaker he could continue to direct government funding to his district. Among the variety of reasons why Foley lost was the fact that he was perceived by many people in his conservative eastern Washington State district as too liberal. Foley opposed term limits for legislators, an issue strongly supported by his constituents. As in Foley's case, incumbents especially fear the power of a well-organized interest group that targets their defeat.

Congress members use a number of techniques to gauge public opinion. These include questionnaires that they mail, using their franking privilege, to households in their districts. Surveys mailed to district households are notoriously bad examples of polling because the wording of the questions often biases the answers and the return rate is only about 15 percent. Representatives and Senators can get some sense of public opinion from reading summaries of their mail (only about 15 percent of Americans have ever written to *any* public official), from analysis of letters to local newspapers, and direct contact with constituents at town meetings in their districts. All these methods suffer from getting unrepresentative samples of the population. Relatively few scientific polls are taken at the congressional district level, but in most states major newspapers and universities do statewide polling. During an election year Congress members often moderate their views if they believe they are somewhat more extreme than the majority of voters. A few incumbent Representatives are faced with major problems when their districts' boundaries are substantially redrawn, but in most cases redistricting every ten years only makes their districts safer.



**“Murdoch Admits He Tried to Shape Public Opinion on Iraq”**

## **Evaluating the Role of Public Opinion**

Based on the material presented in this chapter, we can make several generalizations about the role of public opinion in American politics.

As we saw with many issues, public opinion often shifts over time. A shift can be rapid in response to a domestic or international event, or more gradual as a series of events occur. Although it often is difficult to make direct connections between public opinion and enactment of specific policy, in many instances we can see that public opinion has set *boundaries*, or outside limits, on the kind of policies the public will accept. This is especially true in foreign policy, where the public usually does not follow issues closely. Public support for United States military intervention, for example, is limited by geography (regions or specific countries to which troops should be sent in the event of an emergency), the duration of the commitment (the shorter, the better), and the number of casualties that would be permissible. Boundaries also exist for many areas of domestic policy. For example, most Americans support the death penalty for murder, but public opinion limits other crimes for which the death penalty can be imposed.

Although we support the ideal of “government by the people,” we have to realize that on many issues large numbers of people are uninformed and/or they just don't care. Worse, the majority can be wrong and public officials will still choose to follow public opinion. For example, until the 1960s virtually no southern members of Congress spoke out against the evils of racial segregation. Perhaps the most effective guard against

wrongheaded public policy has been decisions of the Supreme Court, which often have gone against public opinion. Like them or not, many of the Court's decisions over the past 60 years in the areas of civil rights, prayer in public schools, rights of criminal defendants, and flag burning have been contrary to the opinions of the majority of Americans.

To the extent that the public is not well informed about policy issues, narrowly focused, well-financed interest groups find their power increased. As many of the framers of the Constitution worried, apathy may lead to manipulation of opinion by elites that make emotional appeals to existing prejudices. Others argue that apathy is a sign of public satisfaction with the status quo and that a sudden increase in political participation would be a disturbing sign of potential unrest in the country. Perhaps the best solution to the dilemma posed by the lack of public interest in politics is better education, with an emphasis on encouraging people to take their civic responsibilities seriously. Democratic governments should have no fear of an informed and politically active public.



## “Noam Chomsky – The Political System in the USA”

### Glossary

**Cross-Pressures:** When young adults experience political values and beliefs that differ from those of their parents and they are undecided about the direction they want to take.

**Depression Era:** The United States in the 1930s, following the stock market crash of 1929 when unemployment rose and economic production fell.

**Franking Privilege:** The ability of members of Congress to send certain mailings to their constituents without paying postage.

**Fundamentalists:** Those who stress a strict and literal interpretation of the Bible as fundamental to Christian life.

**Gender Gap:** Differences of opinion between women and men on political, economic, and social issues.

**Liberalizing:** Acquiring information that causes people to become more tolerant of personal differences and more accepting of different political points of view.

**Mainline Denominations:** Traditional Protestant groups, such as Presbyterians and Lutherans, whose religious views are considered moderate.

**Multistage Cluster Samples:** In a national sample (poll), the country is divided into regions and people in counties and cities within the regions are selected at random to be interviewed.

**Political Socialization:** Process by which children acquire political beliefs and values from their parents, teachers, and the media. Adults are socialized by their peers, the media, and public officials.

**Poll:** Process of questioning persons selected at random to get their opinions on issues or candidates.

**Public Opinion:** The collected attitudes of a group of people concerning issues or candidates.

**Random Sample:** When everyone in a given population has an equal chance of being questioned in a poll.

**Region:** The United States is divided into four geographical areas that have certain common characteristics. The regions are South, Northeast, Midwest, and West.

**Religiosity:** How religious someone is. Does not depend on type of religion but on intensity of belief. The more religious tend to be more conservative.

**Sample:** The group of people selected to be interviewed in a poll.

**Wording of Questions:** Questions in polls need to be direct and unambiguous.

## Selected Internet Sites

All major polling organizations have websites. Here are a few sites:

[www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com), [www.cbsnews.com](http://www.cbsnews.com). (CBS Television News and the *New York Times*),

[www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com). (ABC Television News and the *Washington Post*).

[www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com). This is a service of *The Polling Report*, which reports on opinions about politics, the economy, and popular culture.

[www.ropercenter.uconn.edu](http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu). This is the site for the Roper Poll, as well as for archival data from many polls, including the Gallup Poll.

[www.publicagenda.com](http://www.publicagenda.com). This site has polling data, plus information about how to analyze poll results critically.

[www.fivethirtyeight.com](http://www.fivethirtyeight.com). This site is the home of Nate Silver, the well regarded statistician who polls about politics.

[www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com). This site is a non-partisan aggregation of polling data on a variety of issues.

## WebQuest

### Introduction:

There are many polling organizations that continually survey the American people. As we have noted, reputable, scientific polls produce accurate results because of their careful sampling process, the wording of questions, and the professional behavior of interviewers. Other polls, sometimes described as “quick and dirty,” obtain results that are self-serving to candidates or to economic interests. As consumers of information, we encounter polls nearly every day. It is important that we understand the process of polling in order to evaluate the reliability of poll results.

### Task:

The assignment is to monitor some of the major polls for at least a two-week period. This will give you a snapshot of current public opinion in the United States and allow you to make comparisons about the polling process and the polling results of several organizations.

**Process:**

On what common issues are these organizations surveying the American public?

How similar are their results?

If there is polling for candidates in upcoming elections, how similar are the results and did you see a change in the degree of support for particular candidates during the time of your study?

Do all the polls use a similar sampling size?

Do all the polls indicate and explain their statistical margin of error?

Can you detect wording of questions that you think is inappropriate?

**Resources:**

<http://www.pollingreport.com>. Information about public opinion from The Polling Report.

<http://www.ncpp.org>. Information from the National Council of Public Polls that explains how to conduct and interpret polls.

<http://www.people-press.org>. Polling reports from the research organization, the Pew Center for the People and the Press.

<http://www.wsj.com>. Polls conducted by the Wall Street Journal and NBC Television News.

<http://www.cbsnews.com>. Polls conducted by CBS Television News and the New York Times.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com>. Polls conducted by the Washington Post and ABC Television News.

<http://gallup.com>. Polls conducted by the Gallup Poll.

<http://www.usatoday.com>. Polls conducted by USA Today.

<http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/>. Polls conducted by the Roper Poll and data from other polls maintained by the University of Connecticut.

**Evaluation:**

What similarities and differences in the polling process did you discover among the organizations? Did their polls on similar issues produce similar results? Are there common issues that all organizations are including in their polls?

**Conclusion:**

Having looked at poll results from several organizations over a period of several weeks you should have a better idea about the nature of public opinion in the United States. Perhaps you can then determine how well Congress and the President seem to be following the wishes of the public on certain issues.

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