Not all observers of American democracy have had such favorable views of public opinion as Abraham Lincoln. Many of the framers of the Constitution were concerned about the tendency of democracies to disintegrate as a result of the “instability, injustice, and confusion” that are the diseases of popular government (Federalist Papers, No. 10). Similarly, in the early twentieth century the journalist and political theorist Walter Lippmann wrote: “The problems that vex democracy seem to be unmanageable by democratic methods.”

There has always been a debate throughout this nation’s history between those who are trustful of public opinion and those take a less optimistic view of the subject. Whatever the shortcoming of public opinion may be, this nation’s popular government has survived and flourished for more than two centuries. Many mistakes have been made during this long period of time, but most were corrected and improvements made.

The concept of self-government is basic to this nation’s political system. If the people are to govern themselves, they should have sound opinions on political issues. In this chapter we explore how political opinions are formed by such institutions as the family, school, the community, and the media. We will also examine the modern techniques used to study public opinion, especially scientific polling. Finally, we will discuss the means by which Americans express their political opinions—that is, how they participate in politics.

**Questions:** Should public officials always act according to the dominant public opinion? Or should they exercise a degree of independence in taking positions on important public issues? How does public opinion polling contribute to American democracy? Is it in any way harmful to our democracy?

**THE AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE**

Public opinion in the United States must be viewed within the context of the nation’s political culture—the fundamental, widely supported values that hold American society together and give legitimacy to its political institutions. The American political culture is, obviously, democratic. The democratic goals of equality, individual freedom, and due process of law are among the most basic values of the American people.

Although almost all Americans support the basic goals of democracy, there is less agreement when it comes to the application of democratic procedures. Over the course of American history, for example, majorities have been willing to deny freedom of speech to a variety of groups, including communists, fascists, small religious bodies, atheists, racists, and artists. But most studies show that the American public has become more tolerant of unpopular political ideas in recent decades; this is especially true of citizens with more education.
It should also be understood that the nation’s political leaders support democratic goals and procedures more strongly than the general public does. The fact that public officials are especially likely to support democratic procedures is important. It means that they will generally make decisions that maintain those procedures even if they lack widespread public support. It is not at all certain that democratic political systems require public commitment to basic democratic principles:

Hostility to democratic procedures is fatal, whether among the leaders or the public, but support of these procedures may prove essential only among leaders. Perhaps the public need not agree on basic principles so long as it does not demand disruptive policies and procedures.5

**POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION**

The process by which a society’s political culture is transmitted from one generation to the next is known as political socialization. The process begins in early childhood, when children acquire a general orientation toward political issues from their parents that continues throughout life.6 People’s political ideas are influenced by all the groups of which they are members: immediate, personal groups, such as family and friends, as well as larger, less personal ones, such as political parties or labor unions. They are also affected by social categories, such as race, religion, place of residence, income level, and education. Of course, historical events and political issues may also affect a person’s attitudes.

**The Family**

The earliest and perhaps most powerful influence on a person is the family. This is largely because young children have very little contact with people outside the family. Many youngsters learn about their parents’ political party preference during the preschool years, and often that party identification persists in later life. The family also has a strong effect on a person’s later interest in politics. Children of people who show interest in political matters generally express such an interest as adults.

**The School**

Many social scientists believe that the school’s impact on the socialization process is almost as great as the family’s. That is not surprising, for after their preschool years children spend much of their time in the classroom. Here they are taught discipline, patriotism, and respect for the law. In addition, teachers serve as models for many schoolchildren and influence their attitudes and behavior.7
The Peer Group

Children’s friends, classmates, teammates, and other associates also influence their attitudes. As an adult, a person may belong to peer groups within his or her religious community, political party, and ethnic association, as well as other more or less formal groups, such as bridge clubs and parent-teacher associations. Relations among the members of peer groups are often highly personal, and certain groups can have a lasting effect on a person’s political opinions.

The Media

Although many of the forces that socialize children and young adults have been around for centuries, the influence of the media on the socialization process is a product of the relatively recent past. Since television became a regular part of most Americans’ daily lives, the political messages presented on it have become more important to our political culture.

The media can socialize through very direct methods, such as broadcast coverage of political campaigns and elections. This coverage gives the public direct contact with the political process. In addition, the media can socialize in much more subtle ways. Television shows for children can encourage tolerance of people of other races and religions, or they may encourage children to believe that violence is an acceptable solution to most problems. These more subtle and indirect forms of socialization are present in virtually all broadcast programming, even when the programming is ostensibly labeled as entertainment. The important role of television in socializing children is starkly shown by the fact that many children spend more time each day watching television than they spend being formally educated in school.

Social Class: Income, Occupation, and Education

Although the United States is sometimes thought to be a classless society, there are several fairly distinct social classes—“upper middle,” “lower middle,” “working”—based on income, occupation, education, and related factors. Americans can, and often do, move from one social class to another.

It is sometimes difficult to obtain information about the political opinions of members of various social classes. Some people, for example, do not consider themselves to be members of the class in which a social scientist might place them. Despite this difficulty, however, enough information has been gathered to permit some conclusions about the relationships between social class and political opinions. Generally, people with higher incomes, more education, and higher job status (doctors, business executives, lawyers) are more conservative in their political opinions and tend to support the Republican party. Unskilled workers, by contrast, are generally more liberal in their political views and support the Democratic party.

Race and Religion

Certain patterns of political opinion can be traced to race or religion. On such issues as civil rights, abortion laws, and aid to Israel, members of racial and religious groups have strong opinions, are very active, and in some cases have a significant influence on public policy. Most African Americans, for example, are concerned about civil rights issues; many Catholics and conservative Protestants oppose abortion; and Jews have been active in their support for Israel.
The area in which people live can also influence their political opinions. Ever since World War II, many suburbs of America’s cities have been Republican, whereas most of the nation’s largest cities have been strongly Democratic for more than a century. Certain sections of the country—most Rocky Mountain states, for example—have been Republican strongholds. By contrast, the Democratic party’s almost complete dominance of the South for a century after the Civil War caused political analysts to refer to it as the “solid South.” This dominance has gradually declined since the 1950s, and the Republican party is now either the majority party or competitive in all southern states.

Attitudes are also influenced by the important events that occur in a person’s lifetime. Military service in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s has probably had a long-term effect on the opinions of many Americans regarding issues of war and peace and American foreign policy in general. In the same manner, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States will surely have long-term consequences on the way most Americans think about issues of war and foreign policy. But the involvement with history need not be a direct, personal one. The opinions of most members of a society are influenced by the events of their time. This is especially true of major developments like wars, scandals, and both periods of economic recession and prosperity.

As people grow older, they gather a variety of impressions of the political system in which they live. Very early in life they begin to develop their own attitudes toward political activities—attitudes that are influenced by the many different kinds of people with whom they come into contact, by factors in their society, and by historical events. These attitudes shape their political opinions.

Political opinion is a form of public opinion, the range of opinions expressed by citizens on any subject. The subject may be anything from their favorite television programs to which team is going to win the World Series. There is no single public opinion on any given issue; rather, there are as many public opinions as there are possible views on an issue. Political opinion is the set of opinions expressed by the members of a community on political issues (issues that involve some aspect of public policy). Issues such as taxation, welfare, health care, and foreign policy can, and usually do, generate political opinions, and those opinions are just as varied as opinions on nonpolitical issues. In this chapter, when we refer to public opinion, we are concerned with opinions on political subjects.

Although views on political subjects can vary greatly, even within the same family, it is possible to identify some general features of political opinions. These characteristics have been labeled intensity, concentration, stability, distribution, and salience (importance or relevance). Political opinions can also be either transitory or lasting.

Intensity refers to how strongly an opinion is held. It varies according to the individual; some people feel more strongly about certain issues than do others. Intensity also varies according to how important an issue seems to a person. Topics
such as crime, education, and taxation tend to evoke stronger opinions among many Americans than do such matters as farm subsidies or antitrust law.

An opinion is said to be concentrated if it is held by a small portion of society. For example, corn and wheat farmers in the Midwest have benefited from federal farm subsidies. Accordingly, public opinion in favor of farm subsidies tends to be concentrated in that part of the nation.

When the intensity and concentration of a given political opinion are fairly constant over a long period, the opinion is said to be stable. The opinion that democracy is a good form of government is clearly a stable one; if it were not, radical attempts to change the American political system would have succeeded long ago. It should be noted, however, that opinions are never absolutely stable; change is always possible.

The distribution of opinion refers to the number of people who support various positions on a given issue. In the case of abortion, for instance, opinion is largely distributed between two major camps—those who are opposed and those who believe it is a matter for individual decision. In other cases, however, opinion may be distributed fairly evenly along a continuum. An example would be the opinions Americans hold on a subject such as the future of the American economy—that is, whether the nation will prosper or decline in coming years.

The term salience refers to the importance or relevance of an issue to a person or group. To most Americans, such issues as the state of the economy or whether the United States should engage in military conflicts are salient, whereas for most Americans U.S. policy toward small businesses is not.

Some political opinions are short-lived or transitory, whereas others are lasting. Many political issues at the national, state, and local levels change fairly rapidly; political opinions on those issues will be formed and will last only as long as the issue is important. Some political opinions remain constant and are long-lived. People’s core attitudes—whether they are liberal or conservative, for example—may remain basically the same throughout their lives.

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

In a democracy, politicians and public officials want to know what the public is thinking about issues and candidates. Historically, they found this out by talking to citizens directly and by reading the letters that came into their offices. They also kept track of public opinion as it was expressed in the media, especially the press.

During the nineteenth century, various journals began presenting public opinion in a new form known as the “straw poll.” Such polls, which tabulated the political preferences of specific communities or groups, were thought to give the press more trustworthy information than could be obtained by interviewing party leaders. Newspapers favored the polls as a means of demonstrating their independence and professionalism. They could support a particular candidate even though news stories showed that the candidate was trailing in the race. By the turn of the twentieth century, straw polls had become a routine practice.

Techniques for predicting election results on the basis of past voting information were introduced in the 1940s, but it was not until the development of computer technology in the early 1960s that polling came into its own. Not only can computers process vast quantities of information, but computerized polling also allows for the use of much more sophisticated methods of analysis. The advent of computers dramatically increased the use and importance of scientific polling.
Today the most important method used to find out about public opinion is scientific polling, the use of scientific methodology and mathematical probability to analyze public attitudes toward issues and candidates in electoral campaigns. Scientific polling was first used in the United States in the fields of advertising and market research. Since World War II, it has also become widely used in academic research, politics, journalism, and the media.

One of the earliest polling organizations was the American Institute of Public Opinion, better known as the Gallup Poll. The first organization to attempt a nationwide poll (in 1944) was the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center (NORC). Since that time a large number of polling organizations have been established. Some of them, such as the Gallup and Harris polls, sell their results to clients. Others are academic research organizations like the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago and the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan.

Polling organizations sell their results to candidates, television and radio stations, and newspapers and magazines. Those results, of course, are “news” and
are published by the media. Modern media polls are sponsored by all three of the major television networks and by some of the nation’s largest newspapers—the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times, for example—and the national newsmagazine—Time. Media polling has grown rapidly since the 1970s and always plays an important role in national elections.

Many of the clients of polling organizations are politicians and candidates for office who want to know what people believe the main issues to be and how they feel about those issues. Candidates also want to know how popular they are compared with other candidates. The results of surveys conducted for candidates often are not made public unless the candidate thinks publication of the findings would benefit his or her campaign.

How Polls Are Conducted

The basic tools of modern scientific polling are the sample and the survey. Sampling is the process of choosing a relatively small number of cases to be studied to derive information about the larger population from which they have been selected. To be of value to the researcher, a sample must be representative; that is, every major attribute of the population from which the sample has been drawn must be present in the sample in roughly the same proportion, or frequency, as it is in the larger population. For example, a representative sample of the U.S. population must, among other things, contain the same proportions of blacks, whites, Native Americans, Hispanics, and other groups as the population as a whole.

The method used to choose a representative sample is known as random sampling. Although it may involve sophisticated statistical analysis, random sampling is essentially a lottery system; the sample is chosen in such a way that each case (or individual) in the entire population has an equal opportunity to be selected for analysis, just as in a properly run lottery every number has an equal chance of being the winning number.

Once a random sample has been selected, the researcher can carry out the actual study. If the purpose of the study is to find out what people think or how they act, the best (and sometimes the only) way to find out is to ask them. The method used to do this is known as survey research. It may be defined as a method of data collection in which information is obtained directly from individuals who have been selected so as to provide a basis for making inferences about some larger population. The techniques used in survey research include direct questioning through face-to-face or telephone interviews and mailed or self-administered questionnaires.

Survey research can be broken down into a series of steps, beginning with specifying the purpose of the research and ending with reporting the findings. Some key steps in the research process are instrumentation (drafting the questions and other items that will appear on the questionnaire or interview guide), pretesting (administering the survey instrument to a small sample to ensure that the instructions can be interpreted correctly), surveying (administering the survey instrument to the entire sample), coding (reducing the data collected to numerical terms), and analyzing the data.

TELEPHONE POLLS

Polls conducted by the media have become the most important form of political polling. Media polls use two basic methods: the telephone poll and the exit poll. The findings of polls such as the CBS News/New York Times...
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and ABC/Washington Post polls are generally based on telephone polls, in which telephone numbers are selected through random-digit dialing; up to four callbacks are made to reach the selected respondent. Such a poll usually takes about fifteen or twenty minutes to administer. Some telephone polls are conducted on a quarterly or monthly basis and measure public opinion on such subjects as support for presidential policies or pending legislation. Some are shorter surveys intended to monitor opinion on a particular governmental action or event.

Telephone surveys always include standard demographic questions on such matters as household income, education, and marital status and may include questions about political party identification, participation in past elections, and interest in the current campaign. The data gathered can be weighted to match nationwide population distributions by region, race, sex, age, and education; the resulting figures provide reasonably accurate estimates of public opinion for all adult Americans.

A variant of the telephone survey that has been used by the media since 1984 is the tracking poll. Such a poll may include up to a thousand interviews in a single day and will indicate changes in voter preferences from day to day during the week or so preceding an election.10

EXIT POLLS Another frequently used polling method is the exit poll, in which voters are interviewed at the polls on election day. This method was developed in the 1960s but did not become common until the next decade. At first, such polls were used to determine voter preferences in a few selected precincts; soon, however, journalists discovered that they could use them to predict the outcome of an election while it was still in progress.

The questionnaires used in exit polls may contain thirty or forty items, but they can be completed in a few minutes. This is important, because the television networks need to obtain the results of the polls within an hour or less after the last interview so that they can be used on the evening news programs.

In an exit poll, the interviewer attempts to question voters leaving the polling place in a systematic way throughout the day. The interviewer may, for example, approach every nth voter, with the n varying according to the size of the electoral precinct. (The precincts in which the poll is to be conducted are randomly selected.) The voter is asked to fill in the questionnaire and place it in a container; the results are collected several times during the day and are tallied and entered into a computer.

A typical national exit poll collects information from fifteen thousand or more voters. This total is large enough to contain subgroups (such as Jews, Hispanics, or professional women) whose voting preferences may be compared and analyzed. An even more important feature of exit polls is their immediacy: Voters are interviewed right after they have voted and before the results are known. This has made the exit poll an increasingly popular method for learning about voting patterns as well as for predicting election results. By 1988, there was at least one network exit poll in every state, and all three major networks conducted national exit polls.11
Polling organizations allow themselves a margin of error of 3 to 4 percent; that is, if the actual outcome is within 3 or 4 percent of the stated outcome, they consider their analysis to be accurate. As a result, in a close election their prediction of voter intentions can be accurate, given the margin of error they allow themselves, but they may name the wrong candidate as the winner. (The pollsters themselves would not say that they are predicting anything, just that they are determining public opinion at the time of the poll.)

**FOCUS GROUPS** Since the early 1980s, candidates have made increasing use of the *focus group*, a technique that has long been used by marketing organizations to gauge the potential popularity of new products. Originally developed by social scientists as the *focused interview*, in which the interviewer probes an individual’s response to a specific stimulus, the technique was soon expanded to groups. In a typical focus group, a professional poll taker holds a conversation with about twelve participants. The participants (ordinary citizens who are paid a small fee for their participation) are asked about their views on candidates and issues. Their responses are recorded by hidden microphones and video cameras; later the dialogue is transcribed and analyzed by experts.

Focus groups have become popular among both elected officials and candidates and are a staple of presidential campaigns. In recent presidential elections, most campaign ads have been tested by focus groups before appearing on television. The comments of focus-group participants can have a profound impact, even changing the course of a campaign. President Clinton relied heavily on focus groups in the months leading up to the 1996 election. The result was a repositioning of his campaign to present a more conservative image. For example, Clinton stressed the need to be tough on crime and drugs, balance the federal budget, and reduce the size of the government; he also signed a major welfare reform law.

The method used to select focus-group participants is a far cry from the scientific techniques employed in survey research. The goal is to find people who will feel comfortable speaking candidly in a group setting. Usually this results in groups whose members are similar in race, sex, and social class. Once group members relax and get to know one another, their comments may become very frank, revealing opinions that are often suppressed in more public settings. Thus, focus groups can be extremely valuable to polling organizations because they provide clues to the feelings and attitudes that determine how people actually vote.

**Criticisms of Public Opinion Polling**

Despite its prevalence in modern politics, scientific polling is not universally acclaimed. Critics point to a variety of problems in the way polls are conducted. Those problems are of two main types: problems related to the sample and problems associated with the phrasing of questions. There are also special problems associated with exit polls and polling in primary elections.

**PROBLEMS RELATED TO THE SAMPLE** A number of problems can arise in the selection of a sample of individuals to be polled. If a polling organization has limited funds, it may include too few people in a sample. Results from a sample of fewer than a thousand people cannot be generalized to a large population, yet samples of five hundred to seven hundred respondents are not uncommon. Another problem is that the sample may not be representative of the larger population. For example,
poll takers sometimes interview registered voters about their preferences for particular candidates, without finding out whether those individuals are actually planning to vote. This is a major problem of pre-election telephone polling. In most non-presidential elections, only about 60 percent of eligible voters actually vote; a poll that samples the 40 percent who do not vote will obtain misleading information. Most telephone polls do not include procedures for identifying likely voters because of the extra effort and expense involved.12

Exit polls, of course, gather information from people who have already voted, but they suffer from a related problem in that the conclusions derived from the data are based on assumptions about the likely voter turnout in each precinct, which in turn are based on past voting patterns. If those patterns change—that is, if turnout increases or declines—the assumptions become misleading.

Unrepresentative samples can result from a variety of other procedural errors, such as using a phone directory for a wealthy community (where many people are likely to have unlisted phone numbers) or calling people at home in the afternoon (when more women than men and more retired people than younger people are likely to be home). Also, poor people and minorities tend to be underrepresented in telephone surveys and surveys taken in shopping malls.

The popularity of cell phones creates additional problems for polling organizations. By 2007, about 14 percent of American homes possessed only cell phones. Polling organizations had largely ignored this new reality. It was not until January 2008 that the first pollster—Gallup—began contacting people on their cell phones.

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TELEVISION AND THE 2000 ELECTION IN FLORIDA

At 7 P.M. on November 7, 2000—Election Day evening—the polls closed in the eastern part of Florida. The events that followed would create a storm of controversy and embarrass the national news services, the nation’s polling organizations, and many of the country’s newspapers.

At 7:50 P.M. the Associated Press and the major television networks began announcing that the Democratic candidate for president, Al Gore, would win the electoral vote in Florida. Gore’s purported victory in Florida would, in effect, make him president of the United States, since several other large battleground states—Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Michigan—were also favoring him. The Voter News Service—a consortium of polling organizations that conducted exit polling on Election Day—had provided the information about Gore’s Florida victory to the Associated Press and the television networks.

At 9:30 the Republican presidential candidate, George W. Bush, began calling the networks to say that they had made a mistake and that the vote in Florida was too close to call. By 9:50 the networks began retracting their original announcement that Florida had gone for Gore. At about 2:15 on the morning of November 8, the networks announced that Florida had gone to Bush and therefore he was the nation’s next president. Newspapers all across the country published editions whose front pages boldly announced that Bush had been elected.

At 3 A.M. on November 8, Al Gore called George W. Bush and conceded the election to the Texas governor. But during the next forty-five minutes, Gore received information that Bush’s Florida lead was diminishing and that state law required that there be an automatic recount in very close state elections. At 3:45, Gore called Bush again and in a testy conversation between the two men, withdrew his concession. At 4 A.M. the networks altered their stand once again and announced that the Florida election was too close to call. The fight for Florida’s key electoral votes would continue for weeks and agitate Americans as no other presidential election had in the nation’s history.

In February 2001, CNN released a study of network coverage of the 2000 presidential election. The study, prepared by three well-regarded journalists, concluded that election night coverage of the event was a “debacle.” The study stated that the “television news organizations staged a collective drag race on the crowded highway of democracy, recklessly endangering the electoral process, the political life of the nation and their own credibility. . . .”
Other organizations are likely to follow this practice. It remains unclear what effect this change will have on polling results.

Many people do not want to participate in telephone polls. They receive many calls from salespeople, some of whom pretend to be pollsters, so that they come to view such calls as a nuisance. Thus, refusal rates are high and can contribute to inaccurate poll results.13

**PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PHRASING OF QUESTIONS**  The wording of survey questions is crucial; in fact, writing questions may be the most difficult part of a poll taker's job. Sometimes the findings of a poll can hinge on the connotations of a single word, such as “welfare” as opposed to “assistance to the poor.” Unfamiliar words, such as “impeachment,” can have similar effects. Even the most carefully worded questions, however, can produce unexpected results, especially when feelings like pride or guilt are involved. For example, most Americans will say that they are environmentalists, simply because it would be embarrassing to say that they are not concerned about this important issue.

A graphic illustration of how the phrasing of questions can influence the result of a poll came early in President George W. Bush’s administration. The president had nominated John Ashcroft to be attorney general of the United States. One poll asked: “Do you think Congress should approve Bush’s choice of John Ashcroft for attorney general even though his far-right views on issues like abortion, drugs, and gun control may make it difficult for him to be an effective attorney general?” “No” answers received 41 percent; “yes,” 37 percent. Another national poll conducted at the same time asked: “Bush has nominated John Ashcroft for attorney general. Do you think the U.S. Senate should or should not confirm Ashcroft as attorney general?” Fifty-four percent believed Ashcroft’s nomination should be approved; 26 percent said that it should not.

Related to the wording of questions is the form in which they may be answered. Most polls use forced-choice questions in which the respondent must choose among a set of answers, such as “Very likely,” “Somewhat likely,” and “Not likely,” or indicate a preference for one of two or three candidates. Questions asked of potential voters may not include a “Don’t know” or “Undecided” option. Thus, many polls may compel a respondent to provide an answer, even though the person has no opinion or is undecided on a subject.

**SPECIAL PROBLEMS WITH PRIMARY ELECTION AND EXIT POLLS**  Polling in primary elections (nominating elections—see Chapter 6) poses special problems. Primaries often do not receive as much media coverage as do general elections, and voters may not yet have made up their minds at the time the polls are conducted. But what makes primary polling especially difficult is that voter turnouts for those elections are often very small. A surge of support for one candidate among a relatively few voters can change the outcome and cause the poll results to be inaccurate.

Exit polls also encounter some special problems. Because voters fill out questionnaires and place them in a box, there is no reason for them to lie on an exit poll. However, the problem mentioned earlier—flawed assumptions about precinct turnouts—can skew the results. In addition, many voters do not wish to be polled; in New York City, for example, as many as 40 percent refused to fill out exit poll questionnaires. Moreover, if poll takers fail to keep track of the sex, race, and apparent age of those who do not participate and weight the responses accordingly, the results of the poll may be misleading.
A further criticism of exit polls is that they have tended to overstate support for the Democratic Party, probably because some conservative Republicans refuse to participate in such polls, believing that the media have a liberal bias.\(^{14}\)

In addition, critics of exit polls have argued that these polls could discourage some people from voting in the belief that the election has already been decided. The low turnout in the 1996 presidential election—less than 50 percent of the eligible voters—may have been caused in part by pollsters’ predictions that Clinton was the sure winner. The failure of voters to turn out could affect the results of close elections. There is some evidence that in presidential elections exit polls have contributed to reduced voter turnout in the western states, where voting centers are the last to close because they are located in earlier time zones. Exit polls therefore may well have affected the outcomes of some close congressional and state elections in the West.

Most preelection polls held during the 2004 presidential election were reasonably accurate. Most gave George Bush a small lead in the contest and accurately identified the most closely contested states. But the exit polls conducted on Election Day were less successful. Information released by two major polling firms on the afternoon of the election showed John Kerry benefiting from a wave of voter support. They also showed Kerry ahead in battleground states such as Florida and Ohio. (To their credit the major television news organizations—burned by their failures in 2000—did not publicize this information.)

In the 2008 national election, the polling organizations repeated their successes from four years earlier. They did make a major error in the New Hampshire Democratic primary earlier in the year when they found Barack Obama ahead of Hillary Clinton by eight points; he lost by 2.6 percent. But their performance in November was exemplary; they did not make any major mistakes. On election night, the polls accurately called the states that went for Obama and for McCain and those like Missouri, North Carolina, and Indiana, that were too close to call. In the seven states in which most polling was done prior to election day—Florida, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, North Carolina, Virginia, and Pennsylvania—nine leading polling companies missed Barack Obama’s victory by margins that ranged from 0.96 percent to 3.24 percent.\(^{15}\)

Despite their alleged shortcomings, polls have become a central feature of American politics. The number of polls has proliferated; not only the major networks but also at least 40 percent of American newspapers conduct polls. The quality of those polls varies, partly because the demand for polling has grown beyond the supply of trained poll takers and, sometimes, available funds. Accurate or not, polls have an immense impact on the conduct of American politics. They influence the behavior of politicians and journalists, and probably that of the American public as well.\(^{16}\)

It must be said in conclusion that, despite all of the efforts made to perfect public opinion polls, they remain as much art as science. One expert on the subject has declared: “There is no . . . right way to do a survey. Lots of decisions, made at every step, can influence the results.”\(^{17}\)

**THE GROWTH OF THE MEDIA**

Throughout much of human history, information was scarce. It traveled primarily by word of mouth from neighbor to neighbor and from town to town. The invention of the printing press brought about the first significant change in the manner information was communicated. But few people were able to read even if they
could find printed material. “Today, by contrast, we live in a world of unprecedented media abundance that once would have been the stuff of science fiction. We can increasingly obtain and consume whatever media we want, wherever and whatever we want: television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the bewildering variety of material available on the Internet.”

Radio, television, magazines, and the Internet have grown rapidly in size in the past several decades. Only newspapers have struggled to maintain their circulation numbers, the result of competition from these other news sources.

The Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television

The news media have always played an important role in the American political process. While the nature of this role has changed dramatically since the nation’s founding, the ability of the media to influence voters and politicians alike cannot be underestimated. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the media outlets available to politicians were limited to newspapers and journals. During this time, the editors and owners of major newspapers often used their papers as a forum in which to expound upon their personal political beliefs. It was not uncommon for newspaper owners to emphasize stories that supported their political party and ignore news items that reflected negatively on their personal views. For much of the nineteenth century, most American newspapers were closely identified with a particular political party.

In the late nineteenth century, the content of newspapers began to change. As literacy rates increased, newspapers tried to increase the breadth of their appeal. Rather than targeting their messages to a politically informed and well-educated elite, they took aim at a much larger and less politically interested group. From the early 1850s to the turn of the century, the number of daily newspapers increased from approximately 250 to over 2,200. As the audience changed, the content of the news changed as well. In order to attract the interest of the public, newspapers began to focus their coverage on sensational stories and scandals. This type of news reporting is commonly referred to as yellow journalism.

The yellow journalism of the late nineteenth century is best exemplified by the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst. Hearst’s papers were infamous for running a story first and checking the facts later. If the story had lots of sex or violence (preferably both), Hearst would run it on the front page to increase sales. Hearst’s papers were read throughout the United States, allowing him to influence public opinion on a variety of issues. When Hearst felt that President McKinley was doing nothing during the civil war in Cuba, he ran dozens of front-page stories in his newspapers purporting to show the brutal and senseless acts being perpetrated against the “innocent” Cubans by the “inhuman” Spanish colonists. By constantly attacking McKinley and the Spanish, Hearst managed to sway public opinion toward the Cuban rebels. Although we will never know exactly how many of the stories carried by Hearst’s papers were either exaggerations or outright lies, there is little question that Hearst’s constant pressure was at least partly responsible for President McKinley’s eventual decision to declare war on Spain and send U.S. troops to Cuba to fight against the Spanish colonists.

The newspaper empires of Hearst and others marked the peak of the print media’s ability to influence public opinion. By the early 1920s, radio broadcasting had become a major player in the competition to disseminate political information. Radio quickly became the dominant source of political news for many Americans and a preferred media outlet for most politicians. Thanks to the immediacy of radio,
politicians could now speak directly to the public, circumventing the newspaper editors who generally summarized (and occasionally misrepresented) what the politicians had to say. Radio also brought national and international news to the forefront. In the heyday of the newspapers, most news coverage focused on local and state issues. But since a single radio newscast could be routed to every station in the country, national and international news coverage increased dramatically during the 1920s and 1930s.

The first part of the twentieth century also ushered in many new journalistic standards for both newspapers and radio. The media began to focus on presenting the facts of a story, rather than allowing editors and owners to slant the news to fit their political ideologies. The media emphasized objective, rather than opinionated, news coverage. In most major newspapers, the ideological bias of the editors and owners was limited to the editorial pages and left out of the regular news coverage. While yellow journalism still exists, it has generally been relegated to tabloid papers.

Radio provided much political information to the public until the 1950s. The current popularity of political talk-show hosts—many of them conservative—helps maintain radio’s continued importance as a source of ideas about politics to many Americans. Radio’s continued importance can also be seen in the growth of this form of communication over the past four decades. In 1970 about 700 radio stations existed in the nation. The number today is almost twice that number.

With the emergence of television, most Americans turned to televised evening news programs to get the political news of the day. The ability to combine audio and visual elements in a constant flow made televised news very appealing to most Americans. Indeed, today television, both network and cable, is the source of most of the information the public receives about politics. Over the past five decades, the Roper polling organization has asked the public. “Where do you usually get most of your news about what’s going on in the world today—from the newspapers or radio or television or magazines . . . ?” A large majority of people have always indicated that television provides the most information.

Perhaps the most important development in the American media in recent years has been the decline in circulation of the nation’s major newspapers and the number of newspapers that have either gone out of business or entered bankruptcy. This number has steadily dropped for many decades, but the changes that have taken place in just the past few years are ominous. Some have predicted that the end of the daily newspaper is only a matter of time.

Paid circulation of newspapers has long been in decline, but the rate has increased since the start of the 2007 recession. In the six-month period that ended on September 30, 2010, daily circulation dropped 5 percent and 4.5 percent on Sunday. Between late 2008 and early 2009, a number of major papers filed for bankruptcy: for example, The Minneapolis Star-Tribune and The Tribune Company, which publishes The Baltimore Sun, the Chicago Tribune, and the Los Angeles Times. The Rocky Mountain News simply ended operation. The New York Times has experienced serious economic problems and has borrowed heavily to survive. It is estimated that in the near future another dozen major papers could close, enter bankruptcy, or publish only digitally.

This phenomenon is not difficult to explain. The recession that began in 2007 caused readers to reduce their purchases of newspapers and major companies cut back on advertisements. But of greater importance is the rise of the Internet. More and more people have been turning to this source as their primary means of obtaining information about public and private subjects and have been turning away from newspapers.
Roles of the Media

Although the media fulfill a wide variety of functions, ranging from socialization to entertainment, there are three roles in which they interact directly with the political sphere: the roles of reporter, agenda-setter, and investigator.

THE MEDIA AS REPORTER In general, the primary responsibility of the media is to present the news as it happens. Because it is impossible for the public to constantly monitor the actions of government, the public relies on the media to present them with a condensed yet accurate version of the activities of government. The framers of the Constitution saw this as the primary function of the media; the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of the press was added to the document to guarantee this function. They believed that an informed public is critical to the maintenance of democracy. As long as the people are informed about the actions of government, they can make informed decisions in the voting booth as well.

THE MEDIA AS AGENDA-SETTER Although the primary function of the media is to report what the government is doing, it is also important that it also consider what the government should be doing. Part of the task of the media is to identify the current public issues that warrant government action. By bringing such issues to the attention of the public through news coverage, the media can influence the processes of government.

While the ability to help set the public agenda can often force government to address issues that it would otherwise ignore, the power to mobilize the public on a particular issue or set of issues is a double-edged sword. If the media choose to ignore an issue, that issue has little hope of ever entering the public forum. For example, during the late 1990s, the broadcast media decided to emphasize the ethnic violence in Kosovo and Serbia rather than the massacres in Rwanda and other African nations. As a consequence of this decision, many more Americans were willing to support sending troops to the Balkans in the 1990s than were willing to endorse sending similar troops into Central Africa. While there is little debate that atrocities were being committed in the Balkans, the level and magnitude of the violence paled in comparison to the enormous numbers of civilians killed during the Central African ethnic cleansings.

This power to narrow the public’s focus extends to the political arena. Every time a presidential election occurs, the media tend to focus on a few candidates. In the prelude to the 2000 election, for example, the media’s attention was focused almost exclusively on three Republican candidates, George W. Bush, Elizabeth Dole, and Senator John McCain. Similarly, in the run-up to the 2004 nomination primary and caucuses, the media concentrated much of its attention on former Vermont Governor Howard Dean. Less mention was made of other potential contenders, despite the fact that some of these candidates were just as qualified to be the president of the United States.

It is worth noting that the media cannot automatically force issues into the public sphere. If the issue does not resonate in the public mind, the efforts of the media to dramatize it will likely fail. For example, the media has warned the American public since the early 1970s about the dangers of this country’s dependence on foreign oil. The public paid little attention to these admonitions. Gasoline prices remained relatively low and, after several scares in the 1970s, supply was abundant. Congress largely ignored the issue.
In recent years, public interest in this nation's dependence on foreign oil supplies has risen and fallen with the price of the product. When prices remained relatively low, little attention was given to the subject. But when the average price of a gallon of oil soared between the fall of 2007 and the summer of 2008 (it reached $4.82 per gallon in July 2008), the public was aroused. The price of gasoline became an issue in the 2008 presidential campaign and the demand to allow more off-shore drilling in parts of the United States grew in intensity. But when prices dropped sharply in the winter of 2008–2009, foreign oil dependence disappeared as a public issue.

**THE MEDIA AS INVESTIGATOR** In conjunction with the role of reporting facts, the media also serve as an independent check on the behavior of government and government officials. Since it is impossible for the public to keep track of the actions of government officials, they rely on the media to keep tabs on them. During the late nineteenth century, the journalists who exposed the corrupt workings of government and industry were called muckrakers. Although this term has been dropped from the lexicon of political discussion, the spirit of the muckrakers lives on in journalism. Investigative reporters for the media try to uncover corruption, abuses of power, scandal, and other unethical or illegal activities by government officials.

Two powerful illustrations of the potential impact of investigative journalism are the investigations of the Watergate break-in during President Nixon's term and the affair between President Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Journalists in both instances uncovered unethical and possibly illegal activities on the part of the president. In both cases, efforts were made by the White House to try to hide the truth from the public, and in both cases, the truth was eventually revealed at least partly through the unceasing work of members of the media. As a result of these two investigations, one president (Richard Nixon) was forced to resign based on his involvement in illegal activities, while the other (Bill Clinton) became only the second president in the nation's history to be tried by the Senate on impeachment charges. It is highly unlikely that either of these incidents would have been brought to the attention of the public without the work of investigative journalists.

**The Media and Elections**

In their search for news about elections, journalists look for something tangible to report; this often causes them to focus on elections as a horse race rather than on the issues and policies being discussed in a campaign. Moreover, most reporters do not analyze or evaluate candidates' policy proposals. Instead, they report on such matters as the candidates' standings in the polls, the amount of money they raise, and the endorsements they attract.

Journalists also have a tendency to focus on incumbents rather than on challengers and to pay more attention to better-known candidates than to those who are less well known. One reason for this is that it is easier to cover incumbents; many of their official activities are reported anyway, and they have already established a relationship with the media.

There are some significant differences between the print and electronic media in their coverage of political campaigns. For one thing, the electronic media present much less news than the print media. A political story on the network news, for
example, receives between thirty seconds and two minutes of coverage. Television reporters rarely give in-depth coverage to candidates and campaigns. In addition, a television news story must have an interesting visual background if it is to hold viewers' attention. If a campaign event does not take place in interesting surroundings, it is likely to be ignored. The print media do not operate under such pressures.

An estimated $1.6 billion was spent on the 2008 presidential election campaign, twice the amount that was spent in the 2004 contest. Much of the money was spent on television advertisements at the state and local, not national levels. In both the 2004 and 2008 elections, most of the airtime was purchased in a handful of states that were closely contested and had a significant number of electoral votes—Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Virginia, for example.

Presidential election campaigns often appear to be managed almost solely for the benefit of television news. Each stop and public appearance is carefully planned and scripted with the evening news programs in mind. The candidates' images are crafted to appeal to viewers, and each day has a theme—the message to be delivered to the voters that evening. Little attention is given to substantive issues, and there is almost no contact with actual voters. In short, "Political operatives are seeking to isolate not just the candidate but the entire campaign from anything resembling spontaneous reality."21

A key feature of television coverage of campaigns is the sound bite. This technique developed out of the advertising industry's recognition that people are likely to remember short, punchy messages. Coupled with the tendency of politics to become increasingly image conscious, it has resulted in campaign coverage that is dominated by brief, narrowly focused vignettes in which the candidate may speak for only seconds. In 1980, the sixty-second spot advertisement was typical: today it is thirty seconds.

Radio news programs give much more coverage to political events. They often have available time that needs to be filled. Thus, radio stations may even use political press releases in the form in which they were written by a candidate's campaign staff; sometimes they feature comments that have been taped by candidates and offered to radio stations. (The latter are especially desirable, because they sound like news and can easily be included in news programs.) Candidates who have difficulty getting attention from television and newspaper reporters may compensate by taking advantage of the availability of radio airtime.

The media devote much more attention to presidential campaigns than to nonpresidential campaigns. Coverage of a presidential campaign begins as long as two years before the election, and by the beginning of the election year the campaign will be the subject of daily reports. In contrast, coverage of gubernatorial races does not begin until Labor Day, and coverage of senatorial races often does not start until a month before the election. Nonpresidential candidates also receive much less media scrutiny than presidential candidates.

**Television Advertising**

Today it is impossible to run a national political campaign without heavy reliance on television, and it is virtually impossible for a candidate to run for office at the state level without extensive use of television commercials. In fact, television advertising accounts for about two-thirds of the budget of a typical statewide campaign. The costs of television advertising vary according to the size of the population to be reached, the number of markets in which the candidate must advertise, and the number of exposures desired. (It is generally assumed that between three and five
exposures are required for a message to "sink in."\(^{22}\) Differences in the size of state populations and the cost of television advertising in different states play a significant role in a campaign organization’s choices about the use of television advertising.

Television is less important in congressional campaigns than in national and statewide campaigns. The use of television in congressional primary contests varies in different regions of the country, depending on cost and on the degree of similarity between the television market and the congressional district. In the Southwest, where television advertising is still relatively inexpensive, three-quarters of House candidates buy television advertising. On the West Coast, the proportion falls to one-quarter; in the Middle Atlantic region, less than one-fifth of congressional candidates use television. In the general election fewer than half of all House candidates use television advertising. Various studies have shown that the cost efficiency and market potential of television ads are greater in the midwestern and southern states than in New England and the western states. Television also is generally more effective in rural districts than in urban areas.\(^{23}\)

Candidates for local offices are less likely to use broadcast advertising. Instead, they rely on direct voter contact, both in person and by direct mail and telephone. These methods are preferred because they can be more readily targeted at district audiences. Direct mail is used extensively in urban congressional districts, where it is used to reinforce intensive personal voter contact.\(^{24}\)

Recent political campaigns have witnessed a dramatic increase in the frequency of negative advertising—ads that attack the opposing candidate. Such ads have become common in campaigns at all levels of government but are especially prominent in presidential elections. One commentator claims that candidates use advertising “at least as much to bash the other side as to promote themselves.”\(^{25}\) One famous use of negative advertisement occurred in 1988 when the senior George Bush’s Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis, was attacked for allowing a...
convicted murderer to be released from prison; the former convict then committed another serious crime. Although there are some indications of a backlash against negative advertising, many candidates continue the use of such ads.

Knowing that many people dislike advertising, campaign strategists have devised a variation on the negative ad. They now spend money and energy on attempts to convince the public that a rival’s campaign is more negative than it really is. “Candidates and their surrogates are branding as negative comments by their foes that in other campaigns might have been dismissed with a yawn,” one commentator has observed.26

Political consultants say that there is a simple explanation for the use of negative advertising: It works. Research has shown that although people often express a dislike for such advertising, they also tend to remember the ads. Positive advertising must be repeated numerous times to have the same impact. Another cause of the increase in negative advertising is the growing cost of paid media. Because negative ads are more likely to be remembered, they are more cost-effective than positive ads. Negative ads cannot be ignored; if the candidate who is attacked by such an ad does not quickly answer the charges, he or she is likely to lose ground in the polls.

The Question of Media Bias

Both liberals and conservatives accuse the news media of being biased against them. Conservatives believe that the media espouse a number of liberal causes that are more in harmony with Democrats than with Republicans. Liberals argue that the media are controlled by large corporate entities that bias the news toward conservative economic and social issues. As with most such political debates, neither view is completely true or completely false.27

But one thing is clear. The American public is increasingly distrustful of the accuracy of the news presented in the media. A study released in August 2009 found that the public’s evaluation of the press had fallen to a twenty-five year low. Only 29 percent believed that reporting was accurate and only 18 percent believed that the media dealt fairly with all sides.28

EDITORS VERSUS REPORTERS It is difficult to generalize about the political beliefs of members of the media. Some studies have portrayed members of the media as being more liberal than the general public. These studies have been widely cited by conservative columnists throughout the nation. The problem with any generalization about the media is that such broad statements miss an important distinction. Although a majority of reporters consider themselves liberals, editors and owners are decidedly more conservative.29 Because owners and editors may choose to influence the overall content of the news, it is possible that any bias in the news would be in favor of conservatives rather than liberals. On the other hand, a number of the nation’s major newspapers—including the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times—generally side with the policies and candidates of the Democratic Party.

MEDIA OWNERSHIP One of the most controversial aspects of the media bias question is the increasing concentration of news outlets in the hands of a few corporate entities. As fewer and fewer companies control a greater number of media outlets, many critics of the media fear that the result will be homogenized and uncontroversial news. For example, when Disney and ABC merged, the resulting conglomerate controlled radio stations, newspapers, cable television stations, and
a major broadcast network. The merger of Time-Warner with Ted Turner’s media empire created an organization that owned film studios, newsmagazines, cable channels, and a widely watched cable news station, Cable News Network (CNN). Some argue that if one company can control so many sources of information, it becomes much easier for that organization to control the flow of information.

The trend toward concentration of media ownership is more than balanced, however, by other trends in communication. The large number of smaller local and national cable stations that provide information to the public has been growing rapidly in recent years. Further, the Internet offers an almost unlimited amount of information that is provided by a vast number of individuals and by tens of thousands of private and public organizations located throughout the world. The proliferation of Internet Web logs (or “blogs” as they are commonly called) has added to the myriad sources of information available to the American public.

**The Modern Media: Cable, Blogs, and the Social Media**

A striking feature of recent presidential election campaigns has been the frequent appearance of candidates on cable television interview programs. While candidates continue to make appearances on Sunday morning network shows, such as *Meet the Press*, they look to cable television as a means of gaining greater exposure to the voting public. This development represented a major change from earlier campaigns, when candidates relied heavily on network news programs.

This decline has to be considered in relation to the rapid growth of cable and satellite television. In 1996 only 73 percent of Americans had such service. Today the figure is over 90 percent.

The fall of network television as a means by which Americans learn about public events is dramatically revealed by the steady decline in the number of viewers of their evening news programs. These programs on CBS, NBC, and ABC were watched in 1980 by 52.5 million people. The networks’ news programs have steadily lost viewers ever since that time, even though the population of the nation has grown. By 2010 the number of viewers had fallen to 21.6 million, a loss of 752,000 or 3.4 percent over the previous year. The greatest loss was among the 18- to 35-year-old demographic group.

During the first decade of this century, to the contrary, cable news stations saw a rise in their viewers. This was most evident in the rise of the Fox News Channel. Begun in 1996, Fox News has rapidly increased the number of its viewers. Since 2010 the station has outranked its main cable rivals—CNN and MSNBC. (It must be understood, however, the total number of network news viewers is still much greater than those who watch the cable news stations.)

Advances in communications technology will undoubtedly increase the importance of the new media in political campaigns. It is already clear that nontraditional media are profoundly changing the way Americans—including candidates and voters—receive information and communicate with one another. The rapidly growing popularity of the Internet is especially likely to affect political communication in the twenty-first century.
The Internet

The use of the Internet in American politics had modest beginnings in the 1996 presidential election campaign. The two major political parties and many candidates for public office posted websites to expound their views on public issues. But the information they offered was often little more than summaries of platform positions and campaign speeches. There was little evidence that this new technology had a significant effect on the outcome of the election.

By the 2000 presidential election, the use of Web pages by political candidates became fairly common and the sites more sophisticated. Both presidential candidates—Al Gore and George Bush—as well as the national committees of both the Democratic and Republican parties, created websites. These sites were used to set forth the political views of each party’s candidate and to criticize the ideas of their opponents. Further, the sites were used to recruit volunteers for campaign work and to sell political merchandise—tee-shirts, cuff links, and caps, for example.

The Internet was also used as an inexpensive means of advertising, and some candidates used very sophisticated methods to target specific audiences. John McCain and George W. Bush, for example, used banner ads—which appear at the top or bottom of the computer screen—to reach specific online users based on their voter or party registration.

But raising funds for campaigns has proven to be the most important use of the Internet in American politics. John McCain was the first candidate to employ the Internet successfully as a means of raising money during his failed attempt to obtain the Republican presidential nomination in 2000. Four years later, Howard Dean, a fairly obscure former governor of the small state of Vermont, built on the methods developed by Senator McCain and for a time was a leading candidate for the presidential nomination of the Democratic party. He used the Internet to raise millions of dollars for his campaign and to organize a significant base of supporters at the local level.

INTERNET BLOGS

They are easy and inexpensive to create and maintain. Everyone can have one, and many individuals and groups have established them. They are blogs (web logs). Blogs are the fastest growing part of the Internet. No one knows how many exist; probably tens of millions in the world, several million in the United States. Many thousands of new blogs are created every day. But many are abandoned by their creators and the total operating on a daily basis is probably not more than a few hundred thousand.

What are blogs? They are entries entered in chronological order. They are primarily textual but often contain links to other sources, and images.

Blogs can deal with any subject from art to zoology. But probably the largest numbers are political in nature. While many blogs are serious and responsible, too many are characterized by invective and sensationalism.

Political blogs run the gamut from the political left to right. Among the most prominent of the former are the DailyKos and Salon.com. Conservative blogs include Instapundit and Polipundit. These examples only scratch the surface of the number of active and widely read political blogs on the Internet.

It is hard to measure the influence of blogs. But clearly blogs can have political consequences. One example came during the 2004 presidential election. Dan Rather, then the evening news anchor for CBS, produced documents that purported to show that President Bush had falsified his military records. Blogs quickly presented evidence that the documents had been forged. CBS apologized for its errors and Rather soon lost his position with CBS.
Barack Obama, however, proved to be the first person to rely heavily on Internet fund-raising to first capture the presidential nomination of the Democratic party and then be elected president of the United States. A first-term Senator from Illinois, he used the Internet to raise enough money to defeat heavily favored Hillary Clinton for the party’s nomination.

Obama’s financial advantage in the 2008 presidential campaign propelled him to election in November. He was the first candidate of a major political party who refused public funding for his campaign. While John McCain had to rely largely on $84 million in public money, Obama raised vast sums of money, much through the Internet. From the time he announced his candidacy early in 2007 until September 2008, Obama had received $605 million in contributions. In September 2008 alone, he broke all fund-raising records when 632,000 new donors gave $150 million to his campaign.31

The ability to obtain significant financial support by means of the Internet does not, of course, guarantee success. But without the Internet Howard Dean would never have been able to become a serious candidate for the presidential nomination of his party. Nor is it likely that all, or even many, candidates will be able to use the Internet successfully. The Internet will probably favor insurgent candidates with a strong message (Dean opposed the war in Iraq) more than incumbents and more traditional candidates.

When the Internet first began to emerge, some idealists saw it as an instrument to interest large numbers of new voters and give them the power to influence the direction of politics in the United States. This vision has been partly fulfilled during the first three presidential nomination and election contests of this century. The Internet has helped promote more vigorous debate of public issues and allowed two vigorous insurgents—McCain in 2000 and Dean in 2004—to emerge as serious presidential candidates. But the Internet has also been used to
re-create many of the same campaign techniques that have been used for decades on television. Short spot advertisements and attack ads were common during both the 2004 nomination and election periods. Indeed, the Internet has become a more “permissive” medium than television. “A negative advertisement that might rub viewers the wrong way in their living room is apparently less likely to do so when they are at their computers.”

It is too soon to evaluate the effect the Internet will have on American politics and perhaps more important, on the nation’s democratic political system. Major changes always produce warnings of dire consequences from some observers. But others say that democracy can be advanced only by increasing the amount of information available to the public, and without question, this is the main function the new technology of the Internet will perform for society.

**Proposals for Reform**

The increasing dependence of political campaigns on the media, especially television, has become a matter of concern to many analysts of American politics. Critics believe that negative advertising has given a nasty tone to many campaigns and that excessive use of sound bites has tended to trivialize important public issues. These observers see much news coverage of political campaigns as superficial, focusing on images rather than issues and providing little of substance for viewers to evaluate in deciding how to vote.

Some newspapers have begun to watch televised political advertising with a critical eye and publish reports on the accuracy of the content and the methods used to create the ads. Some newspapers, for example, reprint the text of new political advertisements accompanied by an analysis that may challenge, clarify, contradict, or present a context for claims made in the commercial. These so-called “truth boxes” have had some effect on campaign advertising: media consultants have become somewhat more careful about documenting their claims.

But newspaper truth boxes have some drawbacks. For one thing, they are published only once, whereas a commercial may be repeated dozens or even hundreds of times. For another, they focus on literal statements rather than on the visual and aural content of ads. Yet viewers recall video images more effectively than written or spoken statements. “People tend to believe what they see more than what they hear,” comments one expert. “You can try to counteract it by explaining what a candidate is trying to do. But people still succumb to the beautiful visuals.”

Proposals have been offered to address the problem through legislation. One proposal would attempt to curb negative advertising by requiring candidates to appear in person in their commercials, thereby forcing the candidate to take personal responsibility for the content of the ad. But the constitutionality of this proposal has been questioned, since it could be viewed as interfering with the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech. An alternative plan, which has been considered by Congress, would provide public financing in the form of vouchers to purchase television time in blocks of one to five minutes; the purpose of this proposal is to reduce candidates’ dependence on brief television sound bites.

Many media experts do not believe that longer advertisements and news spots would solve the problem of negative advertising. Some scholars and public
officials favor an approach in which free television time would be granted to parties rather than to candidates. This approach is widely used in other democratic nations. However, most of the countries that currently use it are parliamentary democracies with multiparty systems that are quite different from the candidate-centered, two-party system of the United States. Also, the number of television stations is much more limited in other countries, making it more likely that viewers will be exposed to most political commercials and debates. In the United States, the multiplicity of television stations and cable services results in a fragmentation of the television audience, with the result that any given message is unlikely to reach a large percentage of viewers.

Even these reforms may not be enough to counteract the superficiality of American political campaigns. That may require more fundamental changes in American culture. As one political scientist has pointed out, “You cannot improve discourse. Lack of education, lack of demands by the public that a certain level of discourse be reached are the problem. That will not change with free time. That is corrected with more and better civic education, starting from kindergarten.”

**HOW AMERICANS PARTICIPATE**

For public opinion to influence government policy, it must be translated into actions; in other words, to have an effect on the political system, people must participate in that system. Voting, of course, is one way to participate. But participation can take many other forms: belonging to a political club, working for a political party or candidate, attending a political rally or meeting, or contributing money to a campaign, for example. Rates of participation for all of these activities are generally below 10 percent.

When participation is examined in terms of social and economic status, a significant pattern emerges. Those who participate least tend to be members of lower socioeconomic classes, while those who participate most tend to be higher in social and economic status. People with more years of formal schooling are more likely to engage in political activities, as are people with higher incomes. There are also racial and ethnic differences in political participation, with members of minority groups less likely to participate, owing partly to lower levels of educational attainment. As these obstacles are removed and average educational levels increase, we can expect more active participation by racial and ethnic minorities.

Political participation is likely to result in more favorable action by government officials. Therefore, those who participate often obtain the most benefits from the government, such as favorable tax policies or the protection of Medicare and Social Security benefits, for example. But those who participate less may need such benefits more. A person living in an inner-city neighborhood, struggling to support a family on a small income, is probably too busy even to think much about politics; yet such people need the benefits of participation more than those who do become involved. It is for this reason that activists who want to obtain more benefits for certain groups spend a great deal of energy trying to get members of those groups to vote and to participate more in political activities.

Of course, the most common form of political participation is voting. In fact, for many Americans participation begins and ends with voting. The subject of voting—and nonvoting—by Americans will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.
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CONCLUSION

Today we know more about public opinion than at any time in human history. Public opinion polling is conducted every day of the year; the number of polls multiplies during every presidential nomination and election. Our thoughts on candidates and political issues are dissected by every conceivable analytical category: gender, age, income, education, race, and ethnic background are only the most important of these groupings. Polling organizations use increasingly sophisticated techniques to determine what Americans believe. Sometimes they err; more often their results are accurate.

Important questions remain about the consequences of political polling on the American political system. Has the country moved too far away from the kind of limited democracy that the framers of the Constitution attempted to create for the nation? Does the prevalence of polls encourage our political leaders to bend to the public will and not use their own judgment about what is best for the country? Finally, how much information can the public be expected to know about political issues? This question becomes particularly important because government has grown increasingly complex and the amount and availability of news about politics has multiplied.

A government based on the will of the people still remains the best form of government. In his first inaugural address, given on March 4, 1801, Thomas Jefferson responded to those who criticized democracy, by declaring: “Sometimes it is said that Man cannot be trusted with the government of himself—Can he then be trusted with the government of others? Or have we found angels in the form of kings to govern him?”

INTERNET ACTIVITIES

1. Public Opinion Polls. Go to the Gallup Organization website at www.gallup.com and select “Gallup Poll.” Then select “Presidential Approval Ratings” to determine which presidents had the highest and lowest approval ratings from the public. Check out their latest polls at www.gallup.com.

2. Highbrow Media For Public Affairs. Go to the Atlantic Monthly at www.theatlantic.com/atlantic. Select “Site Guide.” Check out “Atlantic Unbound.” Review the thematic list of articles. Select one that matches your academic major or interests and write a brief report. The Atlantic publishes major articles that intelligently address the major political, economic, and cultural forces in public life. For an informed view on issues like euthanasia, affirmative action, foreign policy, and much more, return here often.

KEY TERMS

- blog 104
- exit poll 92
- muckrakers 100
- political culture 85
- political opinion 88
- political socialization 86
- public opinion 88
- sampling 91
- scientific polling 90
- survey research 91
- telephone poll 92
- tracking poll 92
- yellow journalism 97

SUGGESTED READING


NOTES


5. Flanigan and Zingale, Political Behavior, pp. 8–11.


11. Ibid.


14. Ibid.


