In Part 2, we discussed a number of fundamental structural factors that affect how American politics works: the Constitution, our federal system, the nature of the American society and economy, the political culture, and the international system.

In Part 3, we turn to what we call political linkage factors: public opinion, the mass media, organized interest groups, political parties, elections, and social movements. These people and institutions are affected in many ways by the structural factors already discussed. They, in turn, strongly affect the governmental institutions that are the subject of the next portion of the book. They are not a formal part of government, but they directly influence what sorts of people are chosen to be government officials—who is elected president and who goes to Congress, for example. They also affect what these officials do when they are in office and what sorts of public policies result.
On August 2, 1964, the Pentagon announced that the U.S. destroyer Maddox, while on “routine patrol” in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin near Vietnam, had undergone an “unprovoked attack” by three communist North Vietnamese PT boats. Two days later, the Pentagon reported a “second deliberate attack” on the Maddox and its companion destroyer, the C. Turner Joy. In a nationwide television broadcast, President Lyndon Johnson referred to “open aggression on the high seas” and declared that these hostile actions required that he retaliate with military force. Air attacks were launched against four North Vietnamese PT boat bases and an oil storage depot.1

Years later, the Pentagon Papers, a secret Defense Department study leaked to the news media by defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg, revealed that the American people had been deceived. The Maddox had not been on an innocent cruise; it had, in fact, been helping South Vietnamese gunboats make raids on the North Vietnamese coast. The second “attack” apparently never occurred. At the time, however, few skeptics raised questions. On August 7, 1964, by a vote of 88–2, the Senate passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which approved the president’s taking “all necessary measures,” including the use of armed force, to repel any armed attack and to assist any ally in the region. A legal basis for full U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War had been established.

For more than a decade, the United States had been giving large-scale military aid to the French colonialists, and then to the American-installed but authoritarian South Vietnamese government, to fight nationalists and communists in Vietnam. More than 23,000 U.S. military advisers were there by the end of 1964, occasionally engaging in combat. On the other side of the world, the American public knew and cared little about the guerrilla war. In fact, few knew exactly where Vietnam was. Nevertheless, people were willing to go along when their leaders told them that action was essential to resist communist aggression.

After the Tonkin incident, people paid more attention. Public support for the war increased. When asked in August what should be done next in Vietnam, 48 percent said to keep troops there, get tougher, or take definite military action while only 14 percent said negotiate or get
Through the fall of 1964, more people wanted to step up the war than wanted to pull out, and many endorsed the current policy. But the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam rose rapidly, reaching 536,100 at the end of 1968, and casualties increased correspondingly. A total of 1,369 Americans were killed in 1965; 5,008 in 1966; 9,377 in 1967; and 14,589 in 1968. Television news began to display weekly casualty counts in the hundreds, with pictures of dead American soldiers going home in body bags. The war became expensive, as politicians put it, in “American blood and treasure.” Senate hearings aired antwar testimony. Peace marches and demonstrations, though resented by much of the public, nonetheless increased pressure to end the war. By December 1967, about as many people (45 percent) agreed as disagreed with the proposition that it had been a “mistake” to send troops to fight in Vietnam.

Then catastrophe struck. In January 1968, during Vietnam’s Tet holidays, the North Vietnamese army launched what became known as the Tet Offensive: massive attacks throughout South Vietnam, including an assault on the U.S. embassy in Saigon. The American public was shocked by televised scenes of urban destruction and bloody corpses, of U.S. soldiers destroying Ben Tre village “in order to save it,” of marines bogged down in the rubble of the ancient city of Hue, and of a 77-day siege of the American firebase at Khe Sanh. The chief lesson seemed to be that a U.S. victory in Vietnam, if feasible at all, was going to be very costly in terms of lives and dollars.

After Tet, criticism of the war—by politicians, newspaper editors, and television commentators such as Walter Cronkite and others—mushroomed, and public support for the war diminished. President Johnson, staggered by a surprisingly strong vote for antiwar candidate Eugene McCarthy in the New Hampshire primary, announced that he would limit the bombing of North Vietnam, seek a negotiated settlement, and withdraw as a candidate for reelection. In March 1968, only 41 percent of Americans described themselves as hawks (supporters of the war), a sharp drop from the 61 percent of early February. Anger over Vietnam
This chapter is about public opinion, how it is formed, and what effect it has on American politics and government.

After taking office in January 1969, President Richard Nixon announced a plan to begin a slow withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, with the aim of turning the fighting over to South Vietnamese forces. A majority of the public supported the plan but soon supported calls for a more rapid withdrawal, telling pollsters they wanted to move in this direction even if it might lead to the collapse of the South Vietnamese government. The shift in mood was propelled, no doubt, by rising American casualties, numerous congressional hearings on the war, and massive anti-war demonstrations. After a slow start on withdrawals in 1969 (about 100,000), the pace picked up, and most American troops were gone by mid-1973. There can be little doubt that public opinion influenced U.S. disengagement from the war.

The Vietnam story shows how government officials can sometimes lead or manipulate opinion, especially when it concerns obscure matters in faraway lands, and how opinion is affected by events and their presentation in the mass media. The story also shows that public opinion, even on foreign policy matters, can sometimes have a strong effect on policymaking. This complex interaction between public opinion, the news media, elected officials, and foreign policy in Vietnam is not very different from what has been going on with respect to the war in Iraq where a substantial majority of the public, believing administration claims about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (since proved untrue), supported the invasion of that country in 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein. By 2006, a majority of Americans were telling pollsters that it was a mistake to have gone to war, a shift in mood propelled by mounting American casualties, an evident lack of progress in achieving either democracy or stability in Iraq, and news about the mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and other prisons. The shift in public attitudes was a major factor in the Democratic Party’s victory in the 2006 congressional elections.
beliefs, most Americans also have political attitudes about the specific political issues of the day, including attitudes about government policies, public officials, political parties, and candidates. Public opinion refers to these political attitudes are expressed by ordinary people and considered as a whole—particularly as they are revealed by polling surveys.

Public opinion is particularly important in a democracy if we understand democracy to be fundamentally about the rule of the people. For the people to rule, they must have their voice heard by those in government. To know whether or not the people rule, we require evidence that those in government are responsive to the voice of the people. The best evidence that those in power are responsive to the voice of the people is a strong showing that what government does reflects the wishes of the people. The wishes of the people can be discerned in elections, to be sure, but a particularly powerful way to know what the people want is to ask them directly in a polling survey. In a real democracy, there must be a close match between public opinion and government policies and actions, at least in the long run.

Curiously, however, many leading political theorists, including some who say they believe in democracy, have expressed grave doubts about the wisdom of the public. James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and other Founders of our national government worried that the public’s “passions” would infringe on liberty and that public opinion would be susceptible to radical and frequent shifts. Journalist and statesman Walter Lippmann declared that most people do not know what goes on in the world; they have only vague, media-provided pictures in their heads. Lippmann approvingly quoted Sir Robert Peel’s reference to “that great compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy and newspaper paragraphs which is called public opinion.”

Economist Bryan Caplan argues that public opinion is more influential than it should be after showing that widespread public ignorance about how the economy works leads people to support harmful public policies.

Modern survey researchers have not been much kinder. The first voting studies, carried out during the 1940s and 1950s, turned up what scholars
considered appalling evidence of public ignorance, lack of interest in politics, and reliance on group or party loyalties rather than judgments about the issues of the day. Repeated surveys of the same individuals found that their responses seemed to change randomly from one interview to another. Philip Converse, a leading student of political behavior, coined the term *nonattitudes:* on many issues of public policy, many or most Americans seemed to have no real views at all but simply offered “doorstep opinions” to satisfy interviewers. What should we make of this? If ordinary citizens are poorly informed and their views are based on whim, or if they have no real opinions at all, it hardly seems desirable—or even possible—that public opinion should determine what governments do. Both the feasibility and the attractiveness of democracy seem to be thrown into doubt. When we examine exactly what sorts of opinions ordinary Americans have, however, and how those opinions are formed and changed, we will see that such fears about public opinion have been exaggerated.

### Measuring Public Opinion

Decades ago, people who wanted to find out anything about public opinion had to guess, based on what their barbers or taxi drivers said, on what appeared in letters to newspaper editors, or on what sorts of one-liners won cheers at political rallies. But the views of personal acquaintances, letter writers, or rally audiences are often quite different from those of the public as a whole. Similarly, the angry people who call in to radio talk shows may not hold views that are typical of most Americans. To figure out what the average American thinks, we cannot rely on unrepresentative groups or noisy minorities. Fortunately, social scientists have developed some fairly reliable tools for culling and studying the opinions of large groups of people.

### Public Opinion Polls

A clever invention, the public opinion poll, or *sample survey,* now eliminates most of the guesswork in measuring public opinion. A survey consists of systematic interviews conducted by trained professional interviewers who ask a standardized set of questions of a rather small number of randomly chosen Americans—usually about 1,000 or 1,500 of them for a national survey. Such a survey, if done properly, can reveal with remarkable accuracy what the rest of us are thinking.

The secret of success is to make sure that the sample of people interviewed is representative of the whole population, that is, that the proportions of people in the sample who are young, old, female, college-educated, black, rural, Catholic, southern, western, religious, secular, liberal, conservative, Democrat, Republican, and so forth are all about the same as in the U.S. population as a whole. This representativeness is achieved best when the people being interviewed are chosen through *random sampling,* which ensures that each member of the population has an equal chance of being chosen. Then survey researchers can add up all the responses to a given question and compute the percentages of people answering one way or another. Statisticians can use probability theory to tell how close the survey’s results are likely to be to what the whole population would say if...
asked the same questions. Findings from a random sample of 1,500 people have a 95 percent chance of accurately reflecting the views of the whole population within about 2 or 3 percentage points.8

For a number of reasons, perfectly random sampling of a national population is not feasible. Personal interviews have to be clustered geographically, for example, so that interviewers can easily get from one respondent to another. Telephone interviews—the cheapest and most common kind—are clustered within particular telephone exchanges. Still, the samples that survey organizations use are sufficiently representative so that survey results closely reflect how the whole population would have responded if everyone in the United States had been asked the same questions at the moment the survey was carried out. Recently, some commercial polling organizations have tried to do polling on the Internet. For the most part, these attempts fall prey to the problem of nonrandom sampling. Not all Americans own computers; not all computer owners regularly use the Internet. So, polling people by Internet is going to capture a sample that is very unrepresentative of the American population.

Challenges of Political Polling

Those who use poll results—including citizens encountering political polls in newspapers and on television—should be aware of the following problems with polls and what competent pollsters try to do about them. (See the “By The Numbers” Feature for more on what to watch out for.)

Issues of Wording The wording of questions is important; the way in which a question is worded often makes a big difference in the way it is answered.

- A question that asks “do you favor the death penalty?” is likely to get a higher proportion of people saying they are in favor than a question that asks “do you favor or oppose the death penalty?” because the former gives only one option.9 Attaching the name of a popular president or an unpopular one to a survey question—as in “Do you support President X’s proposal for Medicare reform?”—affects how people respond. Good survey questions try to avoid such “leading” wording.

- “Closed-ended” or “forced-choice” questions, which ask the respondents to choose among preformulated answers, do not always reveal what people are thinking on their own or what they would come up with after a few minutes of thought or discussion. So, in this sense, a survey may not always be capturing what people think is important or what choices they would make. Some scholars

THE POLLSTERS GET IT WRONG

Harry Truman ridicules an edition of the Chicago Tribune proclaiming his Republican challenger, Thomas Dewey, president. Opinion polls stopped asking questions too early in the 1948 election campaign, missing Truman’s last-minute surge. Top pollsters today survey likely voters right to the end of the campaign.
Do Americans support stem cell research? How do we know which surveys to believe?

One of the emerging controversies in American politics concerns whether the federal government should encourage or discourage medical research that uses embryonic stem cells. Proponents say the use of such cells, often harvested from unused embryos from fertility clinics, is almost certain to lead to new medical treatments for a wide range of genetically linked diseases, such as Parkinson’s and juvenile diabetes. Opponents say the expanded use of stem cells for research will encourage more abortions—aborted embryos being a potentially important source of stem cells—as well as the creation of cloned embryos, both of which, in their view, are morally unacceptable.

**Why It Matters** In the long run, government policies tend to follow public opinion on major issues. Whether the federal government will allow research in this emerging biomedical field, and whether it will help pay for basic research, will depend a great deal on how strong the public stance is on the issue.

**Behind the Number** At first blush, it certainly looks as if the public strongly supports stem cell research. In early 2001, several leading survey organizations reported the public in favor of moving along this path: An NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll showed 69 percent in favor, Gallup reported 54 percent in favor, ABC News weighed in with 58 percent in favor, and the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation reported 70 percent in favor. On the other hand, a poll sponsored by the Conference of Catholic Bishops showed only 24 percent in favor of stem cell research.

**Calculating the Number** In the surveys reported here from 2001, the various polling organizations did not simply ask respondents whether they were in favor of stem cell research or against it, but offered alternative positions for respondents to consider, briefly spelling out the arguments being made for both sides in the debate. So it would seem, given the care with which questions were written and the opinion numbers reported above, that proponents of stem cell research have won the public opinion battle.

**Criticisms of the Number** But not so fast! Consider a number of problems raised by academic critics, all of which are related to a concern about whether Americans really had opinions at all about stem cell research when they were first polled:

- High levels of “don’t know” responses are a clue that the public has not formed well-grounded opinions about the survey issue. Unfortunately, among the surveys cited, only the Gallup organization offered such an option to respondents. The
Gallup finding of high numbers of “don’t know” responses suggests Americans may have been more uncertain about stem cell research in 2001 than appears on the surface.

When wide variations in opinion are reported—in this case, between those in the Catholic Bishops’ survey and the others—the culprit may be the question wording. Well-established and strongly held opinions are not easily shaken or changed by question wording. Consequently, when question wording leads to wide variations in expressed opinions, public opinion specialists suspect that the public has not yet formed opinions about the issues being addressed in the survey. There is some evidence of this in the Bishops’ survey; examination of the survey shows that some fairly loaded language was used, including wording such as “the live embryos would be destroyed in their first week of development.” Their questionnaire, moreover, states that the embryos would be used “in experiments,” leaving unmentioned possible medical advances arising from research.

What to Watch For  Although respondents in a survey are generally willing to help out survey researchers by saying whether they are “for” or “against” one thing or another, they may not really have solid, well-formed opinions about the issue being addressed. Three very useful clues are

- A high number of “don’t know” responses. Check the original source of the survey results reported in the newspaper or on television to find out the number of these responses.
- Wide variations in the results of opinion surveys on a particular issue. Do not depend on the results of one survey but look at several on the same subject.
- The presence of highly detailed questions that explain the issue to the respondent. Go to the original source and see how the question or questions are worded.

What Do You Think?  Have you formed an opinion about the benefits and drawbacks of stem cell research? Do newly-announced breakthroughs in the development of stem cells from sources other than unused embryos affect how you feel about the issue? If you have an opinion, do you believe it is based on information you have encountered and thought about carefully? If you have formed a solid point of view on stem cell research, you may want to contact various elected officials and let them know where you stand.


population. In some cases, the problems seem to be getting worse. Here are the principal things they are concerned about:

- Because they are inundated by phone calls from advertisers who sometimes try to disguise themselves as researchers, Americans have become less willing to answer pollsters’ questions.
- Finding themselves bothered by telephone solicitations that interrupt their lives, Americans are increasingly using answering machines and “caller ID” to screen their calls. Pollsters are finding it increasingly difficult to get past the screening.
More and more Americans are turning to mobile phones and cutting their reliance on land lines. Because mobile phones are often turned off, survey researchers cannot always get through to people who are part of the prospective random sample. Also, because people don’t want to use their minutes up when they are reached, many are unwilling to take part in lengthy surveys. And, pollsters cannot use autodialing technology to randomly call hundreds or thousands of potential respondents because the Federal Communications Commission requires that pollsters dial cell numbers directly.

The top academic and commercial polling firms claim they are taking steps to overcome these problems—using repeated call-backs and statistical methods to fill in for missing people, for example—but the problems are likely to get worse before they get better. For now, we will have to make do with polling results from quality researchers and firms. A good rule of thumb is to see which polls are most relied upon by public opinion scholars and other specialists on American politics.

Political Socialization: Learning Political Beliefs and Attitudes

The opinions and attitudes revealed by public opinion polls do not form in a vacuum. A number of important factors—among them families, schools, churches, the mass media, and social groups with which individuals are most closely associated—significantly influence both our core beliefs and our political attitudes. Political scientists refer to the process by which individuals acquire these beliefs and attitudes as political socialization. The instruments by which beliefs and attitudes are conveyed to individuals in society (such as our families, schools, and so on) are called agents of socialization.

Political socialization is a lifetime process in the sense that people engage in political learning throughout the life-course. However, political learning in childhood and adolescence seems to be particularly important, as childhood is the period when people attain their core beliefs and general outlooks about the political world.

The family plays a particularly important role in shaping the outlooks of children. It is in the family—whether in a traditional or nontraditional family—that children pick up their basic outlook on life and the world around them. It is mainly from their family, for example, that children learn to trust or distrust others, something that affects a wide range of political attitudes later in life. It is from the family, and the neighborhood where the family lives, that children learn about which ethnic or racial group, social class or income group, and religion they belong to and begin to pick up attitudes that are typical of these groups. In dinner table conversations and other encounters with parents, children start to acquire ideas about the country—ideas about patriotism, for example—and their first vague ideological ideas: whether government is a good or bad thing, whether taxes are a good or bad thing, and whether certain people and groups in society are to be admired or not (welfare recipients, rich people, corporations, and the like).

Most importantly, because it represents the filter through which a
great deal of future political learning takes place, many children adopt the political party identifications of their parents, especially if the parents share the same party identification. Although the relationship between parent and child party identification is weaker now than it was in the 1940s and 1950s, a majority of adult Americans still identify with the same party as their parents.

Schools are also important as agents of political socialization. In the early grades, through explicit lessons and the celebration of national symbols—such as the flag in the classroom, recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, pictures on the walls of famous presidents, patriotic pageants, and the like—schools convey lessons about American identity and patriotism. In the middle grades, schools teach children about the political process by sponsoring mock presidential elections and elections to student government. In the upper grades, most students in most school districts take courses in American history and American government and continue learning about participation through student government.

Popular culture—movies, music, and advertising—also shapes the budding political outlooks of young people. To be sure, most of the messages coming from the popular culture have more to do with style, fashion, and attitude. But much in popular culture conveys political messages. Many rock performers such as U2 and Green Day, for example, embed political messages in their songs. Many Hollywood movies come with a political message; for example, themes of sleazy politicians and untrustworthy or corrupt elected officials are quite common.

Political socialization does not stop when children become adults. Substantial evidence shows that a college education affects people’s outlooks about public policies and the role of government. People with a college education, for example, are more likely to support government programs to protect the environment. We know, moreover, that people’s political outlooks are shaped by major events or developments that affect the country during their young adult years. In the past, such events have included the Great Depression, World War II, the civil rights movement and the countercultural revolution of the 1960s, the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The effect of these events and developments seems most pronounced for young people who are just coming to a sense of political awareness. Political scientists identify this phenomenon as a generational effect. Thus, young people coming of age politically during the 1960s turned out to be much more
liberal throughout their lives than young people coming of age during the 1950s or during the Reagan years.

Finally, a number of socializing agents affect people’s attitudes and expressed political opinions throughout adulthood. Jobs and experiences at work can affect the confidence that people express about the future for themselves and their families. The news media affects people’s attitudes by how they select and frame the issues they cover, as you will see in Chapter 6. Getting married and buying a home—because they bring with them new concerns with things such as the quality of local schools and neighborhoods, interest rates on home mortgages, and more—cause many people to alter their positions on political parties, candidates, and issues. So too does retirement, which often brings a new sense of urgency about government support for retirement and health care benefits.

How and Why People’s Political Attitudes Differ

As we learned in Chapter 4’s section on the American political culture, as well as in the previous section, the socialization of core beliefs in the United States is common to most Americans. Indeed, a broad range of socialization agents—from the news media and popular entertainment to government leaders and the schools—reinforce one another about what it means to be an American and to live in the United States. However, Americans also grow up and live in a variety of distinctive environments that shape general political outlooks and specific attitudes in distinctive ways. In this section, we explore some of the most significant circumstances that define and often divide us in our political views.

Race and Ethnicity

Polling reveals differences in political attitudes that divide significantly along racial and ethnic lines. Among the biggest differences are those between white and black Americans. Hispanics and Asian Americans also have some distinctive political opinions. Many white ethnic groups, however, are no longer much different from other members of the population.

African Americans On most core beliefs about the American system, few differences are discernible between black Americans and other Americans.14 Similar percentages of each group believe, for example, that people can get ahead by working hard, that providing for equal opportunity is more important than ensuring equal outcomes, and that the federal government should balance its budget. Equal numbers say they are proud to be Americans and believe democracy to be the best form of government.15 On a range of other political issues, however, the racial divide looms large.16 Partisanship is one important area where African Americans differ from whites. Blacks, who stayed loyal to the Republican party (the party of Lincoln and of Reconstruction) long after the Civil War, became Democrats in large proportions in the 1930s during the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose New Deal greatly expanded the federal government’s role in providing...
safety nets for the poor and unemployed. Most black Americans have remained Democrats, especially since the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Today African Americans are the most solidly Democratic of any group in the population: About 60 percent call themselves Democrats, while only 2 percent call themselves Republicans (see Figure 5.1). In 2008, XX percent of African Americans voted for Democrat Barack Obama; only XX percent supported Republican John McCain.17

Black Americans also tend to be much more liberal than whites on economic issues, especially on those involving government programs to
provide assistance to those who need help in the areas of jobs, housing, medical care, education, and so on. This liberalism reflects African Americans’ economically disadvantaged position in American society and the still-real effects of slavery and discrimination. However, blacks tend to hold strong religious values and to be rather conservative on some social issues. More are opposed to abortion, for example, than are whites. In general, however, African Americans are very liberal (i.e., favor an activist government to help solve social ills). More blacks identify themselves as liberals than as conservatives or moderates, a pattern that is almost exactly reversed among whites. African Americans also are more likely than Americans in general to favor government regulation of corporations to protect the environment and to favor labor unions. Black and white divisions are most apparent on issues related to affirmative action and who is responsible for the progress or lack of progress African Americans have experienced. For example, 57 percent of African Americans but only 27 percent of whites agree with the statement that “the government should make every effort to improve the position of blacks and minorities, even if in means giving preferential treatment.” Moreover, 48 percent of whites believe that the country has “gone too far in pushing equal rights...,” a view shared by only 27 percent of blacks.

Hispanics Hispanics—people of Spanish-speaking background—are the fastest-growing ethnic group in America and the largest minority group in the nation. As a whole, the Hispanic population identifies much more with the Democrats than the Republicans (see Figure 5.1). However, the Hispanic population itself is quite diverse. Cuban Americans, many of them refugees from the Castro regime, tend to be conservative, Republican, strongly anticommunist, and skeptical of government programs. The much more numerous Americans of Mexican, Central American, or Puerto Rican ancestry, by contrast, are mostly Democrats and quite liberal on economic matters, although rather traditional on social questions—reflecting their predominant Roman Catholicism. For example, 77 percent of Hispanics say that abortion is unacceptable.
Asian Americans Asian Americans, a small but growing part of the U.S. population—approximately 4 percent of the population in 2006—come from quite diverse backgrounds in the Philippines, India, Vietnam, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, China, and elsewhere. As a group, Asian Americans are more educated and economically successful than the general population but are less likely to vote and express an interest in politics than people of equal educational and financial status. On social issues, Asian Americans strongly support the death penalty and oppose same-sex marriage; on economic issues they are slightly more conservative than average. However, in recent elections they have leaned slightly toward the Democrats.

White Ethnics Other ethnic groups are not so distinctive in their political opinions. Irish Americans and people of Italian, Polish, and other southern or eastern European ancestry, for example, became strong Democrats as part of the New Deal coalition. But as they achieved success economically, their economic liberalism tended to fade, and their social conservatism became more prominent. By the 1980s, these groups were not much different from the majority of other white Americans in their attitudes about political and social issues.

Social Class

Compared with much of the world, the United States has had rather little political conflict among people of different income or occupational groupings; in fact, rather few Americans think of themselves as members of a social “class” at all. When forced to choose, about half say they are “working class” and about half say they are “middle class.” In Great Britain, on the other hand, where the occupational structure is similar to that of the United States, 72 percent of the population calls itself “working class.”

Still, since the time of the New Deal, substantially more low- and moderate-income people have identified themselves as Democrats rather than as Republicans. This still holds true today; households in the lowest income quintile (lowest 20 percent) are twice as likely to call themselves Democrats as Republicans. Upper-income people—whether high-salaried business executives, doctors, accountants, and lawyers or asset-rich people with no need to hold a job—have identified with the Republican Party for a long time and continue to do so today. Those in the highest income quintile are almost twice as likely to call themselves Republicans rather than Democrats (see Figure 5.1).
People in union households—including both blue-collar and white-collar unions—have long favored the Democrats and continue to do so. About 6 in 10 people in union households say they favor the Democrats, roughly 11 percentage points higher than the party’s support among all voters. This Democratic advantage has changed hardly at all since the mid-1970s, although it is important to be aware that the proportion of Americans who are members of labor unions is quite low compared with other rich countries and has been steadily declining (see Chapter 7).

Lower-income people have some distinctive policy preferences. Not surprisingly, they tend to favor much more government help with jobs, education, housing, medical care, and the like, whereas the highest-income people, who would presumably pay more and benefit less from such programs, tend to oppose them. To complicate matters, however, many lower-income people, primarily for religious reasons, favor Republican conservative positions on social issues such as abortion, law and order, religion, civil rights, education, and gay rights. Furthermore, many high-income people—especially those with postgraduate degrees—tend to be very liberal on lifestyle and social issues involving sexual behavior, abortion rights, free speech, and civil rights. They also tend to be especially eager for government action to protect the environment. We can see this manifested in recent elections where more high-income, high-education congressional districts in places such as California and Connecticut have elected Democrats, while low-income districts in Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia sent Republicans to Congress.

Region

Region is an important factor in shaping public opinion in the United States. Each region is distinctive, with the South especially so. Although southern distinctiveness has been reduced somewhat because of years of migration by southern blacks to northern cities, the movement of industrial plants and northern whites to the Sun Belt, and economic growth catching up with that of the North, the legacy of slavery and segregation, a large black population, and late industrialization have made the South a unique region in American politics.

Even now, white southerners tend to be somewhat less enthusiastic about civil rights than northerners; only people from the Mountain West are as conservative on racial issues. Southerners, especially white men, also tend to be more conservative than people in other regions on social issues, such as school prayer, crime, women’s rights, and abortion, and supportive of military spending and a strong foreign policy (although they remain fairly liberal on economic issues, such as government-guaranteed jobs and health insurance, perhaps because incomes are lower in the South than elsewhere).

These distinctive policy preferences have undercut southern whites’ traditionally strong identification with the Democratic party, especially since the 1960s and 1970s, when the national Democrats became identified with liberal social policies and antiwar foreign policy. The white South’s switch to the Republican party in the 1994 elections, in fact, is one of the major reasons Republicans were able to maintain control of Congress for a dozen years until the Democrats won back both houses in 2006. Although the South remains strongly Republican, moderate Democrats have been elected recently to fill important posts; Jim Webb won a Senate seat in Virginia in 2006 and Steve Beshear won the governorship in Kentucky in 2007.
On many issues, northeasterners tend to be the most different from southerners, with midwesterners, appropriately, in the middle. Pacific Coast residents resemble northeasterners in many respects, but people from the Rocky Mountain states tend to be quite conservative, with strong majorities opposed to government job guarantees and health insurance assistance, for example. The mountain states’ traditions of game hunting in wide-open spaces have led them, like southerners, to cherish the right to bear firearms and to resist gun controls.

These regional differences should not be exaggerated, however. Long-term trends show a narrowing in regional differences on many core beliefs and political attitudes. This is the outcome of years of migration of Americans from one region to another and the rise of a media and entertainment industry that is national in scale, beaming messages and information across regional lines.

Education

The level of formal education that people reach is closely related to their income level because education helps people earn more and also because the wealthy can pay for more and better schooling for their children. But education has some distinct political effects of its own.

As we will see in Chapter 10, education is generally considered the strongest single predictor of participation in politics. College-educated people are much more likely to say that they vote, talk about politics, go to meetings, sign petitions, and write letters to officials than people who have attained only an elementary or a high school education. The highly educated know more about politics. They know what they want and how to go about getting it—joining groups and writing letters, faxes, and e-mail messages to public officials. Within every income stratum of the population, moreover, college-educated people are somewhat more liberal than others, being more in favor of, for example, increased domestic spending to combat poverty and provide national health insurance. They also are more likely than other people in their same income stratum to favor multilateralism in international affairs, favoring the use of diplomacy, multination treaties, and the United Nations to solve global problems.

People who have earned postgraduate degrees also have some distinctive policy preferences. They are especially protective of the civil rights, civil liberties, and individual freedom of atheists, homosexuals, protesters, and dissenters. Education may contribute to tolerance by exposing people to diverse ideas or by training them in elite-backed norms of tolerance.

Gender

A partisan “gender gap” first appeared in the 1980s and persists today, with the percentage of women who identify themselves as Democrats about 10 percentage points higher than men (see Figure 5.1). The difference between men and women is primarily a product of declining Democratic Party identification among men, particularly white southerners, and increasing Democratic identification among younger, unmarried women. The differences show up in elections; in 2008, only XX percent of women voted for XXXXXXXX, compared with XXXXX percent of men. However, although the partisan gender gap is real and persistent—women identify more with the Democrats and are more likely to vote for Democratic candidates—the
scale of the gap is not enormous, leading some scholars to suggest that the
gender gap issue has been exaggerated.\textsuperscript{34}

Women also differ somewhat from men in certain policy preferences.
Women tend to be somewhat more supportive of protective policies for the
poor, the elderly, and the disabled. Women tend to be more opposed to violence,
whether by criminals or by the state. More women over the years have opposed
capital punishment and the use of military force abroad and favored arms
control and peace agreements.\textsuperscript{35} Perhaps surprisingly, there is no gender gap
on the issue of abortion.\textsuperscript{36}

\section*{Age}

Younger citizens are less likely to identify with a political party than
older cohorts, although those who do are increasingly leaning towards the
Democrats.\textsuperscript{37} The young and the old also differ on certain matters that
touch their particular interests: the draft in wartime, the drinking age, and, to
some extent, Social Security and Medicare. Furthermore, people over the age of
60 tend to be more critical of government, perhaps because their expectations
about what government can and should deliver are higher.\textsuperscript{38} But the chief dif-
ference between old and young has to do with the particular era in which they
were raised. Those who were young during the 1960s were especially quick to
favor civil rights for blacks, for example. In recent years, young people have been espe-
cially concerned about environmental issues, and they are much less supportive
than other Americans of traditional or con-
servative social values on homosexuality and the role of women in society. More
than any other age cohort, those between the ages of 17 and 29 support the idea
of government-sponsored universal health insurance, legalization of same-sex
marriage, and a “path to citizenship” for illegal immigrants.\textsuperscript{39} Often social change occurs by generational replacement in which
old ideas, like the Depression-era notion that women should
stay at home and “not take jobs away from men,” die off with old
people. But it is worth noting that older Americans are not neces-
sarily entirely fixed in their views; like other Americans, those
over the age of 60 have become over the past decade or so more tol-
erant of homosexuality and more supportive of the idea of women
pursuing careers.\textsuperscript{40}
Religion

Although religious differences along denominational lines are and have always been important in the United States, the differences between the religiously observant of all denominations and more secular Americans is becoming wider and more central to an understanding of contemporary American politics. We look first at denominational differences, then at what has come to be called the “culture wars.”

Religious Denominations  Roman Catholics, who constitute about 24 percent of the U.S. population were heavily Democratic after the New Deal but now resemble the majority of Americans in their party affiliations—pretty evenly split between the Democrats and Republicans. Catholics’ economic liberalism has faded somewhat with rises in their income, although this liberalism remains substantial. Catholics have tended to be especially concerned with family issues and to espouse measures to promote morality (e.g., antipornography laws) and law and order. But American Catholics disagree with many church teachings; they support birth control and the right to have abortions in about the same proportions as do other Americans, for example.

A majority of Americans (52 percent) are Protestant. Protestants come in many varieties—the relatively high-income (socially liberal, economically conservative) Episcopalians and Presbyterians; the generally liberal Unitarian-Universalists and middle-class northern Baptists; and the lower-income and quite conservative Southern Baptists and evangelicals of various denominations. The sharpest dividing line seems to be that between evangelical Protestants and mainstream Protestants. Evangelicals are twice as likely to identify themselves as Republicans than as Democrats and favored Republicans over Democrats by a margin of 70 percent to 28 percent in the 2006 congressional elections. In 2008, evangelicals supported.
Approximately 2 percent of Americans are Mormons, members of the fast-growing Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. They are the most staunchly conservative and most solidly Republican of any major religious denomination in the country.

American Jews (a little more than 2 percent of the U.S. population) began to join the Democratic Party in the 1920s and did so overwhelmingly in the 1930s, in response to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal social policies and his foreign policy of resisting Hitler. Most Jews have stayed with the party. Next to African Americans, they remain the most Democratic group in the United States: about 54 percent identify themselves as Democrats and only 21 percent as Republicans. In the 2008 presidential election, Jews cast XX percent of their votes for XXXXX and only XX percent for XXXX. Jews are exceptionally liberal on social issues such as civil liberties and abortion. They also tend to be staunch supporters of civil rights. Although rising incomes have somewhat undercut Jews’ economic liberalism, they remain substantially more supportive of social welfare policies than other groups.

Religiously Committed Versus the Less Committed and Secular

Among the factors that most differentiate Americans on political attitudes and partisanship is their degree of religious belief and practice. The religiously committed, no matter the religious denomination, are the most likely Americans to vote Republican and to hold conservative views, particularly on social issues such as abortion, the death penalty, same-sex marriage, and stem cell research. Committed and observant Catholics, Jews, and Protestants are not only much more Republican and socially conservative than people who practice no religion and/or claim to be totally secular, but they are also more Republican and socially conservative than their less committed and observant co-religionists. As an example, 55 percent of committed white evangelicals identify as Republican compared with only 38 percent of other Evangelicals (and a miniscule 15 percent among people who say they are secular). Among mainstream Protestant denominations, the committed are 38 percent Republican, compared with 31 percent among the less committed. Taking all denominations together, to look at another example of how relative religious commitment matters, the “churched” are far more likely to vote Republican than those who are less “churched” or who don’t go to church (or synagogue or mosque) at all (see Table 5.1).

The gap between the religiously committed and other Americans—particularly those who say they never or almost never go to church—on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bush</th>
<th>Kerry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than once a week</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few times a year</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

matters of party identification, votes in elections, and attitudes about social issues has become so wide and the debates so fierce that many have come to talk about America’s culture wars. On a range of issues—including Supreme Court appointments, abortion, the rights of gays and lesbians, prayer in the public schools, and the teaching of evolution—passions on both sides of the divide have reached what can only be called white-hot fever pitch. To be sure, much of the noise in the culture wars is being generated by leaders of and activists in religiously affiliated organizations and advocacy groups, exaggerating, perhaps, the degree to which most Americans disagree on most core beliefs and political attitudes. But, the battle between the most and least religiously observant and committed has helped heat up the passions in American politics because each group has gravitated to one or the other political party—the former to the Republicans and the latter to the Democrats—and become among the strongest activists and financial contributors within them.

**Partisanship**

Increasingly, what most differentiates how people feel and think about political matters is what party they identify with and how strongly they identify with it. The roots of people’s party identification, or sense of belonging to a party, are not fully understood, but they seem to be related to the party identification of one’s family, generational effects caused by major societal events such as the Great Depression and World War II, and other factors explored earlier, including race, religious affiliation, income, education, and region. Whatever the roots, many (though by no means all) Americans feel such an identification. When survey researchers ask people whether, generally speaking, they consider themselves Republicans, Democrats, independents, or something else, about 60 to 65 percent pick one of the two major parties, although the exact numbers fluctuate a bit year to year, particularly around election time. Notably, 35 to 40 percent of Americans claim no party identification at all, or say they are independent.

In a later section, we examine long-term trends in party identification in the United States. For now, in this section on how people differ on political attitudes, we would simply point out that one’s party identification seems to be a strong determinant of political outlooks; for about 6 in 10 Americans, party identity is a stable and powerful shaper of one’s overall political identity. People use the party label to help organize their thinking about politics: to guide them in voting, judging new policy proposals, and evaluating the government’s performance. People who consider themselves Republicans are much more likely than Democrats to vote for Republican candidates and approve of Republican presidents; they tend to belong to different social and economic groups; and they are more likely to favor policies associated with the Republican party. Republicans are much more likely than Democrats to support big business and an assertive national security policy; Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to support government programs to help the poor and help racial minorities get ahead. Table 5.2 shows some of these differences; on a wide range of issues on what government should do, Republicans and Democrats face each other across a wide chasm.

The evidence suggests that the partisan organization of political outlooks is becoming even more pronounced. Republicans are much
TABLE 5.2 Partisanship and Issue Positions, 2007
(percentage agreeing with the statement)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Statement</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government should take care of people who can’t care for themselves.</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government should help more needy people even if the national debt increases.</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor people have become too dependent on government programs.</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should have a smaller government providing fewer services.</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The best way to ensure peace is through military strength.</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should restrict and control people coming into our country to live more than we do now.</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[It should be] more difficult for a woman to get an abortion.</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government is really run for the benefit of all the people.</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


more likely than in the past to vote across the board for Republicans and hold conservative economic and social beliefs; Democratic identifiers are much more likely than in the past to vote for Democrats and to hold liberal economic and social beliefs. So, among the 60 percent or so who identify with one of the two major parties, differences in public policy and ideological outlooks between Democrats and Republicans are becoming more and more pronounced (see Figure 5.2), and the intensity with which these preferences and outlooks are held by partisans is greater than in the past.50

While Democratic and Republican identifiers are moving farther apart, the distances are even greater between Democratic and Republican

![Figure 5.2 The Growing Ideological Homogeneity of Party Identifiers](image-url)

Party identification and political ideology are becoming more closely related. Republican identifiers, more conservative than Democratic Party identifiers anyway, are becoming even more conservative. At the same time, Democratic Party identifiers are becoming more liberal. The deep divide that reflects the confluence of parties and ideologies has become a key feature of modern American politics and contributes to much of the incivility and intensity of public affairs in recent years. Source: New York Times/CBS News/Gallup Poll, 2004.
active partisans, those Republican and Democratic identifiers who not only vote but are engaged in other party, candidate, and party-support activities, such as making campaign contributions, attending candidate meetings, putting bumper stickers on their cars, and the like. Democratic active partisans are strongly liberal, with, for example, 78 percent supporting abortion, 70 percent supporting the use of diplomacy over force in international relations, and 70 percent favoring environmental protection over job protection. For their part, Republican active partisans are a near mirror image, reporting only 41 percent, 11 percent, and 24 percent approval, respectively, for these things.51

The Contours of American Public Opinion: Are the People Fit to Rule?

Now that we know more about how public opinion is measured and why people hold certain core beliefs and political attitudes, we can return to the issue raised in the opening pages of this chapter concerning the place of public opinion in a society that aspires to be a democracy. Recall from the earlier discussion that many observers of American politics in the past and today have had little confidence in the abilities of the average person to understand vital public issues or to rationally engage in public affairs. If, as they have feared, ordinary citizens are uninformed, prone to rapid and irrational changes in their political attitudes, and easily led astray, there is not much reason to assume that public opinion can or ought to play a central role in deciding what government should do. However, as we will see in this section, further examination of the opinions of ordinary Americans and how they change in response to events and new information will demonstrate that such fears about an uninformed and irrational public may have been exaggerated.

What People Know About Politics

Several decades of polling have shown that most ordinary Americans do not know or care a lot about politics.52 Nearly everyone knows some basic facts, such as the name of the capital of the United States and the length of the president’s term of office. But only about two-thirds of adults know which party has the most members in the House of Representatives. Only about 30 percent know that the term of a U.S. House member is two years; only about one-half know that there are two U.S. senators from their state.53 And barely one in four Americans can explain what is in the First Amendment. Furthermore, people have particular trouble with technical terms, geography, abbreviations, and acronyms like NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement). And, despite the explosion of information sources—including the Internet and 24-hour cable news—there has been no improvement in Americans’ political knowledge over the past two decades.54

The things that most Americans don’t know may not be vital to their role as citizens, however. If citizens are aware that trade restrictions with Canada and Mexico have been eased, does it matter that they recognize the acronym NAFTA? How important is it for people to know about the two-year term of office for the U.S. House of Representatives, as long as they are aware of the opportunity to
vote each time it comes along? Perhaps most people know as much as
they need to know in order to be good citizens, particularly if they can
form opinions with the help of better-informed cue givers (experts, polit-
ical leaders, media sources, informed friends, interest groups, and so on)
whom they trust or by means of simple rules of thumb.55

We do not mean to minimize the consequences of people’s lack of political
knowledge. It has some extremely important implications. As we will see in
Chapter 7, for example, when policy decisions are made in the dark, out of pub-
lic view, interest groups may influence policies that an informed public would
oppose. Nor do we mean to encourage complacency, fatalism, or ignorance.
Individuals should take the personal responsibility to be good citizens, and
organized efforts to alert and to educate the public are valuable. But low lev-
els of information are a reality that must be taken into account. Perhaps it is
unrealistic to expect everyone to have a detailed knowledge of a wide range of
political matters.

By the same token, we should not expect the average American to have an
elaborately worked-out political ideology, a coherent system of interlocking
attitudes and beliefs about politics, the economy, and the role of government.
You yourself may be a consistent liberal or conservative (or populist, socialist,
libertarian, or something else), with many opinions that hang together in a
coherent pattern. But surveys show that most people’s attitudes are only loosely
connected to each other. Most people have opinions that vary from one issue
to another: conservative on some issues, liberal on others. Surveys and in-
depth interviews indicate that these are often linked by underlying themes and
values, but not necessarily in the neat ways that the ideologies of leading
political thinkers would dictate.56

For the same reasons, we should not be surprised that most individuals’
expressed opinions on issues tend to be unstable. Many people give different
answers when the same survey question is repeated four years or two years or
even a few weeks after their first response. Scholars have disagreed about
what these unstable responses mean, but uncertainty and lack of information
very likely play a part.

None of this, however, means that the opinions of the public, taken as a
whole, are unreal, unstable, or irrelevant. The collective whole is greater than
its individual parts. Even if there is some randomness in the average individ-
ual’s expressions of political opinions—even if people often say things off the

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**political ideology**
A system of interrelated and coherently patterned beliefs and attitudes.

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**IDEOLOGICAL COMBAT**
Most Americans do not have fully developed ideological positions, unlike many
dueling heads they encounter on television and radio. Here, the very liberal James
Carville and the very conservative Mary Matalin argue about a book on *Meet the
Press*. As odd as it may seem, Carville and Matalin are husband and wife.
top of their heads to survey interviewers—the responses of thousands or millions of people tend to average out this randomness and reveal a stable collective public opinion. Americans' collective policy preferences are actually very stable over time. That is, the percentage of Americans who favor a particular policy usually stays about the same, unless circumstances change in important ways, such as a major war or economic depression. Moreover, even if most people form many of their specific opinions by deferring to others whom they trust (party leaders, television commentators, and the like) rather than by compiling their own mass of political information, the resulting public opinion need not be ignorant or unwise because the trusted leaders may themselves take account of the best available information. Some recent research, moreover, indicates that Americans' collective policy preferences react rather sensibly to events, to changing circumstances, and to new information, so that we can speak of a rational public.  

The Collective Public Opinions of Americans

Americans have opinions about many different political matters, including the political system in general, the performance of our government, party identification, and specific policy preferences.

The System in General

At the most general level, Americans are satisfied with their lives and quite proud of their country and its political institutions. For example, one survey reports that only 4.8 percent of Americans agreed with the statement “There are some countries better than the United States.” Almost 9 in 10 Americans say they feel duty bound to vote (but not that many do vote; see Chapter 10).  

Well over three-quarters of Americans agreed with the statement “The American system of government is the best in the world.” In 2004, about 80 percent of Americans said they were proud to be an American; only 43 percent of British, 33 percent of French, and 23 percent of Germans said the same about their own countries.  

However, there are indications that Americans, perhaps in response to a series of blows dealt by military problems in Iraq and Afghanistan, multiple economic troubles at home, Washington scandals, and the calamitous response to Katrina, are becoming more sober about their assessments of the American political system. For example, while 58 percent of Americans in 2007 agreed with the statement “As Americans, we can always find a way to solve our national problems and get what we want,” this was down from 74 percent in 2002 and 66 percent in 2003. More than 4 in 10 Americans, moreover, say they have very little or no confidence in the public’s political wisdom, up from 2 in 10 in 1964.  

The sense that government is responsive to ordinary people also has declined; only 34 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that “most elected officials care what people like me think,” down from 47 percent in 1987 (and down from 70 percent in 1961!). Long-term confidence in leading political and social institutions—with the exception of the military—has been declining (see Figure 5.3). And, in spring 2008, an astonishing 81 percent of Americans reported that the “country was moving in the wrong direction,” the highest number ever reported for this question.  

collective public opinion

The political attitudes of the public as a whole, expressed as averages, percentages, or other summaries of many individuals’ opinions.

rational public

The notion that collective public opinion is rational in the sense that it generally stable and consistent and that when it changes it does so as an understandable response to events, to changing circumstances, and to new information.
Government Performance

One important aspect of happiness or unhappiness with government is a judgment about how well the president has been doing his job. For many decades, pollsters have been asking people whether they approve or disapprove of the president’s handling of his job. The percentage of people saying that they approve—the presidential approval rating—is taken as a crucial indicator of a president’s popularity. Approval tends to fluctuate up and down with particular events—Lyndon Johnson’s approval fluctuated with events in Vietnam, and he decided not to run for reelection when his ratings fell to historic lows after the Tet Offensive—but in the current era, most presidents have come on hard times. Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter all had low approval ratings by the end of their terms. George H. W. Bush reached a then-record 89 percent approval in March 1991 in the aftermath of the
Gulf War but fell below 30 percent by the summer, an unprecedented collapse. Oddly, Bill Clinton enjoyed the highest job approval ratings of any recent president for the final two years of the presidential term, in spite of the fact that he was impeached by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives. George W. Bush's 90 percent job approval in late 2001 broke his father's record. By early 2008, however, Bush's approval hovered in the low 30s, among lowest presidential approval ratings in 50 years.65

The public's evaluations of presidents' handling of their jobs depend on how well things are actually going. The state of the economy is especially important: when the country is prosperous and ordinary Americans are doing well and feeling confident about the future, the president tends to be popular; when there is high inflation or unemployment or when general living standards remain stagnant, the president's popularity falls. George W. Bush's declining approval after his post–9/11 high point in 2001 was probably tied to the country's economic troubles in 2002 and 2003, when job growth and middle class incomes lagged behind economic growth and rising productivity, and in 2007 and 2008, when high gasoline prices and the sub-prime mortgage crisis hurt living standards. International crises may lead the public to rally and support the president (providing that leaders in both parties are doing so), but that solidarity lasts only a little while unless the crisis works out well. If bad news keeps coming, people begin to disapprove of the president's performance.66 Bad news from Iraq and Afghanistan no doubt played a role in the collapse of President Bush's public approval.

**Party Identification**

The distribution of party identification among the American people is important on a number of grounds. First, as you saw earlier in this chapter, party identification helps determine people's political attitudes on a wide range of issues. Second, how the parties stand relative to one another in the affections of the American people has a lot to do with which party controls the presidency, Congress, and, eventually, the federal courts. It has mattered a great deal, then, that the substantial 25 to 30 point advantage Democrats once enjoyed over the Republicans in the 1950s and 1960s has grown much smaller and that self-identified independents have become the largest group among the American people (see Figure 5.4).
Beginning at the time of Roosevelt’s highly popular New Deal in the 1930s and continuing to the late 1980s, the Democratic lead over Republicans among party identifiers was substantial, making them the majority party. The Democrats still maintained a lead among party identifiers for most of the 1990s, but it was a small one, indeed, ranging from 2 to 7 percentage points. After 9/11, the Democrats and Republicans briefly were dead even, with each accounting for 30 to 31 percent of the population but the Democrats lead has widened again, though the lead remains in the single digits. (If we include those who “lean” toward one party or the other among independents, Democrats had widened their lead over Republicans to 15 percentage points by the end of 2007.67) Because the parties have been relatively close to one another in terms of party identification among the American public in recent years, even very small swings from election to election in Democratic and Republican voting turnout have had big effects on who wins and loses in presidential and congressional contests.

The proportion of people who say they are independents—including leaners, or those who say they are independents but lean slightly to one party or another—has steadily increased, from the low 20s in the 1960s to the high 30s today (the remainder are respondents who choose “no preference” or “don’t know”). Although some scholars maintain that these figures exaggerate the rise of independents because many leaners behave the same way as people who say they consider themselves Republicans or Democrats68—in late 2007, 17 percent of independents said they leaned Democratic, with only 11 percent leaning Republican69—there has clearly been a decline in the proportion of Americans who identify with either of the two major parties (although party identifiers, taking into account both major parties, are still in the majority). Oddly, then, while a growing proportion of the American population is calling itself independent, views about public policies in the United States are becoming increasingly

### FIGURE 5.4 Trends in Party Identification

Over the years, the gap between the percentages of those who call themselves Democrats and those who call themselves Republicans has been getting smaller. This is happening because fewer Americans today compared with the early 1950s identify as Democrats and more identify as independents. After 2006, the gap between Democrats and Republicans widened once again, however, primarily because of the drop in Republican identifiers during the last two years of the Bush presidency, something shown by all the major polling organizations, including Gallup and Pew. Source: American National Election Studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Republican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Note

67 In late 2007, Democrats had widened their lead over Republicans to 15 percentage points by the end of 2007.
68 In late 2007, 17 percent of independents said they leaned Democratic, with only 11 percent leaning Republican.
69 In late 2007, 17 percent of independents said they leaned Democratic, with only 11 percent leaning Republican.
polarized along partisan lines, primarily because partisans vote more than independents and participate more in campaigns. Independents voted in larger numbers in 2006, however, tipping the elections to the Democrats.

**Liberals and Conservatives**

Although most Americans do not adhere to a rigid political ideology of the sort beloved by certain political philosophers or adhered to by many people around the world—for example, Marxism, communism, socialism, fascism, anarchism, radical political Islam, and the like—they do divide on the role they believe government should play. To complicate matters, Americans generally divide along two dimensions when it comes to government: one related to government’s role in the economy, the other related to government’s role in society. Some Americans—those we usually label economic conservatives—tend to put more emphasis on economic liberty and freedom from government interference; they believe that a free market offers the best road to economic efficiency and a decent society. Others—whom we usually label economic liberals—stress the necessary role of government in ensuring equality of opportunity, regulating potentially damaging business practices, and providing safety nets for individuals unable to compete in the job market. Government regulation of the economy and spending to help the disadvantaged are two of the main sources of political disputes in America; they make up a big part of the difference between the ideologies of liberalism and of conservatism. However, this accounts for only one of the two dimensions. It is also useful to distinguish between social (or lifestyle) liberals and social (or lifestyle) conservatives, who differ on such issues as abortion, prayer in the schools, homosexuality, pornography, crime, and political dissent. Those who favor free choices and the rights of the accused are often said to be liberals, while those preferring government enforcement of order and traditional values are called conservatives (see Table 5.3).

**TABLE 5.3 Positioning Prominent Americans**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economic Liberal</th>
<th>Economic Conservative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Liberal</td>
<td>(favor more government regulation of business to protect the environment and consumers, more progressive taxes, and more programs to help low-income Americans)</td>
<td>(favors less government involvement in economy and society, leaving more to the private sector)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bill and Hillary Clinton Barack Obama</td>
<td>Milton Friedman Rudi Guiliani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Conservative</td>
<td>(against abortion, supports traditional families and gender roles, favors more religious practices in public life)</td>
<td>Rev. Rick Warren (of the Purpose Driven life fame) Mike Huckabee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ronald Reagan George W. Bush</td>
<td>Rudi Giuliani</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It should be apparent that opinions on economic and social issues do not necessarily go together. Many people are liberal in some ways but conservative in others. A gay activist, for example, would likely be a social liberal, but might also be an economic conservative when it comes to taxes and regulation of business. An evangelical minister preaching in a poor community might be a social conservative on issues such as homosexuality and pornography but an economic liberal when it comes to government programs to help the disadvantaged.

Policy Preferences

According to democratic theory, one of the chief determinants of what governments do should be what the citizens want them to do, that is, citizens’ policy preferences.

Spending Programs

As Figure 5.5 indicates, Americans have been consistent in their positions on a range of things they want from government. We can see that large and rather stable majorities of Americans think we are spending “too little” on education, fighting crime, and providing health insurance. Many polls show that the public also gives consistently high support to Social Security, Medicare, and environmental protection programs. Substantial majorities, moreover, have said for many years that they want the government to pay for more research on diseases such as cancer and AIDS and to “see to it” that everyone who wants to work can find a job.

By contrast, few people think too little is being spent on foreign aid; many more think too much is being spent. Except for disaster relief, such as for the 2005 tsunami, foreign aid is generally unpopular. (The reason may be, in part, that few realize how little is spent on foreign aid—only about 1 percent of the annual federal budget is devoted to economic, humanitarian, and military assistance. When this is made clear, support for economic aid rises sharply.) Large majorities of the public oppose military aid or arms sales abroad. The space program wins only slightly greater support.

When public opinion changes, it usually does so for perfectly understandable reasons. Hard economic times, for example, often cause shifts in attitudes. It is perhaps not surprising then that economic troubles in 2001–2003 and 2006–2008 formed the backdrop for significant increases in public support for programs to “care for those who can’t care for themselves” (increased from 57 percent in 1994 to 69 percent in 2007) and to “help
the needy even if it means an increase in the national debt” (increased from 41 percent to 54 percent).  

**Social Issues** As Figure 5.6 shows, Americans make distinctions among different circumstances when deciding whether they favor permitting abortions. For much of the past three decades, about 55 percent of Americans have reported that they support the legality of abortion under certain circumstances. Thus, more are likely to find abortion acceptable if the life of the mother is in danger, but fewer support abortion when a woman says she simply does not want another child. About 25 percent say abortion should be legal under all circumstances; about 20 percent believe that abortion always should be illegal. Views about abortion, then, have remained consistent over many years, even in the face of the furious cultural war that has swirled around this issue.

As the nation has become more educated and its mass entertainment culture more open to diverse perspectives and ways of life, public opinion has become more supportive of civil liberties and civil rights for women and minorities. Beginning in the 1940s or 1950s, for example, more and more Americans have come to favor having black and white children go to the same schools and integrating work, housing, and public accommodations. In 2007, fully 83 percent of Americans said it was alright for blacks and whites to date one another, a big jump from 1987 when only 48 percent endorsed this view. At the same time, however, there is considerable opposition among whites to affirmative action programs that involve the use of racial preferences. And, there has been a slow but steady increase in support of equal treatment for gays and lesbians, although substantial majorities oppose same-sex marriage. These issues are explored in depth in Chapter 17.

On a number of issues, Americans support positions favored by social conservatives. Large majorities, for example, have consistently favored

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**FIGURE 5.6 Public Approval for Allowing Abortions**  
Only a minority of Americans supports or rejects abortion under any and all circumstances. For a long time now, a majority of Americans say they believe abortion should be legal, but only under certain circumstances. *Source:* General Social Survey, 2006.
Introduction While Americans generally do not call for more spending on the military and national defense, and while they tell pollsters they are hesitant to use troops abroad unless it is important in the defense of the nation, they have—since the end of the Second World War and at the urging of their leaders—supported a very large military establishment. Americans’ firmly “isolationist” inclinations were transformed by the experiences of the Second World War, which the United States entered into largely unprepared, the perceived threat allowing organized prayer in the public schools, banning pornography, preventing flag burning, penalizing drug use, punishing crimes severely, and imposing capital punishment for murder.

Foreign Policy and National Security In the realm of foreign policy and national security, public opinion sometimes changes rapidly in response to crises and other dramatic events. Major international events affect opinions, as we saw in the chapter-opening story on public reactions to the Tet Offensive during the Vietnam War. The percentage of Americans saying we were wrong to invade Iraq steadily increased as the news from there got worse. Confidence in the effectiveness of American foreign and military policies declined sharply between 2005 and 2007. This seems quite understandable given events on the ground. But often foreign policy opinions are quite stable. Since World War II, for example, two-thirds or more of those giving an opinion have usually said that the United States should take an “active part” in world affairs. The percentage supporting a U.S. role has remained relatively high, not fluctuating much with alleged public moods and changing circumstances.

The public has been quite hesitant to use troops abroad, however, unless the threat to the United States is tangible. Just before U.S. troops were sent as peacekeepers to Bosnia in 1994, for example, 78 percent of the public opposed the idea and only 17 percent were in favor. Opposition faded as the operation began to look less risky. The public strongly supported the use of the military to destroy Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and initially supported President Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003, when only 23 percent of those surveyed said the United States “made a mistake sending troops to Iraq.” By fall of 2005, with bad news from Iraq dominating the news, those thinking it was a mistake had soared to 58 percent.
of the Soviet Union and communism, and the continuing problem of terrorism.

Mapping the World’s Military Spending. This cartogram map is provided by Worldmapper.org and was developed by researchers at the University of Sheffield and the University of Michigan. In the cartogram, each nation is drawn in proportion to its share of total world military spending. It includes monies spent by governments on military personnel and equipment as well as military assistance to other countries in 2002. The result is “eye-popping.” The cartogram shows that the United States by this measure is the world’s military superpower, dwarfing every other nation or group of nations. In that year, the United States was nine times larger than the second place military spender Japan, and much larger than all of the western European nations taken together. Russia and China lagged far behind. Indeed, in 2002, the United States accounted for fully 45 percent of all military spending in the world.

What Do You Think? Given the nature of the threats we face in the world today, do you think that the United States spends too much, too little, or just about the right amount on the military? If you think we spend too much, would you cut taxes and put back more money into the pockets of Americans, or would you want the government to spend the money on other things like environmental protection and health care? If you think we don’t spend enough on the military, into what programs would you put extra monies? Military assistance to allies? More special forces? More high-tech warfare capabilities?

Source: Worldmapper, map number 279. The SASI Group (University of Sheffield) and Mark Newman (University of Michigan), 2006. (www.worldmapper.org)

Although not many Americans embrace pure isolationism—the view that the United States should not be involved abroad and should only pay attention to its own affairs—the public (and political and economic leaders, as well) is divided over whether its involvement in the world should take a unilateralist or a multilateralist form. Unilateralists want to go it alone, taking action when it suits our purposes, and not necessarily seeking the approval or help of international organizations such as the United Nations or regional organizations such as NATO. Unilateralists are also uncomfortable with entering into too many international treaties. Multilateralists believe that the protection of American interests requires continuous engagement in the world, but do not think that the United States has the resources or ability to accomplish its ends without cooperating with other nations and with international and regional organizations. According to most surveys, roughly two out of three Americans are in the multilateralist camp, telling pollsters they oppose unilateral U.S. military intervention in most cases and support cooperation with the United Nations and NATO and international treaties on human rights, the environment, and arms control. In this regard, they are considerably more multilateralist than American legislative and executive branch officials. Despite low public support for military interventions and strong support for multilateralism in foreign affairs, U.S. military spendy is the highest in the world (see the “Mapping American Politics” Feature).

The People’s “Fitness to Rule” Revisited

This examination of collective public opinion, its evident stability on a wide range of issues over time, and why it sometimes changes on some issues leads us to conclude that confidence in the role of the public in the American political system is warranted. The isolationism

isolationism
The policy of avoiding involvement in foreign affairs.

multilateralist
The stance toward foreign policy that suggests that the United States should seek the cooperation of other nations and multilateral institutions in pursuing its goals.

unilateralist
The stance toward foreign policy that suggests that the United States should “go it alone,” pursuing its national interests without seeking the cooperation of other nations or multilateral institutions.
Evidence demonstrates that collective public opinion is quite stable and sensible when it comes to core beliefs and attitudes about government, the parties, and policy preferences. The evidence further shows that when collective public opinion does change, it does so for perfectly understandable reasons: dramatic events, new information, or changes in perspective among American leaders. The conclusion we draw is a simple yet powerful one: The American people are fit to rule. The next question to address is whether the people, in fact, do rule.

Does the public's opinions determine what government does?

We have argued that a crucial test of how well democracy is working is how closely a government's policies match the expressed wishes of its citizens over time. Do the actions of the U.S. government match what collective public opinion says it wants government to do? Some scholars claim that yes, the government generally acts in ways that reflect public opinion. But others argue that public officials sometimes ignore public opinion; that public opinion is often heavily manipulated by government leaders so that it tends to reflect rather than influence government action; and that the public is inattentive and has no opinions on many important policy issues, leaving political leaders free to act on their own. In the remainder of this chapter, we'll take a look at just how much of an impact public opinion has on government action, and consider whether public opinion works in the United States to make our system more democratic.

As our opening story about the Vietnam War suggests, at least under some circumstances, public opinion does affect policymaking. We have encountered other examples that tell the same “government responsiveness” story in this book. President Bush’s attempt to alter Social Security in 2005, for example, was blocked by Congress opponents backstopped by strong public support for the current system.

These stories about government responsiveness to public opinion have been buttressed by important assessments by scholars that indicate a strong statistical correlation between public opinion and government action. Looking at many different policy issues—foreign and domestic—one scholar found, for example, that about two-thirds of the time, U.S. government policy coincides with what opinion surveys say the public wants. The same two-thirds correspondence has appeared when other scholars investigated how changes in public opinion relate to changes in federal, state, and local
Moreover, when public opinion changes by a substantial and enduring amount and the issue is prominent, government policy has moved in the same direction as the public 87 percent of the time within a year or so afterward. Yet another influential study shows that substantial swings in the national political mood have occurred over the past half century or so and that public policy has followed accordingly. As the American people have moved first in a liberal direction, then a conservative direction, and back again over the years, elected leaders in Washington have shaped their policies to fit the public mood, being more activist in liberal periods and less activist in conservative periods. Finally, one scholar concludes, after carefully reviewing the results of 30 studies, that public opinion almost always has some effect on what government does, and when an issue is visible and important to the people, public opinion is the decisive factor in determining the substance of government policy. Although these studies seem to lend substantial support for the idea that public opinion is a powerful determinant of what government does in the United States, showing a strong statistical correlation between public opinion and government policy does not prove that public opinion causes government policies. There are any number of plausible reasons why a “causal relationship” may not really exist. Here is what the critics say:

It may be the case that public opinion and government policies move in the same direction because some third factor causes both of them to change. In this example, the true cause of government action is this third factor, not public opinion. There are many instances in the real world in which this has happened. For example, the news media often play up a particular incident or situation and persuade both public opinion and government policymakers that action is needed. This is clearly what happened when the Hearst newspaper chain whipped up fervor among both the public and elected leaders for war against Spain in the wake of the sinking of the battleship Maine in Havana harbor in 1898. Or an interest group or set of interest groups might sway public opinion and government officials in the same direction at the same time, as medical, insurance, and hospital associations did when they launched a successful campaign to sink Bill Clinton’s health care initiative in 1994.

Even if public opinion and government actions are highly correlated, it may be the case that it is government that shapes public opinion. In statistical language, we might say that the causal arrow is reversed, going not from the public to government, but the other way around: that officials act to gain popular support for policies and actions these officials want. Such efforts can range from outright manipulation of the public—the Tonkin Gulf incident described in the opening story in this chapter is such a case; some would claim that the use of the “weapons of mass destruction” rhetoric to raise support for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is another compelling case—to the conventional public relations efforts carried out every day by government officials and agencies. This is why both the legislative and executive branches of the federal government are so well equipped with communications offices, press secretaries, and public liaison personnel.

So where does all of this leave us on the question of public opinion’s influence on government? It is probably reasonable to say that public opinion
often plays an important role in shaping what government does: political leaders seem to pay attention to public opinion when they are in the midst of deciding on alternative courses of action. Some would argue that they do entirely too much of this, in fact, pandering to the whims of the public rather than exercising leadership. This desire to find out what the public thinks and what it wants is why congressional incumbents, candidates for office, presidents, and government agencies spend so much time and money polling their relevant constituencies. And it is no mystery why elected officials do this, as do their challengers: public opinion is eventually translated into votes at election time. So, staying on the right side of public opinion—giving people what they want in terms of policies—is how people gain and keep elected offices.

But it is the case that the public is not always paying attention or has an opinion about important matters. This has led scholars to suggest that while public opinion plays an important role in shaping government policy under certain conditions, it plays a lesser role in others. In particular, public opinion seems to matter most when issues are highly visible to the public (usually because there has been lots of political conflict surrounding the issue), are about matters that affect the lives of Americans most directly, and concern issues for which people have access to reliable and understandable information. When economic times are tough—during a recession, for example—no amount of rhetoric from political leaders, the news media, or interest groups is likely to convince people “that they never had it so good.” People have a reality check in such circumstances.

By the same token, many foreign policy questions are distant from people’s lives and involve issues in which information is scarce or incomplete. In this circumstance, government officials act with wide latitude and play an important role in shaping what the public believes. After studying decades’ worth of surveys of public and elite opinion on foreign policy issues collected by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, for example, researchers concluded that a deep disconnect exists between the public and elites, with the public much less eager than elites to use force in foreign affairs and more supportive of international cooperation—in the form of international treaties and the United Nations—to tackle global problems. Additionally, some issues, such as the details of tax legislation or the deregulation of the telecommunications industry, are so obscure and complex that they become the province of interest groups and experts, with the public having but ill-formed and not very intense opinions. Moreover, public opinion is only one factor in shaping what government does, something we will address in later chapters. A range of other political actors and institutions, including political parties, interest groups, the news media, and social movements, also influence government, and many scholars argue that their combined influence has far more of an effect than public opinion on what government does. It is probably reasonable to say, moreover, that the influence of public opinion on government is significantly less than the statistical studies suggest (e.g., the “two-thirds” rule) for the reasons given: the impact of third factors on both opinion and government and the significant amount of influence government officials have over popular opinion. And it is hard to avoid noticing the many times government acts almost exactly contrary to public opinion—Congress’s decision to go ahead with the impeachment and trial of Bill Clinton in late 1998 and early 1999 in the face of strong public opposition comes to mind, as does inaction on gun control (see the “Using the Framework” feature).
Gun Control

If a majority of Americans say they want gun control, why hasn’t the federal government done much about it?

The Second Amendment to the Constitution guarantees that “the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.”

The gun has long been an important icon of American popular culture.

A majority of Americans supports gun control, but don’t rank it very high among their priorities for government action.

Voters rarely take gun control into account when deciding who they will vote for.

The National Rifle Association funnels substantial amounts of money into congressional, presidential, referendum, and issue campaigns.

Many candidates are reluctant to attract the negative attention of the National Rifle Association; many others want NRA campaign contributions.

The reelection calculations of members of Congress favor doing nothing; voting for stricter laws invites the opposition of intense minorities, such as the NRA; voting against such laws does not alienate many voters.

Republican presidents and members of Congress have generally opposed stricter gun control laws.

Democratic presidents have either had other legislative priorities or have faced daunting GOP opposition in Congress when they have introduced gun control proposals.

Most major gun control bills fail to become law.
SUMMARY

- Public opinion consists of the core political beliefs and political attitudes expressed by ordinary citizens; it can be measured rather accurately through polls and surveys.

- The democratic ideals of popular sovereignty and majority rule imply that government policy should respond to the wishes of the citizens, at least in the long run. An important test of how well democracy is working, then, is how closely government policy corresponds to public opinion.

- Political socialization is the process through which people learn their political attitudes and beliefs from their families, peers, schools, and workplaces, as through their experiences with political events and the mass media. Structural factors in the society, the economy, and the international system strongly affect public opinion.

- Opinions and party loyalties differ according to race, religion, region, urban or rural residence, social class, education level, gender, and age. Blacks, Jews, city dwellers, women, and low-income people tend to be particularly liberal and Democratic; white Protestants, suburbanites, males, and the wealthy tend to be conservative and Republican.

- Whether people are fit to rule depends a great deal on the quality of public opinion. Most people, of course, do not know a lot of facts about politics and do not have well-worked-out ideologies or highly stable policy preferences. Contrary to the fears of the Founders and others, however, the collective public opinion of Americans is real and stable, and it takes account of the available information.

- For the past four decades, Americans’ trust in government and approval of the performance of political leaders have been declining, although there were significant up-ticks during the Reagan and Clinton years and in the year or so following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The public’s regard for government and political officials rebounded dramatically in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States and the war on terrorism, then declined again. Party loyalty, although still widespread, has declined in strength.

- Most Americans strongly believe in freedom, economic liberty, capitalism, equality of opportunity, and democracy, but they disagree about the role of government in fostering these things. Economic liberals and conservatives disagree about economic regulation, taxes, government spending, and the need for safety nets for the unfortunate. Social liberals and conservatives disagree about the role of religion in American life, abortion, and the rights of gays and lesbians, among other things.

- Majorities of the public favor government action on crime, education, medical care, and the environment. Support is lower for defense and the space program and lower still for foreign aid.

- Support for civil rights, civil liberties, and the right to have an abortion increased over the last third of the twentieth century, but the public is conservative about patriotism, crime, prayer in the schools, and same-sex marriage.

- Public opinion has important effects on what federal, state, and local governments do, but so do other political actors and events. And government officials often shape public opinion. When all is said and done, the responsiveness of government to public opinion falls considerably short of the hopes of advocates of strong democracy.

WEB EXPLORATION

The Gender Gap

ISSUE: There has been much talk of a “gender gap” in the United States.

SITE: Examine male and female political attitudes and behaviors by accessing the American National Election Study in MyPoliSciLab at www.mypolisci.com. Open “Web Explorations,” then select “index of tables.” Open “guide to public opinion,” then “public opinion on public policy issues.” Look at a few survey questions. For each question you examine, select “percent among demographic groups who responded,” and you will see how men and women have responded over the years to the same questions.

WHAT YOU’VE LEARNED: Is there a “gender gap”? If there is one, does the gap exist in all areas of politics and policy, or is the gap more pronounced on some issues compared with others?

HINT: As a measuring rod to determine the seriousness of the gender gap, read the survey question, look at the differences between males and females on the same survey question, and rank the survey questions from the greatest to the least difference between males and females.
INTERNET SOURCES

American Association for Public Opinion Research
http://www.newsu.org/Angel/section/default.asp?format=course&id=aapor_polling07
  An online course for understanding and interpreting polls; free with registration

Doonesbury
http://cgi.doonesbury.com/cgi-bin/view_poll.cgi
  A daily online poll on current issues; participate and see results as well.

Gallup Organization
www.gallup.com/
  Access to recent Gallup polls as well as to the Gallup archives. Requires a paid subscription.

National Election Studies
www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/nesguide.htm
  Biennial survey of voters, focusing on electoral issues.

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press
www.people-press.org
  Complex, in-depth polls on domestic and foreign issues.

Political Compass
www.politicalcompass.org
  Determine where you stand in ideological terms by completing the online survey.

Polling Report
http://www.pollingreport.com
  A compilation of surveys from a variety of sources on politics and public affairs.

Public Agenda Online
http://publicagenda.org/issues/issuehome.cfm
  A comprehensive collection of opinion polls on public issues.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

  Argues that the public is systematically—rather than randomly—misinformed about economic matters and that this leads to irrational government policies.

  A comprehensive survey of what we know about American public opinion and how we know it.

  Based on surveys of the public and elites sponsored by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, the authors demonstrate the existence of a deep disconnect between the public and elites on what kind of foreign policy the United States should have.

  Shows that public policies in the United States reflect long-range changes in American public opinion.

  A passionate argument on why government officials should not be too responsive to public opinion.

  Suggests that Americans are neither interested in nor informed about public affairs and the effects to these twin conditions undermine democracy in the nation.
Endnotes

CHAPTER 5


9. Ibid., p. 38.


11. For a review of the research literature on political socialization see Erikson and Tedin, American Public Opinion, ch. 5.


17. This and the votes of other groups reported in this section are from Pew Research Center, "Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes.”

18. Ibid., sections 7 and 8.

19. Ibid., p. 41.

20. Ibid., p. 87.


24. Reported by Erikson and Tedin, American Public Opinion, pp. 198–199, using over-time reports from the National Election Study surveys; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, Polarized America.

25. Ibid.,

26. Ibid.,


36. Fiorina, Culture War, pp. 66–69.


41. For a summary of statistics on how adherents of different religious traditions divide on party identification and on a range of policy issues, see Erikson and Tedin, American Public Opinion, pp. 209–216.

42. Black and Black, Divided America.


45. Fiorina, Culture War.

46. Ibid., pp. 96–103. There is some evidence, however, that the declining popularity of George W. Bush and the Republicans among the American public after 2004 even affected evangelicals, with several prominent movement leaders publicly rebuking the GOP and contemplating a break in their alliance with the party. See David D. Kirkpatrick, “The Evangelical Crackup,” The New York Times Sunday Magazine (October 28, 2007).

47. Erikson and Tedin, American Public Opinion, p. 84.


50. Ibid.


57. Page and Shapiro, The Rational Public. Also see Taeku Lee, Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Erikson and Tedin, American Public Opinion, pp. 93–94. This view is strongly rejected by Caplan, The Myth of the Rational Voter, who believes that, at least on issues related to economic policies, errors by the public are systematic rather than random so that they do not balance out.


62. Ibid., p. 50.

63. Ibid., p. 45.

64. CBS/New York Times Poll (March 28–April 2, 2008).


82. For a summary of the evidence see Erikson and Tedin, American Public Opinion, pp. 302–308.


88. W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston, When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media From Iraq to Katrina (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), ch. 5.


90. Bartels, Unequal Democracy.

91. Public opinion scholar Larry Bartels suggests that the 2001 tax cut (the largest in two decades, with tax relief going overwhelmingly to upper-income people) was supported by the public out of sheer ignorance and confusion about the impact of changes in the Tax Code. See Larry M. Bartels, “Homer Gets a Tax Cut: Inequality and Public Policy in the American Mind,” Perspectives on Politics, 3, no. 1 (March 2005), pp. 15–29. In the same issue (pp. 33–53), Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson disagree; they suggest in their article “Abandoning the Middle: the Bush Tax Cuts and the Limits of Democratic Control,” that manipulation and deception were prominent in the successful effort to raise public support for the 2001 tax cuts.