CHAPTER 5

Public Opinion

CHAPTER OUTLINE

What Is Public Opinion?

Sources of Public Opinion
  Socialization • Personal Experiences • Self-Interest
  • Education • Reference Groups • The Media

Measuring Public Opinion
  Sampling Error • Selection Bias • Measurement Error

Characteristics of Public Opinion
  Public Opinion Often Is Uninformed • Public Opinion Is Not Ideological • Public Opinion Is Inconsistent

Governing by Public Opinion?
  The Power of Public Opinion • The Limits of Public Opinion: Gun Control
Americans initially were divided over George W. Bush’s presidency, with little more than half approving of his performance. Television comics regularly ridiculed the nation’s leader, implying that he lacked intelligence. Other critics were less humorous. They dismissed Bush as an illegitimate leader—one who rose to wealth using family connections and shady stock manipulations, who rose to political prominence based on his father’s name, and who rose to the land’s highest office in a coup staged by Republican justices on the Supreme Court. The prospects of a popular Bush Administration seemed rather dim.

President Bush’s public standing changed rapidly, however, in the wake of 2001’s terrorist attacks against the nation. All of a sudden, citizens rallied behind their chief executive. Almost 9 out of 10 Americans reported to pollsters that they were satisfied with the job he was doing, the largest popularity increase ever recorded for a U.S. president. Judging from the polls, President Bush had become trusted, admired, even loved.

A presidential administration with limited political experience might have sat back and soaked up the admiration. Bush and his advisers knew better, though, because the President’s father had been in much the same position just a decade before. After the Gulf War of 1991, President George H. W. Bush’s popularity ratings reached levels very similar to those of his son—but American voters abandoned him over the next year as they became concerned with the nations’ economic performance (see Figure 5.1). The elder Bush entered the 1992 election year as one of the least popular presidents in the last 50 years and lost his reelection effort to Bill Clinton, a previously obscure Arkansas governor.

Ten years later, his son and his son’s advisers were painfully aware that they could not rely on public opinion to remain behind their administration. Their position was especially delicate because the administration’s surge in popularity came at a serious cost. President George W. Bush faced overwhelming expectations after the 9/11 tragedy, including consoling the bereaved, increasing protections at home, exacting revenge abroad, shoring up the economy, and building international coalitions. Americans expected quick performance.

Bush’s decision to initiate wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, two nations that harbored terrorists, carried perhaps the most-serious political risks. In the short term, of course, successful military action could sustain Bush’s high popularity levels. But wars cost money, which would limit the president’s flexibility in both domestic and economic policy. Furthermore, wars that go sour can help undermine a presidency, as the Korean War did to President Truman’s and the Vietnam War did to President Lyndon Johnson’s.

The Bush administration therefore worked aggressively from the start to maintain voter interest in and support for the president’s foreign policy. In particular, they continually fed the media upbeat stories to compensate for the usual journalistic tendency to seek out bad news (see Chapter 9). Bush’s advisers made frequent appearances on TV news shows to explain the administration’s actions. Bush himself visited American forces in ways almost guaranteed to generate hopeful images—donning a flight suit and landing on an aircraft carrier in one instance, attending a secret Thanksgiving dinner with troops on another.
Journalists were allowed unprecedented access to the troops in the field—they could bring their audiences along and make them feel part of the military effort. Iraq’s organized armies were defeated with few American casualties. A spin campaign turned one captured American soldier, Jessica Lynch, into a national hero. Journalists also received extensive detail about the capture of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and the slaying of his two sons.

Nevertheless, the wars dragged on. Soldiers began to face deadly attacks from terrorists and guerrillas within the countries they had conquered. Tragic reports filtered home almost daily: young soldiers killed by enemy actions, American civilians held captive or killed horribly, brutal treatment of detained Iraqis in military-operated prisons, the liberated populations of Afghanistan and Iraq growing to resent American troops, and Europeans refusing to cooperate with efforts to rebuild the captured nations. Despite all of its public-relations efforts, therefore, the Bush administration could not sustain overwhelmingly positive public opinion for very long. By early 2004, Bush’s reelection year, a mere 49% of poll respondents approved of his job performance.

**Making the Connection**

In the era of the permanent campaign, public opinion probably is more important than it has ever been.\(^1\) Certainly, modern politicians have more information about it than ever before—but the role that public opinion plays in determining what government does continues to be complicated and unpredictable.

The failure of both George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush to maintain their popularity after an international crisis illustrates how hard it is for even the most visible politicians to cultivate public support. Opinions may be rooted in stable, underlying values—but they respond to social

---

\(^1\) One might argue that the information revolution has made this argument even more compelling.
Public opinion is the aggregation of people's views about issues, situations, and public figures. Although conceptions of democracy differ (see Chapter 1), public opinion is an essential element of all of them—either determining policy outcomes directly or setting the bounds within which elected officials must operate when they choose public policies.

Political scientist V. O. Key, Jr. captures the importance of public opinion when he defines it as "those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed." Democratic governments find it "prudent" to heed the opinions of private persons, of course, because of elections. Note that, in Key's conception, public opinion need not be actively expressed. Even if public opinion is silent, or "latent," public officials may act or fail to act because they fear arousing it. This is the so-called law of anticipated reactions, whereby public opinion influences government even though it does so indirectly and passively. When we say, "Public opinion wouldn't stand for that," we are referring to this latent, constraining function of public opinion.

Sources of Public Opinion

If public opinion is nothing more than the aggregated opinions of individual people, the first step in understanding public opinion is to figure out where individuals get their political ideas. Most of the sources of political attitudes fall into several broad categories. These categories are not mutually exclusive; often they overlap.

Socialization

People learn political beliefs and values in their families, schools, communities, religious institutions, and workplaces—a process called socialization. Sometimes socialization occurs directly and explicitly, as when schools teach citizenship and patriotism. Catholic doctrine condemns abortion, and church-going Catholics are indeed less accepting of abortion than are mainline Protestants and Jews. Most Fundamentalist Protestant churches officially condemn homosexuality, and rank-and-file members are indeed less tolerant of homosexuality than are mainline Protestants. Labor unions typically endorse Democratic candidates, and union members are indeed more Democratic in their voting than other blue-collar workers.

Sometimes socialization occurs indirectly, when someone observes or imitates others—a form of socialization that is no less powerful for being unplanned. Children
begin to form political attitudes at an early age. Research carried out in the 1950s and 1960s usually concluded that the single most important socializing agent was the family (although a few scholars argued that schools carried more weight). Within the family, studies generally found that the mother was most important; she spent more time with the children. Not surprisingly, then, studies have found that many children will identify themselves as Democrats or Republicans well before they have any idea what the parties stand for. Older children are especially likely to share the party affiliation of their parents. Different socializing agents may be dominant today, however, because of changes in American family life. Increases in single parenthood and in the divorce rate have left many children in one-parent families. Moreover, the proportion of mothers who work outside the home has doubled since the 1960s; even children in two-parent families spend more time with service providers and less time with the members of their household.

**Personal Experiences**

Although people form many of their attitudes in childhood, political views continue to develop over the course of a lifetime. Childhood socialization can be modified or even reversed by adult experiences. The horrors of the Great Depression focused many Americans on the importance of economic issues and, after the depression lifted, cemented their loyalty to the Democratic Party. On the other hand, the stagflation of the 1970s left a younger generation of Americans disenchanted with the Democrats and later encouraged their identification with the Republican party of Ronald Reagan. The ill-fated war in Vietnam made many people skeptical about getting U.S. troops involved in foreign wars.

Not all experiences are historical ones that change entire generations. Some life experiences differ from person to person within a single generation, perhaps because of the place in which one lives or the groups one chooses to join. Life experiences may differ because of how a community treats different sorts of people: men vs. women, youths vs. the elderly, people of different races, the poor, the handicapped, fat people or thin people, tall people or short people. These varying life experiences can profoundly influence not only how someone thinks about specific parties or policy proposals, but also how they feel about fundamental concepts such as fairness, authority, freedom, or justice.

**Self-Interest**

Public policies seldom affect everyone equally. Usually some people will benefit from a policy proposal and others will suffer. Some people profit from a political party’s initiatives; others do not. Ordinary citizens show a rather impressive ability to determine where their bread is buttered, as the old saying puts it, when they approach public affairs.

Voters do not always behave in a fashion that directly benefits them. People rarely abandon their party loyalties, for example, simply because one candidate or one policy position contradicts their personal tastes. Nevertheless, people’s interests often determine where they stand in a political debate. For example, blue-collar workers are more sensitive to a rise in unemployment that throws them out of work, and
Chapter 5 * Public Opinion

**Figure 5.2**

Higher Education Is Associated with Greater Tolerance of Diversity

Individuals with a college education are less likely to express negative feelings toward Hispanics, blacks, and gays.


Professionals and managers are more sensitive to a rise in inflation that drives up interest rates and depresses the overall business climate. Women working outside the home, who must balance the conflicting demands of home and workplace, are more supportive of gender equality than stay-at-home mothers.\(^\text{12}\)

**Education**

Although schools are socializing agents and one’s training certainly affects self-interest, education belongs in something of a separate category—especially higher education. In general, education is associated with a somewhat more tolerant outlook. Highly educated people are especially tolerant of minority groups and practices.\(^\text{13}\) Apparently, values emphasized in higher education predispose college graduates to think about political issues differently; they are more likely to accept people different from them and practices different from theirs (see Figure 5.2). They are also more likely to view political involvement as a duty to carry out rather than as a chore to be avoided. And higher education is associated with a greater sense of political efficacy (the belief that the citizen can make a difference by acting politically).

**Reference Groups**

Members of various social groups often differ significantly in the opinions they hold, as indicated by Figure 5.3. Weekly churchgoers show more hostility to homosexuality than those with less religious involvement. African Americans endorse government involvement in health care at a higher level than whites customarily do. Women support banning pornography at much higher rates than men do.

To a certain extent, group differences likely result from the same sources of public opinion that we’ve already discussed: different interests, life experiences, forms of socialization, and levels of schooling. Churches may socialize members to believe that homosexuality is wrong, for example. African Americans may be more likely to need improved health care, or they may be more likely to witness cases in which someone
Welfare recipients are in genuine need of help

The law should ban the possession of handguns

Police have high honesty and ethical standards

By law, prayer should be allowed in public schools

Federal spending on health care should be increased

Respondent is white

Respondent lives in an urban area

Respondent lives in a rural area

Respondent is white

Respondent is black

Respondent attends church

Respondent does not attend church

Respondent has not put off medical care due to the cost

Respondent has put off medical care due to the cost

FIGURE 5.3 Examples of Group Differences in Public Opinion

People with different life experiences hold different views about politics.

SOURCE: Calculated from the National Election Studies and the Gallup Poll Cumulative Index.

lacks adequate care. Women may be socialized against consuming pornography, leaving them little reason to support keeping it legal.

On the other hand, individuals may look to the groups of which they are a part to determine where they ought to stand in a political debate. Even if their experiences or their interests push them to oppose a proposed law, they may become friendlier toward it if they notice that folks like them tend to number heavily among the supporters. Individuals are especially likely to stick with their reference group when they identify closely with its fate, or if they tend to hear about public affairs through word of mouth, from the perspective of other group members. Some groups even attempt to enforce solidarity, as when union members disparage the “scabs” who cross their picket lines or African Americans dismiss those who break ranks as “Uncle Toms.” In short, the pushes and pulls of group identity can shape people’s political attitudes beyond what one might expect given the other influences on their thinking.

The Media

In recent years, many people have expressed a fear that public opinion is increasingly shaped by the mass media. This substantial issue is steeped in controversy (see Chapter 9). Suffice it to say that under some circumstances the media can sway public opinion,
while under other circumstances the media are surprisingly ineffectual. Overall, little evidence supports the worst fears of the media’s critics. For example, an extensive study of opinion change during a presidential campaign found that, in the aggregate, TV and newspaper exposure had only marginal effects on preexisting views.\textsuperscript{14} And more generally, despite the overwhelmingly negative coverage that President Clinton received during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, his job performance ratings scarcely budged. At best, the media represent only one influence on public opinion out of many.

**Measuring Public Opinion**

For most of the nation’s history, figuring out what voters wanted was more art than science. Politicians attended public gatherings, scanned influential newspapers, or consulted with powerful local officials to gauge the popular mood. Often they made mistakes and paid the price on election day.

Estimating public attitudes requires much less guesswork in modern times. A whole industry has sprung up dedicated to contacting individuals, asking them questions, and collecting the responses. Firms range from specialized campaign-consulting operations to highly reputable research and marketing companies (such as Gallup, Roper, and Chilton). These companies sometimes divulge their poll results to the media. So do the various academic institutions and nonprofit foundations that conduct intensive surveys on particular public-affairs issues. Journalistic organizations, meanwhile, have formed alliances to survey public opinion for their own news coverage (examples include CBS News/\textit{New York Times} and ABC News/\textit{Washington Post}).\textsuperscript{15} Both politicians and voters therefore have much more information about public opinion than in the past.

**Sampling Error**

Americans sometimes express doubt about the reliability of all these opinion polls. They recognize that surveys rarely report the exact truth. Part of the problem with opinion polls is that even properly administered surveys contain \textbf{sampling error}—chance variation that results from using a small sample to estimate the characteristics of a larger population. People may not think about the problem in such technical terms, but they understand the idea intuitively. If you flip a coin, you expect that the chance of having it come up heads is the same as the chance of having it come up tails—which is why it is a fair method for deciding who gets to go first in a game or who gets the last piece of pie. If you flip a coin ten times, though, you would not be shocked by a result other than five heads and five tails. Coin tosses will vary by chance alone. Polling results also contain such sampling error. A survey of randomly selected people can tip this way or that through the luck of the draw.

The variability that results from sampling error makes people suspicious about polls. “I refuse to believe,” they sometimes protest, “that the opinions of 1500 people can speak for a nation of 210 million adults.” This skepticism is misplaced, however. Sampling error is not the reason that public opinion polls often are unreliable or even contradictory. A properly administered survey of national opinion should not require more than 1500 people (nor would increasing the number of participants do anything to redeem an \textit{improperly} administered survey). A small sample of people can mirror a much larger population reasonably well.
Polling Wizardry

Surveys often provide inaccurate results because of errors in measurement, such as when the options available to respondents do a poor job of capturing the actual range of opinions. Pollsters who wish to avoid biased research must shape the wording of their questions carefully.

Selection Bias

Survey researchers use a bewildering variety of techniques to ensure that their samples will mirror the larger population. However, the trait that unites most sampling methods is that they are devised to avoid selection bias—distortion caused when a method systematically includes or excludes people with certain types of attitudes. Surveys that fail to guard against selection bias usually offer nothing of value; results they report will not be representative of the larger population. For example, if we were to poll attendees at a hockey game, a heavy-metal concert, or even a political-science lecture, the results would say very little about public opinion because these events attract audiences that differ from other Americans in politically relevant ways.

Perhaps it seems obvious that the political attitudes held by heavy-metal fans would reveal little about national opinion. Yet real-life organizations regularly conduct polls just as likely to induce selection bias. Interest groups and magazines conduct mail surveys. Their samples are not representative, because their members and readers differ from the population at large. Moreover, those who bother to fill out and return the questionnaires are a biased sample of those who receive the survey—they are people who care more than others about the subject of the poll. The same is true for call-in surveys conducted by radio and TV stations. These may be good ways of generating audience interest, but they have little or no scientific value.
The latest craze is online surveys, but few such polls take adequate care to ensure a proper sample. Most tap only the opinions of people with existing World Wide Web connections who happen to find their way to the poll site and who have their own motivations for taking part in the exercise—hardly a representative group. The problem with Internet polls was highlighted by a mildly embarrassing experience suffered by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) in January 2000. At that time, the DNC Web site offered a weekly opinion feature. One question noted that the United States anticipated a large budget surplus and asked people to vote for one of two ways to use the surplus:

“saving Social Security, strengthening Medicare, and paying down the debt,” or
“implementing George W. Bush’s $1.7 trillion risky tax scheme that overwhelmingly benefits the wealthy.”

Surprisingly, when the results were tabulated, 72 percent of the respondents favored “risky” tax cuts for “the wealthy”—mischievous Republicans monitoring the opposition had swamped the Democrats’ poll! This amusing episode graphically illustrates the problem with allowing a sample to determine itself.

In a scientific poll, the investigator must control who is included in the sample and who is not. Pollsters typically select sampling methods that somehow choose participants randomly, with minimal differences from person to person in the chance of being picked. For example, telephone polls customarily rely on “random-digit dialing,” in which a computer randomly selects some portion of the number being called. People with unlisted telephone numbers may be surprised and irritated when they answer their phone and hear a pollster, but no one has given out their personal information—the computer has found them by chance.

Not all selection bias results from flaws in the sampling method. Even if pollsters devise an approach that avoids favoring some sorts of people over other sorts, potential respondents still control whether to participate in the research. In a typical telephone poll, more than half the original sample either never answers the phone or refuses to be interviewed. Research shows that, as a result, survey samples tend to contain too few men, whites, young adults, and wealthy people. Although pollsters try to adjust their numbers to compensate for unequal rates of participation, they may not succeed at eliminating the bias. In 1996, pre-election polls overestimated Bill Clinton’s margin over Robert Dole. Some conservative commentators claimed that the error occurred because pro-Democratic groups were more likely than pro-Republican groups to respond to the polls.

Some tools for exploring public opinion do not seek to eliminate selection bias. Researchers using these tools care less about getting a representative sample than they do about reaching a complex and detailed understanding of certain kinds of people. For example, political consultants increasingly rely on focus groups, small groups of people brought together to talk about issues or candidates at length and in depth. These groups are too small to provide good estimates of public opinion, but they are useful for testing the appeal of ads, campaign slogans, symbols, and so forth. President Clinton’s 1996 campaign slogan, “a bridge to the twenty-first century,” was selected after it tested well in focus groups.

**Measurement Error**

Media accounts of poll results routinely report sampling error. They also often describe the method for gathering the sample, and may even report the rate of participation among the people interviewers contacted. If sampling error and selection bias were the
only two sources of inaccuracy in opinion polls, an attentive reader could judge their reliability fairly well. Unfortunately, sampling is a relatively unimportant source of error in most professional surveys. Various kinds of measurement error are much more troublesome.

An individual’s opinion is not an objective fact like the length of a box. Ask ten people to measure a box and, if a ruler is handy, they will all do it about the same way. Unless they are careless, all ten will report approximately the same length. Opinions do not have such obvious physical properties; they are intangible. No obvious tool, such as a ruler, exists to measure them (although pollsters do sometimes settle on particular questions that they like to ask repeatedly). Opinions are hard to quantify.

Answers can vary dramatically depending on how a question is asked. For example, poll responses vary according to the choices provided. People tend to give more consistent answers to questions that allow graduated responses (agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly) than to either/or questions (agree/disagree). More people will choose a “don’t know” or “not sure” answer when it is explicitly offered to them. Survey responses also depend on the larger context. People respond differently if earlier questions in a survey prompt them to think along certain lines, or if the interviewer lists arguments on each side of an issue before asking about it. People also respond differently when surveyed after significant social, economic, or political developments than when surveyed beforehand.

Opinions are particularly hard to pin down when citizens are unfamiliar with an issue. Just to take one example: A flurry of public opinion polls taken in the summer of 2001 probed whether citizens supported federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. Most Americans had not given much thought to this technical question, nor did pollsters have an established way to ask about it. Not surprisingly, polls reported anywhere from 24 percent to 70 percent in favor of the funding. Sampling error certainly did not produce this much variability.

The wording of survey questions may be the most important source of measurement error. Even if people have fairly fixed opinions, the answers they provide pollsters will depend on exactly what they think a question is asking. Question wording may (1) confuse respondents, (2) prompt respondents to think about an issue in a certain way, or (3) oversimplify complex social issues. Let’s consider examples of each problem.

Confusing Questions: The Holocaust Poll Fiasco Germany’s Nazi leaders executed millions of innocent civilians during World War II. Although they targeted gypsies, homosexuals, and Poles—among others—Nazi officials put most of their genocidal efforts into exterminating European Jews. They relocated Jewish men, women, and children to concentration camps within Nazi-controlled territory, where victims either were worked to death or were executed outright. Careful research indicates that at least 5 million Jews died as a result of the Holocaust, including almost the entire Jewish populations of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Baltic states. Aside from a fringe group of conspiracy theorists, who deny that such large-scale genocide really took place, scholars uniformly count the Holocaust as one of the worst horrors in a global war filled with terrible tragedy.

Just before the opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, a respected commercial polling organization called Roper Starch Worldwide tried to determine whether Holocaust deniers were making headway among the American public. Roper’s survey, commissioned by the American Jewish Committee, produced
Embarrassed by a Poll

The opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum was accompanied by a polling embarrassment that underscored the necessity of keeping public-opinion-poll questions clear and simple.

• Why might a person have answered yes to the following: “Does it seem possible, or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened?”

Some distressing results. It indicated that 22 percent of the American public believed it “possible the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened” and that another 12 percent were unsure.

The news media jumped on the story. Editorialists in particular pondered what might be wrong with the American public, that they would give such shocking survey responses. Had anti-Jewish prejudice grown so strong that a third of Americans embraced the views of the lunatic fringe? Was the educational system failing so miserably that, just 50 years after World War II, the American public could have forgotten one of the best-documented tragedies of that global crisis? What did the Holocaust poll say about the American people?

Very little, it turned out. Social scientists knowledgeable about prejudice and public opinion were immediately suspicious of the poll findings, which contradicted other research on American attitudes. The Gallup organization—a Roper business competitor—soon demonstrated that the Roper poll was seriously in error because it had asked a confusing question. The exact wording of Roper’s question was:

Does it seem possible, or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened?

One of the first rules of survey research is to keep questions clear and simple. The Roper question fails that test because it contains a double negative (impossible . . . never happened)—a grammatical construction long known to confuse people.

Gallup conducted a new poll in which half of the sample was asked the Roper question with the double negative and the other half an alternative question:

Does it seem possible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened, or do you feel certain that it happened?

This change in the question’s wording may seem minor, but it made a great deal of difference. In the half of the sample that was asked the Roper question, one-third of
the respondents again replied that it was possible the Holocaust never happened or that they were unsure, but in the half that were asked Gallup's alternative question, less than 10 percent of the sample were Holocaust doubters. The whole episode had been the product of a simple verbal mistake.23 Roper asked a poorly constructed question, but its survey provided an accurate estimate of how Americans would react to the question, as verified by the Gallup poll.

**Leading Questions: The Welfare Policy Mystery** What looks like minor variation in question wording can elicit significantly different answers. These are especially likely to occur when questions use emotionally or politically “loaded” terms. A classic example comes from the policy area of government spending on the poor. Consider the following survey question:

> We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I’m going to name some of these problems and for each one I’d like you to tell me whether you think we’re spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount.24

When the public was asked about “welfare,” the responses showed that a large majority of Americans believed that too much was being spent:

- Too little: 13%
- About right: 25%
- Too much: 62%

Conservatives might interpret such a poll to mean that Americans want to slash aid to the poor. But when the same people in the same poll were asked about “assistance to the poor,” a similarly large majority responded that too little was being spent:

- Too little: 59%
- About right: 25%
- Too much: 16%

Liberals could use the poll to argue that welfare spending should rise.

Although welfare and assistance to the poor may appear to mean the same thing—welfare is the policy used to provide assistance to poor families—the terms evidently tap into different attitudes. Welfare carries negative connotations; it seems to prompt people to think of lazy and undeserving recipients—the stereotypical welfare cheats. But assistance to the poor does not evoke these negative stereotypes. Careless (or clever) question wording can produce contradictory findings on a major public issue. Reputable survey organizations work constantly to identify and eliminate loaded questions.

**Oversimplified Questions: Public Opinion on Abortion** In 1973, the Supreme Court handed down its Roe v. Wade decision, striking down any restrictions on a woman’s right to terminate a pregnancy in the first trimester and limiting restrictions on that right in the second trimester. The issue has never left the national agenda since then, and there is reason to believe that most Americans long ago decided where they stood on the issue. Indeed, when the same survey question is repeated over time, public opinion is strikingly constant. Yet support for abortion rights vary widely from one poll question to another—prompting both pro-choice and pro-life spokespersons to claim that a majority of Americans support their position. Unless the laws of arithmetic fail to hold in the case of this issue, one side or both must be wrong, but neither side makes up its figures. How can this be?
As with welfare policy, part of the inconsistency comes from the use of leading questions.25 One *Los Angeles Times* poll in the late 1980s asked,

> Do you think a pregnant woman should or should not be able to get a legal abortion, no matter what the reason?

By a heavy margin (57 percent to 34 percent), Americans said no. As pro-life spokespeople claimed, Americans were pro-life. Should Democratic campaign consultants have advised their clients to flip-flop to the pro-life side? Well, probably not. A few months later, a *CBS News/New York Times* survey asked,

> If a woman wants to have an abortion, and her doctor agrees to it, should she be allowed to have an abortion or not?

By more than a 2:1 margin (58 percent to 26 percent), Americans said yes. As the pro-choice spokespeople claimed, America had a pro-choice majority. Should Republican campaign consultants have advised their clients to flip-flop to the pro-choice side?

Which poll was right? Probably neither. Upon close examination, both survey questions are suspect. Each contains words and phrases that predispose people to answer in one direction. The first question uses the phrase “no matter what the reason.” If forced to choose yes or no unconditionally, some generally pro-choice people will say no, believing that some circumstances are just not sufficiently serious to justify abortion. The CBS/NYT question leans in the opposite direction. A doctor’s approval suggests a considered decision based on medically justifiable grounds. Some generally pro-life people might agree to abortion in such a case.

In addition, Americans distinguish between the morality of behavior and the legality of behavior. A CBS News/ *New York Times* poll asked people whether they agreed or disagreed with the stark claim that “abortion is the same thing as murdering a child,” Americans were deeply split (46 percent agreed, 41 percent disagreed). Similarly, a plurality or majority of Americans regularly agrees that “abortion is morally wrong” (51 percent agreed, 34 percent disagreed in the aforementioned CBS News/New York Times poll).26 On the other hand, a CBS/NYT poll asked the following question:

> Even in cases where I might think abortion is the wrong thing to do, I don’t think the government has any business preventing a woman from having an abortion.

By close to a 3:1 margin (69 percent to 24 percent), Americans agreed with that sentiment. Individualistic Americans favor freedom of choice, especially when it involves preventing government interference. Many Americans who are troubled by abortion nonetheless will not support making it illegal.

Opinions on abortion are especially likely to change depending on the way pollsters ask about the issue, suggesting that the use of leading questions may be insufficient to explain the volatility. More likely, opinions on abortion are too complex for pollsters to capture in a single, simple question. Evidence that pollsters often oversimplify the abortion issue appears in surveys taken by the National Opinion Research Center, which use a more complex question. The NORC question reads as follows:

> Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if

1. the woman’s health is seriously endangered?
2. she became pregnant as a result of rape?
3. there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?
4. the family has low income and cannot afford any more children?
5. she is not married and does not want to marry the man?
6. she is married and does not want any more children?

As Figure 5.4 shows, after moving in a liberal direction in the late 1960s, opinion stabilized at the time of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, stayed remarkably constant for two decades, and then moved a bit in a conservative direction in the late 1990s. These trends across time vary much less than responses do across circumstances.28 Americans are pragmatic, not ideological, when it comes to abortion. They favor the right to choose, but not an unconditional right to choose in every possible circumstance.

In the late 1990s, some pro-life groups began to focus media attention on a procedure called “partial-birth abortion,” in which the fetus is destroyed after it has been partially delivered. Pictures and verbal descriptions of this process, disseminated by pro-life groups, are quite gruesome. The publicity surrounding this particularly distressing form of abortion probably explains why support for pro-choice positions declined during the period (review Figure 5.4). Majorities of Americans have consistently registered opposition to the procedure. The debate over partial-birth abortion reminded Americans of the conditions under which they opposed abortion rights, underscoring the fact that most Americans hold complicated opinions about when abortion should and should not be legal.

Figure 5.5 shows this complexity in a different way. It indicates that very few Americans hold absolute positions on abortion; only a fifth want abortion “always illegal” and only a quarter wish to keep it “always legal.” The majority of Americans hold a more complicated set of preferences that would make abortion legal in some circumstances and illegal in others. Thus, although opinion on abortion has been stable over

---

**Figure 5.4**

Popular Attitudes Toward Abortion Have Been Remarkably Stable Since *Roe v. Wade* (1973)

*Note: Respondents who answered “don’t know” are included in the calculation.*

Characteristics of Public Opinion

Why should the results of measuring public opinion be so sensitive to how it is measured? The characteristics of public opinion often make it very hard to obtain reliable measurements.

Public Opinion Is Uninformed

On many issues, people have little or no information. The extent of popular ignorance is most obvious when surveys pose “factual” questions. As shown in Figure 5.6, only a third of adults over age 36 could identify the political party controlling their state legislatures in 2003. Less than a quarter could identify the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives; more than a third could not even identify the political party in charge. Young adults exhibited even less political knowledge.

Elections are not SAT tests, of course; it is not necessary to know the answers to all sorts of factual questions in order to vote intelligently. But widespread ignorance extends beyond such factual questions to important matters of government and public policy. During the 1995 federal government shutdown, 40 percent of Americans were unaware that the Republicans controlled both houses of Congress (and 10 percent did not know that the president was a Democrat). By more than a 2:1 margin, Americans believed—absolutely wrongly—that the federal government spent more on foreign aid...
than on Medicare. In fact, the United States was spending four times as much on Medicare as on foreign aid.29 Most people pay little attention to politics.

Upon learning the full extent of popular ignorance, some politically involved students react critically, jumping to the conclusion that ordinary Americans are irresponsible people who fall far short of the democratic ideal. Such reactions are understandable, but unjustified. The simple fact is that most people have little time for politics. They work hard to take care of life’s necessities, such as paying bills, caring for families, and nurturing personal relationships—leaving little time or energy to work through the New York Times. Nor do Americans stand out for their inattentiveness to public affairs. Citizens in other countries usually lack political and historical knowledge as well. A British Gallup poll, for example, found that only 40 percent of Britons know that the United States once was part of their empire.30

Those who criticize ordinary citizens for their lack of attention to public affairs often have jobs that enable them to stay informed with little effort. For example, political conversation is a common diversion on university campuses. In such a context, professors and students find it easy to stay informed. Likewise, the jobs of many journalists involve following politics: If they are not informed, they are not doing their job. If everyone worked in a university or for the news media, no doubt we would all be much better informed. But most people do not—a fact that social critics tend to forget.

The general point is that gathering, digesting, and storing information is neither effortless nor free; it is costly. For most Americans, bearing such information costs brings them few immediate benefits.31 Citizens doubt that they can make much difference when earthquakes strike Iran or riots erupt in Venezuela. When faced with a costly activity that has no obvious benefit, many of them quite rationally decide to minimize their costs. Thus, from a logical standpoint, the puzzle is not why so many Americans are ill informed; the puzzle is why so many are as well informed as they are.32

**Figure 5.6**

**Americans Are Not Very Knowledgeable About the Specifics of American Government**

Young people know even less about government than relatively ill-informed older Americans.

**Source:** Representative Democracy in America Project, 2003.
Information costs do not fall equally on all people. Education makes it easier to absorb and organize information; thus it comes as no surprise that more-educated Americans are better informed than less-educated ones (see Figure 5.7). In addition, the benefits of information are not the same for all people on all issues. Most people will be better informed on issues that directly affect their lives or livelihoods. Parents and teachers are especially knowledgeable about school operations and budgets. Steelworkers have strong views on foreign imports. Farmers keep track of cotton and wheat subsidies. Such issue publics are different from the large mass of citizens in that they find relevant information particularly valuable and can gather it more cheaply.\footnote{33}

Of course, some people will bear information costs even when they get little direct benefit from doing so. They may consider it their duty as citizens to be informed, so they stay attuned to public affairs simply because they believe it is the “right thing” to do. Other people follow public affairs because they find it intrinsically interesting in the same way that some follow sports or the arts. For such people, following public affairs is a recreational activity, a luxury. Probably most citizens know as much as they do because they enjoy staying informed, not because they derive any tangible benefit from doing so.\footnote{34}

Why does American ignorance hinder attempts to measure public opinion? Americans are an accommodating people. If a pollster asks us a question, many of us will cooperate by giving an answer, even if we have not thought about the question or have no basis on which to arrive at an answer. An extreme example occurred in a survey asking people to rate 58 ethnic groups. Although one nationality included in the list (“Wisnians”) was fictitious, 29 percent of the sample ranked them anyway.\footnote{35} Surveys that collect meaningless answers will obscure public opinion rather than clarify it.
Public Opinion Is Not Ideological

Another characteristic of public opinion that makes it easy to misinterpret is that even when people have reasonably firm views on issues, those views usually are not connected to each other. In other words, few Americans are ideological.

An ideology is a system of principles and beliefs that ties together a person’s views on a wide range of particular issues. For example, if you are told that Representative Smith is a “liberal” Democrat, it is a safe bet that Smith is pro-choice on abortion, favors gun control, and supports a strong government role in health care. Conversely, if you are told that Representative Jones is a “conservative” Republican, you might guess that she is pro-life, opposes gun control, and thinks that health care should be left to the private sector as much as possible. Such assumptions will seldom be wrong. The reason is that political elites—people who are deeply involved in politics, whether as activists or as office holders—tend to have well-structured ideologies that bind together their positions on different policy issues.

Ordinary citizens are another matter. People with little direct involvement in politics—a group traditionally called the mass public—usually are not ideological. Their views on specific issues do not cluster together like those of elites, nor do their evaluations of party leaders or of political groups. Rather than believe consistently in either activist or minimal government, citizens favor federal spending in some areas but oppose it in others. They like some Democratic politicians but dislike others. They favor toleration for some groups in some situations, but not for other groups in other situations.

Even when the standards for ideological thinking are rather low, the evidence indicates that few people follow conventional political ideologies. For example, when given
the option, one-quarter to one-third of the population will not classify themselves on a liberal–conservative scale, and another one-quarter put themselves exactly in the middle: “moderate, middle of the road.” Furthermore, Americans seem unaware of the ideologies that structure the decisions made by their leaders. During the 2000 campaign, for example, only 59 percent of Americans considered the Republicans the more conservative of the two parties, while 9 percent thought the Democrats were, and 32 percent didn’t know.

Here again, there is a tendency to disparage regular citizens. Critics assume that ordinary Americans form their political attitudes haphazardly or thoughtlessly simply because their preferences do not follow conventional patterns. Here again, we disagree with such judgments. In our view, ideologies are social constructions. Personal views aside, can anyone explain why a person who prefers lower taxes and a strong military necessarily should oppose abortion but not the death penalty and should support strip-club regulations but not gun control? Such issue positions may go together when people polarize across an ideological divide—that is, when they view the political world as a struggle between liberals and conservatives and adopt the many traits that characterize their side—but no comprehensive political philosophy ties all these issue positions together. Indeed, ideologies change over time. Maybe it is political elites who should be viewed critically for conforming to a laundry list of policy preferences that have no logical connection to each other.

Whether you regard ideological thinking as good or bad, however, you should bear one point in mind. Because they presume that ideological thinking is the norm, party and issue activists, media commentators, and many public officials will conclude too much on the basis of opinion polls and voting returns. Support for one variety of government action may indicate nothing about support for another, seemingly similar government action. Support for a candidate’s position on one issue may suggest little or nothing about that candidate’s “mandate” to act on seemingly related issues. The nonideological nature of public opinion means that elites often hear more than the voters are saying.

Public Opinion Is Inconsistent

Given that people often have not thought about issues, and given that most of them do not think ideologically, perhaps it is inevitable that public opinion will send contradictory messages. For example, in 1980, when Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter and the Republicans made striking gains in Congress, many observers interpreted the election results as a “resurgence of conservatism” or a “turn to the right” in American politics. In fact, the data were confusing.

Polls reported that large majorities of the citizenry felt that the federal government was spending too much money and doing too much regulating. Popular sentiments like these seemed to explain Reagan’s victory. But the same polls asked the same people which domestic programs they favored cutting and which areas of business activity they favored deregulating. Surprisingly, pluralities—and often majorities—felt that most domestic activities deserved higher funding or warranted more regulation. Their sentiments about particular spending reductions and regulatory changes did not match the principles they claimed to endorse. Americans were inconsistent.
Findings like these are not unusual. In recent decades, the American people have never delivered a clear mandate either for the Republicans to cut and retrench or for the Democrats to tax and expand. After the Republicans took control of Congress in 1994, for example, most Americans wanted to balance the budget but opposed cutting expensive entitlement programs that accounted for much of the government's deficits. President George W. Bush pushed a tax-cut plan early in his administration that a plurality of voters supported in early polls at the same time they endorsed increasing spending on social security and education. Such contradictory views may be amusing—they recall the old maxim that "everybody wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to die"—but they confuse political debate. One consequence was the gridlock and deficits of the 1980s and 1990s. Both parties could refuse to compromise or to adapt their platforms, firm in the belief that public opinion supported much of what they stood for.

Why is public opinion so inconsistent? Ignorance explains some of the contradictions. People think that the federal budget lavishes money on unpopular programs such as "welfare" and foreign aid, even though such policies account for relatively little federal spending. They also believe that government agencies waste so much money that elected leaders could slice funding without harming essential services. Citizens therefore unrealistically expect painless budget cuts.

Not all examples of inconsistency reflect insufficient and inaccurate information, however. People oppose amending the Constitution but they endorse numerous amendment proposals. They support various fundamental rights, but not for groups they oppose. As Figure 5.8 shows, most citizens favor free speech "for all"—but half would prevent a member of their most disliked group from giving a speech. They favor freedom of the press and freedom of assembly—with "reasonable" exceptions. And they believe in the separation of church and state—but favor prayer in schools. In short, citizens are so consistently inconsistent when applying general principles to specific cases that explanations other than ignorance must be at work.
Figure 5.8  
Americans Tend to Endorse General Principles but Make Numerous Exceptions to Them  

Source: Data are taken from John Sullivan, James Piereson, and George Marcus, Political Tolerance and American Democracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

The first three items show the percentage of people supporting the general principles indicated. The last four items show the percentage of people supporting specific civil liberties for the political or social group they dislike the most. The groups about which people were asked included members of the John Birch Society, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Black Panthers, as well as fascists, communists, socialists, atheists, anti-abortionists, and pro-abortionists.

FIGURE 5.8  
Americans Tend to Endorse General Principles but Make Numerous Exceptions to Them  

SOURCE: Data are taken from John Sullivan, James Piereson, and George Marcus, Political Tolerance and American Democracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

Some social critics contend that Americans are hypocrites. Americans pay lip service to fine-sounding principles, but they do not really believe in these values. They abandon them whenever it is convenient to do so. A more positive interpretation is possible, however. Law professors, newspaper editors, and political activists tend to view rights inflexibly—as rules that government officials must respect at all times. Once leaders start making exceptions, they can water down rights until they provide no protection whatsoever. Few Americans accept such an absolutist perspective, though. They tend to be more practical, to be pragmatists. Rights are good things, but at times they conflict with other values.45

Most citizens are prepared to make trade-offs on a case-by-case basis,46 relaxing rights when they threaten to produce “unreasonable” outcomes that violate “common sense.” Yes, free speech is a good thing—but perhaps not enough to justify allowing Nazi rallies in a neighborhood where Holocaust survivors live. Yes, people should be treated equally—but perhaps it does little harm to favor historically disadvantaged groups when they apply for college as a way to erase social differences. Yes, police
The inconsistencies in public opinion may suggest that voters are buffoons who think that government can provide anything they want. However, what seems like inconsistency may grow from the public’s desire to avoid extremes and seek a practical balance between competing principles.

should not search someone’s home without a good reason—but that does not necessarily mean murderers should go free just because police failed to obtain a search warrant before collecting evidence. To adults familiar with life’s complexities, the realm of real-world politics has to be flexible. They may feel no contradiction in treating rights as guidelines rather than as ironclad rules.47

Governing by Public Opinion?

Never before have American politicians had so much data about public opinion. Indeed, critics regularly complain that politics and government today are “poll-driven.” As we have seen, however, given the characteristics of public opinion, trying to measure and interpret it is far from an exact science. At times it is more like reading tea leaves! Furthermore, even when public opinion is fairly clear, there is no guarantee that policy makers will follow it. Political scientists have tried to determine if public opinion influences policy, and if so, when it does or does not do so.

The Power of Public Opinion

Public opinion may be uninformed, nonideological, and inconsistent—but that does not mean elected officials can ignore it. The public as a whole generally possesses enough information about the political system to understand the choices voters need to make. For example, the public at large understands that the Democrats are to the left of the Republicans on most issues.48 Moreover, even within the same party, the public knew that Ronald Reagan was farther to the right than Richard Nixon and that George McGovern was farther to the left than Jimmy Carter. Political scientist James Stimson has shown that, when numerous survey questions are analyzed together, researchers can find distinct shifts in the general direction of “mood” of the public.
example, after analyzing hundreds of questions, he found that the electorate in fact did shift to the right in the years leading up to Ronald Reagan’s election.49

In the same vein, noted political scientists Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro have argued that, viewed collectively, the public is reasonably “rational.” Analysis of thousands of poll questions asked repeatedly over more than a 40-year period shows that in the aggregate, public opinion is far more stable than the opinions of individual members of the public. When it does shift, public opinion generally reacts to new events and conditions in natural ways. For example, when federal spending goes up, public preferences for continued increases go down, an effect that indicates some broad public recognition of the direction in which government policy has moved.50

Given the stability and sensibility of overall public opinion, elected officials usually feel compelled to give voters what they want. Page and Shapiro have used their long-term survey research to confirm that American policies follow public opinion. When trends in opinion are clearly moving in one direction, public policy generally follows. The more pronounced the trend in opinion, the more likely policy is to follow it.51 Such findings illustrate the problem with assuming that an uninformed, nonideological, and inconsistent public will be unable to exercise their rights in a democracy.

Given the stability and sensibility of overall public opinion, elected officials usually feel compelled to give voters what they want. Page and Shapiro have used their long-term survey research to confirm that American policies follow public opinion. When trends in opinion are clearly moving in one direction, public policy generally follows. The more pronounced the trend in opinion, the more likely policy is to follow it.51 Such findings illustrate the problem with assuming that an uninformed, nonideological, and inconsistent public will be unable to exercise their rights in a democracy.

Why can a limited public nonetheless guide the behavior of their government? The answer lies in the distinction between individuals and aggregates. Even if particular voters have little grasp of public affairs, as a group they may be much more capable—with the process of aggregation canceling out individual error and enabling overall public preferences to emerge. Think of a grade school orchestra. Individually, the young musicians are so unsteady that it is difficult to identify the tune each is playing, but put them all together and the audience can make out “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” So it is with public opinion. On some issues and at some times, public opinion and public policy may not be closely aligned, but looking at the general direction of public policy over the long run reveals that it tends to follow public opinion.

The Limits of Public Opinion: Gun Control

Policy makers may consider voter preferences when they shape policy, but the public does not always get what it wants. Even if individual politicians are highly responsive to public opinion, the system as a whole need not be. The Columbine shootings provide a stark illustration. On April 20, 1999, two deranged students at Columbine High School in Colorado killed a teacher and 12 of their schoolmates. They wounded more than 20 others. The killers used two shotguns, a semi-automatic pistol, and a semi-automatic rifle in their murderous spree. This was the fourth high-profile school shooting in the United States in little more than a year. Whether because of the cumulative impact or the sheer scale of the rampage, the Columbine tragedy energized elected officials.

In the Senate, a juvenile-crime bill had been going nowhere fast. Anti-gun legislators decided to use this bill as a vehicle for passing new gun control measures, sensing that the Columbine shootings might allow them to get a bill through the law-making process. They proposed an amendment to the bill that tightened restrictions on sales at gun shows. In a highly publicized climax to the renewed debate, the Senate adopted the amendment only after Vice-President Al Gore cast a tie-breaking vote (under the Constitution, the vice-president votes when the Senate is tied). By much wider
margins, the Senate adopted other provisions mandating trigger locks or lock boxes with every handgun sale, outlawing imports of high-capacity ammunition clips, and raising the age at which juveniles could buy handguns and assault weapons. The amended bill easily passed the Senate.

In the House, Republican leaders agreed that the aroused state of public opinion required some response. Speaker Denny Hastert (R-IL) commented, “This is one of those rare times when the national consensus demands that we act.” He promised that the House would pass a gun control measure.52 But the issue was now thoroughly entangled in partisan politics. Vice-President Gore obviously believed that his highly visible gun control stance would aid his 2000 presidential bid, and congressional Democrats hoped to use the issue to take over Congress. The key target group was suburban voters—especially women, whom polls showed to be more in favor of gun control than were men.53 To appeal to them, Democrats framed the issue as one of protecting children by restricting access to guns.

The Democrats were not united, however. A senior Democrat, John Dingell of Michigan, was an avid hunter and a former National Rifle Association board member. Dingell worked with Republican leaders to develop an amendment that would soften the Senate’s gun-show restrictions. Forty-five Democrats followed Dingell, helping pass the alternative provision. Then, angry liberals who believed the weakened legislation did not go far enough joined angry conservatives who felt it still went too far. Together, they defeated the bill. Gun control was dead!

At first glance, this story seems to be one of irresponsible or even corrupt behavior by the Congress. The story line offered by the media was simple: Public opinion counted less than the campaign contributions and arm twisting of the NRA. Certainly the media interpretation was correct in one respect: The U.S. public favors limits on guns. As Figure 5.9 indicates, large majorities favor the specific provisions—background checks, trigger locks, restrictions on magazine size—that were part of the rejected bill.

**Figure 5.9**
Most Americans Support Gun Control Proposals

Different polls showed a high degree of agreement on these questions. How, then, could representatives of the people fail to pass gun control? The answer has two parts, one institutional, the other behavioral.

Institutionally, members of Congress represent congressional districts of approximately 630,000 people. The national distribution of opinion is of little importance to members of Congress. What counts is the distribution of opinion in their home districts, especially among the voters who elected them. Many of these district electorates differ significantly from the country as a whole. Opinion on gun control varies according to whether someone lives in an urban or rural environment, for example, with rural residents far more supportive of gun rights. Not surprisingly, therefore, 81 percent of the representatives from rural districts voted for Dingell’s amendment, including a majority of Democrats (see Figure 5.10). Although no detailed study is available, we think it likely that most representatives who voted against gun control voted in accordance with the sentiments of voting majorities in their districts.

Still, given the extremely high level of support for the gun-control provisions, it is likely that some representatives did vote against district preferences. Was this the NRA at work? To some extent, perhaps. But remember that interest-group endorsements and campaign contributions don’t vote. There have to be voters in the district who will act on the group’s support. That is the second part of the explanation for the failure of gun control. Behaviorally, supporters of gun control feel less strongly about it than do opponents. As Democratic Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-MO) conceded, “The 80 percent that are for gun safety just aren’t for it very much. They’re not intense.”

Indeed, although most polls registered a high level of support for gun control after Columbine, the same polls indicated that the public did not regard it as one of the more important issues facing the country. Gun control ranked relatively low compared to issues such as social security, health care, Medicare, and education. One national poll had gun control 12th in importance as a voting issue in the next election. Not many supporters of gun control are intense, single-issue voters (if they vote at all), but oppo-
nents of gun control are classic single-issue voters. Indeed, Representative Dingell pointed out that popular support for gun control was at least as high earlier in the decade as it was after Columbine. Despite that fact, Democrats lost their congressional majority in 1994 in part because of the party’s support for the ban on assault weapons.

Why are gun-control supporters less intense about the issue than its opponents are? Part of the explanation seems to be cultural. Guns are essential to rural culture, especially in the South and West. For many rural voters, guns are a part of everyday life; they are not alien and frightening mechanical devices as they may seem to suburban voters. As former Senator Alan Simpson of Wyoming once commented, “Where I come from, people think gun control means how steady can you hold your rifle.” Such voters view gun control laws as government interference with their way of life, an attack on their values.

By contrast, gun-control supporters see restricting guns as little more than one method to reduce violence. They have relatively low expectations for gun control, believing that dangerous criminals will find ways to get around restrictive laws. It is hard to feel passionate about laws that would have such a minor impact. Gun-control supporters are so doubtful about the effectiveness of restrictions that they seldom retaliate against elected officials who stand on the other side. They lack intensity. This example therefore illustrates the imperfect connection between aggregate public opinion and national public policy.

Chapter Summary

Public opinion is a basic element of democratic politics. For the people to “rule,” their opinions must translate into public laws and policies. However, measuring public opinion is an inexact science at best. Sample design and question wording make interpreting opinion polls very tricky. And on many issues—among them abortion—the public truly does not have an answer that is easily quantified.

Even when public opinion seems relatively clear, governing by opinion poll may not be a good idea. Citizens tend to be uninformed, so polling data may not represent firmly held opinions. Preferences can change with little notice, and the public may not connect two issues that elected officials consider clearly related. Thus, leaders often misinterpret poll results. Politicians cannot stick too closely to short-term fluctuations in the polls if they wish to remain in office.

Rather, public opinion exerts its influence largely through the calculations of officials who try to anticipate what they must do to win reelection. Clearly, elected officials will hesitate to defy the will of an aroused public—but they pay more attention to the wishes of their own voters than they do to the wishes of the American public as a whole.

Key Terms

- focus groups, p. 10
- ideology, p. 19
- information cost, p. 17
- issue public, p. 18
- mass public, p. 19
- measurement error, p. 11
- political efficacy, p. 6
- political elite, p. 19
- public opinion, p. 4
- sampling error, p. 8
- selection bias, p. 9
- socialization, p. 4
Suggested Readings

Of General Interest


Page, Benjamin, and Robert Shapiro. The Rational Public. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Prize-winning study of public opinion from the 1930s to the 1990s. The authors argue that, viewed as a collectivity, the public is rational, however imperfect the individual opinions that members of the public hold.


Focused Studies


Jacobs, Lawrence and Robert Shapiro. Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2000. Provocative argument that today's politicians follow their own strongly held preferences and that polls are only a tool used to determine how best to frame the positions that the politicians personally favor.

Schuman, Howard, Charlotte Steeh, and Lawrence Bobo. Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985. Thoughtful examination of racial attitudes. The authors find that Americans have come to accept principles of equal treatment but remain quite divided on government policies designed to bring about racial equality.


On the Web

Academic organizations archive a great deal of public opinion data on political and social topics.

www.aapor.org
www.ropercenter.uconn.edu
www.norc.uchicago.edu

Some of the best sites are the American Association for Public Opinion Research, the Roper Center, and the National Opinion Research Center. The AAPOR site links to the best scholarly journal of public opinion, Public Opinion Quarterly. The world's largest collection of public opinion data can be found at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. This collection includes a huge amount of commercial and academic poll data.

The Roper Center's service—iPoll—requires subscription, but your university may be able to help you gain access. The National Opinion Research Center site contains the 23 General Social Surveys (GSS) carried out since 1972.

www.pollingreport.com

The Polling Report summarizes recent media polls from major media outlets such as CNN/Gallup and the New York Times, among others. This site will have more current information than the academic sites, but because news organizations polling about trendy issues sometimes use inconsistent or inadequately tested question wordings, the findings are more subject to question and interpretation.