Chapter 9 - Public Opinion - Characteristics

AP Government
In a democratic republic like the United States, where the ultimate authority for all government actions is “the people,” the will of the majority structures debate and itself guides public opinion.

In the United States, it may truly be said that public opinion is king.
Changes in Public Opinion

Opinion polls fluctuate greatly over time.

To the extent that contemporary politicians live by the polls, it is also true that their political power can evaporate quickly.
At the beginning of 2003, nearly 90 percent of the American public approved of George W. Bush’s handling of the war on terrorism and over 60 percent approved of his handling of the economy.

By fall 2005, less than 50 percent approved of his handling of terrorism and approval of his handling of the economy had dropped below 35 percent, where it remained well into 2006 and 2007.
Popular approval of President George W. Bush’s handling of the situation in Iraq dropped sharply from 2003 to 2004, although the president’s policies in Iraq did not change during this period. Does this mean the president was indifferent to public opinion? Should presidents change their policies in response to the polls?

NOTE: N = 1,004 adults nationwide. Margin of error is ±3.


FIGURE 9.1 President Bush’s Falling Approval Rating
## Characteristics of Public Opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Public opinion is the values and attitudes that people have about issues, events, and personalities. | • Direction  
• Intensity  
• Saliency  
• Latency |
Public opinion has direction.

Whatever the response to a public opinion poll (yes or no; more or less; 1 or 100) people have opinions about proper directions and preferred alternatives.

Liberals are said to be on the “left,” and conservatives are said to be on the “right.”
If “direction” measures what people think, **intensity** refers to how deeply individuals hold a given opinion and how likely they are to act on it.

Not all opinions are equally felt by citizens, so not all opinions are equally consequential for politics.
Individual vs. Overall

If direction and intensity characterize individual opinions, saliency and latency are characteristics of overall opinion.

Salient opinion is that which enjoys widespread public attention and is a high priority.

Latent opinion may be widespread but generally remains in the background unmolded, unmobilized, and uncrystallized.
Ideas
The Marketplace of Ideas

Different ideas and opinions compete for democratic acceptance and legitimacy in a "marketplace of ideas."

In theory, the best or most popular issues will rise to the top, having survived the competition of the "idea market."
Idea Market

• The American “idea market” has produced consensus around many core issues, some of which are so consensual that they are no longer actively debated.

• Such consensus is often a cause of “latent” opinion.

• There is substantial consensus on broad concepts like democracy, liberty, and equality of opportunity.
Negative

• Negative consequence of the “marketplace of ideas” is that unpopular ideas might not be given a chance to compete, regardless of their potential merit.
• Ideas seem at first glance to be unpopular
• Potentially good ideas are likely to go unexpressed.
• Ideas do not receive the consideration that might make them seem more appealing.
• Differences in public opinion can be very valuable.
Gender Gap

• Differing opinions of men and women often appear in polls.
• Race, ideology, age are other factors that can influence public opinion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government Action</th>
<th>Approve of Action (%)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Going to war against Iraq (2003)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brokering a cease-fire in Yugoslavia instead of using NATO air strikes (1999)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending the ban on homosexuals in the military (1993)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in a military operation against a Somali warlord (1993)</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to war against Iraq (1991)</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• **Public Opinion** – Denotes the values and attitudes that people have about issues, events, and personalities.

• **Values (Beliefs)** – Represent deep-rooted goals, aspirations, and ideals that shape individuals' perceptions of political issues and events.

• **Political ideology** – Complex and interrelated set of beliefs and values that form a general philosophy about government.
Attitude

• Attitude or opinion – a specific view about a particular issue, personality, or event.
Referendum

• Populist movement
• Initiative and Referendum are procedures that allow for direct popular legislation at state level.
• Adopt at National level?

Results of 2005 Netherlands referendum on European constitution
Equality of Opportunity

• All individuals should be allowed to seek personal and material success.
• Freedom to use whatever talents and wealth we possess to reach our full potential.
• Success linked to personal effort ability.
• Other Common Fundamental Values of Americans
  – Individual freedoms
  – Democracy
American Support for Fundamental Values

• 95% - Equality of Opportunity
  – Favor equal opportunity in employment and education

• 75% - Liberty
  – Right to freedom of speech is essential

• 95% - Democracy
  – Public officials should be chosen by majority vote.
**EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY**
- 95% agree

**LIBERTY**
- 75% agree

**DEMOCRACY**
- 95% agree

**ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE**
While Americans disagree about many issues, they seem to agree on fundamental values. Virtually all Americans agree that equality of opportunity, liberty, and democracy are extremely important. Is this agreement on fundamentals important? Could America be "one nation" if Americans did not share some basic commonality of outlook?

**FIGURE 9.2 Americans’ Support for Fundamental Values**

Political Socialization
Political Socialization

• The process through which underlying political beliefs and values are formed.
• Citizens need to share some fundamental beliefs in a democracy.
• Feelings about the economy, government, the military form the basis of our socialization.
Agents of Socialization

• Social institutions that help shape individuals’ basic political beliefs and values.
  – Families
  – Social groups
  – Education
  – Prevailing political conditions
Family

- Initial orientation to politics come from the family.
- Party preferences.
- Not always the case in adulthood.
Social Groups

• Membership in certain social groups shape our political orientation.
  – Involuntary – Gender and Racial groups
  – Voluntary – Political parties, labor unions, religions, education and occupational groups

• Changes in social class can change social groups.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>In Favor (%)</th>
<th>Opposed (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White nonevangelical Protestant</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White non-Hispanic Catholic</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Protestant</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women and men should have equal roles.</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion should never be allowed.</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government should adopt national health insurance.</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The United States should not concern itself with other nations’ problems.</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government should see to fair treatment in jobs for African Americans.</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government should provide fewer services to reduce government spending.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** American National Election Studies, 2004 data, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan (electionstudies.org).

**Note:** The figures show the percentage of respondents in each category agreeing with the statement.

**Analyzing the Evidence**

What factors might explain the relationship between education and opinion? Some commentators believe that many college courses have a liberal political orientation. Do you agree? How have your college courses affected your opinions on social and political issues?
Differences in Public Opinion

Political divisions between “liberals” and “conservatives” reflect relatively consistent differences among Americans. - specific issues - core areas of concern.

Demographic differences (between and among racial and ethnic groups and between men and women) persist.

Define many of the important political battles in American politics.
ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE

Although America’s system of legally mandated racial segregation ended nearly half a century ago, its effects continue to linger. In contemporary America, blacks and whites have different perspectives on race relations. Blacks are more likely to perceive race relations as bad and to view themselves as victims of discrimination. Whites are more likely to believe that blacks are treated fairly and have a real opportunity to succeed. Do you think that black-white differences have increased or decreased in the past few decades? Are these differences of opinion important?

FIGURE 9.3 Disagreement among Blacks and Whites (top)
FIGURE 9.3 Disagreement among Blacks and Whites

- **Does the government’s response to Hurricane Katrina show that racial inequality is still a major problem?**
  - **Blacks’ Responses:** 71%
    - Yes: 22%
    - No: 7%
    - Don’t know: 7%
  - **Whites’ Responses:**
    - Yes: 32%
    - No: 56%
    - Don’t know: 12%

- **Do you generally favor or oppose affirmative action programs for racial minorities?**
  - **Whites’ Responses:**
    - Favor: 44%
    - Oppose: 49%
    - Unsure: 7%
  - **Blacks’ Responses:**
    - Favor: 70%
    - Oppose: 21%
    - Unsure: 9%

Study - Pew Research Center

• Guarantee Food and Shelter
  – Whites – 62%
  – Blacks – 80%

• Help the Needy
  – Whites – 55%
  – Blacks – 72%

• Hispanics
  – 54% believe education is important to advance in society
  – 60% believe immigration is good for America

• Non-Latinos
  – Believe immigration is a threat to America 60%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Democratic (%)</th>
<th>Republican (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE
Members of America’s Latino community share a linguistic and cultural heritage, but they are not politically homogeneous. For example, most Mexican Americans and Puerto Rican Americans are staunchly Democratic, whereas most Cuban Americans are loyal Republicans. What factors might account for these differences?
Political Ideology
Party Leaders

- Democrats - More and more Liberal
- Republicans – More and more Conservative
- Hard to find Conservative Democrats and almost impossible to find Liberal Republicans
Political Conditions

• Conditions in society that shape political affiliation
  – Federalists vs. Anti-Federalist
  – Civil War – Republicans
  – Great Depression and WWII – Democrats & FDR
  – Southern Democrats now Republicans in 1960’s

• Any group’s political outlooks shaped by circumstances at that time
Political Ideology

- Ideas and beliefs through which they interpret politics
- Liberal
  - Support for political and social reform.
  - Extensive government intervention in economy
  - Expansion of federal services
  - Efforts on behalf of poor, minorities, women
  - Greater concern for consumers and environment
  - Generally, support abortion rights, Gay rights, oppose religious expression in government
  - Internationally, arms control, aid to poor nations, no military intervention.
Political Ideology

• Conservative
  – Support social and economic status quo
  – Large and powerful government a threat to citizens freedom
  – Oppose expansion of government
  – Oppose government intervention in business
  – Oppose abortion, support school prayer
  – Support use of military to intervene in other countries.
Lack of Political Knowledge

- 25% of respondents to one study could name their two senators.
- 29% knew their U.S. representative.
- Less than half the 1st 10 amendments were known as the Bill of Rights.
Political Labels

• People - Describe themselves as Liberal or Conservative
• Many individuals who accept only part of one or the other.
• Liberal on social issues and conservative on economic issues.
• Poor guides for decision making.
Larry Bartels

• Lower-class citizens favor tax cuts for the rich because of “misplaced self-interest”

• Widespread inattentiveness to politics weakens American democracy.

• Knowledge doesn’t always translate into political power but the lack of knowledge is almost certain to translate into political weakness.
Shaping Public Opinion
Shaping Opinion

Political opinions are also shaped in the “marketplace of ideas” by:

– political leaders
– private groups
– the media
Governments and politicians seek to monitor and shape public opinion to build public support for governmental actions and policies.

In recent years, politicians have increasingly used technologies such as public opinion polls and media appeals, to shape public opinion.
Educational Policies

• The Bush administration paid a conservative African American radio pundit, Armstrong Williams to comment favorably on its educational policies.

Other political actors, such as outside interest groups and the mass media, seek to sell their ideas and influence “tastes” in the idea marketplace.
Political and Economic Groups

• Private Groups seek to shape public opinion on specific issues.
  – Pro-Life, Gun Advocates, Labor Unions, etc

• Conservative Groups
  – U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Public Affairs Council, Heritage Foundation, Hoover Institution, American Enterprise Institute

• Liberal Groups
Communication Media

• Powerful force operating in “marketplace of ideas”
• Enormous effect on popular attitudes and opinions – How it frames specific events
• Examples
  – Broadcasters and the media were very supportive of security policies following anthrax letter attacks that targeted members of the media.
  – Campaign in Afghanistan and domestic antiterrorism campaigns presented in positive light.
Media - Problems

• The documentary *The Selling of the Pentagon* exposed the government manipulation of public opinion about Vietnam by planting news stories.

• Dan Rather was forced into retirement for airing a report about President Bush’s Air National Guard service prior to the 2004 Presidential election.

• Failed to verify facts.
Public Opinion

• An opinion given off the top of your head is known as a “doorstep” opinion.
• The American public frequently lacks adequate information on policies.
Public Opinion

• Public opinion moves predictably in response to changing political, economic, and social circumstances.

• It is rational primarily because random errors in individual responses cancel each other out according to Page and Shapiro.
Polling and Sampling
Random Digit Dialing

- National samples are usually drawn using a technique called random digit dialing.
- Computerized random-number generator produces a list of as many 10 digit numbers as the pollster deems necessary.
If done **correctly**, public opinion polls are remarkably accurate snapshots of public sentiment at any given time and reasonably good predictors of election outcomes.

Poor construction and mistaken interpretations of polls can misrepresent public opinion:

- poor sampling
- question wording and ordering
- illusion of saliency
- illusion of central tendency
Missing the Mark in Polling

• Jesse Ventura
  – Reform Party candidate in three way race.
  – Changed the composition of electorate in 1998 in Minnesota.
  – Pollsters did not pick up on this trend.
Other Example - Selection Bias

- 1936 – Literary Digest predicted Republican Alf Landon would defeat Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt.
- Poll relied on telephone directories and automobile registration for sampling frame
- Only the wealthy owned telephones and autos.
Nonresponse Bias

- More individuals refuse to answer pollsters’ questions – using caller id or answering machines.
- Growth of cell phone use with “do-not-call” legislation (poor only have cell phones in some cases).
- Middle and upper class individuals are more likely to respond to surveys than working-class people.
- Hasn’t undermined a national survey, yet.
Survey Design

• Source of measurement error is the wording of the survey questions.
• Poorly formatted questions, bad vocabulary, ambiguous questions, built-in bias.
**The Question**

President Clinton has proposed setting aside approximately two thirds of an expected budget surplus to fix the Social Security system. What do you think the leaders in Washington should do with the remainder of the surplus?

**Variation 1:** Should the money be used for a tax cut, or should it be used to fund new government programs?

- Tax cut: 60%
- New programs: 25%
- Other purposes: 11%
- Don’t know: 4%

**Variation 2:** Should the money be used for a tax cut or should it be spent on programs for education, the environment, health care, crime fighting, and military defense?

- Tax cut: 22%
- Programs: 69%
- Other purposes: 6%
- Don’t know: 3%

• **Push Polling** – Asking a respondent a loaded question about a political candidate.
  – Elicit response sought by pollster
  – Shape respondent’s perception of the candidate.

• “If you knew that Lamar Alexander had raised taxes six times in Tennessee, would you be more or less inclined to vote for him.”

• **Salient Interests** – Issues truly important to voters.

• **Illusion of Salience** – What politicians think is important but is not.
The Constitution

• The framers of the Constitution strongly favored representative government rather than direct democracy because of the capacity for compromise.

• Although most politicians deny being “poll-driven,” most politicians at the national level (and all modern presidents) use polls to make decisions.
Policy

• Inconsistencies between opinions and policy could be resolved with a broader use of the ballot initiative.
• Public support is volatile and changes over time.
• Public opinion often lacks coherence and is internally contradictory.