

# PUBLIC OPINION

*Public opinion* refers to the views of the American people on the issues facing the nation. It can reflect deep divisions in American society on such emotional questions as abortion or homosexual rights, or demonstrate the broad consensus that exists on the war against terrorism. Attitudes that Americans have may change quickly, however. A president's approval ratings, for example, are very sensitive to the cycles of the economy and world events — as both George Bush and George W. Bush can attest, the country rallies around the president in time of war. Certain issues, moreover, take center stage because of demographics. For example, social security and prescription drugs were important issues during the 2000 campaign because baby boomers are approaching retirement age and they vote.

## Measuring Public Opinion

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A television station flashes a question on the screen and gives viewers two 800 numbers to call: one if you agree with the statement and the other if you disagree. Your Internet provider asks, "Do you think the president is doing a good job handling the economy?", and asks you to click yes or no. These are attempts to gauge public opinion by polls. But the two examples tell us very little about what the people who called in or clicked online think. They are **straw polls** and are highly unreliable because they emphasize quantity (the more people who respond, the better) rather than the quality of the sample. Also keep in mind that in phone-in or Internet polls, people who feel strongly about an issue can call in or log on as many times as they like.

**Random sampling**, a statistical technique that ensures that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in the poll, produces valid results however. A sample of between 1,200 and 1,500 persons can represent all Americans in terms of such key variables as gender, ethnicity/race, income, and education. The same approach is used for smaller target groups such as all eligible voters or all women. A poll is still an estimate, and none is completely accurate. A **margin of error** of + or - 3% is common. If a presidential preference poll shows candidate A getting 53% of the vote and candidate B 47%, the difference might actually be as great as 12 percentage points (56% to 44%) or the election might be too close to call (50% to 50%).

In the fall of 1936, the *Literary Digest* polled over two million Americans on whether they planned to vote for President Franklin Roosevelt or his Republican challenger, Governor Alf Landon of Kansas. The magazine predicted an overwhelming Landon victory when, in fact, Roosevelt won in a landslide. The error was the result of a sample bias. The people included in the poll were drawn from automobile registration lists and telephone directories. Those who owned cars and had phones in the midst of the Depression were the more affluent, and they were much more likely to vote Republican than the population as a whole.

In addition to sample bias, the questions asked and how the poll is conducted can skew results. For example, "Do you believe that convicted serial killers should be put to death?" will get a much different answer than, "Do you believe in capital punishment?" Pollsters need to avoid

loaded questions or phrases that might prompt a particular response. Most polls today are conducted over the telephone through computer-assisted **random digit dialing**. Numbers are called until the target sample is reached; wrong numbers, unanswered calls, and hang-ups are not a factor. Factors such as the physical appearance, dress, and demeanor of the interviewer do not come into play in a telephone poll as they might during an in-person poll.

One type of poll that is particularly controversial is the **exit poll**. On Election Day, every tenth voter in selected precincts is asked how he/she voted when leaving the polling place. The purpose of an exit poll is to predict the outcome of an election as soon after the polls close as possible. The news media uses such polls. In the 2000 election, exit poll data from Florida was misinterpreted and the state was first awarded to Al Gore and then to George Bush. Most Americans consider voting a very private matter, and will often not answer exit poll questions candidly.

Polling is pervasive in American politics. Pollsters are key members of a campaign staff; candidates want to know what issues the voters care about and whether their message is getting across. Presidents beginning with Franklin Roosevelt commissioned polls to take the public pulse on a broad range of policy and political questions; President Clinton was often criticized for allowing polls to actually determine policy options. News organizations, including the major networks and cable outlets along with national newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, routinely conduct polls and publish or air the results. It is not uncommon for the poll to become the story. During presidential primaries and the general election, the media focuses on polls to determine which candidate is ahead; coverage becomes less about issues and more like a horse race.

## **Political Socialization**

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Political socialization refers to the way in which individuals learn about the political process and develop their political views. It is, to a large degree, an informal process with the family, school, and the media as key factors in shaping a person's political outlook.

Although teenagers may shudder to think that they have anything in common with their parents, political values are passed down from generation to generation. Things said around the dinner table and off-hand comments made during an election campaign have an impact. Studies have shown that people tend to share their parents' politics, particularly when it comes to party affiliation. If the parents are Democrats, the likelihood is that their children will vote Democratic as well.

Schools inculcate political values in direct and indirect ways. Basic facts about the American political system are introduced in the elementary grades, and typically high school students take a U.S. government course that covers how the Congress, the President, and the courts function and interact. But school is also the first laboratory of politics. Children learn about voting, campaigning for office, and candidate speeches when they run for class monitor or student body president, or just participate in school elections.

Newspapers and magazines, television, and the Internet are essential sources of political information. The media plays a role in setting the nation's political agenda — the issues that people consider important for the government to tackle — simply by the amount of space or air time given to a particular story. The importance of the media in political socialization, particularly compared to family and school, is open to debate. While Americans watch a great deal of television, they are not necessarily tuned into either local or national news programs, the explosion of 24-hour all-news cable stations notwithstanding. Moreover, there is a difference between the viewing as well as the reading habits of adults and young people.

Political socialization is a lifelong process; it does not stop when a person moves out of the family home or finishes high school. Another group of variables come into play that help explain the political attitudes of different groups within American society. These include religion, race/ethnicity, gender, region, and age. Income and class are involved as well. Wealthy Americans are much more likely to consider themselves conservatives.

As a rule of thumb, the more religious a person is in terms of beliefs and practices, the more politically conservative he/she tends to be. The “religious right,” associated with fundamentalist Protestant groups affiliated with Reverends Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, has been an important constituency of the Republican Party since the 1980s. But the principal is valid across denominational lines. An evangelical Protestant and a religiously observant Jew both are likely to support vouchers for students attending private schools. When level of observance is taken out of the equation, a different picture emerges. As a general rule, Protestants are more conservative than either Jews or Catholics, both of which have traditionally supported the Democratic Party. Jews remain the most liberal of any religious group. There is little data on American Muslims, but one would expect that they would be strong social conservatives on issues such as abortion, school prayer, and family, but have more liberal opinions on economic questions such as the minimum wage. You should be aware that other factors come into play as well. Well-to-do Catholics may well support Republicans, while a party's or candidate's position on the Middle East may affect both Jewish and Muslim voters.

There are sharp differences between racial/ethnic groups on a variety of political questions. In contrast to whites, African Americans oppose the death penalty, support affirmative action, and favor less spending on defense. To the extent that they could vote, blacks identified with the Republicans, the “party of Lincoln,” until the 1930s. Since the New Deal, African Americans have voted in overwhelming numbers for Democratic candidates; Bill Clinton was a beneficiary of that support in 1992 and 1996.

Hispanic Americans also traditionally back Democrats, but not to the same extent as blacks. Nor is there necessarily an association of interests among racial/ethnic groups. Data collected in the late 1990s, for example, showed that a higher percentage of Hispanics favored capital punishment than did whites. There are also significant differences within the Hispanic community: Cuban-Americans tend to be more affluent than Mexican Americans or immigrants from Central America, and more politically conservative. Their strong anti-Castro, anti-Communist views are more closely aligned with the Republican Party.

The **gender gap** refers to the fact that women and men have significantly different positions on a range of political issues and the relative strengths of the major parties among women voters.

Women are less supportive of defense spending and the commitment of American troops than men; they give priority to assistance to the poor and unemployed, education, and gun control. A popular bumper sticker that asks the question, “What if schools had all the money they ever needed and the Pentagon had to hold a bake sale to buy a B-1 bomber?”, summarizes the differences. The issues that concern women are traditionally associated with the Democratic Party, and women are more likely to vote for Democrats. Ronald Reagan was so concerned about the gender gap in 1980 that he pledged to appoint the first woman to the Supreme Court in an attempt to narrow it.

Although the mobility of Americans has reduced regional differences to an extent, these differences still remain. The South remains more socially conservative than the rest of the country. It also went through a political transformation in the last quarter of the twentieth century. From the end of Reconstruction to the 1960s, the “solid South” meant that the Democratic Party dominated politics in the states of the Confederacy. The Republicans began to make inroads with Richard Nixon’s Southern strategy; today, Republicans not only control many of the Southern congressional delegations, but the state legislatures as well. Certain issues are more important in one part of the country than another. Water resources and access to public lands are vital questions to people in the Southwest and Mountain West, but probably would not even register in public opinion polls in the Northeast.

The population of the United States is getting older; the fastest growing age group are those over 65. The “graying of America” has and will continue to influence the issues that elected officials need to pay attention to, for instance the solvency of social security and Medicare benefits. Younger Americans, whatever their political concerns may be, lack the clout to put their concerns on the national agenda. Not only do they not have the numbers, they also have the lowest voter turnout. The case of older Americans illustrates an important point — public opinion is often explained by personal interest, particularly when it comes to things like cutting the capital gains tax, increasing deductions for child care, making more loans available for college, or raising the minimum wage.

## **Political Ideology**

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**Political ideology** is a coherent set of beliefs about politics and the role of government. Consistency over a wide range of issues is considered a vital element of a political ideology. The lack of consistency in the positions taken by elected officials and voter behavior suggest that American politics is non-ideological. George W. Bush called himself a “compassionate conservative” — he favored returning power to the states but was prepared to enhance the role of the federal government in education. Many Americans have no problem supporting more spending on defense (conservative) while agreeing with limits on prayer in the public schools (liberal). Even if non-ideological, most people recognize that American politics operate within a narrow range in the middle of the political spectrum, and the terms “liberal” and “conservative” are useful in defining the limits of that range.

The meanings of liberal and conservative have changed over time. Nineteenth-century liberalism was associated with the principles of *laissez-faire* — government should keep its hands off business. Conservatives, responding to the excesses of the French Revolution, opposed change and put their trust in traditional institutions such as the monarchy and the church. In the twenty-first century United States, liberals call on the federal government in particular to regulate the economy in the public interest and help those who cannot help themselves; they strongly oppose any government attempt to restrict personal freedom. Conservatives, on the other hand, favor less intrusion from Washington, and want power to flow back to states and local governments. They believe that the government does have a role to play, however, in promoting certain types of social behavior, for example, programs that encourage abstinence. **Libertarians**, usually considered to be on the political right, believe in maximizing individual freedom and severely curtailing the power of the state. They reject both the liberal government as regulator and the conservative government as moral arbiter. The following chart summarizes liberal and conservative positions on several important policy areas:

<b>Liberal and Conservative Positions on Key Issues</b>		
<i>Issue</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Conservative</i>
Abortion	Pro-choice	Pro-life
School prayer	Oppose	Favor
Defense spending	Spend less	Spend more
Crime	Focus on underlying social causes	Focus on law enforcement; longer sentences
United Nations	Positive; force for world peace	Somewhat negative; promotes world government
Affirmative action	Favor	Oppose
Regulation of business	Support	Oppose; favor deregulation

The chart reflects views typically held by people who considered themselves liberal or conservative before September 11, 2001. In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the attitudes of Americans on a range of foreign policy and national defense questions quickly changed. There was broad agreement on the need to intervene militarily in Afghanistan and to bolster defense (including homeland defense) spending. This suggests how events can affect public opinion and blur political labels.