

Chapter 5 OUTLINE

I. What is Public Opinion?

- Public opinion is an important element in all kinds of democracy. It influences politicians either actively (as in popular democracies) or passively (as in responsible democracies).

II. Sources of Public Opinion

A. Socialization

- Socialization refers to the ways in which people learn beliefs and values. Sometimes the learning takes place as a result of explicit teaching, and sometimes it results from the less conscious observation or imitation of others.

B. Personal Experiences

- Some of the opinions people hold are based on their own experiences. For example, 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.

C. Self-Interest

- People sometimes vote based on self-interest. People who are particularly affected by policies hold opinions about those policies, and may vote based on those opinions.

D. Education

- One aspect of education, higher education, results in a somewhat more tolerant outlook.

E. Reference Groups

- Members of various social groups often differ significantly in the opinions they hold. 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.

F. The Media

- Sometimes the media shape's public opinion and sometimes they do not. One study found that television and newspaper exposure during a presidential campaign had only marginal effects on preexisting views.

III. Measuring Public Opinion

- With the advent of modern survey research in the 1930s, public opinion became a much more powerful political force.

A. Sampling Error

- The Gallup Organization is one of the recognized polling firms. Survey research is the technical term for the scientific design and administration of public opinion polls. If selected randomly, a poll of 1,500 people can give accurate results even for the entire nation. A sample of this size would produce results within plus or minus 3 percentage points 95 percent of the time. But the key is that there be no selection bias in obtaining the sample.

B. Selection Bias

- Increasingly, politicians are relying on focus groups to determine how the public will respond to ideas and proposals. Other methods of gauging public opinion are mail surveys, call-in surveys, and Internet polls. All of these are less reliable than scientific polls.

C. Measurement Error

- A unique problem with measuring public opinion is that opinions are subjective beliefs and individuals may not have given much consideration to beliefs prior to expressing them to a pollster.

1. Confusing Questions: The Holocaust Poll Fiasco

- An example of how wording the questions of a poll can affect poll results is the poll conducted on what Americans think about the Holocaust.

2. Leading Questions: The Welfare Policy Mystery

- When questions include information that may affect voter opinion on an issue, this can affect poll results.

3. Oversimplified Questions: Public Opinion on Abortion

- Opinions on complex issues are sometimes impossible to understand based on simple questions.

IV. Characteristics of Public Opinion

- Public opinion is not an objective quantity like body weight or temperature that can be measured with a simple physical instrument.

A. Public Opinion Is Uninformed

- On many issues, people have little or no information. Most people most of the time pay little attention to politics. Far more Americans watch sitcoms like “Everybody Loves Raymond” or the reality show “Survivor,” than watch Anderson Cooper, “The O’Reilly Factor,” Ted Koppel’s “Nightline” or the “News Hour” with Jim Lehrer.
- Most people have little time for politics. The effort required to stay informed competes with family life, work, recreation and relaxation. Those who do criticize citizens for the lack of attention they pay to politics are those that have the luxury to stay informed with minimal effort.
- Gathering, processing, and storing information is costly. For most Americans, bearing such information costs will bring them little in the way of corresponding benefits. Those with a better education or certain types of occupations find that costs are not as great and hence are more informed than others.
- Some people, however, are informed not because of any benefit but just because they either think it is part of being a good citizen to be informed or find politics or political issues interesting.

B. Many of the Opinions Expressed in Polls are not Strongly Held

- Elected officials and other political activists often use poll results as proof that the public approves of their actions and policies. Yet even when survey data appear to support such claims, there is considerable evidence that many of the responses registered in public opinion surveys are not very strongly held: respondents do give the answers recorded, but they are not firmly committed to them.

C. Public Opinion Is Not Ideological

- Even when people have reasonably firm views on issues, those views often are surprisingly unconnected to each other. This is another way of saying that the American people are not very ideological.
- Political elites, on the other hand, tend to have well-structured ideologies.
- In a study done in the 1950s, only 3 to 16 percent of average Americans could be accurately labeled as thinking ideologically. There was some increase in ideological thinking in the 1960s, but it is still much below the level of elites. Still, Americans should not be criticized for their non-ideological thinking. After all, the issues making up liberal or conservative thinking in America are often not logically connected. Furthermore, the meaning of the words liberal and conservative change over time.
- Perhaps the non-ideological views of most Americans should be taken as evidence for pragmatic, commonsensical thinking, while the ideological views of elites should be viewed as evidence of rigid, emotional commitment.
- Regardless of one's views on the desirability of ideological thinking, one fact stands out: the non-ideological nature of public opinion means that elites often read more into opinion polls of average voters.

D. Public Opinion Is Inconsistent

- It is not uncommon for poll data to reveal an inconsistency in the public's thinking. For example, the 1994 polls showed Americans wanted to balance the budget but not cut government programs.
- 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.
- One result has been divided government -one party controlling the presidency, the other Congress - with its result of gridlock. Both seem to reflect the inconsistency in public thinking.
- Several reasons explain why Americans hold such inconsistent opinions. Often, such thinking would appear to be due to lack of information or misinformation.
- Another explanation would be that Americans think pragmatically. They value free speech, but when faced with particular examples they see a need for restricting it.

V. Governing by Public Opinion?

- Policymakers have a great deal of access to public opinion, but do they follow that opinion?

A. The Power of Public Opinion

- The uncertainty surrounding the true state of public opinion makes government by public opinion poll immensely difficult, even if that were what everyone wanted.

1. The Limits of Public Opinion: Gun Control

- Congressional debates about gun control after Columbine illustrate the limits of public opinion on policy.