

Chapter 8: Mass Media and Public Opinion

Section 1: The Formation of Public Opinion

Key Words: public affairs, public opinion, mass media, peer group, opinion leader

A. What is Public Opinion

1. Public opinion is hard to measure because we are all part of several “publics” that affect our opinion. For instance, a single person may be from the educated public, the elderly public, and a public that lives in the Northeast. Each of these influences us to think politically in a certain manner.
2. **Public opinion** is those attitudes held by a significant number of persons on matters of government and politics. Public opinion is generally considered to be our opinions on public affairs, which include politics, public issues, and public policies.
2. Public opinion is made up of a wide variety of expressed group attitudes. It does not need to be expressed vocally, but can also be expressed in writing or electronically. It may also take the form of a public protest, a film, a billboard, or a vote for a candidate.

B. Family and Education

1. The Family
 - a. No one is born with political attitudes. Political socialization (the process by which we acquire political ideas) begins within the family, where children learn basic attitudes toward authority, property, and rules of behavior.
 - b. Adult political behavior is firmly based on attitudes and values formed in the home in early childhood.
2. The Schools
 - a. Schools give children formal knowledge that they will need to be good citizens.
 - b. Schools are also centers of informal learning about other groups in society.
3. According to sociologists, the family and schools are the two most important vehicles for political socialization.

C. Other Factors

1. There is no one factor that completely shapes a person’s political identity. There are a number of sources of political socialization and tend to be very complex.
2. Mass Media:
 - a. Mass media is any form of communications that can reach a large, widely dispersed audience simultaneously.

b. Mass media has a huge effect on politics in today's world. There is at least 1 television in 98% of American households, and statistics indicate these TV sets are turned on for around 7 hours daily. TV is a very effective means of communicating political information.

3. Peer Groups

- a. A **peer group** is made up of the people we normally associate with.
- b. Peer groups normally reinforce what we believe politically. Most people trust the opinions of our friends. In addition, we also tend to associate with people who share our ideas and values, so the peer group reinforces what we already feel.

4. Opinion Leaders

- a. **Opinion leaders** are people who have more than the usual amount of influence on the attitudes of others.
- b. They include politicians, members of the press, & professional people. They may also include clergymen, teachers, and so on. Unfortunately, they may also include people such as movie stars, rock stars, and professional sports players who no little or nothing about politics.

5. Historic Events

- a. Historic events may influence our political opinions. Many people have strong feelings about such events as the Great Depression, World War II, and 911, and the political parties associated with these events.

6. A Mix of Factors

- a. No one factor by itself shapes any person's political opinions.
- b. The factors that are most important vary with the issue being considered.

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Key Words: mandate, interest group, public opinion poll, straw vote, sample, random sample, quota sample

A. Measuring Public Opinion

-There are many means to measure public opinion. Some are more accurate than others. Accurate opinion information is vital to the American political system.

-The following all provide some degree of information about the public opinion:

-Elections: Elections are said to be a valid indication of public opinion. Candidates who win elections by large margins believe they receive a mandate, or instructions from the public, to carry out their policies. Elections, however, are not a valid indication of public opinion because:

-Voting choice sometimes has little or nothing to do with the candidate's platform

-Voting indicates the beliefs of only those that vote, which is generally only about 50% of our country

-Interest Groups: These are private organizations whose members share certain view and work to shape public policy. They are also called pressure groups or special interest groups because they attempt to put pressure on politicians and the public to move toward their particular viewpoint. When dealing with interest groups, it is impossible to determine 2 things:

-How many people does the group actually represent?

-How strongly held are the opinions of the members of the group?

-The Media: The media is often seen as a source of public opinion. When they report the news, they are said to indicate public opinion. They are seen as mirrors and molders of public opinion. The media is not a very good indicator of public opinion because, by their very nature, they tend to report only the views of a vocal minority.

-Personal Contacts: Public officials receive information from the public in a variety of ways: meetings, phone calls, surveys, letters, and emails. Many politicians have developed the ability to gauge the opinion of the public through these contacts with the public. Many other politicians, however, are not very good at determining the public opinion.

B. Polls – The Best Measure of Public Opinion

-Public opinion is best measured by **public opinion polls**, or devices that attempt to collect information by asking people questions. The most accurate polls are based on scientific polling techniques.

-Straw Votes: This is a poll that simply asks the same questions of a large number of people. It is based on the idea that the more people you ask, the more accurate your data becomes. The straw vote is highly unreliable because it makes no effort to reflect the makeup of the population.

-**Scientific Polling:** Early scientific polls were developed by George Gallup & Elmo Roper. There are over 1000 polling groups in the US, with over 200 of them dealing with political opinion. The most prominent today are the Gallup Poll and the Harris Survey.

C. Evaluating Polls and Limits on the Impact of Public Opinion

-Scientific polls today tend to be fairly accurate.

-Polls cannot usually measure:

-The **intensity**, or strength, of the feeling or opinion

-The **stability** of the opinion. Is this a long-term opinion or is it easily changed?

-The **relevance** of the opinion. How important is the particular issue to the person?

-Polls sometimes create their own public opinion simply by asking a question or by how a question is asked.

-Polls are very useful tools that are of great help to politicians. But, in the end, they are not elections. Democracy is about more than just measuring public opinion and saying what people want to hear.

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Section 3: The Mass Media and Politics

Lecture Notes

Key Words: medium, public agenda, sound bite

A. An Overview of the Mass Media

1. Television - Television is the principal source of political information for about 80 percent of the population.

2. Newspapers - Newspapers, which can carry much more in-depth information than television news, are the second most important source of political information in the United States.

3. Radio - Since its advent in the 1920, radio has played a major role in informing Americans.

4. Magazines - Major news magazines and journals of opinion are important sources of political news and comment.

B. The Media's Impact on Politics

1. The **Public Agenda** – The public agenda is the societal problems that political leaders and citizens agree need government attention. The issues on which the media focus

determine what the public thinks about, if not what it thinks. Media generally does not tell us what to think, but they tell us what to think about. This, in turn, shapes public opinion and the public agenda.

2. Electoral Politics - Television has influenced political campaigns by making candidates more concerned about public "image" and less dependent on party organizations than ever before. In addition, candidates are less dependent on party organizations for media coverage. Television is the single most expensive item in a campaign, and it is regularly used because it reaches so many households simultaneously. It is difficult to determine the character of a candidate from a commercial or news piece, since the message is refined to fit into 30 second to 1 minute bites.

C. Limits on Media Influence

1. Most Americans do not follow public affairs closely.
2. Those that do follow politics tend to select their own sources of information to reflect and bolster opinions they already hold.
3. Lack of public interest in politics limits the amount of news that commercially oriented mass media are able to present.