Chapter 6

**Public Opinion and Political Socialization:**

**Shaping the People’s Voice**

**Chapter Outline**

I. Political Socialization: The Origins of Americans’ Opinions

A. Primary Socializing Agents: Family, School, and Church

B. Secondary Socializing Agents: Peers, Media, and Leaders

II. Frames of Reference: How Americans Think Politically

A. Party Identification

B. Political Ideology

C. Group Orientations

1. Religion

2. Economic Class

3. Region

4. Race and Ethnicity

5. Gender

6. Generations and Age

7. Crosscutting Cleavages

III. The Measurement of Public Opinion

A. Public Opinion Polls

B. Problems with Polls

IV. The Influence of Public Opinion on Policy

A. Limits on the Public’s Influence

B. Public Opinion and the Boundaries of Action

C. Leaders and Public Opinion

**Learning Objectives**

Having read the chapter, you should be able to do each of the following:

1. Describe the process of socialization and the types of agents that contribute to the political socialization of Americans.
2. Describe the frames of reference that influence how Americans think politically, and their relative contribution to political opinion.
3. Explain how partisan thinking influences opinions about issues and candidates.
4. In terms of group thinking, detail some of the major types of groups that can contribute to group thinking, and discuss how those groups can influence an individual’s political views.
5. Describe the different methods used to measure public opinion and discuss why some are more accurate than others.
6. Assess the degree to which American policymakers are responsive to public opinion, and comment on how this question relates to the issue of representation in American politics.

**Chapter Summary**

The process by which individuals acquire their political opinions is called political socialization. During childhood, the family and schools are important sources of basic political attitudes, such as beliefs about the parties and the nature of the U.S. political and economic systems. Many of the basic orientations that Americans acquire during childhood remain with them in adulthood, but socialization is a continuing process. Adults’ opinions are affected mostly by prior beliefs, peers, political leaders, and the news media. Events themselves are also a significant short-term influence on opinions.

The frames of reference that guide Americans’ opinions include ideology, although most citizens do not have a strong and consistent ideological attachment. In addition, individuals develop opinions as a result of group orientations—notably, religion, income level, occupation, region, race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Partisanship is a major source of political opinions; Republicans and Democrats differ in their voting behavior and views on many policy issues

Public opinion can be defined as those opinions held by ordinary citizens that they openly express. Public officials have many ways of assessing public opinion, such as the outcomes of elections, but they have increasingly come to rely on public opinion polls. There are many possible sources of error in polls, and surveys sometimes present a misleading portrayal of the public’s views. However, a properly conducted poll can be an accurate indication of what the public is thinking.

Public opinion has a significant influence on government but seldom determines exactly what government will do in a particular instance. Public opinion serves to constrain the policy choices of officials but also is subject to their efforts to mold and channel what the public is thinking. Evidence indicates that officials are particularly attentive to public opinion on highly visible and controversial issues of public policy.

**Focus and Main Points**

The focus of this chapter is on public opinion and its influences on the American political system. A major theme of the chapter is that public opinion is a powerful yet inexact force. The policies of the U.S. government cannot be understood apart from public opinion; at the same time, public opinion is not a precise determinant of public policies. The main points made in this chapter are these:

* *Public opinion consists of those views held by ordinary citizens that are openly expressed*. Public officials have various means of gauging public opinion but increasingly use public opinion polls for this purpose.
* *The process by which individuals acquire their political opinions is called political socialization*. This process begins during childhood, when, through family and school, Americans acquire many of their basic political values and beliefs. Socialization   
    
  continues into adulthood, during which peers, political leaders, and the news media are among the major influences.
* *Americans’ political opinions are shaped by several frames of reference, including ideology, group attachments, and partisanship*.
* *Public opinion has an important influence on government but ordinarily does not directly determine exactly what officials will do*.

**Major Concepts**

public opinion

The politically relevant opinions held by ordinary citizens that they express openly.

**political culture**

The characteristic and deep-seated beliefs of a particular people about government and politics.

agents of socialization

Those agents, such as the family and the media, that have a significant impact on citizens’ political socialization.

political socialization

The learning process by which people acquire their political opinions, beliefs, and values.

ideology

A consistent pattern of opinion on particular issues that stems from a core belief or set of beliefs.

economic liberals

Those who believe government should do more to assist people who have difficulty meeting their economic needs on their own.

economic conservatives

Those who believe government tries to do too many things that should be left to private interests and economic markets.

**social (cultural) conservatives**

Those who believe government power should be used to uphold traditional values.

**social (cultural) liberals**

Those who believe it is not government’s role to buttress traditional values at the expense of unconventional or new values.

libertarians

Those who believe government tries to do too many things that should be left to firms and markets, and who oppose government as an instrument for upholding traditional values.

populists

Those who believe government should do more to assist people who have difficulty meeting their economic needs and who look to government to uphold traditional values.

party identification

The personal sense of loyalty that an individual may feel toward a particular political party.

population

In a public opinion poll, the people (for example, the citizens of a nation) whose opinions are being estimated through interviews with a sample of these people.

sample

In a public opinion poll, the relatively small number of individuals who are interviewed for the purpose of estimating the opinions of an entire population.

public opinion poll

A device for measuring public opinion whereby a relatively small number of individuals (the sample) are interviewed for the purpose of estimating the opinions of a whole community (the population).

sampling error

A measure of the accuracy of a public opinion poll. The sampling error is mainly a function of sample size and is usually expressed in percentage terms.

Practice Exam

(Answers appear at the end of this chapter.)

**Multiple Choice**

1. Which of the following groups are most likely to oppose legalized abortion?

a. Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants

b. mainline Protestants and Jews

c. fundamentalist Protestants and Jews

d. Roman Catholics and Jews

e. fundamentalist Protestants and Roman Catholics

2. “Crosscutting cleavages” refers to

a. the tendency of polled individuals to respond against their true beliefs because of fear of being judged negatively.

b. the section of a polling sample that must be disregarded because of “non-opinions.”

c. the tendency of much of the young adult population to change partisan loyalties in response to major social or economic events.

d. the tendency of independents to vote for members of both major parties.

e. the condition in a pluralistic society in which each group includes individuals who also belong to other groups.

3. The accuracy of a poll is expressed in terms of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, the degree to which the sample estimates might differ from what the population actually thinks.

a. opinion error

b. sampling error

c. population error

d. age cohort error

e. probability error

4. The Gallup Organization has erred badly only once in predicting the outcomes of presidential elections, and that was in the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ election.

a. 1936

b. 1940

c. 1948

d. 1972

e. 1984

5. What might be the chief problem with an opinion poll conducted on a downtown street at the noon hour?

a. Polled individuals will feel a time pressure that will affect their responses.

b. People polled in person tend to give less honest answers than when polled over the phone.

c. Logistical difficulties will prevent the collection of a large-enough sample size.

d. It will include a disproportionate number of business employees on their lunch break.

e. It will include a disproportionate number of women and older adults.

6. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ oppose governmental activism in both the economic and social realms.

a. Populists

b. Libertarians

c. Conservatives

d. Liberals

e. None of these answers is correct.

7. In which of the following states would one expect to find the highest concentration of individuals that identify as Republicans?

a. Massachusetts

b. California

c. Maine

d. Michigan

e. Louisiana

8. Which of the following statements is true?

a. Republicans were more likely to oppose an increase of troops in Afghanistan.

b. Republicans are more likely to oppose reductions on taxes than are Democrats.

c. Democrats are more likely to oppose government redistribution of national income than are Republicans.

d. Democrats are more likely to support pro-business initiatives than are Republicans.

e. Republicans are more likely to oppose social welfare programs than are Democrats.

9. Fewer than \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ percent of Americans participate each year in a mass demonstration or write a letter to the editor.

a. 5

b. 10

c. 15

d. 25

e. 38

10. Which of the following is a practice that is almost uniquely American?

a. the redistribution of national income by the government

b. open support for the national military

c. the flying of the American flag on private buildings and homes

d. the strict separation of church and state

e. the measuring of public opinion by national organizations

11. Which of the following is most likely to oppose major increases in health care spending by government and to support government-required prayer in the public schools?

a. liberal

b. populist

c. libertarian

d. conservative

e. None of these answers is correct.

12. Which of the following statements is true?

a. Economic class has more influence on public opinion in the United States than in Europe.

b. Economic class has little to no effect on public opinion in Europe or in the United States.

c. Racial progress has increased the regional divide in the United States.

d. Region has intensified as a basis of political opinions in the United States.

e. Economic class has less influence on public opinion in the United States than in Europe, and region has declined as a basis of political opinion in the U.S.

13. To assess public opinion, political observers today rely primarily on

a. election returns.

b. newspaper editorials.

c. interest group activities.

d. voter registration drives.

e. polls.

14. Increasing refusal rates have raised questions about the future of

a. street polling.

b. the ability of public opinion polls to predict national election results.

c. telephone polling.

d. Internet polling.

e. exit polling.

15. Most self-described independents

a. tend to favor more government intervention in economic issues, but not social issues.

b. tend to favor more government intervention in social issues, but not in economic issues.

c. tend not to lean toward any major party.

d. tend to vote for different parties in successive elections.

e. have a partisan tendency.

16. Which of the following is NOT an agent of socialization?

a. family

b. interest groups

c. school

d. media

e. All of these are agents of socialization.

17. Which of the following is a device for gauging public opinion?

a. telephone polls

b. public demonstrations

c. letters to the editor

d. election results

e. All these answers are correct.

18. If a scientific poll with a 3 percent margin of error found two candidates separated by 1 percentage point,

a. it would indicate that the sample size was taken incorrectly.

b. it would be mathematically incorrect to claim that one of them is “leading.”

c. it would indicate that the sample was not collected randomly.

d. the candidate ahead by 1 percentage point could be labeled as “leading.”

e. it would indicate that the poll’s margin of error was 5 percent.

19. Pollsters use \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ to randomly pick telephone numbers.

a. telephone books

b. computers

c. satellites

d. cellular phones

e. None of these answers is correct.

20. Which of the following statements is true?

a. A survey revealed that only 46 percent of college seniors could identify the phrase “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” as being part of the Declaration of Independence.

b. A survey of Ivy League students revealed that half could not name both U.S. senators from their state.

c. A survey of Ivy League students revealed that 75 percent could not identify Abraham Lincoln as the author of the phrase “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

d. All of these are true: Surveys have found that only 46 percent of college seniors could identify the “We hold these truths…” phrase as part of the Declaration of Independence; half of Ivy League students could not name both U.S. senators from their state; and 75 percent of Ivy League students could not identify Lincoln as the author of “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

e. None of these answers is correct.

**True/False**

1. Rather than having one stable, uniform public opinion that public policymakers can tap for reinforcement, America is described as a nation of many publics.

a. True

b. False

2. The larger the sample, the smaller the sampling error.

a. True

b. False

3. Political socialization refers only to the learning that takes place during childhood years.

a. True

b. False

4. More women favor affirmative action than men.

a. True

b. False

5. “Party identification” refers to a person’s vote, Republican or Democrat, in the most recent election.

a. True

b. False

6. Evidence has shown that no more than a fourth of Americans can be considered to have a true ideology.

a. True

b. False

7. In a democracy, elections are the only reliable indicator of public opinion on issues.

a. True

b. False

8. A person who professes beliefs in traditional social values and little government intervention in the economy is known as a conservative.

a. True

b. False

9. Party loyalties can be altered by changes in social and economic conditions.

a. True

b. False

10. Public opinion in America tends to constrain rather than direct the policy choices of officials.

a. True

b. False

**Essay**

1. What are some of the problems with public opinion polling?
2. What are the characteristics of political socialization?
3. Explain how families affect political socialization.
4. Explain the ideological differences between contemporary liberals and conservatives.
5. What are crosscutting cleavages in public opinion?

Answers to the Practice Exam

**Multiple Choice Answers**

* + 1. e 11. d
    2. e 12. e
    3. b 13. e
    4. c 14. c
    5. d 15. e
    6. b 16. b
    7. e 17. e
    8. e 18. c
    9. a 19. b
    10. c 20. d

Multiple Choice Explanations

1. Fundamentalist Protestants and Roman Catholics are more likely to oppose legalized abortion than are so-called mainline Protestants and Jews, a split that partly reflects differing religious beliefs about whether human life begins at conception or later in the development of the fetus. Therefore, (e) is the correct answer.
2. In a pluralistic society such as the United States, groups tend to be “crosscutting”—that is, each group includes individuals who also belong to other groups, where they can encounter different people and opinions. Crosscutting cleavages encourage individuals to appreciate and understand political differences, which fosters political moderation. Thus, the answer is (e).
3. The correct answer is (b), and the larger the sample, the smaller the error.
4. The Gallup Organization has polled voters in every presidential election since 1936 (nineteen elections in all) and has erred badly only once: it stopped polling several weeks before the 1948 election and missed a late voter shift that carried Harry Truman to victory. Thus, the correct answer is (c).
5. Interviews conducted on a downtown street at the noon hour would include a disproportionate number of business employees on their lunch break, leaving other groups underrepresented. Thus, the answer is (d).
6. Populists favor activist government in both the economic and social realms. Conservatives oppose activist government in the economic realm, but support it in the social realm. Liberals endorse activist government in the economic realm, but oppose it in the social realm. Libertarians (b) oppose government intervention in both areas.
7. The “red states” (Republican bastions) are clustered in the South, Great Plains, and Rocky Mountains. The “blue states” (Democratic bastions) are found mostly in the Northeast, the northern Midwest, and the West Coast. Thus, because it is the only answer option in a Republican area, Louisiana (e) is the correct answer.
8. Republicans and Democrats differ significantly in their opinions on many policy issues. While Democrats generally favor social welfare and little government intervention in peoples’ private lives, Republicans tend to support pro-business, low-tax platforms, and the use of government for the preservation of traditional values. Republicans were also much more likely than Democrats to support the increase in troops for Afghanistan. Thus, the correct answer is (e).
9. A small percentage of Americans (less than five percent) (a) participate each year in a mass demonstration or write a letter to the editor of a newspaper or organization.
10. The flying of the American flag on private buildings and homes is a uniquely American institution; in other countries the flag is generally hung only on public buildings. Thus (c) is the correct answer.
11. Conservatives (d) generally do not favor more government intervention in the economy, but do favor an active government in preserving traditional moral values.
12. With regard to region, racial progress has diminished the regional divide, as has the relocation to the South of millions of Americans from the Northeast and Midwest. Economic class has less influence on political opinion in the United States than in Europe. Thus (e) is the correct response.
13. Although each of the options is a useful tool for gauging public opinion, public opinion polls (e) are the most reliable.
14. Some Americans do not have phones, and many of those who are called refuse to participate. Such factors reduce the accuracy of telephone polling. Indeed, pollsters are concerned about the future of telephone polling. The refusal rate has increased sharply in recent decades; thus the correct answer is (c).
15. Of the one-third who prefer the label “Independent,” most say they lean toward one party or the other and usually vote for that party’s candidates. In short, most self-described independents have a partisan tendency, so (e) is the correct answer.
16. Interest groups (b) are not considered a traditional agent of socialization.
17. Though not all scientific methods, all these devices or actions (e) are ways in which to assess public opinion.
18. If the poll had found the candidates separated by 1 percentage point, it would be mathematically incorrect to claim that one of them is “leading.” The 1-point difference is smaller than the poll’s 3-point sampling error; the correct answer is (c).
19. Pollsters use computer-assisted telephone interviewing (b).
20. The correct answer is (d), though the public’s lack of knowledge about public affairs is not as significant as it might seem.

**True/False Answers**

1. a 6. a

2. a 7. b

3. b 8. a

4. a 9. a

5. b 10. a

**Essay Answers**

1. Mathematical estimations of poll accuracy require a probability sample. This is a sample in which each individual in the population has a known probability of being selected at random for inclusion. Pollsters can only approximate this ideal; they may use computers to randomly pick telephone numbers, which are then dialed by interviewers to reach respondents. Pollsters then are challenged once they do reach respondents—they often get a high refusal rate. Polls are also affected by the wording of the questions and whether they ask about unfamiliar topics. Yet despite these sources of error, public opinion polls are the most relied-upon method of measuring public opinion.
2. The process of political socialization has two major characteristics. First, most people’s political outlook is substantially influenced by their early childhood learning, even though socialization is a lifelong process. Second, political socialization is cumulative in nature. Earlier learning experiences affect later learning. This does not mean that people’s beliefs are completely fixed, for changes in perspectives are possible. Yet widespread political change is rare. When it does happen, it is usually the result of large social or economic changes, and tends to be concentrated in younger adults.
3. The family is a very powerful agent of socialization because it has a near-monopoly, particularly during childhood. Children will absorb many of the values and beliefs of their parents. Political party affiliation is significantly influenced by parents, i.e. many adults identify with the Democrats or Republicans because their parents did as well. This party loyalty is established during childhood; the substantive reasons for the loyalty are developed later in life. The family also contributes to basic orientations that, while not directly political, have political significance. American children, for example, often have a voice in family decisions, contributing to a sense that people should be treated equally.
4. Contemporary American liberalism and conservatism both demonstrate the complicated nature of political ideology in the United States. Many liberals and conservatives do not maintain a consistent stand on the question of how active the government should be in private and community affairs. Social conservatives, for instance, believe that the government should actively uphold traditional mores, while social liberals are suspicious of, or hostile toward, such activities. On the other hand, economic conservatives prefer a limited role for government in economic affairs, while economic liberals favor government intervention in the form of welfare programs. Libertarians tend to oppose government intervention in either sphere, while populists prefer government intervention in both people’s economic lives and their private social lives.
5. Because America is a pluralistic society, groups tend to be “crosscutting.” This means that each group includes individuals who also belong to many other groups. Crosscutting cleavages tend to produce moderate opinions. When people are confronted with conflicting perspectives, many will seek a balanced opinion. In America, by way of example, Catholics and Protestants coexist peacefully, largely because each group includes people of varying income, education, region, and a host of other variables. In other societies (e.g., Northern Ireland), group loyalties are reinforcing rather than crosscutting, so opinions can be intensified by group identifications, and this can result in a significant amount of conflict.