CHAPTER 5 Public Opinion and Political Socialization

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

* Define the key terms at the end of chapter.
* Contrast the majoritarian and pluralist models of democracy with respect to their assumptions about public opinion.
* Explain what is meant by the shape and stability of the distribution of public opinion.
* List the agents of early political socialization, and describe their impact.
* List the major sources of continuing political socialization for adults.
* Show how social or demographic characteristics (such as education, income, ethnicity, region, or religion) are linked to political values.
* Analyze how the two-dimensional typology of political ideology presented in Chapter 1 applies to the actual distribution of political opinions among Americans.

# Public Opinion, Political Socialization, and the Challenge of Democracy

This chapter’s opening vignette contrasts public attitudes toward the death penalty from two different perspectives: the conservative perspective and the liberal perspective. Since a majority of Americans favor capital punishment, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California has had to appease his conservative base, his party, and future voters by supporting it. Even as public support for capital punishment remains high in the United States, exoneration of death row inmates (with the aid of DNA testing) has led to concern about the possible execution of innocent persons and the suspension of the death penalty in Illinois. Yet American attitudes do change over time. Specifically, Americans are more likely to favor capital punishment during periods when the social order is threatened (for instance, by war, foreign subversion, or crime).

An examination of people’s opinions on the clashes between freedom and order and between freedom and equality shows that the public divides itself into the four ideological categories suggested in Chapter 1: conservatives, liberals, libertarians, and communitarians. Furthermore, the four groups differ in terms of their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics.

Public opinion is particularly important to the distinction between the pluralist and majoritarian models of democracy. These models differ in their assumptions about the role of public opinion. Majoritarians depend on an informed public with stable opinions acting to clearly guide public policy. They believe government should do what the public wants. Pluralists, on the other hand, do not expect the general public to demonstrate much knowledge or display stable or consistent opinions. Consequently, pluralists doubt that majority opinion can provide a good guide for public policy. Instead, they depend on interested and knowledgeable subgroups to compete in an open process to achieve public policy goals.

Opinion research certainly shows that the majoritarian assumptions about knowledge do not describe the public as a whole. Yet, lack of knowledge itself does not prevent people from expressing an opinion on an issue. However, when both knowledge and interest concerning an issue are low, public opinion is likely to be changing and unstable. Groups that are highly interested in an issue do have more opportunity to make an impact, yet such groups are often directly opposed by other groups. Politically powerful groups divide on what they want government to do. As a result, politicians have a great deal of leeway in deciding what policies to pursue. And as the opening vignette points out, although the government tends to react to public opinion, it does not always do what the people want.

Chapter Overview

## Public Opinion and Models of Democracy

Statistics make it possible to analyze the public opinion of large groups. It has only been since the 1950s that polling has become more predictable and meaningful. Before then, polling was largely guesswork derived from editorials, speeches, voting records, and diaries. The differing models of democracy make several different assumptions. Majoritarians believe that the majority should have a great deal of influence in government, but pluralists believe that government should cater to the subgroups with clear and focused needs.

One of the largest polling groups is the Gallup Poll. Started by George Gallup in the 1930s, it is generally well respected, although it has been wrong. Its most notable mistake was announcing Thomas Dewey as the winner of the 1948 presidential election, just before Harry Truman won.

## Sampling a Few, Predicting Everyone

In analyzing public opinion, researchers rely on sampling to predict what the population believes. In order for the sample to be predictably accurate, particular attention is paid to the sample’s randomness and size and the amount of variation in the population. In addition, researchers have to pay special attention to the bias of the questions.

## The Distribution of Public Opinion

Once a poll is made, researchers often graph the results for interpretation. By graphing the results, researchers pay attention to the distribution of the sample, including both the shape (normal, skewed, or bimodal) and stability of the distribution over time.

## Political Socialization

Public opinion is rooted in political values, which are in turn produced through a process of political socialization. Early political socialization comes from the family and school, as well as peer and community groups. Among adults, peer groups and media play a particularly influential role in the ongoing process of socialization. World events, like September 11 and Hurricane Katrina, can also have a significant affect on a person’s political values. Older Americans tend to rely more on newspapers and TV news, whereas younger Americans tend to rely on the radio and the Internet for news.

## Social Groups and Political Values

People with similar backgrounds often share various learning experiences, and they tend to develop similar political opinions. Background factors generally believed to affect political opinions include education, income, region, ethnicity, religion, and gender. The role of ethnicity has changed over time. At the turn of the century, for example, there were major differences between the newer immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and eastern Europe and the predominantly Protestant early settlers of America.

## From Values to Ideology

Surveys show relatively little use of ideological labels by voters when they discuss politics, but most voters are willing to place themselves on a liberal-to-conservative continuum. Nonetheless, they often lack the consistent values and beliefs about the scope and purpose of government that characterize truly ideological thinking.

When people are asked to describe liberals and conservatives, they employ two different themes: First, they associate liberals with change and conservatives with the preservation of traditional values (freedom versus order); second, they link liberals with more interventionist government (freedom versus equality). When people are asked about their own attitudes on these issues, they separate into four groups, not two. This suggests that the liberal-conservative ideological framework oversimplifies matters, that ideology is not one dimensional. By examining where they stand on two areas of conflict—freedom versus order and freedom versus equality—Americans, as noted, may be divided into four ideological types: conservatives, liberals, libertarians, and communitarians. People with similar socioeconomic and demographic characteristics also often share the same ideological outlook. Minorities and people with less education and low incomes are often communitarians. Libertarians tend to have more education and higher incomes. Conservatives are more common in the Midwest, and liberals are more common in the Northeast.

## Politics of Global Change

Political ideology changes over time, especially for those in the middle. Recent polls taken over a twenty-year period in fourteen different countries showed a distinct movement toward the middle. Citizens’ self-placement indicates a distaste for the recent growth of highly partisan politics.

## Forming Political Opinions

Are Americans well informed about politics? There is certainly no lack of information available. Schools, universities and colleges, 24/7 news programs, television, internet, radio, and newspapers― we are awash in news, yet it does not permeate all of society. Caucasian males, the affluent, and older adults seem to know more about politics than everyone else. Although they may be less informed, many citizens form their political opinions around ideology; most citizens rely on other factors. This chapter considers three strategies for forming opinions: considering self-interest, using opinion schemas, or issue framing by political leaders.

Although self-interest is often the dominant influence on opinions about economic matters and matters of social equality, there are many issues for which personal benefit is not a factor. Citizens often have difficulty forming opinions in these areas, and they may change those opinions easily.

Citizens rely on opinion schemas—networks of organized knowledge and beliefs that guide the processing of political information on a particular subject. Personal opinion schemes often parallel individuals’ ideological and partisan orientation. Americans have many sources of political information, yet their political knowledge and level of political sophistication tend to be low. On the other hand, recent research indicates that the basic institutions of U.S. government and the positions of the two major political parties on prominent issues are known to at least half the people. And, while individual opinions based on low information may change often, collective opinion is much more stable.

Finally, political leaders also influence the formation of public opinion. Favorable or unfavorable evaluations of a politician may shape public opinion concerning the politician’s proposals. Politicians are adept at framing policy choices they advocate in order to receive support from the public.

Key Terms

public opinion

skewed distribution

bimodal distribution

normal distribution

stable distribution

political socialization

socioeconomic status

self-interest principle

issue framing

# Research and Resources

No doubt you are already familiar with a number of public opinion polls. Newspapers, magazines, and television news broadcasts often present information gathered through public opinion polling. Well-known polls include those done by the Harris and Roper organizations, ABC News/New York Times polls, CBS News/Washington Post polls, and, of course, the Gallup Poll. Data from these polls are often publicly available. The Gallup organization puts out a monthly publication giving the results of its surveys. Periodically, these surveys are indexed and bound in permanent volumes, which can be found in the reference sections of most college libraries. Gallup also maintains a website at <http://www.gallup.com> where you will be able to find current poll data, information on trends in presidential popularity, and poll results dating back to 1996. Another useful comprehensive inventory of current poll data is available at <http://www.pollingreport.com>.

Another excellent source of data on public opinion is the American National Election Studies, which may be found online at <http://www.electionstudies.org>. The mission of the American National Election Studies (ANES) is to “produce high quality data on voting, public opinion, and political participation that serve the research needs of social scientists, teachers, students, and policy makers concerned with understanding the theoretical and empirical foundations of mass politics in a democratic society.” The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior describes much of the survey data at <http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/nesguide.htm>.

# Using Your Knowledge

1. Go to the Gallup Poll’s website about abortion (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1576/Abortion.aspx>) and use it to answer these questions. Are the opinion distributions you find skewed, normal, or bimodal? Is the opinion distribution stable or unstable over time?

2. Using the website information in question 1, look at how opinions change as the specific text of the question changes. Is opinion on any particular question skewed? Does opinion on any question shift over time? How are the answers different on the basis of time scales of first trimester, second trimester, and third trimester?

3. Review the presidential approval ratings for George W. Bush reported on pollingreport.com <http://www.pollingreport.com/BushJob.htm>. Describe the public assessment of the performance of President Bush at key points in his term. Are data from different polling sources consistent?

4. Visit the ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior referenced above. Locate data on the ideology of the American electorate. How has the ideology of the electorate, as reported by respondents to the survey, changed over time?

Sample Exam Questions

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Although American attitudes toward capital punishment remain high, which political party is *most* likely to support the death penalty in most cases?

a. Democrats

b. Republicans

c. Libertarians

d. Green Party

e. All of the above provide equal support.

2. Which of the following is *not* a characteristic of public opinion?

a. Citizens are willing to register opinions on matters outside their expertise.

b. Governments tend to respond to public opinion.

c. Public opinion places boundaries on allowable types of public policy.

d. The public’s attitudes toward a given government policy can vary over time.

e. Those who engage in public opinion surveys are more likely to vote.

3. The worst opinion poll error occurred in the 1948 election. Who was named the winner over Harry Truman?

a. Richard Nixon

b. John Anderson

c. Thomas Dewey

d. Herbert Humphrey

e. Spiro Agnew

4. Which of the following is *not* necessary in order to determine the accuracy of a sample?

a. normal distribution

b. sufficient size

c. random (everyone has an equal chance of selection)

d. sufficient variety

e. None of the above; all are correct.

5. Most people link their earliest recollections of politics with

a. their family.

b. their school experience.

c. youth groups.

d. television.

e. their community.

6. Which model of democracy assumes that most people hold clear opinions on government policy?

a. socialist

b. pluralist

c. pragmatist

d. elitist

e. majoritarian

7. Which of the following terms describes the shape of the distribution of public opinion?

a. skewed

b. normal

c. bimodal

d. stable

e. all of the above

8. Which type of distribution indicates the greatest potential for political conflict?

a. skewed

b. normal

c. bimodal

d. stable

e. none of these

9. Which principle postulates that what is learned first structures later learning?

a. primacy principle

b. engineered principle

c. transfer principle

d. structural principle

e. construction principle

10. How many young American voters tend to identify with the party of their parents?

a. just a few

b. about one-quarter

c. about one-third

d. over half

e. over three-quarters

11. Which of the following is a good defense against community pressures?

a. peer groups

b. schools

c. community leaders

d. media personalities

e. none of these

12. According to recent studies, what percentage of Americans think that individuals should fight global warming by using mass transit and making homes more energy efficient?

a. 85 percent

b. 70 percent

c. 55 percent

d. 40 percent

e. less than 40 percent

13. Which of the following consistently links to opinions which limit the government’s role in promoting order and equality?

a. wealth

b. education

c. gender

d. age

e. ethnicity

14. Which of the following tends to favor government action to improve economic opportunity?

a. wealth

b. education

c. gender

d. age

e. ethnicity

15. What do we call the method politicians use to define the way that issues are presented?

a. ideologies

b. opinion schemes

c. issue framing

d. opinion distributions

e. opinion shapes

16. Which of the following tend to have the *most* knowledge about politics?

a. women

b. minorities

c. the poor

d. the young

e. men

17. The size of the population sampled

a. increases the accuracy of a random sample.

b. decreases the accuracy of a random sample.

c. has only a small effect on the accuracy of a random sample.

d. if large, makes getting a random sample impossible.

e. if small, makes getting a random sample impossible.

18. Most people respond that conservatives are

a. free spending.

b. open minded.

c. fiscally responsible or tight.

d. closed minded.

e. in favor of lots of government.

19. Which group is *most* willing to sacrifice freedom and equality in order to preserve order?

a. libertarians

b. liberals

c. communitarians

d. conservatives

e. none of the above

20. According to the Gallup Poll, support for gay marriage is strongly linked to

a. age.

b. income.

c. education.

d. knowledge.

e. region.

21. When different questions on the same issue produce similar distributions of opinion, we call this effect?

a. skewed.

b. bimodal.

c. stable.

d. unreliable.

e. normal.

22. Individuals in a homogenous community are highly likely to form opinions by

a. socialization.

b. self-interest.

c. ideology.

d. issue frames.

e. rejection of cues from a peer group.

23. Only one other country in the world, besides the United States, believes the world is a safer place with Saddam Hussein out of power. What is that other country?

a. Austria

b. India

c. Israel

d. Russia

e. United Kingdom

24. On which of the following types of issues is a gender gap likely to be found?

a. decisions to send the nation to war

b. decisions to promote equality

c. decisions to apply the death penalty

d. support for a political party in a presidential election

e. all of the above

25. Who is the only public figure to have perfect name recognition among Americans?

a. Arnold Schwarzenegger

b. Al Gore

c. George W. Bush

d. Jay Leno

e. none of the above

Essay Questions

1. What characteristics of American public opinion are revealed by examining public opinion on capital punishment?

2. Without a political party to vote for, describe the methods many independents use to vote.

3. How does public opinion change as the characteristics of a sample change? For example, how do the opinions of men and women differ? Old and young? Rich and poor? Educated and uneducated?

4. Identify and discuss the three key agents of early political socialization. Describe other ways by which a person’s political beliefs can change over time.

5. Discuss the limitations of the one-dimensional, liberal-conservative typology of political ideology. How does the liberal-conservative typology compare to the fourfold classification developed in Chapter 1 and here?

Answers to Multiple-Choice Questions

1. b

2. e

3. c

4. a

5. a

6. e

7. e

8. c

9. d

10. d

11. a

12. b

13. a

14. e

15. c

16. e

17. c

18. b

19. d

20. a

21. c

22. a

23. b

24. e

25. e