CHAPTER 5 Public Opinion and Political Socialization

Parallel Lecture 5.1

This lecture parallels the treatment of public opinion and political socialization in the text.

I. In a democracy, government policy is supposed to be made in response to the public’s wishes.

A. **Public opinion** is the collective attitude of the citizens on a given issue or question.

B. Opinion polling⎯which involves interviewing a sample of citizens to estimate public opinion as a whole⎯is a reliable way to measure public opinion.

C. The history of capital punishment in America shows some of the characteristics of the contemporary relationship between government policy and public opinion.

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

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

3. If asked by pollsters, citizens are willing to register opinions on matters outside their expertise.

4. Governments tend to respond to public opinion.

5. The government sometimes does not do what the people want.

II. Democratic theory implies that government leaders are able to ascertain what the public is thinking about current political and social issues.

A. According to the **majoritarian model,** government should do what the majority wants.

1. Direct election of members of the House of Representatives was supposed to take public opinion into account.

2. In practice, legislation passed by a majority of Representatives does not necessarily reflect the opinions of a majority of citizens.

B. According to the **pluralist model,** government must merely allow free expression of the often numerous “minority” opinions.

1. Pluralists argue that the public as a whole seldom demonstrates clear opinions on the day-to-day operations of government.

2. Pluralists recognize that some subgroups will have vigorous opinions on some issues.

C. Knowing how often government policy runs against majority opinion, it becomes harder to defend the U.S. government as democratic under the majoritarian view of democracy.

1. Surveys show that citizens often prefer a policy different from that followed by the government.

2. To evaluate the role of public opinion in U.S. government, we need to know more about how opinions are distributed and how citizens acquire their opinions.

III. Statistical sampling theory and computer technology have made it possible to better understand the distribution of the population’s beliefs and attitudes about politics and government. (See Feature: Sampling a Few, Predicting to Everyone.)

A. Modern survey research methodology allows national opinion to be estimated within specified degrees of accuracy.

B. The three main factors that influence the accuracy of a sample are

1. The way the sample is selected: random sampling is needed to compute sampling error.

2. The size of the sample: national samples of 1,500 cases will be accurate within three percentage points, plus or minus.

3. The amount of variation in the population; pollsters compute sampling accuracy by assuming maximum variation in the population.

C. Public opinion can be analyzed according to the **shape** and **stability** of the distribution of opinions among citizens.

1. The **shape** of the distribution refers to the pattern or physical form of the responses when counted and plotted. (See text Figure 5.2.)

a) In a **skewed** distribution, most of the opinions cluster around a point on one side of the issue.

(1) For example, public opinion on the death penalty takes a skewed distribution.

(2) In a skewed distribution, those with minority opinions risk social ostracism and sometimes even persecution if they continue to voice their opinions.

b) In a **bimodal** distribution, opinions are divided sharply between two opposing points on the issue.

(1) For example, opinion on gay marriage forms a bimodal distribution.

(2) With bimodal distribution, there is great potential for political conflict.

c) A **normal** distribution is symmetrically shaped (like a bell) around the most frequent response, called the **mode.**

(1) For example, distributions of attitudes on a liberal-conservative continuum form a normal, bell-shaped distribution.

(2) This pattern of distribution tends to support moderate government policies.

2. The **stability** of the distribution refers to the amount of change in the modal category or in the shape of the distribution over time.

a) Some political attitudes change very little over time.

(1) Americans have long supported capital punishment.

(2) Americans also showed consistency in ideological orientations from 1964 to 1984. Americans today are only slightly more conservative than they were when President Johnson launched his Great Society program of liberal legislation.

b) Political attitudes can change dramatically, however—as they have toward the racial integration of public schools.

IV. **Political socialization** refers to the complex process by which people acquire their political values. Most people are exposed to the same sources of influence, or agents of socialization: family, school, community, peers, television.

A. Two principles emphasize the importance of early learning in creating new generations of citizens:

1. The **primacy** principle states that what is learned first is learned best.

2. The **structuring** principle states that what is learned first structures what is learned later.

B. The most important agents of early socialization are:

1. **The family**: For example, children often adopt the party identification of their parents, particularly if both parents strongly identify with the same party.

2. **Primary and secondary schools**:

a) Primary schools introduce authority figures outside the family and teach the importance of national slogans and holidays and democratic decision making.

b) Secondary schools often teach civic responsibility and offer more explicitly political content in their curricula.

3. **The community and peers** (religious organizations, youth groups, civic activities):

a) A homogeneous community exerts strong pressure to conform.

b) Peer groups may offer protection against community pressures, allowing individuals to develop political attitudes that may be substantially different from their parents and other community authority figures.

C. The socialization process continues in later life through other agents, most notably through:

1. College

2. Coworkers, club members, friends, neighbors, and spouses

3. Political leaders and the mass media

4. Election campaigns and the voting experience

5. The maturation process (which brings increased exposure to government actions, such as taxing and regulation)

V. There is generally a relationship between people’s social background and their political values.

A. Although the political socialization process is unique to each individual, there are commonalities among people with similar social backgrounds.

B. These commonalities can be seen in the responses to two questions about trading freedom for either order or equality:

1. Under what conditions, if any, should abortion be permitted? (freedom vs. order)

2. Do you think the government should guarantee a job to everyone willing to work? (freedom vs. equality)

C. Responses to these questions were analyzed according to education, income, region, “old” ethnicity (European origin), “new” ethnicity (race), religion, and gender. (See text Figure 5.4.)

1. People with **high education** choose freedom over both order and equality more often than those with low education.

2. People with **high income** are markedly more opposed to government policies of income redistribution than are those with low income.

3. **Regional** differences, once quite important in U.S. politics, have declined in importance on these issues.

4. Old ethnicity (European nation of origin) has also declined as a determinant of public opinion.

5. Race and ethnicity have emerged as a more critical variable, distinguishing whites from African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans, especially on redistribution of wealth to promote equality.

6. Religiosity has replaced religion as a strong predictor of political values, with those who regard the Bible as containing the word of God more in favor of order than those who do not.

7. The gender factor has come to indicate the greater willingness of women to support social programs.

VI. The concept of ideology—defined in Chapter 1 as a consistent set of values and beliefs about the proper purpose and scope of government—can be used to interpret public opinion.

A. Studies reveal that **ideologues**—people who form their political opinions on the basis of a distinct ideology—constitute only a minority of the electorate, perhaps about 20 percent.

1. Although most Americans readily place themselves along a simple liberal-conservative continuum, few understand what those words mean in an explicitly political sense. Many seem to choose the easy response and locate themselves in the center, or “moderate,” category.

2. Others may choose the middle category because they have “liberal” views on some issues and “conservative” ones on other issues.

B. Those who do think ideologically may be classified more accurately in a two-dimensional typology rather than along a single liberal-conservative continuum.

1. One dimension relates to the **original dilemma** of politics—the tradeoff of freedom for order.

2. The other dimension relates to the **modern dilemma**—the tradeoff of freedom for equality.

C. These dimensions conform to the two survey questions analyzed in the chapter—one on abortion rights and the other on guaranteed jobs.

D. When analyzed according to the two-dimensional typology, responses to these two questions in the same 2000 survey show the following distribution (see Figure 5.5):

1. **Liberals,** 22 percent of respondents

2. **Conservatives,** 30 percent

3. **Libertarians,** 20 percent

4. **Communitarians,** 29 percent

E. These figures indicate that people do not decide about government activity according to a one-dimensional ideological stand.

F. These findings tend to underscore the importance of distinguishing the **purposes** of government (to promote order or equality) when analyzing views on the **scope** of government.

VII. For the many people who lack a strong ideological orientation, the process of opinion formation involves a number of factors.

A. The **self-interest principle** states that people choose what benefits them personally.

1. This principle is particularly important in how people form opinions in regard to economic policy.

2. Unless they are directly affected, the self-interest principle plays little or no role in the judgments that citizens make on many issues.

B. **Information processing** is notably lacking for the average American, but this lack is not a deterrent to Americans’ expressing political opinions.

C. **Opinion schemata** —networks of organized knowledge and beliefs that guide the processing of information on a particular subject—are used by everyone to help interpret related issues.

1. The concept of opinion schema helps us understand that many different factors can impinge on an individual’s attitudes.

2. In spite of complexity in opinion schemas, surprisingly strong correlations are found between individuals’ social background and their political values.

D. **Political leadership** often structures opinions, particularly in the absence of information.