

# PART TWO: Opinions, Interests, and Organizations

## CHAPTER 7

### Public Opinion

#### OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this chapter is to explore what we mean by public opinion and to ask what sort of effects public opinion has on our supposedly democratic form of government. After reading and reviewing the material in this chapter, the student should be able to do each of the following:

1. List the sources of our political attitudes and indicate which are the most important.
2. Explain why there are crosscutting cleavages between liberals and conservatives in this country. Assess the significance of race, ethnicity, and gender in explaining political attitudes.
3. Define political ideology and give reasons why most Americans do not think ideologically. Summarize the liberal and conservative positions on the economy, civil rights, and political conduct.
4. Discuss the basic elements of polling and explain how polling reflects the attitudes of people generally.

#### OVERVIEW

It is difficult to speak of “public opinion” in the United States. This is partly because there are many publics, with many different opinions. It is also partly because opinion on all but relatively simple matters tends to be uninformed, unstable, and sensitive to different ways of asking poll questions.

The chief sources of political opinion are the family, religion, information media, and schooling. Once occupation (or income) was a central determinant of opinion, but with the spread of higher education, the connection between occupational status (or income) and opinion is no longer quite as close.

The chief source of cleavages in opinion are race and ethnicity, class (in which schooling is an important component), and region.

Americans are divided by their political ideologies but not along a single liberal-conservative dimension. There are several kinds of issues on which people may take “liberal” or “conservative” positions, and they often do not take the same position on all issues. Just using two kinds of issues—economic and social—it is possible to define four kinds of ideologies. These are pure liberal, pure conservative, libertarian, and populist.

Political elites are much more likely to display a consistent ideology, whether liberal or conservative. Elites are important because they have a disproportionate influence on public policy. They also influence mass opinion through the dissemination of information and the evocation of political norms.

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE WITH KEYED-IN RESOURCES

- I. What is public opinion?

- A. How people think or feel about particular things
  - B. People do not spend a great deal of time thinking about \_\_\_\_\_; results:
    - 1. High levels of public \_\_\_\_\_ e.g., Monetary Control Bill ruse
    - 2. Despite being poorly informed, citizens are quite good at using cues (limited information) to figure out what candidates/positions reflect their values or interests
    - 3. Public opinion less \_\_\_\_\_ than previously thought
  - C. How polling works (THEME A: PUBLIC OPINION POLLING)
    - 1. Need to pose reasonable questions that are worded fairly
    - 2. Have to ask people about things for which they have some basis to form an \_\_\_\_\_
    - 3. Random \_\_\_\_\_ is necessary to ensure a reasonably accurate measure of how the entire population thinks or feels
    - 4. Sampling error reflects the difference between the results of two surveys or samples
    - 5. \_\_\_\_\_—interviews with randomly selected voters conducted at polling places on election day—have proven quite accurate
    - 6. Polling specifics
      - a) For populations over 500,000, pollsters need to make about 15,000 phone calls to reach 1,065 respondents, ensuring the poll has a sampling error of only +/- 3%
    - 7. Is increasingly difficult to get this number to do because of call-screening
    - 8. Low response rates harm \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. How opinions differ
    - 1. Opinion \_\_\_\_\_; some people care more about certain issues than other people do
    - 2. Opinion stability: the steadiness or volatility of opinion on an issue
    - 3. Opinion-policy congruence: the level of correspondence between government action and majority sentiment on an issue
    - 4. Political \_\_\_\_\_: the process by which personal and other background traits influence one's views about politics and government
      - a) Children tend to share \_\_\_\_\_ political orientations
      - b) Opinion seems to vary in ways associated with class, race, \_\_\_\_\_, gender and other characteristics
      - c) But people with similar family histories, religious affiliations, formal educations, and job experiences do not think or vote exactly the same way
    - 5. Mass and elite opinions differ
      - a) \_\_\_\_\_ know more about politics
      - b) Elites are more likely to hold a consistent set of opinions about the policies government ought to pursue
- II. Political Socialization; The Family
- A. The role of family
    - 1. Party identification of family absorbed, although the child becomes more independent-thinking with time
    - 2. In recent years, there has been a declining ability to pass on party \_\_\_\_\_
    - 3. \_\_\_\_\_ voters exhibit less partisanship; they are more likely to be independent
    - 4. Meaning of the partisanship that children acquire from their parents is unclear; children are less influenced by parents in regard to policy preferences
    - 5. Clear political \_\_\_\_\_ are passed on in only a few families
  - B. Religion
    - 1. Families form and transmit political beliefs through their religious tradition
    - 2. Differences between religions are quite complicated, and vary with particular issues
      - a) Religious influences on public opinion are most pronounced with respect to social issues
      - b) Religious influence on opinion is much less pronounced on non-social issues (e.g., the war in Iraq)
  - C. The gender gap
    - 1. The difference in political views between men and women
      - a) Men have become increasingly \_\_\_\_\_ since the mid-1960s

- b) Women have continued to identify with the \_\_\_\_\_ Party at approximately the same rate since the early 1950s
  - c) Reflects attitudinal differences between men and women, about the size of government, gun control, social programs, and gay rights
2. Not clear whether \_\_\_\_\_ gap is as large for Hispanics as it is for African Americans and whites
- D. Schooling and information
1. From 1920s through 1960s, studies showed college education had \_\_\_\_\_ effect, possibly because of exposure to liberalizing elites
  2. Contemporary college students' opinions are more complicated
    - a) 18-24 year-olds favorably disposed toward public sector, but not consistently in favor of smaller government
    - b) Belief in individual choice on a range of issues may be college students' axial political opinion
    - c) In the last \_\_\_\_\_, increased schooling has not been associated with increased political participation
  3. Liberalization of previous generations probably attributable to increased reading of political information; contemporary college students less apt to read newspapers and news magazines than their predecessors
- III. Cleavages in public opinion (THEME B: GROUP CLEAVAGES, POLITICAL ATTITUDES, AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY)
- A. Social class: ill-defined in U.S., though recognized in specific cases (e.g., truck drivers and investment bankers)
1. Social class \_\_\_\_\_ important in U.S. than in Europe; extent of cleavage has declined in both places
  2. Class voting has \_\_\_\_\_ sharply since the 1940s, in the U.S. and in several other West European nations.
  3. Class differences remain: unskilled workers are more likely to be \_\_\_\_\_ than affluent white-collar workers
  4. Noneconomic issues now define liberal and conservative
  5. Moral, symbolic, and foreign-policy issues do not \_\_\_\_\_ the rich and poor in the same way.
- B. Race and ethnicity
1. African Americans
    - a) Similarities and differences between Blacks and Whites are complex, but there is some evidence that they may be narrowing
    - b) \_\_\_\_\_ differences also surface among African Americans; younger Blacks less likely to believe that social and economic differences between the races are due to discrimination
    - c) Differences of opinion surface between black leaders and black citizens (similar to those between white leaders and white citizens)

2. Latinos and Asians
  - a) Latinos tend to identify as \_\_\_\_\_, though not as strongly as African Americans
  - b) Asians are even more identified with the \_\_\_\_\_ party than are whites
  - c) Asian opinion on issues of order more like Anglo opinion than like Black or Hispanic opinion
  - d) Latinos are somewhat more liberal than Anglos or Asians, but \_\_\_\_\_ liberal than African Americans
  - e) Important differences within “Asian” and “Hispanic” groups

#### C. Region

1. White \_\_\_\_\_ were once more conservative than other regions regarding aid to minorities, legalizing marijuana, school busing, and rights of the accused
2. White southerners were similar to other regions regarding economic issues
3. Historically, the \_\_\_\_\_ is more accommodating to business interests (and less accommodating to organized labor) than the North
4. Southerners now significantly \_\_\_\_\_ Democratic than they were for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

#### IV. Political ideology

##### A. Definition: a more or less consistent set of beliefs about what \_\_\_\_\_, government ought to pursue

1. Measured in two ways:
  - a) Seeing how frequently people use broad political categories to describe or justify their own views and preferences
  - b) Seeing to what extent a citizen’s policy preferences are consistent over time or are based on consistent principles
2. Great majority of Americans do not think : \_\_\_\_\_

##### B. Consistent attitudes

1. Yet, people may have strong predispositions even if they do not satisfy the condition of being “ideological”
2. One may be ideological by crossing the borders of traditional liberalism or conservatism in their issue affiliations

##### C. What do “liberalism” and “conservatism” mean?

1. Liberal and conservative labels have a complex history
  - a) Early 1800s: liberals \_\_\_\_\_: personal, economic liberty; conservatives wanted to restore the power of the state, church, and aristocracy
  - b) Roosevelt and the New Deal began to change this definition, so liberalism began to mean support for an activist government
  - c) Conservative reaction to activism (Goldwater): \_\_\_\_\_ free market, states’ rights, and individual choice in economics
  - d) Today’s meanings are imprecise, but still reflect important differences within and between the parties

##### D. Various categories of public opinion

1. Economic policy: \_\_\_\_\_ favor jobs for all, subsidized medical care and education, increased taxation of the rich
2. Civil rights: liberals favor strong federal action to desegregate schools, create hiring opportunities for minorities, and strict enforcement of civil rights law
3. Public and political conduct: liberals are \_\_\_\_\_ of protest demonstrations, favor legalization of marijuana, emphasize protecting the rights of the accused, and respond to crime by seeking to eliminate its causes

##### E. Analyzing consistency: people mix liberal and conservative positions on these categories

1. Would actually need nine categories to reflect “mix and match” liberalism and conservatism on three issue areas; liberal-conservative structure doesn’t reflect this complexity

2. Focus on economic policy and personal conduct for simplicity; construct 4 categories
    - a) liberals: liberal on both economic and personal conduct issues
    - b) Pure conservatives: conservative on both economic and personal conduct issues
    - c) liberals; conservative on economic issues, liberal on personal conduct issues
    - d) Populists: liberal on economic issues, conservative on personal conduct issues
- F. Political elites
1. Definition: those who have a disproportionate amount of some valued resource
  2. Elites, (usually known as activists) display greater ideological consistency
    - a) They have more information and more interest in politics than most people, so they may see more relationships among the issues
    - b) Their peers reinforce this consistency
- V. Political elites, public opinion, and public policy
- A. Elites influence public opinion in two ways
1. Raise and frame political issues
  2. State norms by which to settle issues and define policy options
- B. Limits to elite influence on the public
1. Elites do not define economic, crime, and other problems that are rooted in personal
  2. Elites contradict and disagree with one another, limiting their influence.

## IMPORTANT TERMS

*elite	People with a disproportionate amount of some valued resource.
*exit polls	Polls based on interviews conducted on Election Day with randomly selected voters.
*gender gap	Difference in political views between men and women.
*norm	A standard of right and proper conduct.
*political elites	Persons with a disproportionate share of political power.
*political ideology	A more or less consistent set of beliefs about what policies government ought to pursue.
*political socialization	Process by which background traits influence one's political views.
*poll	A survey of public opinion.
*public opinion	How people think or feel about particular things.
*random sample	A method of selecting from a population in which each person has an equal chance of being selected.
*sampling error	The difference between the results from two different samples of the same population.

## THEME A: PUBLIC OPINION POLLING

### Instructor Resources

Herbert Asher, *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know*, 4th ed. Washington, D.C.: Press, 1998.

J.M. Converse and Stanley Presser, *Survey Questions: Handcrafting the Standardized Questionnaire*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1988.

Robert S. Erikson, *American Public Opinion: Its Origin, Contents, and Impact*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

Gallup Organization web site: <http://www.gallup.com/>