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Public Opinion and Political Socialization



In 1863, Abraham Lincoln proudly summarized American government as one “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” Though this sentiment has always been true to some degree, our modern political landscape has given this old idea new perspective.

Today, we know more about what “the people” want from their government than ever before. Much of this knowledge comes from our increasing ability to collect representative data on aggregate public opinion. The tools available to pollsters, including the Internet, robocalls, and computer programs, make data collection, analysis, and dissemination easier than ever.

However, there can be dangerous consequences to having so much data. Just about anything can be proven—or disproven—with a public opinion poll. Moreover, the volume of polls conducted and information available about these studies makes them an attractive topic for news coverage. This phenomenon is especially prevalent during election season. And, while on one hand, it may be interesting to examine the relationship between events and citizens’ evaluations of political leaders, on the other hand, constant reports of the results of the latest poll only serve to intensify the horse-race atmosphere of the campaign. More importantly, it may also distract from the true issues of the election and obscure citizens’ understanding of the political process.

Consider, for example, a three-week period in September 2012. On August 31, 2012, a Gallup tracking poll reported that 48 percent of registered voters intended to vote for President Barack Obama; 45 percent supported the Republican candidate, Governor Mitt Romney. About a week

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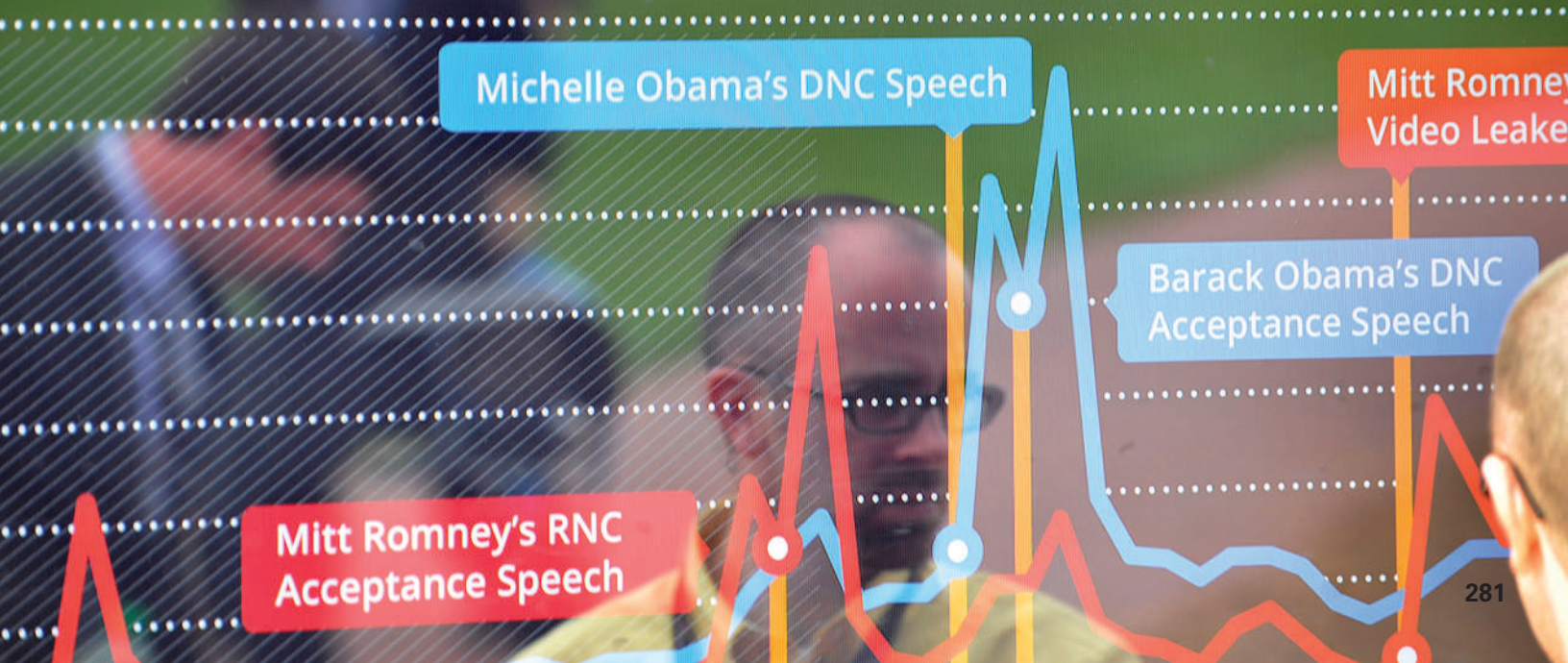
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PUBLIC OPINION PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS Above, a Gallup Poll worker conducts face-to-face interviews during the 1968 presidential election. Below, pollsters use Google search results to track interest in the 2012 presidential candidates, Governor Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama.

OBAMA VS ROMNEY

Google Search interest in Obama and Romney from August — September



10.1

public opinion

What the public thinks about a particular issue or set of issues at any point in time.

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public opinion polls

Interviews or surveys with samples of citizens that are used to estimate the feelings and beliefs of the entire population.

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later, on the heels of a successful Democratic Convention, President Obama's support rose to 50 percent of registered voters. Obama's boost was short-lived. On September 12, following the murders of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and two others at the U.S. Consulate in Libya, only 47 percent of registered voters said they would support President Obama in November.

In a close election such as 2012, these small shifts are often portrayed by the media as dramatic sea changes in the tides of public opinion. And indeed, if these changes were real alterations of the entire population's beliefs, they could have been the difference between an Obama victory and a Romney victory. However, public opinion polls are based on a sample of the American public, and have a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percent. Thus, although the media made much of these shifting values, it is actually possible that public opinion did not change at all during this period. On Election Day, the final popular vote reflected a similarly small margin of victory. Although President Obama won a near landslide in the Electoral College, he won the popular vote by just 3 percent, securing 51 percent of the vote compared to Romney's 48 percent.

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In 1787, John Jay wrote glowingly of the sameness of the American people. He and the other authors of *The Federalist Papers* believed that Americans had more in common than not. Wrote Jay in *Federalist No. 2*, we are "one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in manners and customs." Many of those who could vote in Jay's time were of English heritage; almost all were Christian. Moreover, most believed that certain rights—such as freedom of speech, association, and religion—were rights that could not be revoked. Jay also spoke of shared public opinion and of the need for a national government that reflected American ideals.

Today, however, Americans are more diverse, and the growth of modern public opinion research has helped us to better understand Americans' views on political issues and how our varying experiences, values, and heritage shape them. In part, this is attributable to the pervasiveness of polls. Not a week goes by that major cable news networks, major newspapers, foundations, or colleges and universities do not poll Americans on something—from views on political issues, such as the environment, race, and health care, to their emotions, including happiness and stress. Polling is so common now that the public needs the ability to interpret often-conflicting poll results. In this chapter, we explore how polls are conducted and analyzed, as well as how Americans' demographic and cultural experiences define public opinion.

Roots of Public Opinion Research

10.1

Trace the development of modern public opinion research.



At first glance, **public opinion** seems to be a straightforward concept: it is what the public thinks about a particular issue or set of issues at any point in time. In government and politics, for example, researchers measure citizens' views on candidates, political institutions, and policy proposals. Since the 1930s, governmental decision makers have relied heavily on **public opinion polls**—interviews with samples of citizens that estimate the feelings and beliefs of larger populations, such as all Americans or all women. According to George Gallup (1901–1983), an Iowan who is considered the founder of modern-day polling, polls have played a key role in defining issues of concern to the public, shaping administrative decisions, and helping "speed up the process of democracy" in the United States.¹

Gallup further contended that leaders must constantly take public opinion—no matter how short-lived—into account. This practice does not mean that leaders

must follow the public's view slavishly; it does mean, however, that they should have an available appraisal of public opinion and consider it in reaching their decisions. Politicians may find this process challenging when public opinion appears split on an issue or is in opposition to their views.

Even though Gallup, as a pollster, undoubtedly had a vested interest in fostering reliance on public opinion polls, his sentiments accurately reflect the views of many political thinkers concerning the role of public opinion in governance. Some commentators argue that the government should do what a majority of the public wants done. Others argue that the public as a whole doesn't have consistent day-to-day opinions on issues but that subgroups within the public often hold strong views on some issues. These pluralists believe that the government must allow for the expression of minority opinions and that democracy works best when different voices are allowed to fight it out in the public arena, echoing James Madison in *Federalist No. 10*.

□ The Earliest Public Opinion Research

As early as 1824, one Pennsylvania newspaper tried to predict the winner of that year's presidential contest, showing Andrew Jackson leading over John Quincy Adams. In 1883, the *Boston Globe* sent reporters to selected election precincts to poll voters as they exited voting booths, in an effort to predict the results of key contests. Public opinion polling as we know it today really began to develop in the 1930s. Walter Lippmann's seminal work, *Public Opinion* (1922), prompted much of this growth. Lippmann observed that research on public opinion was far too limited, especially in light of its importance. Researchers in a variety of disciplines, including political science, heeded Lippmann's call to learn more about public opinion. Some tried to use scientific methods to measure political thought through the use of surveys or polls. As methods for gathering and interpreting data improved, survey data began to play an increasingly significant role in all walks of life, from politics to retailing.

Literary Digest, a popular magazine that first began national presidential polling in 1916, was a pioneer in the use of the **straw poll**, an unscientific survey used to gauge public opinion, to predict the popular vote, which it did, for Woodrow Wilson. Its polling methods were hailed widely as "amazingly right" and "uncannily accurate."² In 1936, however, its luck ran out. *Literary Digest* predicted that Republican Alfred M. Landon would beat incumbent President Franklin D. Roosevelt by a margin of 57 percent to 43 percent of the popular vote. Roosevelt, however, won in a landslide election, receiving 62.5 percent of the popular vote and carrying all but two states.

Literary Digest's 1936 straw poll had three fatal errors. First, it drew its **sample**, a subset of the whole population selected to be questioned for the purposes of prediction or gauging opinion, from telephone directories and lists of automobile owners. This technique oversampled the upper middle class and the wealthy, groups heavily Republican in political orientation. Moreover, in 1936, voting polarized along class lines. Thus, the oversampling of wealthy Republicans was particularly problematic because it severely underestimated working class Democratic voters, who had neither cars nor telephones.

Literary Digest's second problem was timing. The magazine mailed its questionnaires in early September. This did not allow the *Digest* to measure the changes in public sentiment that occurred as the election drew closer.

Its third error occurred because of a problem we now call self-selection. Only highly motivated individuals sent back the cards—a mere 22 percent of those surveyed responded. Those who answer mail surveys (or today, online surveys) are quite different from the general electorate; they often are wealthier and better educated and care more fervently about issues. *Literary Digest*, then, failed to observe one of the now well-known cardinal rules of survey sampling: "One cannot allow the respondents to select themselves into the sample."³

straw poll

Unscientific survey used to gauge public opinion on a variety of issues and policies.

sample

A subset of the whole population selected to be questioned for the purposes of prediction or gauging opinion.

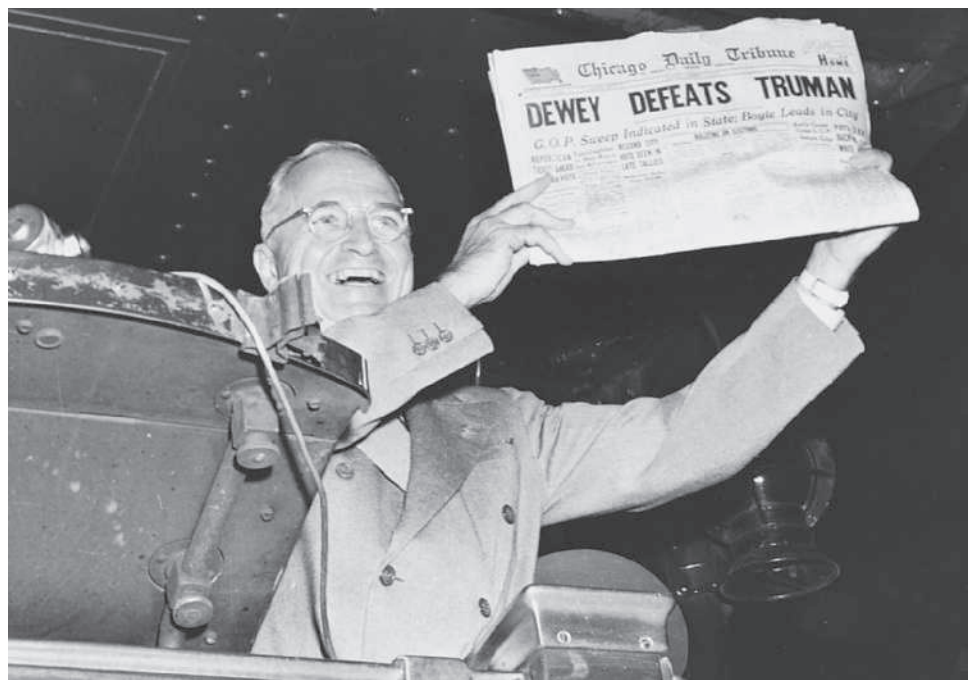
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IS POLLING ALWAYS ACCURATE?

Not only did advance polls in 1948 predict that Republican nominee Thomas E. Dewey would defeat Democratic incumbent President Harry S. Truman, but on the basis of early and incomplete vote tallies, some newspapers' early editions published the day after the election declared Dewey the winner. Here a triumphant Truman holds aloft the *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

□ The Gallup Organization

At least one pollster, however, correctly predicted the results of the 1936 election: George Gallup. Gallup had written his dissertation in psychology at the University of Iowa on how to measure the readership of newspapers. He then expanded his research to study public opinion about politics. He was so confident about his methods that he gave all of his newspaper clients a money-back guarantee: if his poll predictions weren't closer to the actual election outcome than those of the highly acclaimed *Literary Digest*, he would refund their money. Although Gallup under-predicted Roosevelt's victory by nearly 7 percent, the fact that he got the winner right was what everyone remembered, especially given *Literary Digest's* dramatic miscalculation.

Through the late 1940s, polling techniques increased in sophistication. The number of polling firms also dramatically rose, as businesses and politicians began to rely on polling information to market products and candidates. But, in 1948, the polling industry suffered a severe, although fleeting, setback when Gallup and many other pollsters incorrectly predicted that Thomas E. Dewey would defeat President Harry S. Truman.

Nevertheless, as revealed in Figure 10.1, the Gallup Organization continues to make remarkably accurate predictions about the outcome of presidential elections. In 2012, the Gallup Poll predicted a virtual dead heat between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama; President Obama won 51 percent of the popular vote.

□ The American National Election Studies

Recent efforts to measure public opinion also have benefited from social science surveys such as the American National Election Studies (ANES). The ANES have been conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan and Stanford University since 1952. Since 1977, they have been funded largely by the national government through the

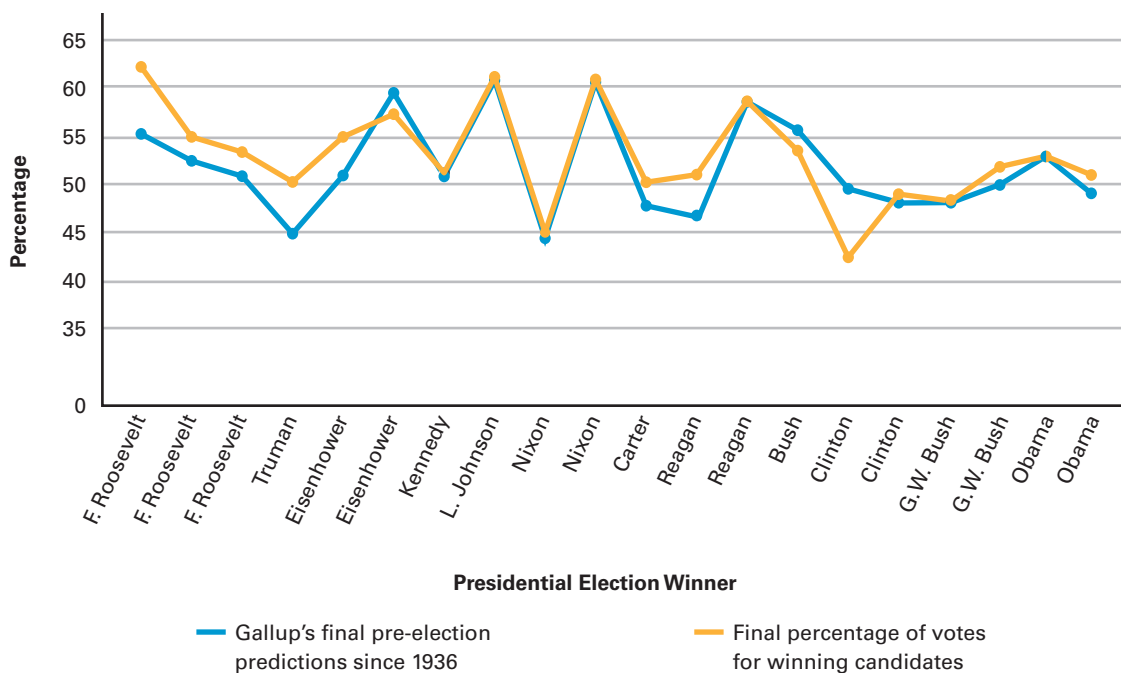


FIGURE 10.1 HOW SUCCESSFUL HAS THE GALLUP POLL BEEN?

As seen here, Gallup's final predictions have been remarkably accurate. Furthermore, in each of the years in which a significant discrepancy exists between Gallup's prediction and the election's outcome, a prominent third candidate factored in. In 1948, Strom Thurmond ran on the Dixiecrat ticket; in 1980, John Anderson ran as the American Independent Party candidate; in 1992, Ross Perot ran as an independent.

SOURCES: Marty Baumann, "How One Polling Firm Stacks Up," *USA Today* (October 27, 1992): 13A; 1996 data from Mike Mokrzycki, "Pre-election Polls' Accuracy Varied," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (November 8, 1996): A12; 2000 data from Gallup Organization, "Poll Releases," November 7, 2000; 2004, 2008, and 2012 data from *USA Today* and CNN/Gallup Tracking Poll, www.usatoday.com.

National Science Foundation. Focusing on the political attitudes and behavior of the electorate, ANES surveys include questions about how respondents voted, their party affiliation, and their opinions of major political parties and candidates. In addition, ANES surveys contain questions about interest in politics and political participation.

Researchers conduct ANES surveys before and after mid-term and presidential elections, often including many of the same questions. This format enables researchers to compile long-term studies of the electorate and facilitates political scientists' understanding of how and why people vote and participate in politics.

Conducting and Analyzing Public Opinion Polls

10.2 Describe the methods for conducting and analyzing different types of public opinion polls.

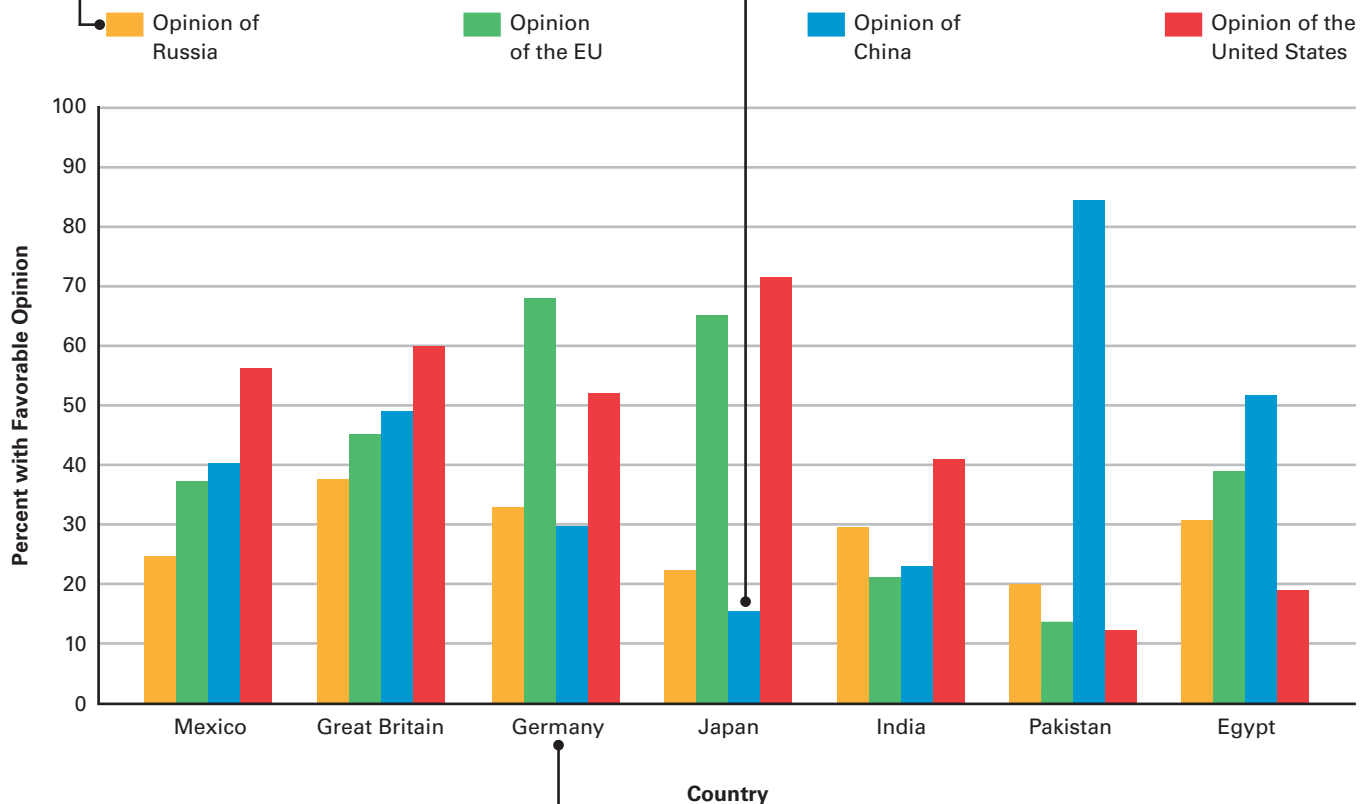
The polling process most often begins when someone says, "Let's find out about X and Y." Potential candidates for local office may want to know how many people have heard of them (the device used to find out is called a "name recognition survey"). Better-known candidates contemplating a run for higher office might wish to discover how they might fare against an incumbent. Polls also can help gauge how effective particular ads are or how well (or negatively) the public perceives a candidate. Political scientists have found that public opinion polls are critical to successful presidents and their staffs, who use polls to "create favorable legislative environment(s) to pass the presidential agenda, to win reelection, and to be judged favorably by history."⁴

Explore Your World

Public opinion polls have become an increasingly common tool for gauging public opinion not only in the United States but also around the world. These global public opinion surveys help us to understand the commonalities and differences across international contexts, and also reflect the social, cultural, and political variations of different states. To think more deeply about these trends, examine the results of four questions from the 2012 Pew Global Attitudes Survey that assess the attitudes toward global powers held by citizens in a sample of countries.

Russia, the European Union, China, and the United States are four significant global powers. Each has significant influence in international politics and world affairs. They also have unique allies and enemies.

Citizens from Russia, China, and the United States are most positive toward their respective states. Citizens from states with long-standing rivalries with each of these countries are the least positive.



Many of the countries whose citizens have the most positive views toward the European Union are member states in good standing.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. How do citizens' ratings in these surveys reflect—and not reflect—political and geographic alliances?
2. Which countries' citizens are most and least positive across the board? Why do you think this is the case?
3. What might be some of the challenges in measuring and comparing cross-national public opinion?

□ Designing the Survey and Sample

No matter the type of poll, serious pollsters or polling firms must make several decisions before undertaking the process. These include determining the content and phrasing of the questions, selecting the sample from the public, and deciding how to go about contacting respondents.

DETERMINING THE CONTENT AND PHRASING THE QUESTIONS The first matter candidates, political groups, or news organizations must consider when deciding to use a poll concerns what questions they want answered. Determining the content of a survey is critical to obtaining the desired results, and for that reason, candidates, companies, and news organizations generally rely on pollsters. Polls may ask, for example, about job performance, demographics, and specific issue areas.

Special care must be taken in constructing the questions. For example, if your professor asked you, “Do you think my grading procedures are fair?” rather than asking, “In general, how fair do you think the grading is in your American Politics course?” you might give a slightly different answer. The wording of the first question tends to put you on the spot and personalize the grading style; the second question is more neutral. Even more obvious differences appear in the real world of polling. Responses to highly emotional issues, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and affirmative action, often are skewed depending on the phrasing of a particular question. Even in unbiased polls, how a question is worded can unintentionally skew results.

During a political campaign, strategists will often ask questions that help candidates judge their own strengths and weaknesses as well as those of their opponents. They might, for example, ask if you would be more likely to vote for candidate X if you knew he or she was a strong environmentalist. These kinds of questions are accepted as an essential part of any poll, but concerns arise over where to draw the line. Questions that cross the line are called **push polls** and often result from ulterior motives.⁵ The intent of push polls is to give respondents some negative or even untruthful information about a candidate’s opponent so that they will move away from that candidate and toward the one paying for the poll. A typical push poll might ask a question such as “If you knew Candidate X beat his wife, would you vote for him?” Push poll takers do not even bother to record the responses because they are irrelevant; the questions themselves are meant to push away as many voters from a candidate as possible. Although campaign organizations generally deny conducting push polls, research shows that this type of polling has targeted more than three-quarters of political candidates.

SELECTING THE SAMPLE After deciding to conduct a poll, pollsters must determine the **population**, or the entire group of people whose attitudes a researcher wishes to measure. This universe could be all Americans, all voters, all city residents, all Hispanics, or all Republicans. In a perfect world, the poll would ask every individual to give an opinion, but such comprehensive polling is not practical. Consequently, pollsters take a sample of the population that interests them. One way to obtain this sample is by **random sampling**. This method of selection gives each potential voter or adult approximately the same chance of being selected.

Simple random samples, however, are not very useful for predicting voting because they may undersample or oversample key populations not likely to vote. To avoid such problems, reputable polling organizations use **stratified sampling** (the most rigorous sampling technique) based on U.S. Census data that provide the number of residences in an area and their location. Researchers divide the population into several sampling regions. They then randomly select subgroups to sample in proportion to the total national population. These selected primary sampling units often are used for many years, because it is cheaper for polling companies to train interviewers to work in fixed areas.

push polls

Polls taken for the purpose of providing information on an opponent that would lead respondents to vote against that candidate.

population

The entire group of people whose attitudes a researcher wishes to measure.

random sampling

A method of poll selection that gives each person in a group the same chance of being selected.

stratified sampling

A variation of random sampling; the population is divided into subgroups and weighted based on demographic characteristics of the national population.

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HOW ARE POLLS CONDUCTED?

The most common method of conducting a public opinion poll is via telephone. These polls are often administered by survey researchers working at large phone banks, such as the one shown here.

The pollsters choose about twenty respondents from each primary sampling unit for interviewing; the total is 600 to 1,000 respondents. Large, sophisticated surveys such as the American National Election Studies and the University of Chicago's General Social Survey attempt to sample from lists of persons living in each household in a sampling unit. A key to the success of the stratified sampling method is not to let people volunteer to be interviewed—volunteers often have different opinions from those who do not volunteer.

□ Contacting Respondents

After selecting the poll's methodology, the next decision is how to contact those to be surveyed. Political polling today takes a variety of forms, including telephone polls, in-person interviews, and Internet polls.

TELEPHONE POLLS Telephone polls are the most frequently used mechanism by which to gauge the mood of the electorate. The most common form of telephone polls is the random-digit dialing survey, in which a computer randomly selects telephone numbers for dialing. In spite of some problems (such as the fact that many people do not want to be bothered or do not have landline phones), most polls done for newspapers and news magazines operate in this way. Pollsters are exempt from federal and state do-not-call lists because poll taking is a form of constitutionally protected speech.

Take a Closer Look

The emergence of a growing number of public opinion research firms means that citizens, the media, and political leaders know more than ever before about how voters perceive political issues and candidates. This information may be useful for promoting a more democratic and representative government. But, it may also be notoriously mercurial, marked by dramatic fluctuations from week to week or even day to day, as illustrated in the political cartoon below.

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CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Why do so many agencies and organizations want to collect public opinion data? How do the data help them advocate for their cause?
2. How might frequent fluctuations in the results of public opinion polls both help and hurt candidates?
3. Is there too much public opinion data in modern politics? Why or why not?

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tracking polls

Continuous surveys that enable a campaign or news organization to chart a candidate's daily rise or fall in support.

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exit polls

Polls conducted as voters leave selected polling places on Election Day.

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During the 1992 presidential elections, the introduction of **tracking polls**, which were taken on a daily basis via phone by some news organizations, allowed presidential candidates to monitor short-term campaign developments and the effects of their campaign strategies. Today, tracking polls involve small samples (usually of registered voters contacted at certain times of the day) and take place every twenty-four hours. Pollsters then combine the results into moving three- to five-day averages (see Figure 10.2).

IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS Some polls, such as the American National Election Studies, continue to perform individual, person-to-person interviews. In-person surveys allow surveyors to monitor respondents' body language and to interact on a more personal basis; thus, they may yield higher rates of completion. However, the unintended influence of the questioner or pollster may lead to interviewer bias. How the pollster dresses, relates to the person being interviewed, and asks the questions can affect responses.

Exit polls, a special form of in-person poll, are conducted as voters leave selected polling places on Election Day. Generally, large news organizations send pollsters to selected precincts to sample every tenth voter as he or she emerges from the polling site. The results of these polls help the media predict the outcome of key races, often just a few minutes after the polls close in a particular state and generally before voters in other areas—sometimes in a later time zone—have cast their ballots. By asking a series of demographic and issue questions, these polls also provide an independent assessment of why voters supported particular candidates.

INTERNET POLLS Well-established pollster John Zogby was among the first to use a scientific Internet survey. Zogby regularly queries over 3,000 representative volunteers (selected using the sampling techniques discussed later in this chapter) on a host of issues. Zogby, Harris Interactive, and other Internet pollsters using scientific sampling strategies have established relatively effective records in predicting election

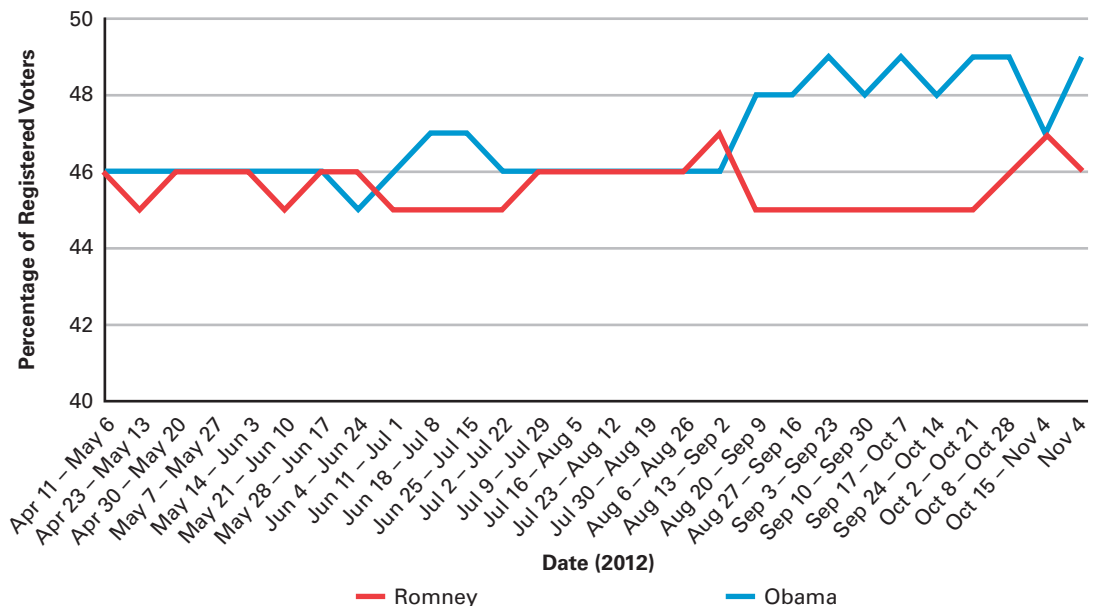


FIGURE 10.2 WHAT DOES A DAILY TRACKING POLL LOOK LIKE?

Day-to-day fluctuations in public opinion on electoral contests are often shown through tracking polls. This figure shows the ups and downs of the 2012 presidential election. President Barack Obama led for much of the race among registered voters, although the polling data generally remained within the margin of error. Note, particularly, Mitt Romney's gains after the first presidential debate in early October.

SOURCE: USA Today and CNN/Gallup Poll results, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/154559/US-Presidential-Election-Center.aspx?ref=interactive>.

outcomes and gauging opinions on numerous issues of importance to the American public. Political scientists, too, use online polling to collect survey research data. The biannual Cooperative Congressional Election Study conducted by political scientists is one example of this kind of research.

Contrasting sharply with scientific Internet surveys are unscientific Web polls that allow anyone to weigh in on a topic. Such polls are common on many Web sites, such as CNN.com and ESPN.com. These polls resemble a straw poll in terms of sampling and thus produce results that are largely inconclusive and of interest only to a limited number of people.

□ Analyzing the Data

Analyzing the collected data is a critical step in the polling process. Analysis reveals the implications of the data for public policy and political campaigns. Data are entered into a computer program, where answers to questions are recorded and analyzed. Often, analysts pay special attention to subgroups within the data, such as Democrats versus Republicans, men versus women, age groups, or political ideology, among others. Reporting the results of this analysis can happen in a variety of ways, such as by news organizations or campaigns.

Shortcomings of Polling

10.3 Assess the potential shortcomings of polling.

Information derived from public opinion polls has become an important part of governance. When the results of a poll are accurate, they express the attitudes of the electorate and help guide policy makers. However, when the results of a poll are inaccurate, disastrous consequences can result. For example, during the 2000 presidential election, Voter News Service (VNS), the conglomerate organization that provided the major networks with their exit poll data, made a host of errors in estimating the results of the presidential vote in Florida, which led news organizations to call the election for Al Gore. Not only did VNS fail to estimate the number of voters accurately, but it also used an inaccurate exit poll model and incorrectly estimated the number of African American and Cuban voters in Florida. Polls may be inaccurate for a number of reasons. These include survey error, limited respondent options, lack of information, difficulty measuring intensity, and lack of interest.

□ Survey Error

All polls contain errors. They may come about from natural errors in statistical measurement that arise from using a sample to extrapolate the opinions of the general public, known as the margin of error. They may also result from drawing an improper sample, known as sampling error.

MARGIN OF ERROR Typically, the margin of error in a sample of 1,000 will be about 4 percent. If you ask 1,000 people, “Do you like ice cream?” and 52 percent say yes and 48 percent say no, the results are too close to tell whether more people like ice cream than not. Why? Because the **margin of error** implies that somewhere between 56 percent ($52 + 4$) and 48 percent ($52 - 4$) of the people like ice cream, while between 52 percent ($48 + 4$) and 44 percent ($48 - 4$) do not. The margin of error in a close election makes predictions very difficult.

margin of error

A measure of the accuracy of a public opinion poll.

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SAMPLING ERROR Errors may also result from the size or the quality of the sample. Small samples, if properly drawn, can be very accurate if each unit in the universe has an equal opportunity to be sampled. If a pollster, for example, fails to sample certain populations, his or her results may reflect that shortcoming. Often polls underrepresent the opinions of the poor and homeless because pollsters give insufficient attention to representatively sampling these groups.

□ Limited Respondent Options

Famed political scientist V.O. Key Jr. was among the first social scientists to note the problem of limited respondent options. He cautioned students of public opinion to be certain their questions adequately allowed respondents the appropriate range in which they could register their opinions. Simple yes-no (or approve-disapprove) questions may not be sufficient to “take the temperature” of the public. For example, if someone asks you, “How do you like this class?” and then gives only like or dislike options, your full sentiments may not be tapped if you like the class very much or feel only so-so about it.

Thus, most polling agencies ask citizens to rank their opinion on five- or seven-point scales that can better gauge variations in public opinion. Other surveys use “feeling thermometer” questions, wherein respondents provide a response from 0 to 100 measuring how they “feel” about a particular issue. These types of questions, however, are too lengthy and unwieldy for polling organizations that seek quick answers.

□ Lack of Information

Public opinion polls may also be inaccurate when they attempt to gauge attitudes toward issues about which the public has little information. Most academic public opinion research organizations use some kind of filter question that first asks respondents whether or not they have thought about the question. These screening procedures generally allow survey researchers to exclude as many as 20 percent of



CAN POLLS MEASURE INTENSITY OF OPINION?

One of the greatest shortcomings of most public opinion polls is that they measure direction of public opinion, but not intensity. Here, members of Westboro Baptist Church demonstrate intense opposition to homosexuality by protesting outside the Supreme Court.

their respondents, especially on complex issues such as the federal budget. Questions on more personal issues, such as moral values, drugs, contraceptives, crime, race, and women's role in society, receive far fewer "no opinion" or "don't know" responses.

political socialization

The process through which individuals acquire their political beliefs and values.

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□ Difficulty Measuring Intensity

Another shortcoming of polls concerns their inability to measure intensity of feeling about particular issues. Whereas a respondent might answer affirmatively to any question, it is likely that his or her feelings about issues such as big government, the death penalty, or support for the war on terrorism are much more intense than are those about the Electoral College or absentee ballot laws.

□ Lack of Interest in Political Issues

When we face policies that do not affect us personally and do not involve moral issues, we often have difficulty forming an opinion. This phenomenon is especially true with regard to foreign policy. Most Americans often know little of the world around them. Unless major issues of national importance take center stage, American public opinion on foreign affairs is likely to be volatile in the wake of any new information. In contrast, most Americans are more interested in domestic policy issues, such as health care and employment which have a greater impact on their daily lives.

Forming Political Opinions

10.4 Analyze the process by which people form political opinions.

Political scientists believe that many of our attitudes about issues are grounded in our political values. The process through which individuals acquire their beliefs is known as **political socialization**.⁶ Demographic characteristics, family, school, peers, the mass media, and political leaders often act as important influences or agents of political socialization.

□ Demographic Characteristics

Individuals have little control over most demographic characteristics. But, at birth, these characteristics begin to affect you and your political values. Some of the major demographic characteristics that pollsters routinely expect will affect political opinions include gender, race and ethnicity, age, and religion.

GENDER From the time of the earliest public opinion polls, women have held more liberal attitudes than men about social issues, such as education, poverty, capital punishment, and the environment. Public opinion polls have also found that women's views about war and military intervention are more negative than men's. Some analysts suggest that women's more nurturing nature and their role as mothers influence their more liberal attitudes on issues affecting the family or children. Research by political scientists, however, finds no support for a maternal explanation (see Table 10.1).⁷

RACE AND ETHNICITY Another reliable predictor of people's political attitudes is their race or ethnicity. Differences in political socialization appear at a very early age. Young African American children, for example, generally show very positive feelings about American society and political processes, but this attachment lessens considerably over time. Historically, black children have had less positive views of the president and other public officials than have white children.⁸

TABLE 10.1 DO MEN AND WOMEN THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT POLITICAL ISSUES?

| | Men (%) | Women (%) |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|
| Labor unions are necessary to protect the working person | 59 | 68 |
| Best way to ensure peace is through military strength | 57 | 50 |
| School boards ought to have the right to fire teachers who are known homosexuals | 24 | 19 |
| Women get fewer opportunities than men for good jobs | 45 | 52 |
| We should restrict and control people coming to our country more than we do now | 69 | 68 |
| Voted for Barack Obama in 2012 | 45 ^a | 55 ^a |

^aCNN Exit Polls, November 6, 2012.

SOURCE: Pew Research Center, 2012 American Values Survey, www.people-press.org/values-questions.

Race and ethnicity are exceptionally important factors in the study of public opinion. The direction and intensity of African American and Hispanic opinions on a variety of issues often are quite different from those of whites. For example, blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to support laws and regulations protecting the environment. Minorities are also more likely to favor government-sponsored health insurance. And, Hispanics are also more likely than other groups to support liberalized immigration policies.⁹

AGE Age seems to have a decided effect on political socialization. Our view of the proper role of government, for example, often depends on the era in which we were born and our individual experiences with a variety of social, political, and economic forces. Older people, for example, continue to be affected by having lived through the hard economic times of the Great Depression and World War II.

Age also affects how citizens view governmental programs.¹⁰ Young people, for example, resist higher taxes to fund Medicare, while the elderly resist all efforts to limit Medicare or Social Security. In states such as Florida, to which many northern retirees have flocked, seeking relief from cold winters and high taxes, the elderly have voted as a bloc to defeat income taxes and school tax increases and to pass tax breaks for themselves.

RELIGION Political scientists have found significant evidence that religion affects the political beliefs and behaviors of the American citizenry. Many American ideals, including hard work and personal responsibility, are rooted in our nation's Protestant heritage. These ideals have affected the public policies adopted by government; they may be one reason why the United States has a less developed welfare state than many other industrialized democracies.

Religious beliefs also shape individual attitudes toward political issues. Evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics, for example, may support programs that provide aid to parochial schools, even if it comes at the expense of lowering the wall of separation between church and state. Similarly, Jewish Americans are more likely to favor aid to Israel—a policy at odds with Muslim Americans' support for a Palestinian state. How strictly we practice and follow religious doctrine may affect political beliefs, as well. For example, strict Roman Catholics, Orthodox Jews, Mormons, and evangelical Christians believe that abortion should be illegal in all cases; they also believe in more traditional roles for women.

□ Family, Peers, and School

The influence of the family on political socialization can be traced to two factors: communication and receptivity. Children, especially during their preschool years, spend tremendous amounts of time with their parents; early on, they learn their



HOW DO YOU ENCOURAGE YOUNG WOMEN TO THINK ABOUT CAREERS IN POLITICS?

Researchers find that women are more reluctant than similarly qualified men to think about running for office. In an attempt to change this norm, the Girl Scouts of the USA offers badges emphasizing patriotism and social action. Farheen Hakeem, shown right, leads a Girl Scout troop in Minneapolis.

parents' political values, even though these concepts may be vague. One study of first graders, for example, found that they already had developed political orientations consistent with those of their parents.¹¹ And, by the age of ten or eleven, children become more selective in their perceptions of the president. By this age, children raised in Democratic households are much more likely to cast a critical eye on a Republican president than are those raised in Republican households, and vice versa.

A child's peers—that is, children about the same age—also seem to have an important effect on the socialization process. While parental influences are greatest from birth to age five, beyond that point a child's peer group becomes increasingly important, especially as he or she enters middle school or high school. Groups such as the Girl Scouts of the USA recognize the effect of peer pressure and are trying to influence more young women to participate in, and have a positive view of, politics. The Girl Scouts' Wave the Flag, United We Stand, and American Patriotism patches encourage girls as young as five to learn about government and social action.

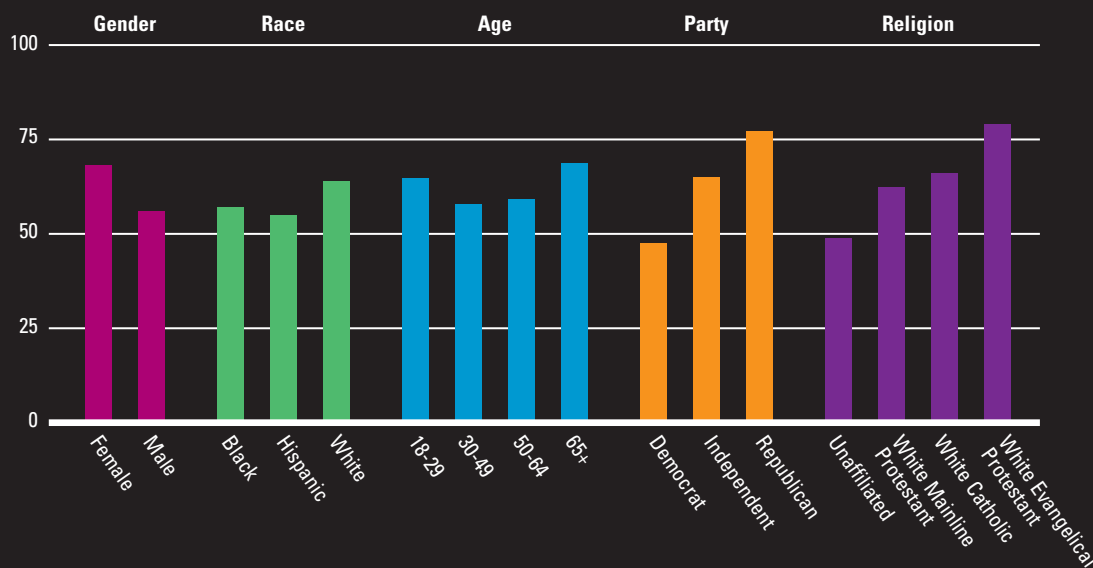
Researchers report mixed findings concerning the role of schools in the political socialization process. There is no question that, in elementary school, children are taught respect for their nation and its symbols. Most school days begin with the Pledge of Allegiance, and patriotism and respect for country are important components of most school curricula. Support for flag and country creates a foundation for national allegiance that prevails despite the negative views about politicians and government institutions that many Americans develop later in life.

For decades, the *Weekly Reader*, read by elementary school students nationwide, attempted to foster political awareness and a sense of civic duty among young people. In presidential election years, students had the opportunity to vote for actual presidential candidates in the nationwide *Weekly Reader* election. These elections were remarkably accurate in predicting the winner. *Weekly Reader* was wrong only once, in the 1992 election of Bill Clinton. These returns were skewed by children's support for prominent independent candidate Ross Perot. *Weekly Reader* was folded into *Scholastic News* in

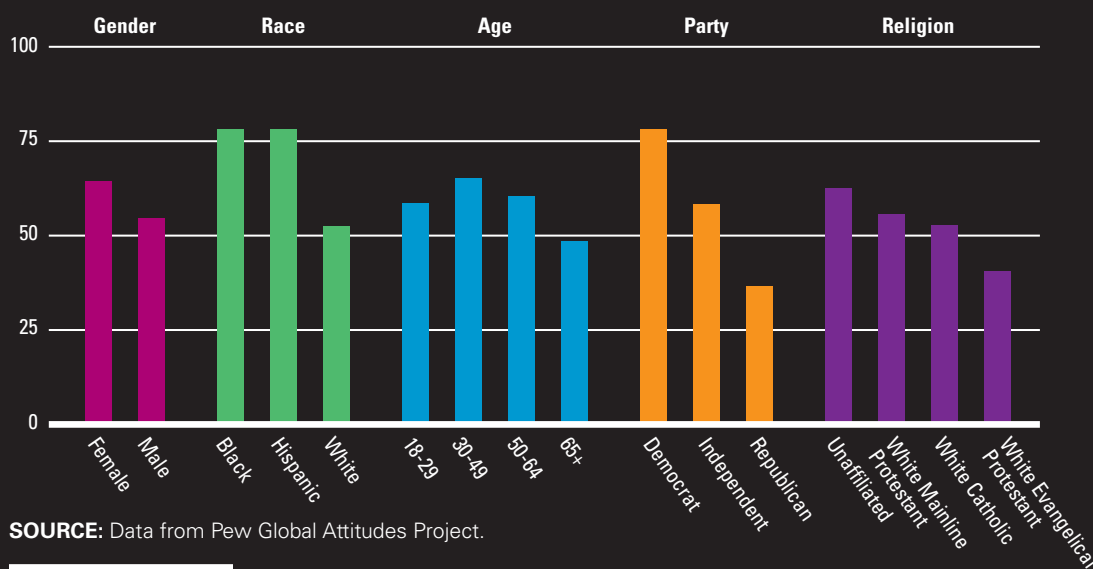
How Do Demographic Characteristics Affect Public Opinion?

Demographic characteristics, as discussed in the text, have a powerful impact on the way citizens view government, political leaders, and public policies. These gaps may be the result of gender, race, age, party, and religion, among other factors. They endure as a result of cultural norms, socialization, and differing value systems. Examine the variations in the attitudes of each of these groups on the questions asked below.

The Federal Government Controls Too Much of Our Daily Lives



The Government Should Guarantee Every Citizen Enough to Eat and a Place to Sleep



SOURCE: Data from Pew Global Attitudes Project.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Which gaps are largest? Smallest? Why do you think these differences exist?
2. Why do you think Republicans are more likely than Democrats and Independents to believe that government controls too much of our daily lives?
3. How might citizens' views on these questions differ as a result of other demographic characteristics, such as income and education?

2012; in a poll designed by Zogby International, students predicted that President Barack Obama would win reelection.

High schools also can be important agents of political socialization. They continue the elementary school tradition of building good citizens and often reinforce textbook learning with trips to the state or national capital. They also offer courses on current U.S. affairs. Many high schools impose a compulsory service-learning requirement, which some studies report positively affects later political participation.¹²

At the college level, teaching style often changes. Many college courses and texts like this one are designed in part to provide the information necessary for thinking critically about issues of major political consequence. It is common in college for students to be called on to question the appropriateness of certain political actions or to discuss underlying reasons for certain political or policy decisions. Therefore, most researchers believe that college has a liberalizing effect on students. Since the 1920s, studies have shown that students become more liberal each year they are in college (see Figure 10.3).

□ The Mass Media

Over the years, more and more Americans have turned away from traditional news sources, such as nightly news broadcasts on the major networks and daily newspapers, in favor of different outlets. TV talk shows, talk radio, online magazines, and blogs are important sources of political news for many people. Cable news, the Internet, and social media are almost omnipresent in the lives of modern Americans. American teenagers, for example, consume almost eleven hours of media content each day.¹³

Cable and Internet news sources are often skewed. Consuming slanted views may affect the way citizens process political information, form opinions on public policy, obtain political knowledge, and receive new ideas. One recent study, for

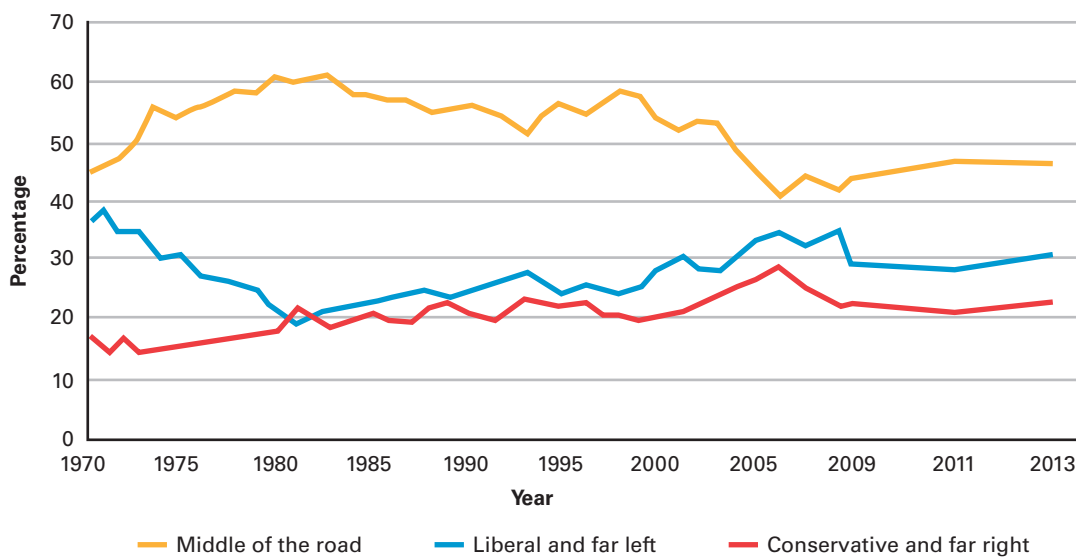


FIGURE 10.3 WHAT ARE THE IDEOLOGICAL SELF-IDENTIFICATIONS OF FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS?

Nearly a majority of first-year college students describe themselves as middle of the road. The percentage of students identifying as conservative or liberal has remained relatively consistent since the 1990s. Liberal and far left students make up slightly higher proportions of first-year students than do conservatives.

SOURCES: Cooperative Institutional Research Program at UCLA, <http://www.heru.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2013.pdf>.

example, revealed that Americans who get most of their news from cable news outlets such as Fox News and MSNBC are even less knowledgeable about political issues than citizens who consume no political news. Individuals who rely on alternative sources such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, as well as Sunday morning talk shows and National Public Radio, are generally more knowledgeable.¹⁴

□ Cues from Leaders or Opinion Makers

Given the visibility of political leaders and their access to the media, it is easy to see the important role they play in influencing opinion formation. Political leaders, members of the news media, and a host of other experts have regular opportunities to affect public opinion because of the lack of deep conviction with which most Americans hold many of their political beliefs.

The president, especially, is often in a position to mold public opinion through effective use of the bully pulpit. The president derives this power from the majesty of his office and his singular position as head of state. Thus, presidents often take to TV in an effort to drum up support for their programs.¹⁵ President Barack Obama, for example, presented his plan for containing the spread of the ebola virus directly to the public, urging citizens to support his efforts.

□ Political Knowledge

Political knowledge and political participation have a reciprocal effect on one another—an increase in one will increase the other. Knowledge about the political system is essential to successful political involvement, which, in turn, teaches citizens about politics and expands their interest in public affairs. And, although few citizens know everything about all of the candidates and issues in a particular election, they can, and often do, know enough to impose their views and values on the general direction the nation should take.

This observation is true despite the fact that most Americans' level of knowledge about history and politics is quite low. According to the U.S. Department of Education, today's college graduates have less civic knowledge than high school graduates did fifty years ago. Americans also do not appear to know much about foreign policy; some critics even argue that many Americans are geographically illiterate (see Table 10.2).¹⁶

Gender differences in political knowledge are also significant. On many traditional measures of political knowledge, women lag behind their male counterparts. However, on issues of interest to women—such as representation in the legislature—women do as well or better than their male counterparts.¹⁷ The gender gap in political knowledge also appears to be affected by education, age, number of children, and marital status.¹⁸

TABLE 10.2 WHAT IS THE EXTENT OF AMERICANS' POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE?

| Can You Identify the Following? | Percentage Unable to Identify |
|--|-------------------------------|
| Majority party in the House of Representatives | 57 |
| Speaker of the House | 56 |
| British prime minister | 62 |
| Photo of Justice Sonia Sotomayor | 35 |
| Israel on a map | 43 |

SOURCES: Pew Research Center, "What the Public Knows," (November 7, 2011) www.people-press.org/2011/11/07/what-the-public-knows-in-words-and-pictures/?src=iq-quiz.

The Living Constitution

The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, chosen by the Legislature thereof, for six Years; and each Senator shall have one Vote. —ARTICLE I, SECTION 3, CLAUSE 1

The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, elected by the people thereof, for six years; and each Senator shall have one vote. —SEVENTEENTH AMENDMENT

The Framers of the Constitution were skeptical of the influence public opinion might have on politics. This is one of the reasons that they crafted such a deliberate system of government with both separation of powers and checks and balances. It was also the primary motivating factor behind the creation of the Electoral College to select the president.

One additional way the Framers tried to temper the influence of public opinion on politics was by placing the selection of senators in the hands of state legislators, as stipulated in Article I, section 3, clause 1 of the Constitution. Legislators, the Framers believed, would be more experienced in political activity and less subject to the effects of campaigning and the whims of the citizenry; thus, they would be more deliberate in their selection of qualified individuals to serve in the Senate.

But, experience proved that this was not always the case. Senators often were chosen on the basis of partisanship and other political alliances. In the early 1900s, Progressive reformers lobbied for an amendment to the Constitution that would remove the selection of senators from the state legislatures and place it in the hands of the citizens. This reform was eventually enacted as the Seventeenth Amendment.

Today, members of both the House of Representatives and the Senate are elected (and reelected)

directly by the people. As a result, members of Congress closely monitor their constituents' opinions on a range of political issues. They use phone calls, letters, and e-mails from citizens, as well as the results of public opinion polls conducted nationally and within their states and districts to help them accomplish this task.

Despite this attention to public opinion, representatives and senators continue to fulfill the deliberate role envisioned by the Framers. They do not always enact the policies that public opinion seems to favor. For example, majorities of Americans oppose U.S. engagement abroad. Yet, complete withdrawal of all peacekeeping and ground troops remains a distant possibility. Similarly, majorities favor insurance coverage for contractees and equal pay for women, yet Congress cannot agree on these issues.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. How closely should members of Congress monitor public opinion? How much weight should these opinions have on their voting behavior?
2. Should public opinion matter more in some issue areas than others? If so, on which issues should it matter more? Less?

Toward Reform: The Effects of Public Opinion on Politics

10.5 Evaluate the effects of public opinion on politics.

As early as the founding period, the authors of *The Federalist Papers* noted that “all government rests on public opinion,” and as a result, public opinion inevitably influences the actions of politicians and public officials. In many swing states, the public’s view of who could best handle the economy, for example, was the driving force behind the victory of Barack Obama in the 2012 presidential campaign.

Andrew Kohut, founding director of the Pew Research Center, argues that the public has become a more critical player in national and international politics in the

10.1

10.2

10.3

10.4

10.5

past three decades for a variety of reasons. Key among them is the rise in the number of polls regularly conducted and reported upon.

According to Kohut, it is impossible to find any major policy proposal for which polling has not “played a significant, even critical role.”¹⁹ Another observer of public opinion polls says, “Polls have become more important and necessary in news writing and presentation, to the point that their significance overwhelms the phenomena they are supposed to be measuring or supplementing.”²⁰ Policy makers thus respond intently to the often mercurial changes in citizens’ opinion. These opinions also influence the way that political campaigns are run. For example, during the 2012 presidential election, President Barack Obama deemphasized his work on health care reform, in part due to the deep divisions in public opinion on the issue.

Intensity of public opinion or the perception of a threat can also spur leaders into action. For example, after Americans expressed growing levels of concern about ISIS and the spread of the ebola virus in late 2014, Republican leaders called for policy change on these issues. Examples such as these show how the public’s views, registered through public opinion polls, can affect policy.

Review the Chapter

Roots of Public Opinion Research

10.1 Trace the development of modern public opinion research, p. 282.

Public opinion is what the public thinks about an issue or a particular set of issues. Polls are used to estimate public opinion. Almost since the beginning of the United States, various attempts have been made to influence public opinion about particular issues or to sway elections. *Literary Digest* first began national presidential polling in 1916, using unscientific straw polls. Modern-day polling did not begin until the 1930s. George Gallup was the first to use scientific polling methods to determine public opinion.

Conducting and Analyzing Public Opinion Polls

10.2 Describe the methods for conducting and analyzing different types of public opinion polls, p. 285.

Those who conduct polls must first determine what questions they want answered and how to phrase those questions. Then they must determine the sample, or subset, of the group whose attitudes they wish to measure, and finally they must determine the method for contacting respondents. The different types of polls include telephone polls, in-person interviews, and Internet polls. Once the poll results are in, they must undergo analysis.

Shortcomings of Polling

10.3 Assess the potential shortcomings of polling, p. 291.

Polls may have several shortcomings that create inaccuracies. These include survey errors, not having enough respondent options to reflect public opinion on an issue, polling those who lack the information necessary to accurately respond, inability to measure the intensity of public opinion on an issue, and the public's lack of interest in political issues.

Forming Political Opinions

10.4 Analyze the process by which people form political opinions, p. 293.

The first step in forming opinions occurs through a process known as political socialization. Demographic characteristics—including gender, race, ethnicity, age, and religion—as well as family, school, and peers all affect how we view political events and issues. The views of other people, the media, and cues from leaders and opinion makers also influence our ultimate opinions about political matters.

Toward Reform: The Effects of Public Opinion on Politics

10.5 Evaluate the effects of public opinion on politics, p. 299.

Politicians often use knowledge of the public's views on issues to tailor campaigns or to drive policy decisions.

Learn the Terms



Study and **Review** the **Flashcards**

exit polls, p. 290
margin of error, p. 291
political socialization, p. 293
population, p. 287

public opinion, p. 282
public opinion polls, p. 282
push polls, p. 287
random sampling, p. 287

sample, p. 283
stratified sampling, p. 287
straw polls, p. 283
tracking polls, p. 290



1. What was one of the three fatal errors of *Literary Digest's* 1936 straw poll?
 - a. Questionnaires were mailed too late.
 - b. The sample was biased toward blue collar workers.
 - c. The response rate was low.
 - d. The margin of error was too large.
 - e. The citizens surveyed were not interested in politics.
2. What is the correct term for an unscientific survey used to gauge public opinion on a variety of issues and policies?
 - a. Exit poll
 - b. Gallup poll
 - c. Straw poll
 - d. Tracking poll
 - e. Internet poll
3. The in-person interviews conducted every two years and used by political scientists to conduct empirical analysis are known as the
 - a. *Literary Digest* Poll.
 - b. Gallup Poll.
 - c. Harris Interactive Poll.
 - d. American National Election Studies.
 - e. Tracking Poll.
4. Which of the following is NOT a traditional poll used by reputable polling organizations?
 - a. Telephone poll
 - b. In-person interviews
 - c. Push poll
 - d. Tracking poll
 - e. Exit poll
5. Which of the following is NOT a benefit of stratified sampling?
 - a. It gives each potential voter or adult approximately the same chance of being selected.
 - b. It avoids undersampling or oversampling key populations.
 - c. It is relatively inexpensive.
 - d. It can be conducted at a polling place on Election Day.
 - e. It allows for a broad, random sample of participants.
6. Which of the following is a shortcoming of polling discussed in your text?
 - a. Too many respondent options
 - b. Limited interviewer knowledge
 - c. Oversampling
 - d. Inaccurate results
 - e. Margin of error
7. One measure of the accuracy of a public opinion poll is referred to as the
 - a. margin of error.
 - b. tracking error.
 - c. voting error.
 - d. information gap.
 - e. stratified sampling.
8. Which of the following is an accurate description of the different political views of men and women?
 - a. Women are more conservative on education.
 - b. Men are more liberal on capital punishment.
 - c. Men are more supportive of wars and military intervention.
 - d. Men are more liberal on health care.
 - e. Women are more conservative on family and children's issues.
9. Which political leader has the greatest influence on public policy?
 - a. Member of Congress from your district
 - b. President
 - c. Supreme Court
 - d. Governor
 - e. Attorney general
10. The number of public opinion polls conducted has
 - a. decreased in recent years.
 - b. stayed about the same.
 - c. increased in campaigns, but decreased in government.
 - d. increased overall.
 - e. grown in the 1990s, but decreased recently.

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