**Chapter 7** **Interest Groups and Political Parties**

In the United States and other democracies, people possess a variety of ways by which they can communicate their opinions to government officials and others. In turn, officials recognize the importance of public opinion, and often change policy (or have their positions bolstered) based on public opinion. While in some cases public opinion is clear and decisive, oftentimes it is murkier. In addition, public opinion can be shaped by the very policymakers who must also respond to it. That is, government officials do play a role in political socialization and often shape public opinion on a variety of issues.

I.      Defining Public Opinion

Public opinion is the aggregate of individual attitudes or beliefs shared by some portion of adults. Private opinion becomes public opinion when an individual takes some type of action to express an opinion to others publicly. We can look to the distribution of public opinion to determine how divided the public is on any given issue. When there is general agreement on an issue, there is said to be a consensus. When opinions are polarized between two quite different positions, there is divided opinion.

II.    How Public Opinion is Formed: Political Socialization

A.   Models of Political Socialization. Political socialization is the process by which individuals acquire political beliefs and values. The interactions an individual has with others have a major impact on the formation of individual opinion.

B.   The Family and the Social Environment. The importance of the family is paramount in the development of individual opinion. Political attitudes begin to develop in children and the major influence on these early values is the family.

1.     Education as a Source of Political Socialization. Educational influence on political opinions is also important. Education introduces individuals to ideas outside of the home and outside of the local community. These new ideas may influence the individual to accept opinions that are different from those of the parents.

2.     Peers and Peer Group Influence. These also have an impact on opinion formation. As people interact with others in school, or at work, or in social activities, various values come into play. These values can influence how opinions are formed.

3.     Opinion Leaders’ Influence. Leaders, both formal and informal, also tend to shape the opinions of the public. Formal leaders include political leaders like the president, governors, and members of Congress. Formal leaders make a conscious effort to shape the opinions of the public. Informal leaders may not necessarily attempt to shape the political opinions of the public, but they still exert an influence on opinion formation. Examples of informal leaders are teachers, religious leaders, and civic leaders.

C.   The Impact of the Media. The media also play a significant role in the political socialization. The media present information on important political topics. How topics are presented and which topics are presented have a major impact on opinion formation.

D.   The Influence of Political Events. Political events can produce a long-lasting impact on opinion formation. An important example was the impact of the Great Depression on people who came of age in that period. We call such an impact a generational effect. While it is likely that the events of September 11, 2001, will play an important role in the political socialization of young Americans, it is still unclear what this impact will be.

III.  Political Preferences and Voting Behavior.

The candidates and political parties that individuals decide to support are influenced in part by party identification and certain demographic and socioeconomic factors. Because of the relationship between various groups and voting behavior, campaign managers often target particular groups when creating campaign advertising.

A.   Party Identification and Demographic Influences. Demographic traits exert a major influence over the development of one’s opinion.

1.     Party Identification. With the possible exception of race, party ID has been the most important determinant of voting behavior in national elections. It is influenced by family, peers, generational effects, the media, and assessments of candidates and issues. In the mid to late 1960s party affiliation began to weaken and the percentage of the electorate who identify as independents increased to about 30 percent of all voters.

2.     Education. For years, higher education levels appeared to correlate with voting for Republican candidates. Since 1992, however, voters with higher levels of education have been voting increasingly Democratic, so that in the 2000 election, these voters were nearly evenly divided between Al Gore and George W. Bush. The reason seems to be that professionals (such as lawyers, physicians, professors, etc.) are trending Democratic. Therefore, persons with postgraduate degrees (necessary for many professionals) now often vote Democratic. Businesspeople have remained strongly Republican, however. Businesspeople are less likely to have postgraduate degrees, which is why the population with only B.A.s continues to appear to favor the Republicans.

3.     The Influence of Economic Status. Economic status and occupation appear to influence political views. On issues of economic policy, individuals who have less income tend to favor liberal policies, while individuals of the upper middle class favor conservative policies. On cultural issues the reverse tends to be true. Those with less income are more conservative and those with higher incomes are more liberal.

4.     Economic Status and Voting Behavior. Although there are no hard-and-fast rules, normally the higher a person’s income the more likely the person will be to vote Republican. Manual laborers, factory workers, and especially union members are more likely to vote Democratic.

5.     Religious Influence: Denomination. Religious influence appears to have a significant impact on the development of political opinions. For example, the Jewish community is highly likely to vote for Democratic candidates. Irreligious voters tend to be liberal on cultural issues, but to have mixed stands on economic ones. A century ago, Catholics were often Democrats and Protestants Republican, but little remains of that tradition.

6.     Religious Influence: Religiosity and Evangelicals. Religiosity and fundamentalist or evangelical views are major predictors of political attitudes among the Christian denominations. Voters who are devout, regardless of their church affiliation, tend to vote Republican, while voters who are less devout are more often Democrats. African Americans, who have been strongly Democratic, are an exception to this trend. Evangelicals tend to be cultural conservatives but not necessarily economic conservatives.

7.     The Influence of Race and Ethnicity. In general, members of minority groups favor the Democrats. African Americans do so by overwhelming margins. Hispanics are voting Democratic by about two to one, though the Cuban-American vote is strongly Republican. Asian Americans tend to support the Democrats but often by narrow margins. American Muslims of Middle Eastern descent gave George Bush majority support in 2000 based on shared cultural conservatism, but went heavily for John Kerry in 2004 on the basis of civil liberties concerns.

8.     The Hispanic Vote. In general, Hispanics favor Democratic candidates over Republican candidates by 73 percent to 26 percent.

9.     The Gender Gap. Key term: the gender gap, or the difference between the percentage of women who vote for a particular candidate and the percentage of men who vote for that candidate. Since 1980, women have tended to give somewhat more support to Democratic candidates for president and men have given somewhat more support to the Republicans. Women have been more supportive of social spending and extending civil rights (the value of equality). They have also been more concerned than men about security in the wake of 9/11, however.

10.   Geographic Region. The former solid Democratic South has crumbled in national elections. Democrats tend to get support from the Northeast and the West Coast. Republicans do well in the South, the Great Plains, and the Rocky Mountains. Perhaps more important is residence—urban, suburban, and rural. People in cities are typically liberal and Democratic, while those who live in smaller communities tend to be conservative and Republican.

B.   Election-Specific Factors

1.     Perception of the Candidates. The candidate who is more successful in projecting an image that the public wants has a better chance of winning the election. Typically, these traits have to do with character (such as trustworthiness).

2.     Issue Preferences. Although not as important as personality or image, where a candidate stands on a given issue does have an impact on voters. Economic issues are often the most important. Some voters may cast votes based on their own economic interests, while others will vote based on what is happening to the nation’s economy as a whole. In the last several years, the Iraq war has emerged as a dominant issue, while health care and immigration reform may also overshadow concerns about the economy.

IV.  Measuring Public Opinion

A.   The History of Opinion Polls. As early as the 1800s, the press conducted “straw polls.” Such polls are not an accurate reflection of public opinion.  The Literary Digest conducted the most infamous of these in 1936. Franklin Roosevelt was elected in a landslide after the poll conducted by the Digest had projected his defeat. The Digest’s sample was not representative. In the 1930s, however, modern, relatively accurate polling techniques were developed by George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and others. Survey research centers were set up at several universities after World War II.

B.   Sampling Techniques

1.     Representative Sampling. To accurately predict the whole based on only a sample, the sample must be representative.

2.     The Principle of Randomness. A purely random sample will be representative within the stated margin of error. For a poll to be random, every person in the defined population has to have an equal chance of being selected. The larger the sample of the population, the smaller the margin of error.  If a random sample, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3%, reveals that 63% of the population favors a reduction in spending for space exploration, then the actual number of people favoring such a reduction is between 60% to 66%. Making sure that your sample is random is a major task. A technique known as quota sampling may depart from the random model, and thus be less accurate. In quota sampling, researchers decide how many persons of certain types they need in the survey—such as minorities, women, or farmers—and then send out interviewers to find the necessary number of these types. Within the categories, the sample may be nonrandom and therefore biased.

C.   The Importance of Accuracy. Survey organizations usually interview about 1500 individuals to measure national sentiment among roughly 200 million American adults. Their results have a high probability of being correct—within a margin of three percentage points—and they have had some notable successes in accurately predicting election results

D.   Problems with Polls. While random samples are usually accurate, there can still be problems. If the margin of error is greater than the difference between two candidates, the poll cannot indicate who is leading at that time. Polls are only accurate for the time frame when they were conducted. In the case of an issue in which public opinion changes quickly, the length of time the poll will be accurate will be very short.

1.     Sampling Errors. Key concept: sampling error, or the difference between a sample’s results and the true result if the entire population had been interviewed. It can be dangerous if the sample is too small or if the polltakers do not know how to correct for common biases in samples.

2.     False Precision. Surveys report within one to two decimal places but the margin of error could make it less accurate.

3.     Poll Questions. The design of a question can affect the result. Yes/no answers are a problem if the issue admits to shades of gray. Often, people will attempt to please the interviewer.

4.     Unscientific and Fraudulent Polls. Polls conducted by workers in campaign offices are usually biased and do not give an accurate picture of the public’s view.

5.     Push Polls. Push polls are not polls at all, but are attempts to spread negative statements about a candidate by posing as a pollster and using long questions containing information about the opposition. Both candidates and advocacy groups use push polls.

V.    Technology and Opinion Polls

A.   The Advent of Telephone Polling. Telephone polling is far easier and less expensive than door-to-door polling, and has become standard. (Years ago telephone polling could not be accurate because many poor voters did not have phones.)

1.     Telephone Polling Problems. In part because of its success, telephone polling has now become problematic because so many entities conduct “polls” and “market research.” Nonresponse Rates Have Skyrocketed. The pervasiveness of polling has meant that fewer people are willing to respond to telephone polls.

2.     The Cell Phone Problem. Cell phone numbers are not included in  random-digit dialing programs.

B.        Enter Internet Polling. Harris, a widely respected polling organization, has attempted to design Internet polls that assign weights to respondents to achieve the equivalent of a random-sampled poll. Public opinion experts argue that the Harris procedure violates the mathematical basis of random sampling, but the Internet population is looking more like the rest of America.

1.     “Nonpolls” on the Internet. There are many unscientific straw polls on the Internet. These nonpolls undercut the efforts of legitimate pollsters to use the Internet scientifically.

2.     Does Internet Polling Devalue Polling Results? In time, nonresponse rates to Internet polling could escalate. With nonscientific polls getting as much attention as more accurate surveys, Americans may begin to see all polls as equally truthful or equally fraudulent, to the detriment of trust in all polls and polling methods.

VI.  Public Opinion and the Political Process

A.    Political Culture and Popular Opinion. Political culture can be described as a set of attitudes and ideas about the nation and government.  Certain shared beliefs about important values are considered the core of American political culture. They bind the nation together despite its highly diverse population.  These values include liberty, equality, and property; support for religion; and community service and personal achievement.

1.     Political Culture and Support for Our Political System. General popular belief that the presidential election of 2000 would be settled fairly is an example of how a general sense of support for our political system allows the nation to get through a crisis.

2.     Political Trust. General levels of trust in government have gone up and down. In the 1960s and 1970s, during the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal, the level of trust in government declined steeply. Levels were high right after 9/11 but have steadily declined since 2001.

B.   Public Opinion about Government. It is clear that there is considerable ambivalence on the part of the public regarding government and other national institutions. Recent data suggest that trust in government peaked after 9/11 but fell back thereafter. Over the years, the military and churches have been the institutions receiving the highest levels of public confidence. After 9/11, confidence in the military reached new highs. Confidence in churches was hurt in 2002 by a series of sex abuse scandals. Banks and the Supreme Court also score highly, while the media, Congress, labor unions, and business come off more poorly. In recent years, the top of the list of the nation’s most important problems has included terrorism, the war in Iraq, the economy, and health care.

C.   Public Opinion and Policymaking. If public opinion is important for democracy, then policy makers should be responsive to public opinion. A groundbreaking study in the early 1990s suggests that the national government is very responsive to the public’s demands. Policy often changes in a direction consistent with public opinion, and when public opinion changes dramatically government policy is much more likely to follow public attitudes.

1.     Setting Limits on Government Action. Public opinion may be at its strongest in preventing politicians from embracing highly unpopular policies. To what degree should public opinion influence policymaking? The general public believes the leadership should pay attention to popular opinion, while policymakers themselves are less likely to believe this.

2.     The Limits of Polling. There are differences of opinion between the public and policy makers on this issue. Part of the difference stems from one of the flaws of polling: poll questions largely ignore the context within which most policy decisions take place. That is, people are likely to express opinions on many kinds of policies without being required to consider the costs.

VII.     Features

A.    What If …Voters Could Accept or Reject National Policies via the Internet? Use of the Internet could provide rapid voter feedback but steps would need to be taken to protect the integrity of the process and prevent voter fraud.

B.        Politics and the Cybersphere. The YouTube and MySpace Generation Rock the Vote. Social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, blogs, and YouTube are becoming powerful tools for disseminating information and expressing political opinions.

C.   Which Side Are You On? The Media and Agenda Setting. The media clearly have a significant impact on the way that Americans think about politics. They also play a considerable role in agenda setting.Often media outlets decide what topics to cover based on entertainment or ratings value. Pointing to the information revolution of the Internet, many argue that anyone can pursue her or his own personal information-gathering agenda.

D.   Elections 2008. The Accuracy of the 2008 Polls.

E.    Politics and Campaigns. Opinion Polling Faces Competition. Opinion polls use random sampling in an effort to make accurate predictions but the polls also count on the truthfulness of the people being polled.

F.    Why Should You Care About Polls and Public Opinion? Successful political participation depends on knowing what fellow citizens are thinking, and polls can give insight into this. Poll results flood news reports at critical political times (such as elections), but not all polls are equally reliable. It is important to consider the source and techniques of a poll before giving credence to its results. The veracity of many polls has to be taken with a grain of salt. For example, in many polls the samples are far from random and the margins of error are much greater than published. How a question is phrased can change the outcome dramatically, such as with “loaded questions.” False precision represented by incredibly detailed results can also make predictions difficult.

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