
VOTE
ROCK THE VOTE

PUBLIC OPINION, PARTICIPATION, AND VOTING

8

OUTLINE

Undecided or "swing voters" received a lot of attention in competitive states in the 2004 presidential election. In June 2004, well before either party held its nominating convention, the proportion of undecided voters was very small compared to the same time period in earlier elections, with fewer than one-in-ten voters undecided.[1] The closeness of the 2000 presidential election in states like Florida and New Mexico reinforced the urgency of finding and converting undecided voters in 2004. Undecided voters in competitive states were courted by both sides, receiving multiple campaign communications. The 2004 election cycle saw a renewed emphasis on person-to-person contact and also targeted communications through the mail and on the telephone. In the battleground states, undecided voters received many communications about the election, often from both sides. Groups and parties were also part of this "ground war." Part of the 2004 effort included registering new voters. Republicans also concentrated on activating voters who had infrequently voted in the past. The result was a much higher turnout, especially in the competitive states, with some voters standing in line for two or more hours waiting to vote.

In a nation as evenly divided as the United States is now, candidates must also effectively mobilize their most loyal supporters, or what is often called the "base." To do this they reaffirm their support for issues or groups that matter to the base. President Bush did this by supporting a constitutional amendment defining marriage as between a man and a woman. He also committed himself to further budget and tax cuts. John Kerry had an unusually unified base, in part because four years out of power motivated

TIME LINE
PUBLIC OPINION, PARTICIPATION, AND VOTING

1870	Fifteenth Amendment guarantees the right to vote regardless of race
1920	Nineteenth Amendment gives women the right to vote
1924	Native Americans given citizenship and the right to vote
1935	First Gallup poll
1936	*Literary Digest* poll erroneously predicts FDR loss to Alf Landon
1965	Voting Rights Act forbids racial discrimination in voting practices in the states
1971	Twenty-sixth Amendment extends the vote to 18–20-year-olds
1984	For the first time, more women vote than men
1993	"Motor Voter Bill" expands the ways in which voters can register
2002	Help America Vote Act passed, modernizing voting technology

Democratic voters to unify in hopes of winning. Kerry also sent clear signals to blacks, Hispanics, union members, people who are pro-choice on abortion, and others that he was the better candidate for them.

At the individual level, likely voters in states where the outcome was close and who had already made up their minds were bombarded with postcards reminding them to vote and phone calls reminding them that it was election day and that their vote was needed. For example, in 2004, the candidates and parties mobilized voters to vote early in states where that was possible. This effort, sometimes called "banking the vote," reduced the list of people the campaigns needed to mobilize on election day. On election day, poll watchers would track who had not yet voted and those who had pledged support were again called and urged to vote.

Campaigns learn about the candidate preferences and the issue positions of potential voters through inrterviews conducted on the telephone or in person, a process called a *canvass*. Individuals who are undecided and probable voters in competitive races are likely to receive communications that persuade them to vote for one particular candidate and motivate them to vote. Interest groups and political parties may also conduct a canvass, followed by mail and phone calls, often reinforcing the same themes expressed by the candidates. In 2004, the Republican party took the lead for the Bush/Cheney campaign in mobilizing voters.

On the Democratic side a consortium of interest groups working together under the name "America Votes" shared data from the canvass and coordinated follow-up contacts. Among the groups participating in America Votes were America Coming Together (ACT), the AFL-CIO, Sierra Club, League of Conservation Voters, Planned Parenthood, NARAL-Pro Choice America, and more than 25 other groups. The focus of both the Republican Party and America Votes was highly competitive states in the 2004 presidential election, sometimes called battleground states. There were relatively few competitive Senate or House contests in 2004 and most of these were not in presidential battlegrounds. Overall, less than 10 percent of House races and only about twice that proportion of Senate races were competitive. Some of these were highly contested, such as the Senate races in South Dakota and Alaska. Most races for the Senate and House in 2004 saw much less activity.

The volume of communication in presidential battleground states was extraordinary. Voters in battleground states received unprecedented levels of contact in the 2004 presidential election. One household in Akron, Ohio, received 15 phone calls in the 24 hours before the polls closed. One home in Tallmadge, Ohio, received 11 unique pieces of mail from the Republican National Committee alone in 2004. Groups, candidates, and the parties all sent mail to voters they thought needed reinforcement or persuasion.

We learned from recent elections that a few hundred votes can determine an election outcome. Candidates cannot take any votes for granted, so in close contests voter mobilization is critical. In this chapter, we look at the nature and level of political participation in the United States, and why people vote as they do. We begin by exploring the related topic of public opinion, how to measure it, and the factors that affect the formation of opinions.

PUBLIC OPINION

All governments in all nations must be concerned with public opinion. Even in nondemocratic nations, unrest and protest can topple those in power. And in a constitutional democracy, citizens can express opinions in a variety of ways, including demonstrations, letters to their elected representatives and to newspaper editors, and voting in free and regularly scheduled elections. There are clear and direct connections between what voters want and what our governments do. In short, democracy and public opinion go hand in hand.

What Is Public Opinion?

Politicians frequently talk about what "the people" think or want. But social scientists use the term more precisely: We define **public opinion** as the distribution of individual preferences for, or evaluations of, a given issue, candidate, or institution within a specific population. *Distribution* means the proportion of the population that holds a particular opinion, compared to people with opposing opinions or those with no opinion at all. Public opinion is most commonly studied by systematic measurement through polls or survey. For instance, final preelection polls in 2004 by the Gallup Organization found that among potential voters, 49 percent reported they would vote for George W. Bush, 49 percent for John Kerry, and 1 percent for Ralph Nader. The actual vote was Bush 51 percent, Kerry 48 percent, and Nader .35 percent.

In addition to polls conducted by Gallup, Pew, and other such organizations, newspapers and TV networks conduct polls on election preferences and numerous other subjects.

TAKING THE PULSE OF THE PEOPLE In a public opinion poll, a relatively small number of people can accurately represent the opinions of a larger population through the use of random *sampling* of people to survey. In a *random sample,* every individual has a known chance of being selected. The sample of randomly selected respondents should be appropriate for the questions being asked. For instance, a survey of 18- to 24-year-olds should not be done solely among college students, since roughly three-quarters of the members of this age group do not attend college. Even with proper sampling, surveys have a *margin of error,* meaning that the sample accurately reflects the population within a certain range—usually plus or minus 3 percent for a sample of at least 1,500 individuals. The final preelection survey results in 2004 were indeed within this margin of error for the actual vote.

The *art of asking questions* is also important to scientific polling. The wording of questions can influence the answers. Question order can also alter the responses. Good questions have to be pretested to be sure that the way a question is asked does not bias how it is answered. Questions should be delivered by trained and professional interviewers, who read them exactly as written and without any bias in their voices. Questions can be worded in different ways to measure factual knowledge, opinions, the intensity of opinion, or views on hypothetical situations. Sometimes *open-ended questions* are asked to permit respondents to answer in their own words rather than in set categories. Open-ended questions are harder to record and compare, but they allow respondents to express their views more clearly and may provide deeper insight into their thinking.

In addition to random sampling and clearly worded questions, thorough *analysis and reporting of the results* are required of scientific polls. Scientific polls inform the public of the sample size, the margin of error, and when and where the poll was conducted. It is also important to realize that public opinion can change from day to day and hour to hour. Polls are really snapshots of opinion at a point in time rather than moving pictures of opinions over time.

Individual preference emphasizes that when we measure public opinion, we are asking *individuals*—not groups—about their opinions. The *universe or population* is the relevant group of people for the question. When a substantial percentage of a sample agrees on an issue—for example, that we should honor the American flag—there is a *consensus.* But on most issues, opinions are divided. When two opposing sides feel intensely about an issue, the public is said to be *polarized.* The Vietnam War in the 1960s is an example of a polarizing issue. A recent example of a polarizing issue is gay marriage. One characteristic of such issues is that it is difficult to compromise or find a middle ground. An example of a contemporary issue with polarized opinions is gay marriage. Neither those who favor legalizing gay marriage nor those who unequivocally oppose see

public opinion
The distribution of individual preferences for or evaluations of a given issue, candidate, or institution within a specific population.

HOW YOU ASK THE QUESTION MATTERS

How you ask a polling question makes a lot of difference in the responses people give, as demonstrated in five different polls that asked about a proposed constitutional amendment defining marriage. The first two questions were part of national surveys conducted by CBS. The third question was part of an ABC/*Washington Post* poll. The fourth question was asked by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

1. Would you favor or oppose an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would allow marriage ONLY between a man and a woman?

Favor	60%
Oppose	37%
Don't Know	3%

2. Would you favor or oppose an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would allow marriage only between a man and a woman, and outlaw marriages between people of the same sex?

Favor	51%
Oppose	42%
Don't Know	7%

3. Would you support amending the U.S. Constitution to make it illegal for homosexual couples to get married anywhere in the United States, or should each state make its own laws on homosexual marriage?

Amend Constitution	44%
State Laws	53%
Don't Know	3%

4. Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally? IF OPPOSE GAY MARRIAGE ASK: There has been a proposal to change the U.S. Constitution to ban gay marriage. Do you think amending the Constitution to ban gay marriage is a good idea or a bad idea?

Total Favor	32%
Total Oppose	59%
(For those opposed) Good idea / favor Const. amendment	36%
Bad idea / oppose Const. amendment	21%
Don't Know / Refused	2%
Don't Know / Refused	9%

SOURCE: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Reading the Polls on Gay Marriage and the Constitution," July 13, 2004, at www.people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID=92.

much room for compromise. The exception is those who oppose it but would favor some legal rights going to gay couples through "civil unions." (See Table 8–1.)

INTENSITY The factor called *intensity* produces the brightest and deepest hues in the fabric of public opinion. The fervor of people's beliefs varies greatly. For example, some individuals mildly favor gun control legislation and others mildly oppose it, some people are emphatically for or against it, and some have no interest in the matter at all; still others may not have even heard of it. People who lost their jobs or retirement savings because of corporate scandals likely feel more intensely about enhanced regulation of corporations and accounting firms than people who have not been directly affected by the scandals. Intensity is typically measured by asking people how strongly they feel about an issue or about a politician. Such a question is often called a *scale*.

LATENCY *Latency* refers to political opinions that exist but have not been fully expressed; they may not have crystallized, yet they are still important, for they can be aroused by leaders and converted into political action. Latent opinions set rough boundaries for leaders who know that if they take certain actions, they will trigger either opposition or support from millions of people. If leaders have some understanding of latent opinions—people's unexpressed wants, needs, and hopes—they will know how to mobilize people and draw them to the polls on election day. Many who lived in communist Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, or Yugoslavia must have had latent opinions favorable to democracy—opinions supporting majority rule, freedom, and meaningful elections. The speed with which these countries embraced democratic reforms was possible when leaders encouraged widespread expression of such ideas. A more recent example of a latent opinion is the desire for security from foreign enemies, which had not been a concern before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Wanting homeland security has now became a manifest opinion.

SALIENCE By *salience* we mean the extent to which people believe issues are relevant to them. Most people are more concerned about personal issues like paying their bills and keeping their jobs than about national issues, but if national issues somehow threaten their security or safety, salience of national issues rises sharply. Saliency and intensity, while different, are often correlated on the same issue.

The salience of issues may change over time. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Americans were concerned mainly about jobs, wages, and economic security. By the 1940s, foreign affairs came to the forefront. In the 1960s, problems of race and poverty aroused intense feelings. In the 1970s, Vietnam and then Watergate became the focus of people's attention. By the 2000s, concern about Social Security, health care, education, terrorism, and national security had become salient issues. Events like terrorist attacks or ongoing strife in Iraq tend to reinforce or elevate the importance of an issue.

How Do We Get Our Political Opinions and Values?

No one is born with political views. We learn them from many mentors and teachers. The process by which we develop our political attitudes, values, and beliefs is called **political socialization**. This process starts in childhood, and the family and the schools are usually the two most important political teachers. Children learn the content of our culture in childhood and adolescence but reshape it as they mature.[2] Socialization lays the foundation for political beliefs, values, ideology, and partisanship.

A common element of political socialization in all cultures is *nationalism,* a consciousness of the nation-state and of belonging to that entity. Robert Coles describes it this way:

> As soon as we are born, in most places on this earth, we acquire a nationality, a membership in a community. . . . A royal doll, a flag to wave in a parade, coins with their engraved messages—these are sources of instruction and connect a young person to a country. The attachment can be strong, indeed, even among children yet to attend school, wherever the flag is saluted, the national anthem sung. The attachment is as parental as the words imply—homeland, motherland, fatherland. . . . Nationalism works its way into just about every corner of the mind's life.[3]

political socialization
The process most notably in families and schools by which we develop our political attitudes, values, and beliefs.

TABLE 8–1 DIFFERING OPINIONS ON GAY MARRIAGE

	Opposed to Legalizing Gay Marriage	*Opposed to Legalizing Gay Marriage but Favor Civil Unions**	*Favor Legalizing Gay Marriage*
Total	**61%**	**34%**	**30%**
Gender			
Men	67	32	24
Women	54	36	36
Region			
Northeast	52	46	34
Midwest	62	28	29
South	66	26	24
West	61	45	35
Age			
18–29	50	34	42
30–44	60	34	32
45–64	58	37	30
65+	81	31	12
Church Attendance			
More than once a week	82	20	10
Once a week	69	30	24
Once or twice a month	58	31	31
A few times a year	55	42	33
Never	45	50	45
Race			
Whites	62	35	31
African Americans	59	28	19
Latinos	61	37	30
Party			
Republican	74	27	18
Democrat	54	37	33
Independent	58	40	36
Political Philosophy			
Conservative	79	23	16
Moderate	57	48	32
Liberal	38	38	51
Marital Status			
Married or living as married	65	34	26
Others	54	36	35
Education			
High school or less	68	28	21
Some college	60	40	33
College degree or more	49	44	42

*Asked only of respondents who said "opposed" to legalizing gay marriage.

SOURCE: *National Annenberg Election Survey 2004,* "American Public Remain Opposed to Same-Sex Marriages as They Begin in Massachusetts, Annenberg Data Show," May 17, 2004, www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004_03_corrected-gay-marriage-update_05-17_pr.pdf.

"It should be 'yes' or 'no' or 'undecided'—we don't accept a 'don't give a damn' answer!"

Cartoon Features Syndicate.

The sources of our views are immensely varied in the pluralistic political culture of the United States. Political attitudes may stem from religious, racial, gender, ethnic, or economic beliefs and values. But we can make at least one generalization safely: We form our attitudes through participation in *groups,* and not only in groups such as families, schools, social organizations, and more political ones like the National Rifle Association or Planned Parenthood, but especially in close-knit groups like the family. When we identify closely with the attitudes and interests of a particular group, we tend to see politics through the "eyes" of that group.[4] Group affiliation does not necessarily mean that individual members do not think for themselves. Each member brings his or her own emotions, feelings, memories, and resistance to groups.

Children in the United States tend at an early age to adopt common values that provide continuity with the past and that legitimate the American political system. Young children know what country they live in, and their loyalty to the nation develops early. Although the details of our political system may still elude them, most young Americans acquire a respect for the Constitution and for the concept of participatory democracy, as well as an initially positive view of the most visible figure in our democracy, the president.[5]

FAMILY Most social psychologists agree that family is the most powerful socializing agent.[6] American children typically show political interest by the age of ten, and by the early teens their interest may be fairly high. Consider your own political learning process. You probably formed your picture of the world by listening to a parent at dinner or by absorbing the tales your older brothers and sisters brought home from school. Perhaps you also heard about politics from grandparents, aunts, and uncles. You, in turn, influenced your family, if only by bringing some of your own hopes and concerns home from school. What we first learn in the family is not so much specific political opinions as basic *attitudes* that shape our opinions—attitudes toward our neighbors, political parties, other classes or types of people, particular leaders (especially presidents), and society in general.

Studies of high school students indicate a high correlation between the political party of the parents and the partisan choice of their children. This relatively high degree of correspondence continues throughout life. Such a finding raises some interesting questions: Does the direct influence of parents create the correspondence? Or does living in the same social environment—neighborhood, church, socioeconomic group—influence parents and children? The answer is *both,* and one influence often strengthens the other. For example, a daughter of Democratic parents growing up in a small southern town with strong Democratic leanings will be affected by friends, by other adults, and perhaps by youngsters in a church group, all of whom may reinforce the attitudes of her parents.[7] What happens when a young person's parents and friends disagree? Young people tend to go along with parents rather than friends on underlying political attitudes such as party affiliation, with friends rather than parents on some specific issues like the death penalty or gun control, and somewhere in between in their actual political behavior such as votes in presidential elections.[8]

SCHOOLS Schools also mold young citizens' political attitudes. American schools see part of their purpose as preparing students to be citizens and active participants in governing their communities and nation. At an early age, schoolchildren begin to pick up specific political values and acquire basic attitudes toward our system of government. Education, like the family, prepares Americans to live in society.

American children learn early the importance of participatory democracy.

From kindergarten through college, students generally develop political values consistent with the democratic process and supportive of the American political system. In their study of American history, they are introduced to our nation's heroes and heroines, the important events in our history, and the ideals of our society. Other aspects of their experience, such as the daily Pledge of Allegiance and occasional programs or assemblies, seek to reinforce respect of country. Children also gain practical experience in the workings of democracy through elections for class or school officers and student government. In some high schools and colleges, the state legislature or college trustees require students to take courses in U.S. history or American government to graduate.

Do school courses and activities give young people the skills needed to participate in elections and democratic institutions? A study of 18- to 24-year-olds commissioned

by the National Association of Secretaries of State found that young people "lack any real understanding of citizenship . . . information and understanding about the democratic process . . . and information about candidates and political parties."[9] "Furthermore, the Secretaries of State report noted that most young people do not seek out political information and that they are not very likely to do so in the future."[10] You and your classmates are not a representative sample in part because you are taking this course and therefore have more interest and knowledge than most people.

The debate about whether there is peer pressure on college campuses to conform to certain acceptable ideas or to use particular language highlights the role higher education can play in shaping attitudes and values. How does college influence political opinions? One study suggests that college students are more likely than people of the same age who are not attending college to be knowledgeable about politics, more in favor of free speech, and more likely to talk and read about politics.[11] Is this the influence of the professors, the curriculum, the students, or the background of people attending collge? It is difficult to generalize. Parents sometimes fear that professors have too much influence on their college-age children; however, most professors doubt that they have a significant influence on the political views of their students.

The Chicago Herald Tribune *was so sure of its polling data in the 1948 election, they predicted a win for Republican Thomas Dewey before the results were final. A victorious Harry Truman displays the mistaken headline.*

MASS MEDIA Like everybody else, young people are exposed to a wide range of media—school newspapers, national newspapers, the Internet, movies, radio, television—all of which influence what they think. They, like adults, often pick and choose the media with which they agree, so their exposure is *selective*. The mass media also serve as agents of socialization by providing a link between individuals and the values and behavior of others. The popular media help shape the attitudes and opinions of the people who watch, listen to, or read them. News broadcasts present information about our society; events that get intensive media coverage often focus our attention on certain issues. For example, the hours of TV coverage of the war in Iraq directed widespread attention to the ethnic groups there and to the difficulty of establishing a lasting peace. Similiarly, many Americans turned their attention to Islamic fundamentalism in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

OTHER INFLUENCES Religious, ethnic, and racial attitudes also shape opinions, both within and outside the family. Generalizations about how people vote are useful, but we have to be careful about stereotyping people. For example, not all African Americans vote Democratic and not all Catholics agree with their church's position against abortion. It is a mistake to assume that because we know a person's religious affiliation or racial background, we know his or her political opinions.

Stability and Change in Public Opinion

Adults are not simply the sum of all their early experiences, but few change their opinions very often. Even if the world around us changes rapidly, we are slow to shift our loyalties or to change our minds about things that matter to us. In general, people who remain in the same place, in the same occupation, and in the same income group throughout their lives tend to have stable opinions. People often carry their attitudes with them, and families who move from cities to suburbs often retain their big-city attitudes for at least a time after they have moved. Political analysts are becoming more interested in the ways in which adults modify their views. A harsh experience—a war, economic depression, or loss of a job—may be a catalyst for change in attitudes and opinions

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and on Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania had at least a short-term impact on public trust and confidence in government. Political Scientist Robert D. Putnam has for several years been studying how the public views political institutions and community interaction. Putnam conducted a national survey in the summer of 2000. Following the terrorist attacks, he reinterviewed the same respondents to see how their views had changed. Table 8–2 shows the changes in selected dimensions. Putnam found that more than half of his sample expressed greater confidence in government after the attacks. Interest in public affairs grew by 27 percent among

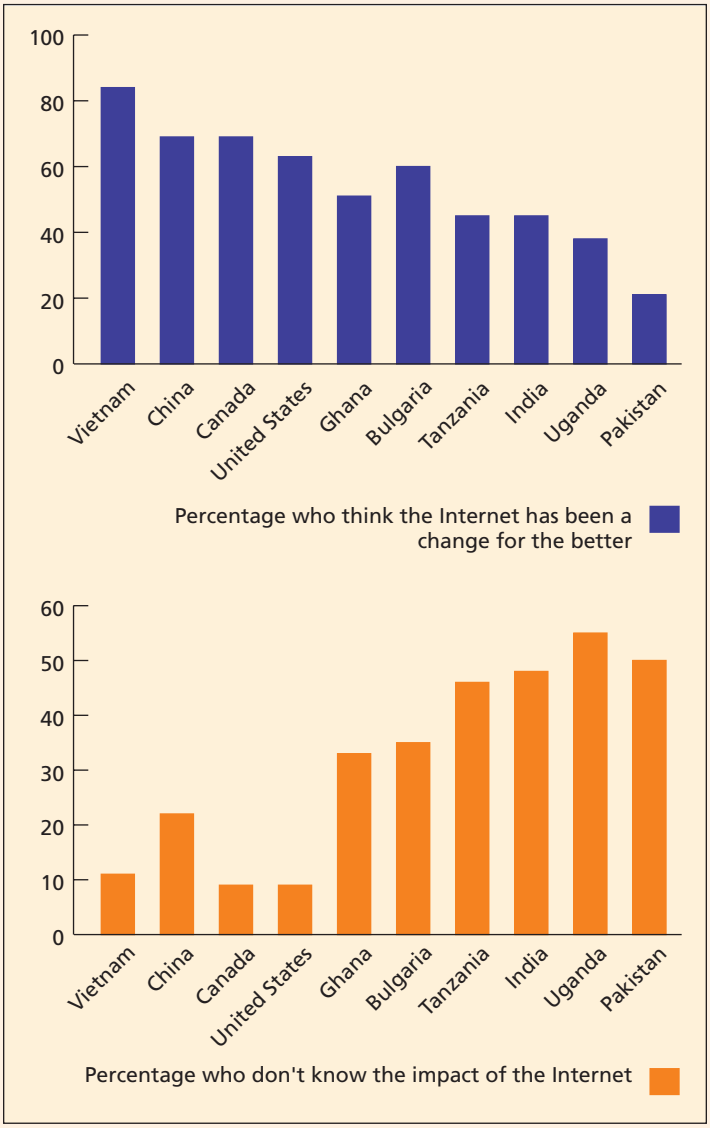
GLOBAL Perceptions

QUESTION: Please tell me if you think that the Internet represents a change for the better, a change for the worse, or it hasn't made much difference.

The Internet is becoming a more important part of political participation. People not only learn about news, but they can engage in political conversations; contribute money to candidates, causes, and parties; and in some places even vote via the Internet. But as the Pew Global Attitudes survey data demonstrate, the world has very different attitudes toward the Internet. Some places, like Vietnam, China, Canada, and the United States, have overwhelmingly positive views of the Internet. In these places some people have ready access to this tool, while in others like China and Vietnam access is more limited. Despite this limited access, people in China and Vietnam view the Internet positively.

But the Pew data are revealing in another way as well. In many less developed countries a large number of people, and in some places a majority of people, don't know much about the Interent. There this potential democratic tool has not become familiar. Places like Uganda and Pakistan lag behind more developed countries in public awareness of the Internet. This is a helpful reminder that not everyone in the world has access to the modern tools of democracy.

SOURCE: Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Views of a Changing World* (Washington, D.C.: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2003), p. T-15.



younger people (age 35 and under) and 8 percent among older respondents. Putnam concludes, "Americans don't only trust political institutions more: We also trust one another more, from neighbors and co-workers to shop clerks and perfect strangers. Following the attacks, Americans express confidence that people in their community would cooperate, for example, with voluntary conservation measures in an energy or water shortage." The events of September 11 also appear to have led people to be "somewhat more generous."[12] How enduring these changes are is not yet clear and may be more consequential in people's private lives than in their public activities like voting, volunteering, or becoming more involved in politics. Putnam's subsequent research found that trust in community leaders, neighbors, other races, etc., declined by spring 2002, but it remained higher than before 9/11. Confidence in community cooperation also "tended to fade over time." On the other hand, civic engagement has continued at its post-9/11 level and maybe even gotten stronger.[13]

TABLE 8–2 CHANGES IN PUBLIC PERCEPTION AFTER TERRORIST ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

	Increased	*Decreased*	*Net Change*
Trust national government	51%	7%	44%
Trust local government	32	13	19
Hours watching TV	40	24	16
Interest in politics	29	15	14
Trust local police	26	12	14
Inter-racial trust	31	20	11
Trust shop-clerks	28	17	11
Support for unpopular book in library	28	18	10
Trust neighbors	23	13	10
Contributions to religious charity	29	20	9
Expect crisis support from friends	22	14	8
Trust "people running my community"	32	24	8
Worked with neighbors	15	8	7
Trust local news media	30	23	7
Gave blood	11	4	7
Volunteered	36	29	7
Expect local cooperation in crisis	23	17	6
Worked on community project	17	11	6
Attend political meeting	11	6	5
Newspaper readership	27	24	3
Visit with relatives	43	40	3
Attended club meeting	29	26	3
Attended public meeting	27	26	3
Contributions to secular charity	28	27	1
Attend church	20	19	1
Organizational memberships (number)	39	39	0
Had friends visit your home	39	45	− 6
Support for immigrants rights	21	32	−11

SOURCE: The Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, January 15, 2002, www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/press.html.

Some of our political opinions change very little because they are part of our core values. An example might be our attitudes toward abortion. Thus our views on abortion, the death penalty, and doctor-assisted suicide remain relatively stable over time. On issues that are less central to our values, such as our view of how a president is performing his job, opinions can show substantial change over time. Figure 8–1 contrasts the public opinion on President Bush with their views on abortion over time. On many issues, public opinion can change once the public learns more about the issue or perceives that there is another side to the question. It is on these issues that politicians can help shape attitudes. The decisions by Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson to enforce school desegregation are examples of leadership of public opinion, as were the positions of Jimmy Carter on the Panama Canal Treaty and George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).[14]

Public Opinion and Public Policy

For much of human history, it has been difficult to measure public opinion. "What I want," Abraham Lincoln once said, "is to get done what the people desire to be done, and the question for me is how to find that out exactly."[15] Politicians in our day do not face such uncertainty about public opinion; far from it.[16] Polling informs them of public

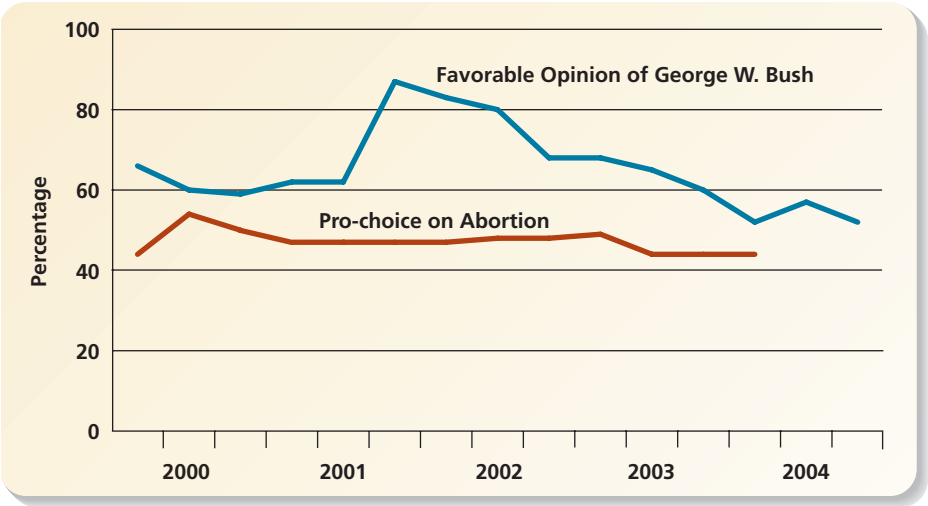


FIGURE 8–1 Comparison of Opinion of President George Bush and Attitude on Abortion Over Time.
SOURCE: Abortion/Pro-choice: Polling Report, at www.pollingreport.com/abortion.htm; Opinion of George W. Bush: Polling Report, at www.pollingreport.com/BushFav.htm9; USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll reports, at www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/nation/polls/usatodaypolls.htm.

opinion on all major policy issues. Politicians can commission polls themselves, or they can turn to public or media polls. More than 80 percent of newspapers and half of all television stations conduct or commission their own polls.[17]

Here are some examples of how public opinion can shape policy and in turn how policies shape opinion. During the Vietnam War, antiwar demonstrations on college campuses spread to cities all over the country. "Public opinion had a substantial impact on the rate of troop withdrawals."[18] In the Persian Gulf War, opposition to the use of U.S. forces was greatly reduced after a few days of success in the air and ground war. When American forces were dispatched to Somalia in Operation Restore Hope in January 1993, fully 79 percent of the public approved of the use of troops to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid, food, and medical provisions. But when U.S. soldiers were killed and dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, support fell to only 17 percent in October of the same year.[19] On May 3, 2003, the day after Bush announced "Mission Accomplished" in the Iraq War on an aircraft carrier, 72 percent of Americans approved of the way Bush had handled the situation with Iraq. About a year later, after the Abu Ghraib prison torture and repeated attacks on American forces in Iraq, the Bush approval rating had fallen to 34 percent.[20]

Typically, elected officials focus on issues of importance to the public.[21] In a sense they follow public opinion. They use polls to learn how to talk about issues in ways that resonate with the public. Winning reelection is a strong motive for members of Congress.[22] "Legislators show greater attention to public opinion as election day looms," and the closeness of the fit between constituent opinion and roll call voting reflects that connection.[23] Candidates use polls to determine where to campaign, how to campaign, and even whether to campaign. The decision about which states John Kerry and George W. Bush most aggressively campaigned in was driven by the polls and a preoccupation with securing 270 electoral votes. Both campaigns lavished time and attention on Ohio, Florida, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Pennsylvania. Even smaller states like New Hampshire and New Mexico received substantial attention. Large states like New York, California, and Texas were taken for granted because one side or the other was ahead. A secondary objective was a plurality in the popular vote.

Surely polls are no substitute for elections. With a ballot before them, voters must translate their opinions into concrete decisions. They must decide what is important and what is not. Democracy is more than the expression of views, more than a simple mirror of opinion. It also involves choosing among leaders, taking sides on certain issues, and

selecting the governmental actions that may follow. Democracy is the thoughtful participation of people in the political process. Elections, despite their failings, still establish the link between the many opinions "We the People" hold and the selection of our leaders.

Awareness and Interest

For most people, politics is of secondary importance to earning a living, raising a family, and having a good time; some Americans are more concerned about which team wins the World Series or the Super Bowl than they are about who wins the school board elections, who gets to be mayor, or even who gets to be president of the United States. Most people find politics complicated and difficult to understand. And they should, for democracy *is* complicated and difficult to understand. But it helps to understand the mechanics and structures of our government such as how the government operates, how the electoral college works, how Congress is set up, and the length of terms for the president and for members of the Senate and House of Representatives.

These college students feel responsible to vote and line up on campus to fill out absentee ballots.

Details about how the government works are typically best known by younger adults, who remember learning them in school. The general adult public, however, fares poorly when quizzed about their elected officials.[24] Just over 15 percent of Americans are able to recall the name of the congressional candidates from their district.[25] With so many voters not knowing who represents them in Congress, it is not surprising that "on even hotly debated congressional issues, few people know where their Congress member stands."[26]

Although the public's knowledge of institutional and candidate issues is poor, its knowledge of important public policy issues is worse. In 1982, after approximately 59 years of debate over ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, nearly one-third of the adults in the United States indicated they had never heard of it. The same is true for many issues.[27] In 2004, only 31.7 percent were able to correctly identify William Rehnquist as the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, 8.6 percent incorrectly identified him, and 59.7 percent didn't know.[28] Fortunately, not all Americans are uninformed or uninterested. About 25 percent of the public is interested in politics most of the time. This is the **attentive public**, people who know and understand how the government works. They vote in most elections, read a daily newspaper, and "talk politics" with their families and friends. They tend to be better educated and more committed to democratic values than other Americans.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are *nonvoters,* people who are rarely interested in politics or public affairs and who rarely vote. About 67 percent of Americans have indicated that they are interested "some of the time," "only now and then," or "hardly at all."[29] A subset of this group might be called *political know-nothings.* These individuals not only avoid political activity but also have little interest in government and limited knowledge about it.

Between the attentive public and the political know-nothings are the *part-time citizens,* roughly 40 percent of the American public. These individuals participate selectively in elections, voting in presidential elections but usually not in others. Politics and government do not greatly interest them; they pay only minimal attention to the news, and they rarely discuss candidates or elections with others.

Democracy can survive even when a large number of citizens are passive and uninformed, as long as a substantial number of people serve as opinion leaders and are interested and informed about public affairs. Obviously, these activists will have much greater influence than their less active fellow citizens.

attentive public
Those citizens who follow public affairs carefully.

When the student pro-democracy protest was stopped by Chinese government tanks in Tiananman Square on June 5, 1989, one man stood up in defiance until he was pulled to safety by bystanders.

PARTICIPATION: TRANSLATING OPINIONS INTO ACTION

Americans influence their government's actions in several ways, many of which are protected by the Constitution. They vote in elections, join interest groups, go to political party meetings, ring doorbells, call friends urging them to vote for issues or candidates, sign petitions, write letters to the editors of newspapers, and make calls to radio talk shows.

Protest is also a form of political participation. Our political system is remarkably tolerant of protest that is not destructive or violent. Boycotts, picketing, sit-ins, and marches are all legally protected. Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. used nonviolent protest to call attention to what they saw as unfair laws (see Chapter 17). The number of Americans who participate in protests is small, but the impact of their actions in shaping public opinion can be substantial.

A distinguishing characteristic of a democracy is that citizens can influence government decisions by participating in politics. When the citizens of Belgrade turned out night after night to protest the nullification of their election, they forced Slobodan Milosevic to permit the victorious candidate, Vojislav Kostunica, to take power. But protests and demonstrations are not always peaceful or successful. In totalitarian societies, participation is very limited, forcing people who want to influence government to resort to violence or revolution. The protest of Chinese students in Tiananmen Square in 1989 failed to stop the onslaught of tanks and the repression that followed. Americans sometimes forget that our democracy was born of revolution but that maintaining a constitutional democracy after the revolution is difficult and demands public participation.

Even in an established democracy, people may feel so strongly about an issue that they would rather fight than accept the verdict of an election. The classic example is the American Civil War. Following the election of 1860, in which Lincoln, an antislavery candidate who did not receive a single electoral vote from a slave state, won the presidency, the South took up arms. The ensuing war marked the breakdown of democracy. Examples in our own time include antiabortion or animal rights groups that use violence to press their political agenda and militia groups that arm themselves for battle against government regulations.

Participation can also include less intense activity and even engaging in patriotic rituals. For example, large numbers of Americans routinely sing the national anthem or recite the Pledge of Allegiance. They communicate their views about government and politics to their representatives in Washington and the state capitol. They serve as jurors in courtrooms and enlist in the military. They express concern about the involvement of American military forces in foreign hostilities. They complain about taxes and government regulations. And many families feel it important that their children visit Washington, D.C., and other historic sights.

For most people, politics is a private activity. Some still consider it impolite to discuss politics at dinner parties. To say that politics is private does not mean people do not have opinions or will not discuss them when asked by others, including pollsters. But often politics is avoided in discussions with neighbors, work associates, even friends and family, as too divisive or upsetting. Typically, less than one person in four attempts to influence how another person votes in an election. An even smaller number actually work for a candidate or party. Only about 11 percent make a contribution to a candidate,[30] and only 11 percent of taxpayers designate $3 of their taxes to the fund that pays for presidential general elections (see Table 8–3).[31] Few individuals attempt to influence

others by writing letters to elected officials or to editors of newspapers for publication. Even smaller numbers participate in protest groups or activities. Despite the small number of persons who engage in these activities, it would be a mistake to assume that small numbers of individuals cannot make a difference to politics and government. An individual or small group can generate media interest in an issue and expand the impact. Peaceful protests for civil rights, about environmental issues, and both for and against abortion have generated public attention and even changed opinions.[32]

TABLE 8–3 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND AWARENESS IN THE UNITED STATES

Watched Campaign on TV	62%
Vote in presidential elections	55
Vote in congressional elections	42
Try to persuade vote of others	29
Display campaign button, sticker, or sign	9
Give money to help a campaign	11
Attend dinner, meeting, or rally for candidate	5

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2003* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003), p. 269; The 2002 National Election Study, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan. The NES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior, at www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/gd-index.htm#6; See also www.census.gov.

COUNTING VOTES

Until the 2000 election, Americans took the counting of ballots for granted. But with the closeness of that election and the controversy surrounding election administration in Florida, the public became aware that counting votes is not a simple matter.

Votes are counted in the United States according to state law as administered by local officials. There has been great variability in the technology used in voting. In Florida in 2000, some counties used paper ballots, others voting machines, others punch-card ballots, and at least one used ballots that could be scanned by a computer. More recently Florida and other states have moved to computerized voting systems with touch

PEOPLE & POLITICS *Making a Difference*

STEVE ROSENTHAL AND AMERICA COMING TOGETHER

One of the most important developments of the 2004 election cycle was the growth of Section 527 organizations (see Chapter 7), and the most visible and important of these groups was America Coming Together (ACT).* This group was headed by Steve Rosenthal, who previously had been the political director of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and Ellen Malcom, formerly of EMILY'S List, a pro-choice group that supports female Democratic candidates. The funding for ACT came from several individuals and groups who shared a commitment to defeating George W. Bush in 2004.

Rosenthal, who says he "barely made it out of High School," has deep roots in the labor movement. As a child a brick was thrown through the front window of his home to warn his father not to form a union.† Rosenthal himself became a member of the Communications Workers of America and worked for the union for twelve years. He also has consulted with numerous political candidates. During the Clinton administration he served as Associate Deputy Secretary of Labor. He has also held positions in the Democratic National Committee.

Rosenthal is best known as having returned the labor movement to its roots of person-to-person communication at the workplace, on the phone, and at the doorstep. Rosenthal describes his method as follows: "what I do when I am thinking about an election is I break it down person by person, name by name, every single voter that we talk to, and who they talk to, to connect them to what we need to do in this state."‡ During the 2004 election cycle ACT, under Rosenthal's direction, targeted more than a dozen states with a concerted effort to register and then turn out voters. ACT registered large numbers of new voters, many of whom voted in 2004. But it was the Republican voter mobilization that carried the day, an effort in many ways patterned after what Rosenthal had done at the AFL-CIO.

*Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, "The New Soft Money: Campaign-Finance Reform Didn't Kill Big Political Donations, It Just Changed the Rules of the Game. Meet the Players." *Fortune,* November 10, 2003, p. 155.
†Ann Gerhart, "Ground War: Steve Rosenthal Wages a $100 Million Battle to Line Up Democratic Votes," *The Washington Post,* July 6, 2004, p. C1.
‡Ibid.

screens. Another lesson reinforced by the recent ballot-counting controversies is that in every election, in every jurisdiction, and with every technology there are imperfections in voting. Touch screens are vulnerable to manipulation of the software, paper ballots are subject to human error in counting, punch cards may not always have the punches perforate, and so on. The goal in election administration is to minimize errors and eliminate bias as much as possible.

But counting votes is more complicated than the means by which we vote. There are also judgment calls that election officials have to make about incomplete or flawed ballots. In the Florida controversy of 2000, substantial attention was devoted to punch-card ballots in which the ballot did not have a completely perforated "chad" or portion of the ballot the stylus was to punch. Did a dangling chad or one that protruded but was not perforated count? These decisions mattered in an election as close as Florida's was in 2000. With the growth in absentee voting and with the law allowing military and civilians living abroad to cast their ballots and return them by mail, election officials face the possibility of a close election not being decided until days after the ballots are cast.

The issue of who may vote on election day is also important to how elections are administered. Some groups contend that the voting rolls in states like Florida were incomplete in 2000 and voters who had registered were not on the rolls. In 2004 there was some confusion, for voters who only voted in presidential elections had their voting place or precinct changed as a result of the 2002 redistricting. Voters who think they should be allowed to vote but who are not on the rolls are allowed to cast what are called provisional ballots. These ballots are only counted if it is determined that the voter was in fact registered to vote.

Congress and state legislatures in the wake of the 2000 election have invested billions of dollars in new voting technology, new rules on provisional ballots, and an effort to modernize voting methods. Florida acted soon after 2000 allocating $32 million[33] to upgrade voting machinery and banning the punch card and paper ballots. The federal government enacted the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) and authorized $3.9 billion to assist states in making voting more reliable and accessible.[34]

Interest groups, political parties, and candidates made the integrity of the 2004 voting process a high priority. Thousands of individuals were poll watchers. Groups established toll free hot lines for voters to call if they felt they were not being fairly treated, and lawyers were on call to file immediate challenges in key jurisdictions. The monitoring of voting was most intense in Ohio, where Republicans charged that Democratic-allied groups had registered Daffy Duck and Mary Poppins. Republicans also threatened to challenge the registration of many of the newly registered voters as they voted. Florida also had controversy in the period before the election regarding newly registered voters and the voting status of felons who had served their jail terms. While there were some delays on election day, they were more the result of insufficient voting booths and machines and not a large-scale challenge to the voting lists.

Voting

Americans' most typical political activity is voting. The United States is a constitutional democracy with more than 200 years of free and frequent elections and a tradition of the peaceful transfer of power between competing groups and parties.

Originally, the Constitution left it to the individual states to determine the crucial question of who could vote, and the qualifications for voting differed considerably from state to state. All states except New Jersey barred women from voting, many did not permit African Americans to vote, and until the 1830s, property ownership was often a requirement. By the time of the Civil War, the franchise had been extended to all white male citizens in every state. Since that time, eligibility standards for voting have been expanded seven times by legislation and constitutional amendments (see Table 8–4).

The civil rights movement in the 1960s, which made voting rights a central issue, secured adoption of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment and passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The Voting Rights Act banned literacy tests, eased registration requirements, and provided for the replacement of local election officials with federal registrars in areas

TABLE 8–4 CHANGES IN VOTING ELIGIBILITY STANDARDS SINCE 1870

Timeline	*Change*
1870	Fifteenth Amendment forbade states from denying the right to vote because of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."
1920	Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote.
1924	Congress granted Native Americans citizenship and voting rights.
1961	Twenty-Third Amendment permitted District of Columbia residents to vote in federal elections.
1964	Twenty-Fourth Amendment prohibited the use of poll taxes in federal elections.
1965	Voting Rights Act removed restrictions that kept African Americans from voting.
1971	Twenty-Sixth Amendment extended the vote to citizens age 18 and older.

where the denial of the right to vote had been most blatant. Its passage resulted in a dramatic expansion of black registration and voting. Once African Americans were permitted to register to vote, "the focus of voting discrimination shifted . . . to preventing them from winning elections."[35] In southern legislative districts where blacks are in the majority, however, there has been a "dramatic increase in the proportion of African American legislators elected" (see Figure 8–2).[36]

Registration

One peculiarly American legal requirement—**voter registration**—arose in response to concerns about voting abuses, but it also discourages voting. Most other democracies have automatic voter registration. Average turnout in the United States is more than 30 percentage points lower than in countries like Australia, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Italy.[37] This was not always the case. In fact, in the 1800s, turnout in the United States was much like that of Europe today. Turnout began to drop significantly around the turn of the twentieth century, in part as a result of election reform (see Figure 8–3). Voter registration requirements have a substantial impact on rates of voting.[38]

American elections in the 1800s were different from those of today. Ballots were prepared by the parties, often using different colors of paper that allowed party officials to monitor how people had voted. In some areas, charges of multiple voting generated a reform movement that substituted the **Australian ballot**, a secret ballot printed by the state, for the party printed ballots This same reform period also pressed for voter

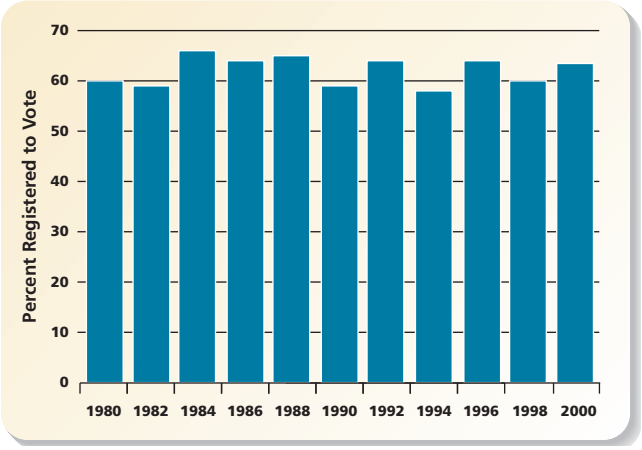


FIGURE 8–2 Percentage of African Americans Registered to Vote, 1980–2000.
SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States,* 2001 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), p. 251.

voter registration
System designed to reduce voter fraud by limiting voting to those who have established eligibility by submitting the proper form.

Australian ballot
A secret ballot printed by the state.

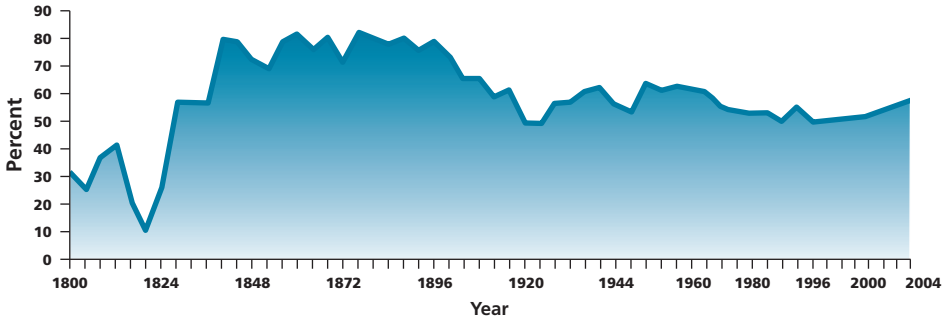


FIGURE 8–3 Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1800–2004.
SOURCE: Howard W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics, 1999–2000* (CQ Press, 2000). See also "National Voter Turnout in Federal Elections, 1996–2000," at www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781453.html. 2004 update by authors.

registration to reduce multiple voting and limit voting to those who had previously established their eligibility.

Registration laws vary by state, but in every state except North Dakota, registration is required in order to vote. Six states permit election day voter registration: Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. The most important provision regarding voter registration may be the closing date. Through the early 1970s, it was not uncommon for closing dates to be six months before the election; now, by federal law, no state can stop registration more than 30 days before a federal election.[39] Voter registration places a responsibility on voters to take an extra step—usually filling out a form at the country courthouse, when renewing a driver's license, or with a roving registrar—some days or weeks before the election and every time they move to a new address. Other important provisions include places and hours of registration.[40]

Motor Voter

The burdens of voter registration were eased a bit when, on May 20, 1993, President Bill Clinton signed the National Voter Registration Act—called the "Motor Voter" bill because it allows people to register to vote while applying for or renewing a driver's license. Offices that provide welfare and disabled assistance can also facilitate voter registration. States have the option to include public schools, libraries, and city and county clerks' offices as registration sites. The law also requires states to allow registration by mail using a standardized form. Motor Voter requires that a questionnaire be mailed to registered voters every four years to purge for death and change of residence but forbids purging for any other reasons, such as nonvoting.

The law has been successful, at least in terms of numbers of new voters registered.[41] Early data on the impact of Motor Voter suggest that neither Democrats nor Republicans are the primary beneficiaries because most who have registered claim to be Independent.[42] Yet even with the increase in registration, Motor Voter does not appear to have increased turnout.

Turnout

Americans hold more elections for more offices than the citizens of any other democracy. In part because there are so many elections, American voters tend to pick and choose which elections to vote in. Americans elect officeholders in *general elections,* determine party nominees in *primary elections,* and replace senators who have died or left office in *special elections.*

Elections held in years when the president is on the ballot are called *presidential elections,* elections held midway between presidential elections are called *midterm elections,* and elections held in odd-numbered calendar years are called *off-year elections.* Midterm elections (like the ones in 2002 and 2006) elect about one-third of the U.S. Senate, all members of the House of Representatives, and most governors and other

IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Registration and Voting in the World's Democracies

	Average Voter Turnout*	Compulsory Voting†	Automatic Registration‡
Australia	82.7%	Yes	No
Austria	85	No	Yes
Belgium	85	Yes	Yes
Canada	68	No	Yes
Denmark	84	No	Yes
Finland	79	No	Yes
France	67	No	No
Germany	81	No	Yes
Greece	80	Yes	No
Ireland	75	No	Yes
Israel	80	No	Yes
Italy	93	Yes	Yes
Japan	69	No	Yes
Netherlands	85	No	Yes
New Zealand	86	No	No
Norway	80	No	Yes
Spain	77	No	Yes
Sweden	83	No	Yes
Switzerland	49	No	Yes
United Kingdom	75	No	Yes
United States	48	No	No

SOURCE: Richard S. Katz, *Democracy and Elections* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 234–235; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, "Voter Turnout from 1945 to Date: A Global Report on Political Participation," at www.idea.int/voter_turnout/voter_turnoutl .html.

*Percentage of turnout for total voting age population (VAP).

†In a *compulsory voting* system, registered voters are required to turn out to vote.

‡Automatic registration uses another form of citizen identification, such as an identity card or a driver's license.

In an effort to make registration easier, states have made registration forms available at motor vehicle stations, schools, public buildings, and even highway tollbooths.

statewide officeholders as well as large numbers of state legislators. Many local elections to elect city councils and mayors are held in the spring of odd-numbered years.

Turnout—the proportion of the voting-age public that votes—is highest in presidential general elections (see Figure 8–4). When examining turnout across states and over time it is best to use as the standard against which you measure turnout the Census Bureau's estimate of population over the age of 18. Because states have different voter registration requirements, the Census Bureau's estimate of eligible voters is the better baseline from which to compare state differences in turnout. Turnout is higher in general elections than in primary elections and higher in primary elections than in special elections. Turnout is higher in presidential general elections than in midterm general elections, and higher in presidential primary elections than in midterm primary elections.[43] This is due to greater interest in and awareness of presidential elections. Turnout is higher in elections in which candidates for federal office are on the ballot (U.S. senator, member of the House of Representatives, president) than in state elections in years when there are no federal contests. Some states elect their governor and other state officials in odd-numbered years to separate state from national politics. The result is generally lower turnout. Finally, local or municipal elections have lower turnout than state elections, and municipal primaries generally have the lowest rates of participation.

Turnout peaked in 1960 at more than 65 percent of persons eligible to vote, but it has since declined to just under 60 percent in 2004.[44] In midterm elections, turnout was 39 percent nationally in 2002, up 3 percent from 1998. Competition tends to encourage turnout, as was the case in Ohio and Florida in 2004 and in states like Minnesota and South Dakota in 2002. More competitive elections generate more interest in the public and more spending by the candidates which in turn stimulate participation. The number of potential voters has increased since the 1960s because the Voting Rights Act of 1965 added large numbers of African Americans to the pool of registered voters. Younger voters were also given the right to vote with the Twenty-Sixth Amendment in 1971. Our electorate has also grown richer and more educated since the 1960s. Since wealth and education are related to voting, we should have seen an increase instead of a decrease in voting. However, over 80 million eligible Americans failed to vote in the 2004 presidential election; the nonvoting figures are even higher for congressional, state, county, and local elections.[45]

Who Votes?

The extent of voting varies widely among different groups. Level of education especially helps predict whether people will vote; as education increases, so does the propensity to vote. "Education increases one's capacity for understanding complex and intangible subjects such as politics," according to one study, "as well as encouraging the ethic of civic responsibility. Moreover, schools provide experience dealing with a variety of bureaucratic problems, such as coping with requirements, filling out forms, and meeting deadlines."[46]

Race and ethnic background are linked with different levels of voting, in large part because they correlate with education. In other words racial and ethnic minorities with college degrees vote at about the same rate as whites with college degrees. Blacks in

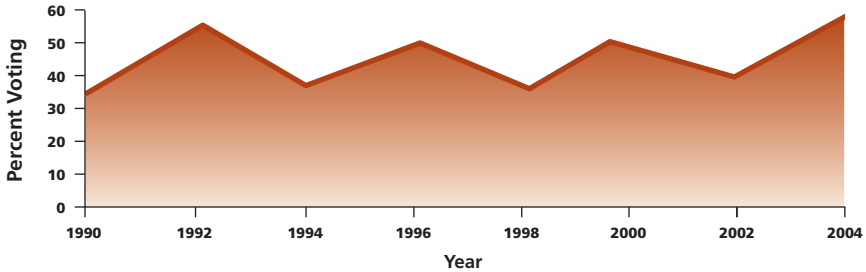


FIGURE 8–4 Voter Turnout in Presidential and Midterm Elections, 1990–2004.

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States,* 1998 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), p. 97; Louis V. Gerstner, "Next Time, Let Us Boldly Vote as No Democracy Has Before," *USA Today,* November 16, 1998, p. A15; www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781453.html; National Voter Turnout in Federal Elections: 1960–2000. 2004 update by authors.

turnout
The proportion of the voting-age public that votes, sometimes defined as the number of registered voters that vote.

CHANGING FACE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

VOTER TURNOUT BY DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002
Sex						
Men	60.2%	44.4%	52.8%	41.4%	53.1%	41.4%
Women	62.3	44.9	55.5	42.4	56.2	43.0
Race						
White	63.6	46.9	56.0	43.3	56.4	44.1
Black	54.0	37.0	50.6	39.6	53.5	39.7
Hispanic	28.9	19.1	26.7	20.0	27.5	18.9
Education						
Some high school	41.2	27.0	33.8	25.0	33.6	23.3
High school graduate	57.5	40.5	49.1	37.1	49.4	37.1
Some college	68.7	49.1	60.5	46.2	60.3	45.8
College graduate	81.0	63.1	73.0	57.2	72.0	58.5
Age						
18 to 24	42.8	20.1	32.4	16.6	32.3	17.2
25 to 34	53.2	32.2	43.1	28.0	43.7	27.1
35 to 44	63.6	46.0	54.9	40.7	55.0	40.2
45 to 64	70.0	56.0	64.4	53.6	64.1	53.1
65 and over	70.1	60.7	67.0	59.5	67.6	61.0

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2003* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003), p. 269; U.S. Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2002: Detailed Tables for Current Population Report," at www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-552.pdf.

general turn out at lower rates than whites, although this is beginning to change. African American participation in the 2004 election increased by 25 percent from the 2000 election but this still only counted for 11 percent of the electorate. Turnout among black voters surged in many states in 2000. Although nationwide, African Americans accounted for 10 percent of the total vote, the same percentage as in 1996, some states experienced exceptional increases. For example, in Florida, African American turnout increased by 68 percent, from 530,000 in 1996 to 893,000 in 2000. Missouri and Illinois also experienced exceptional turnout among black Americans. One of the major reasons was an unprecedented voter mobilization effort mounted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The NAACP's National Voter Fund spent $10 million on a get-out-the-vote campaign. Mobilization efforts can affect election outcomes in races as close as those of 2000 and 2004. In 2004, groups like America Coming Together, the NAACP, and others were especially active. Both candidates spoke to African American groups but President Bush declined the invitation to speak to the NAACP

In 2004 both parties mounted major efforts to register and mobilize Hispanic voters, a group likely to be of growing importance. Candidates, parties, and allied interest groups, anticipating another very close election in 2004, made voter mobilization a high priority. Their efforts included personal appeals, often at the doorstep, where people were invited to register to vote, efforts to get people to vote early by absentee ballot, and offers of rides to the polls on election day. The intensity of the voter mobilization in 2004 was high compared to other recent elections.

Women, another historically underrepresented group, have increased their voting levels to the point that since 1984 more women than men vote.[47] Women's recent higher turnout is generally attributed to increasing levels of education and employment.

This poster, published by the League of Women Voters, urged women to use the vote the Nineteenth Amendment had given them.

A major initiative to register young persons and encourage them to vote was undertaken in 2004. The mobilization effort appeared to work, with more than 4.6 million more voters aged 18–29 voting in 2004 than in 2000. While an impressive gain, because of generally higher turnout, young voters as a percentage of all voters did not increase in 2004. Studies of young voters before the 2004 election found that 57 percent of young adults said that the election would have a "great deal" or "quite a bit" of impact on the country's future, in contrast to the 33 percent of young adults who responded this way during the 2000 election.[48]

Income and age are also important factors in voting. Those with higher family incomes are more likely to vote than those with lower incomes. Income, of course, corresponds to occupation, and those with higher-status careers are more likely to vote than those with lower-status jobs. Poor people are less likely to feel politically involved and confident, and their social norms tend to deemphasize politics.[49] Older people, unless they are very old and infirm, are more likely to vote than younger people. The greater propensity of older persons to vote will only amplify the importance of this group as baby boomers age and retire.

How Serious Is Nonvoting?

Although Americans can hardly avoid reading or hearing about political campaigns, especially during an election as intensely fought as that of 2004, about 40 percent of all Americans fail to vote. Who are they? Why don't they vote? Is the fact that so many Americans choose not to vote a cause for alarm? If so, what can we do about it?

The simplest explanation for low turnout is that people are lazy, but there is more to it than that. Of course, some people are apathetic, but the vast majority of Americans are not. Paradoxically, we compare favorably with other nations in political interest and awareness, but for a variety of institutional and political reasons, we fail to convert these qualities into votes (see Table 8–5).

The difficulty of voting in the United States, the cost in time and effort, is higher than in other democracies. In our system, people are required to register to vote, and they must decide how to vote for a large number of offices, and in many states how to vote on ballot questions relating to public policy or constitutional amendments. Elections in the United States are held on weekdays rather than holidays or weekends as they often are elsewhere. Another factor in the decline of voter turnout since the 1960s is the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, which lowered the voting age to 18. It increased the number of eligible voters, but that group is the least likely to vote. With ratification of the amendment in 1971, turnout fell from 62 percent in 1968 to 57 percent in 1972.[50]

Some political scientists argue that nonvoting is not a critical problem. "Nonvoting is not a social disease," contends Austin Ranney, a noted scholar of politics. He points

TABLE 8–5 WHY PEOPLE DON'T VOTE

Too busy, conflicting schedule	27.1%
Illness or disability (own or family's)	13.1
Not interested, felt vote would not make a difference	12
Out of town or away from home	10.4
Other reason, not specified	9
Did not like candidates or campaign issues	7.3
Refused or don't know	7.5
Registration problems	4.1
Forgot to vote (or send in absentee ballot)	5.7
Inconvenient polling place or hours or lines too long	1.4
Transportation problems	1.7
Bad weather conditions	0.7

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Reasons for Not Voting, by Sex, Age, Race and Hispanic Origin, and Educational Attainment: November 2002," at www.census.gov.

out that legal and extralegal denial of the vote to African Americans, women, Hispanics, persons over 18, and other groups has now been outlawed, so nonvoting is voluntary. He quotes the late Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina: "I don't believe in making it easy for apathetic, lazy people to vote."[51] Some might even contend that nonvoting is a sign of voter satisfaction.

Those who argue that nonvoting is a critical problem cite the "class bias" of those who do vote. The social makeup and attitudes of nonvoters differ significantly from those of voters and hence greatly distort the representative system. "The very poor . . . have about two-thirds the representation among voters than their numbers would suggest." Thus the people who need help the most from the government lack their fair share of electoral power to obtain it. And, it is argued, this situation is growing worse.[52]

Declining participation through voting and other political acts has puzzled some political scientists because voting rates have continued to decline even as level of education, a strong predictor of voting, has increased—part of the answer to the puzzle may be that political parties and other groups have done less voter mobilization over time. In other words, some people don't vote because no one asks them to. Furthermore, advances in technology allow parties and campaigns to narrowly target their appeals to people who are already likely to turn out.[53]

Low voting, according to those who see a class bias in voting, reflects "the underdevelopment of political attitudes resulting from the historic exclusion of low-income groups from active electoral participation."[54] In short, part of the problem of nonvoting among low-income, less-educated people is their failure to be conscious of their interests. Dynamic leadership or strong party organization, or both, would not only attract the poor to the polls but also make clear their "class grievances and aspirations."[55] Others reject this class bias argument. They admit that nonvoters are demographically different but cite polls showing that nonvoters' attitudes are not much different from voters' attitudes. One study, comparing the party identification of voters with that of all Americans, found that the proportion of Democrats was nearly identical (51.4 percent of all citizens and 51.3 percent of voters), while Republicans as voters were slightly overrepresented (36 percent of citizens and 39.7 percent of voters). All other political differences are considered to be much smaller than this 3.7 percent gap. Further, voters are not "disproportionately hostile" to social welfare policies.[56]

What effect might increased voter turnout have in national elections? It might make a difference, since there are partisan differences between different demographic groups, and candidates would have to adjust to the demands of an expanded electorate. A noted political scientist, while acknowledging that no political system could achieve 100 percent participation, pointed out that the entire balance of power in the political system could be overturned if the large nonvoter population decided to vote.[57] However, others contend more persuasively that the difference may not be as pronounced. Nonvoters are not more in favor of government ownership or control of industry, and they are not more egalitarian. Nonvoters are, however, more inclined to favor additional spending on welfare programs.[58]

Another way to think of low voter turnout is to see it as a sign of approval of things as they are, whereas high voter turnout would signify disapproval and widespread desire for change. Even on the subject of how to interpret low turnout there is disagreement.

VOTING CHOICES

Why do people vote as they do? Political scientists have identified three main elements of the voting choice: party identification, candidate appeal, and issues. These elements often overlap.

Voting on the Basis of Party

Party identification is the subjective sense of identification or affiliation that a person has with a political party (see Chapter 7). Party identification often predicts a person's stand on issues. It is part of our national mythology that Americans vote for the

party identification
An informal and subjective affiliation with a political party that most people acquire in childhood.

YOU DECIDE

SHOULD WE ALLOW VOTING BY MAIL AND ON THE INTERNET?

During the past two centuries of constitutional government, this nation has gradually adopted a more expansive view of popular participation. Not only has the right to vote been extended to more people, but the decisions made in the voting booth have been expanded as well to include primary elections to nominate party candidates and ballot referendums in which state constitutional amendments and state laws are adopted.

It seems logical that the next step in our democratic progress is permitting voters to cast ballots through the mail or via the Internet. Not only would such a reform make voting easier, but it would permit us to have more elections. For example, when a city council wants voters to decide whether to build a new football stadium or when there is need for a special election to fill the term of a member of Congress who has died or resigned, election officials could mail out the ballots and then in two or three weeks count up those that have been returned. The state of Oregon has already conducted several general elections by mail, and other states are considering adopting the Oregon system.

What do you think? Should we move toward a system in which we replace the ballot box with the mailbox or the computer? What arguments would you make for and against such an idea?

person and not the party, but as you will see, the person we vote for is most often from the party we prefer.

As discussed, partisanship is typically acquired in childhood or adolescence as a result of the socialization process in the family and then reinforced by peer groups in adolescence. In the absence of reasons to vote otherwise, people depend on party identification to simplify their voting choices. Party identification is not the same as party registration; it is not party membership in the sense of being a dues-paying, card-carrying member, as in some European parties. Rather, it is a psychological sense of attachment to one party or another.

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of self-declared Independents since the mid-1970s. Nominally, there are more Independents in the electorate today than there are Republicans. But two-thirds of all Independents are, in fact, partisans in their voting behavior. Independent-leaning Democrats are predictably Democratic in their voting behavior, and Independent-leaning Republicans vote heavily Republican. Independent leaners are thus very different from each other and from the Pure Independents. Pure Independents have the lowest rate of turnout but generally do side with the eventual winner in presidential elections. These data on Independents only reinforce the importance of partisanship as an explanation of voting choice, because when we consider Independent-leaning Democrats and Independent-leaning Republicans as Democrats and Republicans, respectively, there were only 11 percent Pure Independents or others without a party in 2000,[59] and that proportion dropped in 2002 to 7 percent. These proportions are consistent with earlier election years. In short, the number of genuinely independent voters is relatively small and has remained so over time.

Although party identification has fluctuated somewhat in the past 40 years, it remains more stable than attitudes about issues or political ideology. Fluctuations in party identification appear to come in response to economic conditions and political performance, especially of the president. The more information voters have about their choices, the more likely they are to defect from their party and vote for a candidate from the other party.

Voting on the Basis of Candidates

While long-term party identification is important, it is clearly not the only factor in voting choices; otherwise the Democrats would have won every presidential election since the last realignment in 1932. In fact, since 1952, Republicans have been more successful in winning the White House than Democrats. The answer to this puzzle is largely found in a second major explanation of voting choice—**candidate appeal**.

The elections of the 1980s marked a critical threshold in the emergence of the candidate-centered era in American electoral politics. This change in focus from parties to candidates is an important historical trend that has been gradually taking place over the past several decades.[60] Candidate centered politics means that rather than rely on groups or parties to build a coalition of supporters for a candidate, the candidates make their case directly to the voters. In many races, the parties and groups have also made the candidate the major focus of attention, minimizing partisanship or group identification.[61]

Candidate appeal often involves an assessment of a candidate's character. Is the candidate honest? Is the candidate consistent? Is the candidate dedicated to "family values"? Does the candidate have religious or spiritual commitments? The press in recent elections has sometimes played the role of "character cop," asking questions about private lives and lifestyles. The press asks these questions because voters are interested in a political leader's background—perhaps even more interested in personal character than in a political position on hard-to-understand health care or regulatory policy issues.

Ronald Reagan's effort to generate positive candidate appeal was successful. His opponent in 1980, President Jimmy Carter, had hoped that Reagan would behave more like Barry Goldwater, who in his speech accepting the nomination in 1964 had said, "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. . . . Moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue."[62] Lyndon Johnson, Goldwater's opponent, benefited from public perception

candidate appeal
How voters feel about a candidate's background, personality, leadership ability, and other personal qualities.

that Goldwater and those who nominated him were out of the mainstream of American politics, an idea reinforced by Goldwater's acceptance speech.

Like Barry Goldwater in 1964, George McGovern, who ran as the Democratic candidate for president in 1972, had negative appeal. He was perceived by many as too liberal, a view bolstered by images of his supporters, who by their dress and manner appeared out of the mainstream of American politics. In addition to ideological extremism, McGovern raised doubts about his judgment and leadership by how he handled his choice of a vice president. McGovern named Missouri Senator Tom Eagleton as his running mate, only to discover that Eagleton had once been hospitalized for emotional exhaustion and depression and had received electric shock therapy. McGovern initially stood behind Eagleton, but as press coverage and criticism of McGovern's lack of investigation into Eagleton's past grew, McGovern dropped Eagleton and named a new running mate, Sargent Shriver. In the end, "only about one-third of the public thought McGovern could be trusted as president."[63]

Candidate appeal or the lack of it—in terms of leadership, experience, good judgment, integrity, competence, strength, and energy—is sometimes more important than party or issues. Bill Clinton and John Edwards represent the regular working-class person rising against the odds. Dwight Eisenhower had great candidate appeal. He was a five-star general, a legendary hero of the Allied effort in World War II. His unmilitary manner, his moderation, his personal charm, and his lack of a strong party position made him appealing across the ideological spectrum. Ronald Reagan generated positive candidate appeal in part by asserting characteristics the public found lacking in Jimmy Carter—leadership and strength. In the 2004 presidential primaries, Howard Dean was initially perceived in positive terms, but that changed with his speech following the Iowa caucus. "The Scream," as it was labeled, called into question his self control.[64]

Increasingly, campaigns today focus on the negative elements of candidates' history and personality. Opponents and the media are quick to point out the limitations or problems of any given candidate. Bush was attacked in 2004 for his policies in Iraq, his failure to build broader coalitions with other countries, his tax cuts which lowered taxes for rich people as well as for others, and for rising deficits. Bush's record in the National Guard became a focus of a CBS "60 Minutes" segment, only to have CBS admit that the documents used in this critical story on Bush could not be authenticated. Kerry was attacked for flip-flopping over issues and his liberal voting record in the Senate. Kerry was also attacked for his war record by an outside group called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. This attack put the Kerry campaign on the defensive for several days. (See Figure 8–5 for a list of which qualities mattered most to votes in 2004.)[65]

Voting on the Basis of Issues

Most political scientists agree that issues, while important, are not as central to the decision process as party identification and candidate appeal.[66] Part of the reason is that candidates often intentionally obscure their positions on issues—an understandable strategy.[67] Richard Nixon said he had a plan to end the Vietnam War in 1968, clearly the most important issue in that year, but he would not reveal the specifics. By not detailing his plan, he stood to gain votes from those who wanted a more aggressive war effort as well as those who wanted a cease-fire.

For issue voting to become of major significance, the issue must be important to a substantial number of voters, opposing candidates must take opposing stands on the issues, and voters must know these positions and vote accordingly. Rarely do candidates focus on only one issue. Voters often will agree with one candidate on one issue and with the opposing candidate on another. In such an instance, issues will likely not be the determining factor. But lack of interest by voters in issues does not mean candidates can take any issue position they wish.[68]

More likely than *prospective issue voting* (voting based on what a candidate pledges to do in the future about an issue if elected) is *retrospective issue voting* (holding incumbents,

Thinking It Through

One of the problems with making elections more frequent is that voters will tire. Americans already vote more frequently and for more offices than citizens of any other democracy. Asking them to make voting choices even more frequently could result in lower turnout and less rational consideration. Many voters may be unaware that an election is going on. Yet the advantage of the vote-by-mail system employed by Oregon and some cities and counties is that it increases turnout, at least initially. What political scientists dispute is whether such increases in participation will continue when the novelty wears off.

Some critics of voting by mail or electronic democracy worry about fraud. Even when voters are required to sign their mailed-in ballots, the possibility of forgery still exists. Also, voting by mail or computer has the possibility of allowing people to pressure or harass voters. Another concern is late returns. Concerns about electronic voting have been reinforced by claims that the computer software is not secure and that some electronic voting fails to count all votes.*

Another criticism is that mail and electronic voting could be skewed toward participation by better-educated and higher-income voters, who routinely pay their bills by mail, make purchases on their computer, and own a personal computer with Internet access. Advocates of these new voting procedures contend that voters who do not own computers can drop off their ballots in some public building and that eventually computers will be available widely enough that access will not be a problem.†

However, if voting can be made easier and more convenient, why not do it? If the integrity of the vote can be protected and the new ways of voting become widely accessible, such changes are probably inevitable.

*E.J. Dionne Jr., "Election Dangers to be Avoided," *Washington Post,* May 25, 2004.

†Adam J. Berinsky, Nancy Burns, and Michael W. Tarugott, "Who Votes By Mail? A Dynamic Model of the Individual-Level Consequences of Voting-by-Mail Systems," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65 (Summer 2001), pp. 178–197.

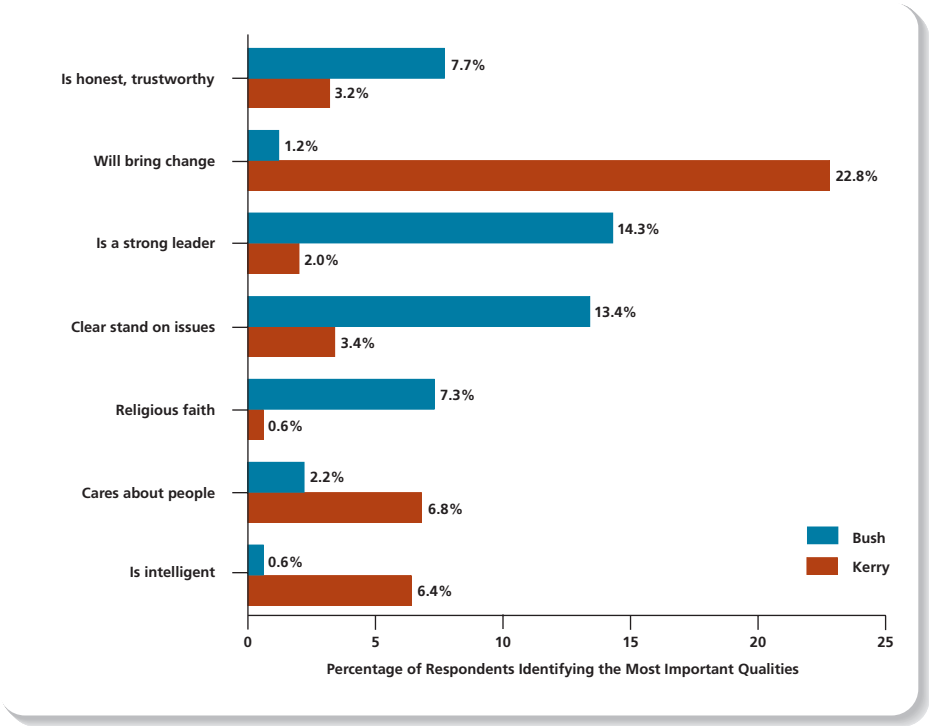


FIGURE 8–5 Which Quality Mattered Most in the 2004 Vote for President?
SOURCE: 2004 Exit Polls from Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International at www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.0.html.

usually the president's party, responsible for past performance on issues such as the economy or foreign policy).[69] In times of peace and prosperity, voters will reward the incumbent; if the nation falls short on either, voters are more likely to elect the opposition.

But good economic times do not always lead to the retention of an administration, as Al Gore learned in 2000. Part of Gore's problem in 2000 was that only half the public saw their family's financial situation as having gotten better. Of these voters, Gore received 61 percent of the vote.[70] But his inability to effectively claim credit for the good economic times hurt him, especially when Republicans contended that it was the American people, not the government, that produced the strong economy. A similar debate arose in 2004 over the state of the economy and the extent to which President Bush's policies or the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, had resulted in job loss and other economic problems. Democrats argued that the tax cut had been irresponsible, especially when the country was at war. The Republicans countered that the tax cuts had helped stimulate the economy.

The state of the economy is often the central issue in midterm elections as well as presidential ones. Several studies have found a positive relationship between the state of the economy and "out" party gains and "in" party losses in congressional seats.[71] Political scientists have been able to locate the sources of this effect in individual voters' decision making. Voters tend to vote against the party in power if they perceive a decline or standstill in their personal financial situations.[72]

Voters see responsibility for the economy as resting with the president and Congress more than with governors or local officials.[73] In 2004, the electorate was divided over the economy, jobs, and Bush's tax cut. More voters felt the economy was "not good or poor" than felt it was "excellent or good." The view of the economy appeared to be influenced by which candidate one preferred, with Bush supporters more positive and Kerry supporters more negative.[74] Kerry often tried to make the election about the economy and jobs but the issues of security and terrorism were seen as more vital.

PUBLIC OPINION: SPIN DETECTION

Public opinion is important in a democracy because the government depends on the consent of the governed. This simulation describes survey techniques and identifies possible problems with surveys. Test your knowledge about survey research and attempt to identify problems with which surveyors deal.

Go to Make it Real, "Public Opinion: Spin Detection."

SUMMARY

1. Public opinion is a complex combination of views and attitudes individuals acquire through various influences from childhood on. Public opinion takes on qualities of intensity, latency, consensus, and polarization—each of which is affected by people's feelings about the salience of issues.
2. The American public has a generally low level of interest in politics, and most people do not follow politics and government closely. The public's knowledge of political issues is poor.
3. Americans who are interested in public affairs can participate by voting; joining interest groups and political parties; working on campaigns; writing letters to newspaper editors or elected officials; attempting to influence how another person will vote; donating money to a candidate, party, or group; or even protesting.
4. Better-educated, older, and party- and group-involved people tend to vote more; the young tend to vote the least. Voter turnout tends to be higher in national than in state and local elections, higher in presidential than in midterm elections, and higher in general than in primary elections.
5. Counting ballots has generated substantial controversy in recent elections. The Florida controversy in 2000 was resolved by the U.S. Supreme Court and Congress subsequently passed HAVA. In 2004, voter turnout soared, in part because of a close election and in part because of successful voter mobilization efforts.
6. Party identification remains the most important element in the voting choice of most Americans. It represents a long-term attachment and is a "lens" through which voters view candidates and issues as they make their voting choices. Candidate appeal, including character and record, is another key factor in voter choice. Voters decide their vote less frequently on the basis of issues.

KEY TERMS

public opinion
political socialization
attentive public
voter registration
Australian ballot
turnout
party identification
candidate appeal

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See also *Public Opinion Quarterly, The American Journal of Political Science,* and *American Political Science Review.*