

## APGoPo - Unit 3

# CH. 8 – PUBLIC OPINION

**Public opinion** is the distribution of individual attitudes toward a particular issue, candidate, or political institution. Although the definition is simple enough, public opinion encompasses the attitudes of millions of diverse people from many racial, ethnic, age, and regional groups. As a result, the study of American public opinion is especially complex, but also very important. For American government to operate democratically, the opinions of the American public must reach and become an integral part of the political process.

## MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

The measurement of public opinion is a complex process that involves careful interviewing procedures and question wording. To complicate the task further, people are often not well informed about the issues, and may comment on topics they know little about. Public opinion polls must be constructed and executed carefully in order to accurately reflect the attitudes of the American public.

Public opinion polling is a relatively new science, first developed by **George Gallup**, who did some polling for his mother-in-law, a candidate for secretary of state in Iowa in 1932. Gallup founded a firm that spread from its headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey throughout the democratic world. Today, other well-known private firms conduct polls, and big television networks, magazines and newspapers, such as CNN, *Time*, and *The New York Times*, conduct their own polls. Pollsters are also hired by political candidates to determine their popularity, and the results of their polls often shape the direction of political campaigns. The national government even sponsors opinion polls of its own.

Polls generally start when someone wants a political question answered. For example, a candidate running for the House of Representatives may wonder, "What do people in the district need?" or "How strong a candidate do they think I am?" Or a newspaper may want to know, "How do people in this country feel about the threats of bioterrorism?" The candidate or publisher may commission a poll, and a reporter may base a story on the research findings. The pollsters then follow several important principles in gathering accurate statistics:

- **Representative sample** -The sample of those interviewed must be representative of the entire population. Every citizen cannot be polled regarding his or her opinion on a whole range of issues, but those selected must allow the pollster to make accurate assessments of public opinion. The most common technique employed is **random sampling**, which gives everyone in the population an equal probability of being selected. Most national surveys sample between a thousand and fifteen hundred persons. The pollster most commonly makes a list of groups, using criteria such as region, age, ethnic and racial groups, gender, and religion. From these groups, people are selected randomly for interviews. The disastrous Literary Digest Poll of 1936 provides a famous example of what can happen if the random sampling principle is ignored. That poll predicted that Alf Landon would beat Franklin Roosevelt by a landslide, but the results were the opposite. The Digest sample was biased because it was based on telephone books and club membership lists at a time when only well-to-do people had phones.
- **Respondent's knowledge** - People must have some knowledge of the issues they are asked about. If the issue is complex (such as American policy toward Afghanistan), people should be allowed to say "I don't know", or "I haven't thought about it much." Still, people are often reluctant to admit a lack of knowledge about political issues, so pollsters always must allow for the fact that people often pretend to know things that they don't.
- **Careful and objective wording** - The structure and wording of the question is very important in obtaining an accurate response. "Loaded" or emotional words should not be used, and the pollster must not indicate what the "right" answer is. For example, consider a question like, "How much do you dislike leaders of Middle Eastern countries?" You could hardly expect an accurate

answer. The categories of answers also determine the results of the poll. A yes or no question, such as, "Do you think the president is doing a good job?" will give very different results than a question that gives the interviewee a chance to rank the president's performance (excellent, very good, good, average, poor, very poor).

- **Cost efficiency v. accuracy** - Almost all polls have a budget, but accuracy should not suffer as a result. For example, a **straw poll** that asks television viewers to call in their opinions is not very expensive, but it generally is not very accurate either. The people that call in usually feel very strong about the issue. And some of them call in more than once.
- **Variances between samples** - The same poll conducted with a different random sample almost certainly will produce slightly different results. These slight variations are known as **sampling errors**. A typical poll of about fifteen hundred usually has a sampling error of + or - 3 percent. This means that 95% of the time the poll results are within 3 percentage points of what the entire population thinks. If 60% of the population supports a candidate for office, in actuality, 57-63% of the population supports him or her. Usually, the larger the sample in proportion to the population, the smaller the sampling error.

## **FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE POLITICAL ATTITUDES**

When pollsters divide people into groups before they conduct random samples, they are acknowledging a well-proven fact: group identifications often influence political attitudes. Political attitudes are shaped by **political socialization**, a lifelong process through which an individual acquires opinions through contact with family, friends, coworkers, and other group associations. Today the media also plays a major role in political socialization, with political news and opinions widely available on TV, radio, and the internet. Political attitudes in turn determine how individuals participate, who they vote for, and what political parties they support. Many factors - including family, gender, religion, education, social class, race and ethnicity, and region - all contribute to American political attitudes and behavior.

### **FAMILY**

The family is probably the most important source of political socialization, and so it plays a major role in shaping political attitudes, particularly of party identification. Polls show that the majority of young people identify with their parents' political party. The process begins early in life (by the age of ten or eleven), and even though individuals generally become more independent as they grow older, the correlation between adult party identification and the parents' party is still very high. A parallel trend, however, is a tendency for this correlation to be lower than it has in the past. This trend may be related to another trend: the growing number of voters who call themselves "independents" rather than Democrats or Republicans.

Logically, the more politically active your family, the more likely you are to hold the same beliefs. For example, most members of the extended Kennedy family are Democrats, and most Bush family members are Republicans. The relationship weaker on specific issues - like gun control, school prayer, and government welfare programs - but still holds strong for overall political views and identifications.

### **GENDER**

A person's gender also influences political views. For example, more women consider sexual harassment in the workplace to be a serious problem than do men, and more men than women tend to support military actions and spending in foreign affairs.

Party identification is also affected by gender, but the relationship has shifted through the years. In the 1920s when women first began to vote, they were more likely to support the Republican Party than were men. Some experts explain this correlation by pointing out that the Republicans tended to be more the party of "hearth and home" in the 20s. Whatever the explanation, the tendency for women to vote for Republicans continued through the 1930s. Although most women supported the Democrat Franklin Roosevelt over his Republican opponents, the percentage of women supporters was lower than the percentage of men who supported Roosevelt.

The trend held until the late 1960s, when the correlation reversed. Since that time women have been more likely than men to vote for Democrats. This "gender gap" has been explained by the advent of the modern women's rights movement and the Democrats' tendency to support points of view women support: equal opportunity for women, abortion rights, and welfare programs. On the other hand, some experts argue that Republicans are more concerned about defense issues, and thus they attract more men to their party. In the election of 2004, the gender gap appeared to be closing, with Republican George W. Bush garnering about 48% of all women's votes. However, Bush's support among men was significantly higher.

A more recent gender-related issue has to do with male vs. female support for women political candidates. Although common sense may tell us that women would be more likely to support women candidates, the research does not show a clear correlation. One problem is that relatively few women run for political office. Although their numbers have increased in recent elections, more women candidates run as Democrats than as Republicans, so it is difficult to know if the candidate's gender alone affects voting patterns of women and men.

### **MARRIED VS. UNMARRIED**

Pollster John Zogby has pointed out that the gender gap (especially as evidenced in the 2004 presidential election) is not nearly as significant as the gap between married and unmarried voters. He found that on most issues single and married voters were often 25-30 points different, with singles more likely to vote for Democratic candidates, and married voters more likely to support Republicans.

### **RELIGION**

An individual's religion is a factor in determining his or her political attitudes. Although the relationships are not as strong as they once were, these patterns still hold:

- Protestants are more conservative on economic matters (such as minimum wage and taxes) than are Catholics and Jews.
- Jews tend to be more liberal on both economic and social issues (such as civil liberties and rights) than are Catholics or Protestants.
- Catholics tend to be more liberal on economic issues than they are on social issues.

Some special research on fundamentalist Christians indicates that they tend to support more conservative candidates for public office, and that they are more likely to contribute to the Republican Party than to the Democratic Party. This more conservative tendency is stronger for attitudes about social issues (such as abortion, civil rights for minorities, and women's rights), than it is for foreign affairs and economic issues (such as government services and job guarantees).

In recent elections, a distinction has emerged between the political attitudes of those that attend religious services regularly and those that don't. The trend was particularly apparent in the election of 2004, when churchgoers were more likely to vote for Republicans, and non-churchgoers were more likely to support Democrats.

### **EDUCATION**

A person's level of education also affects political attitudes, but the evidence provides conflicting results. In general, the higher the individual's educational level, the more likely they are to hold conservative political points of view. However, many studies show that college education often influences an individual to have more liberal social and economic attitudes than they had before they started college. These studies show that the longer students stay in college and the more prestigious the institution they attend, the more liberal they become. The reasons for the correlation are unclear, but some experts believe that the liberal attitudes of professors may influence students. Others believe that the differences lie not in the schooling itself, but in the characteristics of people who attend college vs. those that don't.

## **SOCIAL CLASS**

A number of years ago, the relationship between social class and political attitudes was clear: the higher the social class, the more conservative the individual, and the more likely he or she was to belong to the Republican Party. Today, that relationship is much less clear, perhaps partly because of the correlation cited above between college education and liberalism. Even though the broad affiliations between blue-collar workers and the Democratic Party and businessmen and the Republican Party still have some credibility, those relationships are much weaker than they once were.

## **RACE AND ETHNICITY**

Much research has focused on the relationship between an individual's race and ethnicity and his or her political attitudes. The oldest and largest numbers of studies focus on black Americans, who tend to identify with the Democratic Party and are still the most consistently liberal group within that party. In recent presidential elections, blacks have voted in overwhelming numbers (close to 90%) for the Democratic candidate.

Much less research has been conducted with Hispanic Americans, but preliminary results indicate that they too tend to be more liberal than the majority, with a tendency to affiliate with the Democratic Party. However, the correlation appears to be weaker than that of black Americans.

A very limited amount of research among Asian Americans indicates that they are more conservative than blacks or Hispanics, although attitudes of the various nationalities of Asians fluctuate widely. For example, preliminary research indicates that Korean Americans are more liberal than are Japanese Americans. Overall, more Asian Americans voted in the 2000 presidential election for Democrat Al Gore than for Republican George W. Bush, so the influence of Asian ethnicity on political attitudes is still not clear.

## **GEOGRAPHIC REGION**

As a general rule, people on either coast tend to be more liberal than those in the middle of the country. However, there are many problems in defining that tendency because the rule is overbroad. For example, many Californians are very conservative, as are a number of New Englanders. However, part of the reason for the trend is probably an urban/rural differentiation, with coastal cities inhabited by minorities, recent immigrants, and members of labor unions. Cities in the rust belt of the Great Lakes region also tend to vote Democratic, partly because they have strong labor constituencies.

The Southeast presents some special problems with applying the rule, partly because party affiliations of Southerners have been changing over the past fifty years or so. Since the 1950s, many southerners have broken their traditional ties with the Democratic Party. From the time of Reconstruction until the 1950s, the **Solid South** always voted Democratic. Virtually all representatives, senators, governors, and local officials in the South belonged to the Democratic Party. Since the 1950s, more and more political leaders have affiliated with the Republicans, so that today, in most Southern states, both parties have viable contenders for public office. Some experts explain this phenomenon by pointing out that many southerners disagreed with the Democratic Party's support for the black civil rights movement starting in the 1950s, with the result that many white southerners changed their party affiliation.

Although some research indicates that white southerners tend to be less liberal than others on social issues, such as aid to minorities, legalizing marijuana, and rights of those accused of crimes, southern attitudes on economic issues (government services, job guarantees, social security) are very similar to those from other regions. Although there is some evidence that southerners are more conservative than they were fifty years ago, political views today of white southerners are less distinct from those in other regions than they used to be.

## POLITICAL IDEOLOGY: LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES

A **political ideology** is a coherent set of values and beliefs about public policy. In U.S. politics, ideologies generally are thought to fall into two opposite camps: liberal and conservative. While there are general guidelines for determining the nature of liberalism and conservatism, the differences between the two are not always obvious. Following and describing ideologies is also complicated by the fact that they change over time, so that being conservative or liberal today is not necessarily the same as it was a few years ago.

### How Ideological are American Citizens?

The classic study of the 1950s, *The American Voter*, investigated the ideological sophistication of the American electorate. The authors created four classifications of voters:

- **ideologues** - 12% of the people connected their opinions and beliefs to policy positions by candidates and parties. In other words, only 12% of the American voting populations voted along primarily ideological lines.
- **group benefits voters** - 42% of the people voted for parties based on which one they thought would benefit groups they belonged to or supported. ("Democrats are more supportive of labor union members like me.")
- **nature of the times voters** - 24% of the people linked good times or bad times (usually based on economics) to one political party or the other and vote accordingly. ("The Republicans can get us out of this recession.")
- **no issue content** - 22% of the people could give no issue-based or ideological reasons for voting for a party or a candidate. ("\_\_\_\_\_ is better looking than the other candidate.")

Follow up studies conducted through 1988 reveal some variation in percentages among the groups, with ideologues faring somewhat better than they did in the 50s, but they are still a relatively small group (18% in 1988).

### Liberalism vs. Conservatism

The terms **liberal** and **conservative** are confusing partly because their meaning has changed over the course of American history. In early American history, liberals disapproved of a strong central government, believing that it got in the way of ordinary people reaching their ambitions. They saw the government as a friend of business and the political elite. Conservatives, on the other hand, believed that government was best left to political elites, although they did not deny the rights of individual voters to contribute to the political system.

That trend reversed during the 1930s with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal - big government programs to help ordinary people get back on their feet during the Great Depression. During that era, Democrats began to see the government as a friend to the little people - one that provided much needed support during bad economic times. Republicans came to support the belief in rugged individualism - the responsibility of all people to take care of themselves. Although Democrats are not always liberal and Republicans are not always conservative, liberals since Roosevelt have generally supported a larger, more active role for the central government than conservatives have. However, some observers believe that this distinction between liberals and conservatives may be changing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Conservative President George W. Bush is often seen as supportive of big government, a fact that more traditional conservatives have criticized.

Even though the terms liberal and conservative are more meaningful for political activists than they are for the rank-and-file voter, the concepts are roughly, if inconsistently, understood by most Americans.

The following table summarizes some of the political beliefs likely to be preferred by liberals and conservatives:

<b>ISSUE</b>	<b>LIBERALS</b>	<b>CONSERVATIVES</b>
<b>Health Care</b>	Health care should be more widely available to ordinary people and not necessarily tied to work. Tendency to support a national health care system.	Health care is best handled by private insurance companies and are most logically tied to work place benefits.
<b>Crime</b>	Cure the economic and social reasons for crime.	Stop coddling criminals and punish them for their crimes.
<b>Business Regulation</b>	Government should regulate businesses in the public interest.	Businesses should be allowed to operate under free market conditions.
<b>Military Spending</b>	Spend less.	Spend more.
<b>Taxes</b>	The rich should be taxed more; the government is responsible for reducing economic inequality.	Taxes should be kept low.
<b>Welfare State</b>	The government is responsible for helping the poor find employment and relieving their misery.	People are responsible for their own well-being; welfare takes away the incentive to take care of themselves.
<b>Civil rights</b>	Support for pro-active civil rights government policies.	Limited government role in promoting social equality.
<b>Abortion</b>	Pro-choice	Pro-life
<b>Religion</b>	Clear separation of church and state.	Support for faith-based political initiatives.

Individuals may have political beliefs that are a combination of liberalism and conservatism. Most commonly they may divide their opinions about economic and social issues. For example, an economically liberal, socially conservative person might believe in government support for health and welfare, but may oppose gay rights and/or equal opportunity programs for ethnic/racial minorities.

### **The Neo-Cons**

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the term **Neo-Con** began to emerge to describe the emergence of a post-Cold War conservative movement. Their main goal has been to counter global terrorism, especially as carried out by radical Islamists. Although neo-cons may be from either political party, they tend to affiliate as Republicans. Prominent neo-cons are Vice-President Dick Cheney and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who led the drive to war in Iraq in 2003. Neo-cons advocate the breakup of global terrorist networks, and some endorse the spread of President George W. Bush's war on terrorism to include Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, as well.