6 PUBLIC OPINION
After graduation Silver worked as an economic consultant for an accounting firm in Chicago. But the work was boring. For fun he started a website called the Burrito Bracket, rating Mexican restaurants in Wicker Park. Now adopting the Chicago White Sox and Cubs as his home teams, he began using statistics to predict player performance. His system generated a huge amount of attention within the baseball world. In 2004 he sold his PECOTA projection system to Baseball Prospectus and joined its staff, writing books and articles forecasting team and player performance.

Three years later Silver turned his forecasting skills to politics. He began by writing a political blog for Daily Kos under the pseudonym “Poblano.” Frustrated by sloppy polling and reporting, in March 2008 he established his own blog, FiveThirtyEight (the total number of electoral votes in a presidential election), which tracked and predicted the outcome of presidential primaries so accurately that it got attention from pundits and commentators. Silver sliced and diced the political polls in a way that made them easy for the public to grasp. Sometimes he dismissed the results of a new poll, telling why he did not trust it. At other times he was able to show important trends in public opinion that warranted close attention.

FiveThirtyEight became a daily staple of political junkies and political observers of all stripes. During the course of the campaign, stories in the New York Times,
the Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, and New York Magazine focused on this new prophet. He appeared on Keith Olbermann’s show on MSNBC and The Colbert Report on Comedy Central. On election night he was in Washington, at a studio in the Newseum, serving as an on-air analyst for Dan Rather Reports. At 9:46 P.M., on FiveThirtyEight, he called the election for Barack Obama, whom he had forecast as the winner way back in March. Silver’s rise “from obscurity to quotable authority” was compared to Obama’s, the candidate he had supported all along. “Not only,” said Vanity Fair; “did his disciplined models and microfine data mining command respect, his prognostications hit the Zen mark on Election Day.”

Nate Silver’s gateway to participation in the American political system came by doing what he loved—working with numbers—and applying those skills to politics. He still runs FiveThirtyEight and now writes a monthly column of political analysis for Esquire. He speaks with authority because his work has made political polling more useful and understandable to the public. It has also highlighted the importance of public opinion in a democracy. In fact, without the expression of the public will, there would be no democracy. For politicians, knowing which way the public leans or what citizens think is an avenue to power. For citizens, being able to express opinion and know it is being heard is a gateway to influence. But reading public opinion correctly is not easy. Polls are a great help, but they can be flawed. Even if well measured, public opinion does not always produce a sound direction for the country. A sound direction requires an informed citizenry. In this chapter, we investigate the contours, sources, and impact of public opinion.

The Power of Public Opinion

“Our government rests on public opinion,” claimed Abraham Lincoln (1861–65). "Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed.” The nation’s sixteenth president was, of course, the great champion of “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” as he expressed it in his Gettysburg Address. He understood that democratic government must be responsive to the will of the people. The hope in a democracy is that each citizen has an equal voice and that those voices, collectively, will be heard by government officials and will guide their actions. Knowing what the public is thinking and having public support are a powerful combination. Writing more than one hundred years ago, James Bryce, a famous observer of U.S. politics, contended that public opinion is “the greatest source of power” in the United States, more important than the power of presidents, Congress, and political parties. Perhaps no one appreciates the power of public opinion more keenly than former President George W. Bush (2001–2009).

The Power of Presidential Approval

George W. Bush came to office in 2001, following a contested election in which more than half the electorate had voted against him. However, following the terrorist attacks on September 11 of that year, the country rallied to his side. President Bush enjoyed the approval of 90 percent of the
public. No president had ever scored higher—not Ronald Reagan (1981–89), not John F. Kennedy (1961–63), not Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1933–45). With this unprecedented level of public support, Bush was able to get Congress to agree to nearly everything he wanted. It passed the Patriot Act, which expanded the powers of the federal government in the area of national security, and it approved his call for a new cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security.

When President Bush launched the Iraq War in March 2003, his approval rating was above 70 percent. Then it began to drift downward (see Figure 6.1). In 2004 he won reelection in a tight race, but the increasing unpopularity of the Iraq War undermined his support.

FIGURE 6.1 Approval Ratings of President George W. Bush, 2001–2009. President George W. Bush’s approval ratings went from an all-time high to an all-time low. Presidents’ approval ratings generally decline during their time in office, but Bush’s popularity was hard hit by an increasingly unpopular war in Iraq, an inadequate federal response to Hurricane Katrina, and a severe downturn in the economy.

Source: NBC/Wall Street Journal

approval rating: job performance evaluation for the president, Congress, or other public official or institution that is generated by public opinion polls and is typically reported as a percentage.
among the American people and his influence with Congress. Even on the heels of his successful reelection, he could not convince Congress to reform Social Security. Then the inadequate federal response to Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the Gulf Coast, further eroded Bush’s standing with the public. By 2007 Bush’s public approval rating hovered around 35 percent, and he faced a Democratic Congress—the consequence of the “thumping,” as he put it, that the Republicans took in the 2006 midterm elections.

In 2007, when the immigration reform bill he backed was defeated, President Bush visited Congress personally in an effort to revive the legislation, but even this unusual move had little effect. In fact, Bush was rebuked by his own party when Senator Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) stated that the president “needs to back off.” By the time of Barack Obama’s (2009–) election in November 2008, Bush’s approval stood in the mid-20s, and the CBS/New York Times poll suggested that he had become the most unpopular president since the start of scientific polling in the 1930s.

President Bush’s political roller coaster reveals the power of the public. The views of average citizens can humble the most experienced statesman and elevate a novice to great influence. The example of Bush is not unique. Harry S. Truman (1945–53) began his presidency with widespread support and left office with approval ratings around 30 percent. During 2009 President Obama started out with high ratings from the public; by the end of the year, his approval rating had sunk below 50 percent. Like Bush, Obama faced a struggling economy and an unpopular war—in this case in Afghanistan.

**What Is Public Opinion?**

Public opinion is recognized for its power, but it is ever changing, hard to measure, harder to predict, and nearly impossible to control. Public opinion is the aggregate of individual attitudes or beliefs about certain issues or officials, and it is the foundation of any democracy.

Of course, the electorate expresses its opinion primarily through voting, and elections are the most visible means by which citizens hold elected officials accountable. But a system that claims to be democratic should not rely just on elections to ensure that politicians are doing the people’s will. Elections are not held very often. Further, elections give signals, but not directions. For example, the electoral success of the Democrats in the 2006 midterm elections was hailed as a sign that the public was unhappy with the conduct of the Iraq War. But what should be done? Did the people want an immediate pullout? A slower disengagement? Election results do not say. Voters can indicate only whether they like one candidate more than the other; they cannot convey the reasons for their vote. So legislators and elected executives who want to stay in power expend considerable energy trying to find out what the public wishes and to respond accordingly. Because public opinion plays such an important role in forging responsiveness, it is central to understanding U.S. politics.

Today surveys of public opinion, or polls, are the most reliable indicators of what the public is thinking, and a whole industry and science have grown up around measuring opinion on everything from presidents to toothpaste. Polls are not the only sources of public opinion. In one recent Supreme Court case, the justices sought to gauge public opinion on what constituted “cruel and unusual punishment” by looking at laws passed by state legislatures (see Supreme Court Cases: *Roper v. Simmons*). Other sources of public opinion are the size of rallies and protests, the tone of letters sent to elected officials or newspapers, the amount

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**public opinion:** Aggregate of individual attitudes or beliefs about certain issues or officials.

**polls:** Methods for measuring public opinion.
Roper v. Simmons (2005)

**QUESTION:** Does the cruel and unusual punishment clause of the Constitution prevent states from executing people who were minors at the time of their crime?

**ORAL ARGUMENT:** October 13, 2004 (listen at http://www.oyez.org/cases/)

**DECISION:** March 1, 2005 (read at http://www.findlaw.com/CaseCode/supreme.html)

**OUTCOME:** States may not execute people who were minors at the time of their crimes (5–4).

While only 17 years of age, Christopher Simmons plotted a murder, believing he could get away with it because he was a minor. Simmons and another minor burglarized the house of Shirley Cook, tied her up, and threw her off a bridge into a river. A jury found Simmons guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced him to death. Simmons challenged the death sentence on the grounds that executing a person who is a minor at the time of the crime constitutes cruel and unusual punishment, which is prohibited by the Eighth Amendment.

U.S. Supreme Court decisions on the Eighth Amendment consider sentences to be cruel and unusual if they violate society's “evolving standards of decency.” This makes the Court's Eighth Amendment decisions, alone among constitutional clauses, explicitly dependent on public opinion.

The Court’s use of public opinion, however, is not based on public opinion polls but rather on the actions of the states’ democratically elected legislative branches. The Court assumes that the legislatures are responsive to the wishes of the people. They thus represent the “clearest and most reliable objective evidence of contemporary values.”

In 1989 the Supreme Court declared in a 5–4 decision that executing minors did not violate evolving standards of decency because twenty-five of the thirty-seven states that allowed the death penalty allowed the execution of 17-year-olds, and twenty-two of those states allowed the execution of 16-year-olds.

By the time the Simmons case reached the U.S. Supreme Court, the states had shifted away from the execution of minors, with four more state legislatures prohibiting the practice. Although recognizing that this change was not dramatic, it was enough to tip the Court majority against allowing the execution of minors.

Polls of public opinion, which the Court finds to be a less reliable indicator of public values than legislative decisions, show that a majority of Americans do in fact oppose the death penalty for those who were minors when they committed the crimes. Typically, the percentage of people opposed falls in the mid-50s, whereas the percentage of supporters is in the mid-30s.

- Which branch of government is most likely to be responsive to “evolving standards of decency”? Which would be least responsive? Why?
- Do different state standards on the death penalty violate democratic principles of equality? Explain.
of money given to particular causes or candidates, the content of newspaper editorials, and information gleaned from day-to-day conversations with average Americans.

The Public's Support of Government

The health and stability of a democracy rest with the public. Just as government must respond to what the people want, so citizens must view the system as legitimate and want to be part of it. If the public withdraws its support, the government collapses. For these reasons, political scientists have sought to measure the public's faith in the political system. Two of the most common efforts involve assessing whether the people trust their government and whether they believe their participation in government matters. Political scientists call the latter efficacy—the extent to which people believe their actions affect the course of government. Political trust is the extent to which people believe the government acts in their best interests. Political trust has generally declined over the last fifty years, with a steeper decline since the Iraq War began in 2003 and the financial collapse began in 2008. One estimate in February 2010 suggested that just 19 percent of the public trusted “the government in Washington to do what is right.” This is a very low rating by historical standards.

Efficacy has also declined. It stood at over 70 percent in 1960; by 1994 it had fallen by half. In other words, only one-third of Americans felt that their opinions mattered to government. The figure rebounded to 60 percent by 2002, but then declined again during the Iraq War and financial crisis. There is little doubt, as President Barack Obama said in his 2009 inaugural address, that there has been a “sapping of confidence across our land.”

Public trust and efficacy react to changes in government and whether the nation is experiencing good or bad times. Yet, through it all, Americans’ commitment to the country and its core institutions has remained strong. Patriotism, for example, shows little decline. In 2008 only 5 percent of Americans viewed themselves as unpatriotic. Almost no one in the country favors overthrowing the government.

Public Opinion Polls

Polls make it possible to gauge the public’s thinking on a variety of issues or officials, but they have been scientifically conducted only since the 1930s. Even today, a poorly designed or executed poll can produce misleading results. Moreover, there is so much information available from surveys that it is important to know which findings warrant attention and which warrant caution. Poll results can be biased, contradictory, and confusing, which is why Nate Silver’s clear assessments of them during the 2008 presidential race were so popular.

Gauging Public Opinion in the Past

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the contents of letters, the sizes of crowds at rallies, and people’s willingness to sign petitions were used to gauge public opinion. They were crude indicators. Politicians had to go to great lengths to secure information about the public mood. George Washington (1789–97) was so frustrated with not being able to sense what voters thought about his policies as president that he literally mounted his horse and rode into the countryside to talk to the people. Abraham Lincoln held public meetings at the White House “to renew in me a clearer and more vivid image of that great popular assemblage out of which I sprung,” he said, and he called these receptions his “public opinion baths.” President William
McKinley (1897–1901) had his staff clip newspaper articles and put the clippings in a folder at night so he could read them to gauge the public’s thinking. President Franklin Roosevelt also paid close attention to newspapers. And both Lincoln and Roosevelt, presidents in times of crisis, learned what the people thought through the many letters that citizens wrote to them. Even in the twenty-first century, citizens still write to the president. President Barack Obama receives about forty thousand letters a day, and his staff selects ten, which are delivered to him when he arrives at the Oval Office in the morning. He reads them, individually, throughout the day.

Yet none of these sources of “public sentiment,” as President Lincoln called it, gave very precise indicators. Lincoln once said that he wanted to “get done . . . what the people desire to have done,” but the problem was that he did not know what they desired. Because public opinion was so difficult to determine, there were many disagreements about its shape and direction. Moreover, because it was based on the content of newspapers and letters, on petitions, and on conversations with political observers, it was really elite opinion. In other words, the most activist and literate elements of society were defining public opinion. Those who could write letters, for example, and would take the time to do so were the ones whose voices were heard. Thus, whatever knowledge of public thinking politicians could garner was biased; it did not represent the people as a whole.

**Scientific Polling and the Growth of Survey Research**

In the 1800s newspapers and other organizations polled the people to assess public opinion, but these polls were of limited help because it was unclear who was being surveyed. So-called straw polls, for example, sought to predict the outcome of elections. During the presidential campaign of 1824, the *Harrisburg Pennsylvanian* canvassed the opinion of newspaper readers and concluded that Andrew Jackson would get 63 percent of the vote and win easily. As it turned out, Jackson received only about 40 percent of the popular vote.

Though straw polls were often inaccurate, newspapers and magazines continued to poll readers’ opinions well into the twentieth century. During the 1936 presidential campaign, the *Literary Digest* conducted a poll that predicted Republican Alf Landon would win the election by 57 percent over President Franklin Roosevelt. The reverse happened: Roosevelt won with a landslide 61 percent of the vote. Why did the *Literary Digest* get it so wrong? It had sent out 10 million ballots. But it had sent them to names drawn from automobile registration lists and telephone books and asked recipients to mail the ballots back. The sample, as a result, was biased. First, in 1936 those who owned automobiles and had telephones were wealthier than average Americans, and were more likely to be Republicans. Less wealthy Americans, responding favorably to Roosevelt’s actions to end the Great Depression, were increasingly aligning themselves with the Democrats. Second, the poll asked respondents to mail in their ballots, introducing additional bias. Those who would take the time to do so would likely be better off, further increasing the Republican bias of the sample. Even though 2 million ballots were returned, the poll did not offer a very sound basis on which to make a prediction.
But George Gallup, who had founded the American Institute of Public Opinion in 1935, correctly predicted the outcome of the 1936 election by using a random sample to generate a way to select people to participate in surveys. He made his sample representative of the American public by giving, in effect, every American an equal chance to be part of it. The end product was a sample of five thousand, which was far smaller than the Literary Digest’s sample but far more representative of average Americans. As a result of his innovative approach, Gallup is often considered the father of modern polling, and the best-known name in polling today remains the Gallup Poll. His scientific polling and survey research techniques have been refined over the years.

The advent of scientific polling made it possible to assess the opinions of the public with some degree of ease and accuracy. V. O. Key, a leading scholar of public opinion, described its impact this way: “In an earlier day public opinion seemed to be pictured as a mysterious vapor that emanated from the undifferentiated citizenry and in some ways or another enveloped the apparatus of government to bring it into conformity with the public will. These weird conceptions . . . passed out of style as the technique of the sample survey permitted the determination, with some accuracy, of the opinions within the population.”

Scientific polling also permitted greater equality in assessing public opinion, because the polls had the ability to tap the opinions of all Americans. George Gallup understood this aspect of polling—that scientific polls democratized the measurement of public opinion.

By the early 1940s the federal government began to see the value of survey research, too, and in October 1941 the U.S. Army conducted a survey to understand the opinions of enlisted men and officers. Today, the federal government continues to undertake a wide variety of polls, ranging from surveys about health issues to tapping the public’s thinking on the economy. Polls are undertaken by other organizations as well. After the end of World War II, the University of Michigan founded the Survey Research Center, now the academic center for all sorts of polling. By the 1960s John Kennedy was making use of pollsters, and both Lyndon Baines Johnson (1963–69) and Richard M. Nixon (1969–74) followed his lead. The news media also saw the value of information about the public’s thinking. By the 1980s all the major television networks had polling operations in conjunction with major newspapers or news services.
Today, Americans are regularly surveyed on a wide range of things other than politics. Polls ask about sexual practices, television viewing preferences, car purchases, and how often we go bowling. Because of extensive polling, we know what proportion of the nation believes in UFOs, what kind of soap people buy, and at what age children stop believing in Santa Claus. In December 2009 the Pew Research Center asked Americans whether they were paying more attention to golfer Tiger Woods’s marital infidelity, to President Obama’s decision to send more troops to Afghanistan, or to congressional legislation on health care reform. You may be relieved to learn that only 10 percent of respondents rated the Tiger Woods story as the one they followed most closely. A vast majority of the public was focusing on issues such as health care, the economy, and the war in Afghanistan.22

Types of Polls

In a nation of more than 200 million adults, gathering opinions from everyone is not practical. Even the U.S. census, a count of the population required by the Constitution every ten years, has trouble reaching every adult.23 So polls draw a sample from a larger population. But first the population must be defined. It might be all adults over age 18, or only voters, or only voters who contributed to Republican candidates in 2008.

The typical size of a sample survey is one thousand people, though it can vary between five hundred and about fifteen hundred. Size does not matter as much as whether the sample is representative of the population being assessed. Having a representative sample means, in effect, that everyone in that population has an equal chance of being asked to participate in the poll. If a random one thousand people are asked to be part of the survey, they should be representative of the population generally—in, say, wealth, ethnicity, or educational attainment. The key to a representative sample is the randomness. It should be much like drawing numbered balls for a lottery: each ball has the same chance of being chosen.

There are various ways to collect the information being sought. For in-person interviews, survey researchers send interviewers into neighborhoods and communities to ask questions in person. This was long the favored method, but it became increasingly expensive. With the near universal presence of telephones by the 1970s, calling people became a more viable and much less expensive option. Telephone polls have dominated survey research over the last thirty years and continue to be used much of the time. The latest platform for polling is the Internet. Internet polls have much potential, but the fact that older and poorer Americans may lack access to computers introduces bias. As with telephones in the past century, however, more and more people are using computers and the web, so in the future Internet polling will likely become the dominant platform for survey research.

Call-in polls or write-in polls are other means of securing a sample. For the former, a telephone number is posted on the television screen, for example, and people are asked to call to register their views. In the latter, a newspaper publishes an appeal for subscribers to write letters offering their opinions. Such approaches can yield a large number of participants, but the size of the sample can be misleading, for those who are willing to call or write are different.
from those who are not. The samples yielded in these polls are not representative and, thus, are highly suspect.

Consider the following example of a call-in poll. The Miss America Beauty Pageant had long used a swimsuit competition to help decide who would win the much-coveted crown. However, critics demanded the elimination of the swimsuit segment because they believed it exploited women as sexual objects. Yet those who ran the contest knew that the swimsuit competition was very popular. The managers of the pageant decided to “let the public decide” by having a call-in poll asking whether the swimsuit competition should continue. The results were “clear”: 87 percent voted to retain the swimsuit portion. But did the public really speak here? Because the telephone number was posted only during the airing of the pageant, the respondents were people already watching the pageant and therefore were likely to be favorable to it. Those opposed to the swimsuit segment were more likely to be doing something else.

Presidential elections are awash in polls. In the heat of the fall campaign, nightly polls gauge changes in voters’ preferences for the major contenders. These surveys are called *tracking polls*. Another type of survey involving elections is the *exit poll*, conducted as voters leave the polling booth. The goal here is to learn about the reasoning behind the votes citizens just cast, but, more important, to predict the outcome of the election before all the ballots are formally counted.

The most famous and consequential exit poll took place in Florida during the 2000 presidential elections, fueling one of the most controversial electoral struggles of all time. The major networks used an exit poll to predict that the Sunshine State would go to Vice
President Albert Gore Jr. (1993–2001). Florida’s electoral votes would put Gore over the 270 needed, making him the apparent winner of the presidency. These predictions started to roll in at 8 P.M. on election night. The campaign of Republican George W. Bush protested, saying it was too early to call the state and that the race was still too close to know who won. By 10 P.M. the earlier forecast was withdrawn, and the outcome of the presidential election was again unclear. By 2 A.M. the next morning, Fox News called the election for Bush, with the other major networks soon following. Just two hours later, however, the call was retracted. There followed a long battle over which candidate actually won in Florida. It was not settled until the U.S. Supreme Court halted the Florida recount, giving Bush the presidency.

Many have wanted to blame exit polls for the confusion that election night, but the polls were not as big a problem as the news media’s use of them. The networks feel real pressure to make early calls, and that pressure sometimes leads them to go beyond what the data support. So while CBS was making that first call around 8 P.M., its polling experts behind the scene were urging caution.25

A final kind of election poll is actually a campaign strategy. **Push polls** are conducted by interest groups or candidates who try to affect the opinions of respondents by priming them with biased information. During the 2000 presidential primary in South Carolina, for example, Arizona Senator John McCain claimed that George W. Bush ran a push poll against him. Interviewers had called people to ask if they knew that McCain was a “cheat” and a “liar.” The question was not designed to get information but to turn people against McCain.26 Such polls seek to shift public opinion, not to measure it.

### Error in Polls

Pollsters do everything they can to ensure that their samples are representative. Even if the sample is drawn properly, however, there is still a chance of error. To capture this uncertainty, all poll numbers come with a **confidence interval** that captures the likely range 95 percent of the time. The poll produces a single estimate of the public’s thinking, but the best way to think of that estimate is as a range of possible estimates. For a sample of six hundred respondents, the **sampling error** is about 4 percent. That 4 percent generates the confidence interval. Assume, for example, that 65 percent of those sampled support the efforts of Congress to reform the campaign finance laws. With a sampling error of 4 percent, the best way to think of the proportion is that, with 95 percent certainty, the actual amount of public support is somewhere between 61 percent and 69 percent. This range is the confidence interval. Note, however, that there is still a one in twenty chance (5 percent) that the true proportion is above or below that 8-point confidence interval. Hence, caution is always required when interpreting poll data.

In addition to sampling error, the wording of the question can introduce error. The controversial issue of abortion offers a vivid example. What the public thinks about this issue depends a great deal on the way the question is asked. In November 2003 an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll asked a representative sample of Americans the following question: “Which of the following best represents your views about abortion—the choice on abortion should be left up to the woman and her doctor, abortion should be legal only in cases which pregnancy results from rape or incest or when the life of the woman is at risk, or abortion should be illegal in all circumstances?”
The answers show that 53 percent of the public felt that abortion was a decision best left to the woman and her doctor. Only 15 percent of Americans felt it should be illegal in all circumstances, with 29 percent wanting to have exceptions. In short, a majority of the public appeared to support abortion rights for women. That is an important finding.

But is it true? Consider the following question asked earlier that year, in July, by Fox News/Opinion Dynamics: “Once a woman is pregnant, do you believe the unborn baby or fetus should have all the same rights as a newborn baby?” The answers tell a different story. Nearly 60 percent of the public said yes, the unborn fetus should have the same rights as a newborn baby. Only 26 percent said no. According to this poll, a strong majority wants to protect the rights of the unborn and, therefore, to limit abortion rights for women.

So what is American public opinion on abortion? Clearly, the answer depends on the wording of the question, specifically on whether respondents are asked to focus on the rights of women or the rights of the unborn. This same dynamic applies to other controversial issues, such as attitudes toward homosexuality and race. Because of America’s long and tortured history of race relations, people often try to give socially acceptable responses so as to suggest they are tolerant and not bigots or racists. Although interviewers are trained to be neutral in their questioning, respondents sometimes try to give responses that they think the questioner wants to hear. Another source of error in polls involves what political scientists call nonattitudes. When asked, many people feel compelled to answer, even if they do not have opinions or know much about the question. They do not want to seem uninformed, but their responses create error in the survey.

The Future of Polls

Despite all the concerns about potential errors in polls, surveys are powerful tools, and pollsters learn from their mistakes. If done correctly, surveys open a valuable window on the public’s thinking. Even in the controversial election of 2000, the Zogby organization predicted the outcome for each state accurately. In 2004 the polls were again accurate, correctly anticipating a narrow win by President George W. Bush over Massachusetts Senator John Kerry. An average of the nine national polls conducted just before the 2008 elections predicted that Obama would win with 52 percent. The actual vote was 52.9 percent, suggesting once again that surveys remain good indicators of the public’s thinking.

Today polling is facing a transition. Representative sampling in telephone surveys is increasingly affected by the growing number of cell phones, as many pollsters do not have access to cell phone exchanges and many cell phone users, especially young people, do not have landlines, which are used in telephone polls. At this point, there is not a lot of evidence to suggest that people without landlines vote differently from those with them, but the shift from landlines to cell phones continues. Perhaps more important is the widespread use of caller ID and answering machines. In 2003 half of the public had answering machines at home, which means that increasing numbers of Americans can screen their calls and refuse to participate in surveys. In fact, there is a general “polling fatigue” among the public. People are asked to participate not only in political polls but also in surveys for insurance companies, health care providers, and an endless array of products. Automobile dealers call customers to see if they are satisfied with their most recent visit; banks make similar calls. The result is that fewer people are willing to participate in telephone surveys. The declining
response rate is lessening the ability of pollsters to capture public opinion accurately. In the 1990s the rate of response was nearly 40 percent, and now it is about 25 percent.29

With telephone surveys in trouble, Internet polls represent the future for measuring public opinion. Through the Internet, polls can be done quickly and cheaply, but respondents may not be representative of the population. Once statisticians develop reliable ways to correct for bias, the web will become an even more powerful tool than it is now to measure the public's thinking. As more people gain access to the web, the amount of bias will decline. Such trends suggest that the future of survey research lies with the Internet.

What Drives Public Opinion?

Where does public opinion come from? If it is the aggregate of citizen attitudes and beliefs, it starts with individuals. In this section, we examine the major forces that shape political thinking on a personal level, including the social and political environment in which one grows up and the generation and family into which one is born. Self-interest also affects political attitudes, as do the ideas of opinion leaders such as journalists, political observers, policy makers, and experts.

Social and Political Environment

Political attitudes are shaped by environment—the kind of place one grows up in and lives in. Someone who grew up in a small town in Alabama centered around the local Baptist church would be influenced by that setting, and would be different from someone who grew up in, say, Seattle, Washington, in a family that was not religious. Attendance at a suburban private high school would yield differing influences than attendance at an urban public school. Each of us is a product of our family, friends, and community. We call the process by which our attitudes are shaped socialization.

The way we live our lives, the kinds of foods we eat, the types of vacations we enjoy, and the houses of worship we attend—all shape how we are socialized. Our political attitudes are no different. The clearest embodiment of political socialization is partisanship, and evidence shows that parents pass their partisan views along to their children. If parents are Democrats, there is a two-thirds chance that their children will identify themselves as Democrats. They might identify as Independents, but there is just a 10 percent chance they will be Republicans. The impact of socialization depends, of course, on whether the parents identify with the same party. If the parents are split on partisanship, the chance of the children being Independents rises considerably.30

High divorce rates have changed family structure in recent years, but there is no evidence that they have interfered with the passing along of political values, even when children are exposed to many more potential influences. Recent research concludes that “despite [the] transformation in the political environment and the character of family life over the last thirty years, our findings about youth coming of age in the 1990s strongly parallel those based on youth socialization in the 1960s.”31

response rate: Proportion of the public that responds to inquiries from pollsters to participate in surveys.

socialization: Impact and influence of one's social environment on the views and attitudes one carries in life, a primary source of political attitudes.

Independents: Individuals who do not affiliate with either of the major political parties.
It may be that political values are passed on in families by genes as well as by socialization. Recent research offers some tantalizing hints that genetics may shape political views. Political scientists have been slow to embrace the possibility, but it warrants close consideration. That some people are more outgoing and more willing to build social networks appears to have a basis in one’s genes. If so, such a tendency could explain a willingness to become involved in politics, and it may even shape political views. Studies of twins are particularly revealing. Data collected from sets of twins indicate that identical twins, who share their entire genetic code, expressed more similar political attitudes than did fraternal twins, who are no more similar than any set of siblings. Such data are not conclusive, but they are suggestive. Admittedly, some political attitudes are less likely to have a genetic component, and partisanship appears to be shaped by family and friends. But ideological leanings—whether one is more or less open to change—may be shaped in part by genetics. This new area of research offers fascinating possibilities for understanding the sources of public opinion.

Whether through family socialization or genes, parents have the biggest impact during a child’s early life, but starting in the teenage years, friends also influence attitudes and behavior, as do schools and communities. Communities that are homogeneous, in which most people share many of the same views and opinions, are likely to reinforce the attitudes of parents. Colleges, too, influence attitudes, and college attendance often offers students a chance to break out of the homogeneous settings of their early years. Students meet people from different states or communities, people with different backgrounds and attitudes. College classes and experiences can also shape political leanings.

Socialization does not end at college graduation. It continues as young people pursue careers and choose where and how they will live. Consider people who live in San Francisco versus those who live in Dallas. Those different environments will surely have different effects on residents. Of course, those who choose to live in San Francisco may have different attitudes to begin with from those who move to Texas.

**Generational Effects**

Major events can change an entire generation’s thinking about politics. The Great Depression, for example, which started in 1929 with the crash of the stock market, shaped the attitudes of millions of Americans. It was an economic calamity that even the severe economic downturn of 2008–2009 did not match. Millions lost their savings and their homes. In 1932 one of every four Americans was out of work, and incomes had declined by 50 percent. One consequence was that the public blamed the party in power, the Republicans, and switched party allegiance. The Democrats, as a result, became the majority party for the first time in generations.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were another defining event that caused Americans to change their views, this time on national security. Quite suddenly, many were willing to give up some personal freedom to reduce the threat of terrorism (see Figure 6.2). Severe events, such as the Great Depression and the terrorist attacks, can have long-term effects on public opinion, especially if the generation that experienced them most acutely reacts as a bloc.

**Generational effects** need not be limited to life-altering events, however. They can also be affected by the era in which one is young and first active as a citizen. Those who were young during the term of Republican President Ronald Reagan are likely to think of politics differently than those who are young during the term of Democratic President Barack Obama. The former
will naturally think more favorably about Republicans, the latter more favorably about Democrats. Exit polls from 2008 indicated that 66 percent of all 18- to 29-year-old voters supported Obama. By historical standards, this level of support was quite high. Although it remains to be seen whether being a member of what may be called the “Obama generation” will have an enduring effect on partisan identification and politics, America’s Millennial generation does seem distinctive. Millennials seem to be more trusting of government than previous generations. There is also evidence to suggest that this group is less religious than previous generations.37

Self-Interest and Rationality

Forming political opinion is much more than just a psychological process tied to socialization, however. People also respond to the context in which they find themselves. That is, to a certain extent people are “rational” in that they act in a way that is consistent with their self-interest. For example, as income rises, the chance of someone being a Republican increases. Why? The Republicans have pursued tax policies that protect individual wealth, while the Democrats pursue tax policies that tax the wealthy at higher rates to pay for social programs that benefit the less wealthy. In fact, one could argue that although the transmission of partisanship reflects socialization, the reason it sticks is that it is in one’s self-interest.

Examples of rationality and self-interest abound. Couples with school-age children get interested in education policy. Homeowners become more focused on issues tied to property taxes than do individuals who rent. As citizens approach retirement age, they become protective of Social Security and Medicare benefits. Recently young people, too, have been concerned about these benefits, but in ways that reflect their self-interest. They wonder if the entitlement programs will be bankrupt before they are of age to receive the benefits, and they have engaged in the debate about whether the federal government should privatize Social Security, allowing people to invest the Social Security taxes they pay while they are working directly in the stock market. The prospect seems attractive when the market is doing well, but when it fluctuates and falls, there is evidence that citizens “update their opinions about Social Security reform . . . particularly when movements in the markets remind citizens of the risks inherent in investing.” Such evidence suggests the public is rational and that people act in ways consistent with their self-interest.

Self-interest clearly shapes political attitudes, but that does not mean that people are selfish. It means that they are trying to advance and protect their own interests, and that in itself is encouraging. Since a democracy rests on the sound judgments of the electorate, it is good to know that there is some evidence that citizens act rationally.

Elites

One of the big questions in the field of public opinion is what role elites—leaders of opinion—play in shaping citizens’ thinking. A democracy is supposed to be a system in which the average person has a say in government and the people’s preferences drive public policy. Yet some people

FIGURE 6.2 Shift in Public Opinion following the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, are likely to have a long-term effect on public opinion. The graph shows before-and-after responses to the question about being willing to give up personal freedom. When the question was asked in May 2006, 56 percent answered yes, a 17-point decline from October 2001, but still well above the levels registered before September 11. Source: Fox News/Opinion Dynamic Poll, October 2001, May 2001, and May 2006

self-interest: Concern for one’s own advantage and well-being.

rationality: Acting in a way that is consistent with one’s self-interest.

What are the sources of public opinion?

elites: Group of people who may lead public opinion, such as journalists, politicians, and policy makers.

WHAT DRIVES PUBLIC OPINION? 17
worry that experts, policy makers, political observers, journalists, and others in the news media have an undue influence in shaping public opinion. If elites shape public opinion, can the United States be a democratic nation? One way to approach the question of what political scientists call elite theory is to recognize, first, that it is not so simple a matter as elites offering an opinion and the public swallowing it. That assumption attributes far too much influence to elites and far too little credit to the people. Instead, it appears that elites can influence citizens if two conditions are met: first, citizens must be exposed to the message, and, second, they must be open to it.

Let’s assume that scientists find strong evidence that homosexuality is genetic. That means sexual orientation may well be fixed, just as eye color is fixed. If true, the public’s attitudes toward homosexuality would surely change, as it is harder to justify discrimination against homosexuals if sexual orientation is an inborn characteristic. Yet some citizens, when learning this new information, would be resistant to the idea due to their moral beliefs. Social conservatives, for example, would on average be far less likely than social liberals to accept this information. The prior beliefs of social conservatives would serve as a check on accepting it. By comparison, social liberals would have preexisting views that would fit better with the new information. They would be open to it.

This theory of who changes opinions and who does not has a number of implications. First, massive change in public opinion is not likely because the public is not made up of puppets. Second, elites’ ability to change public opinion is a product of the intensity and consistency of the message. Disagreement among elites on a new issue will decrease the potential for change. The public, for example, remained divided on global warming in the 1990s. Liberals were more willing to believe that climate change was caused by human activity. Conservatives had more doubts. As the scientific evidence mounted and more elites embraced the notion, however, the public began to shift its thinking. In 1997, 60 percent of the public felt that more research about global warming was needed to be sure of its effects, and only 28 percent felt that it was a serious problem. Ten years later, only 25 percent felt that more research was needed, and 64 percent felt that action needed to be taken to deal with climate change.

Elites do influence public opinion, but they are not members of a monolithic group seeking to advance its own interests; in fact, elites often disagree among themselves. When there is agreement among elites, however, that is probably a sign of the merits of the idea. Second, people respond only to ideas that they find appealing and that fit with their own values and opinions. As a model for how people change opinions in response to events, acting out of both self-interest and rationality, we can look at how Americans are viewed by others (see Other Places: The Rise and Fall of Anti-Americanism).

**The Shape of Public Opinion**

To understand public opinion, it is essential to appreciate the ways it is shaped by partisanship and ideology. These two variables can, to a large extent, explain the opinions of citizens. Although not everyone is partisan or ideological, these forces provide useful frameworks for understanding the public’s thinking on issues. With a firm understanding of partisanship and ideology in place, we can address two major questions about public opinion: How informed is the public? And is the public polarized?
The Rise and Fall of Anti-Americanism

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the world rallied to support the United States. There was an outpouring of good will and cooperation. More than forty countries joined the United States in providing military assistance to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban, hoping to root out a major source of terrorism. But this support started to erode as the United States deemphasized cooperation to pursue independent policies. The U.S. attack on Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent war caused global public opinion to turn against the United States. The figure below shows a downward trend in the image of the United States held by four democracies. Israel’s image of the United States remains stable, reflecting long-standing ties.

This trend is now reversing itself. The election of Barack Obama was hailed across much of the world and has signaled a new tone of cooperation. As a result, the U.S. image abroad has begun to improve. In Europe, there has been an across-the-board upturn. Between 2008 and 2009 ratings from the United Kingdom increased from a little over 50 percent to nearly 70 percent. Ratings from Germany doubled—from about 30 percent to over 60 percent. The same is true for countries in other parts of the world, such as Indonesia and Nigeria. Ratings in India increased from 60 percent to 75 percent.

The rise and the fall of anti-Americanism are not unusual. Anti-Americanism has generally increased when the United States has been at war, as it did also during the Vietnam War. Each time that America has fallen out of favor, there has also been a rebound. Public opinion around the world is a product of self-interest and rationality.

- How closely does the world’s opinion of the United States coordinate with what Americans think about their country?
- Should American government be responsive to world opinion?

**PARTISANSHIP**

**Party identification**, or partisanship, is central to understanding how people think politically. Party identification represents an individual’s allegiance to a political party. This psychological attachment usually forms when an individual is young. The attachment, through what is called the **perceptual lens**, shapes the way partisans view the political world and process information. The perceptual lenses of partisans act like prisms that bend light. Democrats have prisms that bend light in one direction; Republicans’ prisms bend it in another direction. The result, for example, is that a Republican would be slower to turn against the Iraq War, initiated by a Republican president, than would a Democrat. Conversely, a Republican would be less sympathetic to Barack Obama’s reform of health care than would a Democrat.  

By knowing party identification, political scientists can predict—with considerable accuracy—attitudes on a range of issues. Republicans, for example, are less likely than Democrats to support government spending to help the poor and elderly. Republicans are not opposed to helping such people, but they want to do so through private charities and individual initiative. More generally, Republicans are less supportive of an activist federal government, while Democrats are more open to giving government an active role in the lives of citizens.

An easy indicator of the power of partisanship is the public’s approval of President Barack Obama. In February 2010 about 53 percent of Americans approved of the job Obama was doing as president, but that proportion hides a much more powerful finding about partisanship. Among Democrats, around 80 percent approved of his performance in the Oval Office. By contrast, just over 20 percent of Republicans supported the president—a gap of 60 percentage points. President George W. Bush experienced the same kind of gap in public opinion, with Republicans approving of his performance at far higher rates than Democrats.

Although partisanship shapes how an individual thinks about politics, it can subside in times of national crisis. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Americans put aside partisan differences. In late September 2001 over 98 percent of Republicans and more than 80 percent (up from 25 percent) of Democrats approved of the job President Bush was doing. Partisanship returned the next year, however, with the 2002 midterm elections.

Because party identification is central to understanding public opinion, pollsters have been asking about partisanship since the 1940s. The American National Elections Studies, a premier academic survey organization, has been asking the same question since 1952: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” This question asks respondents how they think about themselves in order to capture political identification and the general tendency, or the perceptual lens, of their thinking. The theoretical underpinnings are psychological. Partisanship can also be likened to loyalty, like the loyalty to sports teams or to friends that lasts through ups and downs. Partisanship can change over a person’s life, but it tends to be stable, especially when compared to other political attitudes.

In the last few years, there has been much discussion in the press about Independents, with claims that they are the “largest group in the electorate.” With the rise of the so-called Tea Party movement, their numbers are increasing. The view that Americans are mostly Independents is, however, a myth. It is true that many citizens claim to be Independents, but they actually behave like partisans. That is, most Independents lean toward one party or the other. Figure 6.3 charts changes in the share of “pure Independents” as contrasted with “Independent leaners” since the 1950s. The number of those of the pure variety has been pretty much...
THE SHAPE OF PUBLIC OPINION

flat during these six decades. The growth has been in the leaners, and that growth has been substantial. But such individuals vote consistently for one party and are very much partisans, despite self-professed labels. Their behavior is testimony to the strength of partisanship in the United States.

Ideaology

Political ideology has a complex relationship with partisanship. Liberals tend to be Democrats, and conservatives tend to be Republicans, but ideology speaks to both political and social values. Conservatives view a good society as one that allows individuals to pursue their economic interests in an unfettered fashion. Liberals worry that, without some governmental regulation to curb abuse and moderate economic cycles, the rich will get very rich and the poor will get very poor. This concern leads liberals to believe that government can improve people’s lives and prevent inequalities that harm society and the economy as a whole. Conservatives are much more leery of government and view it as a problem in and of itself. They contend that less government interference will give the poor the opportunity to improve their lives by themselves. On social issues, the tables are turned. That is, liberals tend to believe that people should be able to make personal choices free from government interference. Conservatives, by contrast, value more traditional lifestyles and want government, at times, to enforce such choices.

Not all citizens think of themselves as liberals or conservatives. Depending on the wording of the question, about 40 percent of Americans views themselves as ideological moderates, about 25 percent as liberals, and the remaining 35 percent as conservatives.49 But there is also a debate among political scientists about whether citizens think ideologically at all. That is, do people have coherent views about politics? One famous effort to measure the ideological foundations, or levels of conceptualization, of the public’s thinking found little evidence of such organized opinions. Data from the 1950s indicated that only about 12 percent of the public viewed the political parties in ideological terms, whereas over 40 percent judged the parties by the groups (such as social classes or racial and ethnic groups) they were thought to represent rather than the policies they pursued. About 25 percent evaluated the parties by “the nature of the times”: Is the economy doing well? Are we embroiled in a war? The remainder—just over 20 percent—did not think about issues at all when evaluating the parties and candidates; this part of the public showed “no issue content.”48

Over the last fifty years, there have been some changes in the sizes of these four groups, but not major ones. Using data from 2000, about 20 percent of citizens can be thought of as political ideology: Set of consistent political beliefs. liberals: Individuals who have faith in government to improve people’s lives, believing that private efforts are insufficient. In the social sphere, liberals usually support diverse lifestyles and tend to oppose any government action that seeks to shape personal choices. conservatives: Individuals who distrust government, believing that private efforts are more likely to improve people’s lives. In the social sphere, conservatives usually support traditional lifestyles and tend to believe that government can play a valuable role in shaping personal choices. moderates: Individuals who are in the middle of the ideological spectrum and do not hold consistently strong views about whether government should be involved in people’s lives. levels of conceptualization: Measure of how ideologically coherent individuals are in their political evaluations.
being ideological thinkers, 28 percent focus on groups, another 28 percent is driven by the nature of the times, and 24 percent have no issue content in their political thinking.⁴⁹ From this evidence, it would be hard to argue that even a majority of the public has a coherent, ideologically driven view of politics.

Nevertheless, it is still worth looking at the public’s ideological mood. Is the public, collectively, becoming more liberal or more conservative? Such changes should aid understanding of the general direction of the country. Figure 6.4 maps changes in the public’s ideological thinking between 1937 and 2009.

This seventy-year time period reveals some interesting trends. The liberal nature of public opinion was apparent between 1937 and 1964—an era dominated by the Democrats. In the mid-1960s, with the unpopularity of the Vietnam War and growing concerns about civil rights, crime, and excessive government involvement in the economy, conservatism grew—and grew quickly. The pattern since the 1960s has been back and forth, with liberalism on the rise of late. Even with the recent gains, however, the share of liberals in the population generally is still far less than in the time of Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John Kennedy.

**Is the Public Informed?**

A democracy depends on having an engaged and well-informed electorate. Otherwise, how can the public make good choices? If the power is to rest with the people, the people need to be knowledgeable about the issues of the day and the candidates who compete for public office.

The Framers were definitely concerned about the public’s capacity to be informed and make good choices, especially because only 10 percent of Americans at the time were literate.⁵⁰ These concerns were one of the driving forces behind the gates and gateways in the Constitution, a document that sought to represent the public’s views but also to establish institutions that would, according to James Madison, “refine and enlarge” them (see *Federalist* 10 in the Appendix). By that Madison meant that elected officials would react to

![Figure 6.4 Liberal Self-Identification, 1937–2009](image_url)
public sentiment, but not be a slave to it. Instead, they would debate it in a way that would improve it and allow for better government. Over time, the amount of input by citizens has increased; now senators are voted into office by direct election, not by state legislatures. Literacy in 2010 stands at about 99 percent, suggesting that citizens are better able today than in the eighteenth century to meet the demands of being “informed.”

But are they? When survey research began in the 1940s, it became possible to gather systematic information on the public’s knowledge about politics. The early evidence was not encouraging. In a detailed study of the 1940 presidential campaign, scholars from Columbia University assumed that voters were like consumers and would look for the best deal, and that the campaign would be an important source of information as they made their choices. But the data told a different tale. Instead, most voters made up their minds before the campaign, and their choices were driven by where they lived and whom they knew. In a subsequent study, the Columbia researchers went so far as to argue that low turnout in elections might actually be a good thing, because the uninformed would not be choosing the nation’s leaders. This argument has strong elitist overtones and certainly strays far from the assumptions about government responsiveness and citizen equality on which American democracy rests. Together with previous findings about levels of conceptualization, the argument suggested that the public may not be capable of meeting its democratic responsibilities. What ensued was a debate over the accuracy and interpretation of these core findings.

Political scientists went, in effect, in search of the “informed voter,” and they learned that citizens do not know many details about politics. Only 10 percent of the public knows the name of the Speaker of the House. Only about a third can name one U.S. Supreme Court justice. Only about half of Americans know which party controls Congress, and fewer than half know the name of their own congressional representative. These facts suggest that average citizens do not possess the detailed information necessary to hold their government accountable.

Should these data be taken as evidence that the public is not able to meet its democratic responsibilities? Let us consider some findings that give reason for optimism. First, the public, collectively, seems to make reasonable choices. For example, when the economy is doing poorly, the party in power suffers. Voters hold presidents and legislators accountable; failures are punished and successes are rewarded. Further, American people do not favor war, and they reward candidates who pursue peace.

Second, although individuals do not know all the details about candidates’ views on all the issues, they do tend to know candidates’ views on the issues that are salient to them. Hunters know candidates’ views on gun control; college students know candidates’ views on student loans. One study estimates that when an issue is salient to an individual, that individual knows candidates’ views on that issue correctly more than 90 percent of the time.
Third, the public can learn quickly if an issue is salient enough to them and receives attention in the news media. The public quickly learned about AIDS when it started to become a public health crisis in the 1980s. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the public understood the need to consider some curtailment of civil liberties to ensure security.

Fourth, public opinion is more stable than is suggested by the shifting answers people give to the same question just a few months apart. The instability reflected in polls does not speak to a fickle or poorly informed public. Instead, it appears that polls themselves may be at fault. That is, survey questions and the normal error associated with these questions make people's attitudes appear more unstable than they really are. Further, most issues are complex and leave many people genuinely conflicted. Being conflicted is not a sign of lack of information, but perhaps a realization that some problems are thorny and not easily answered. The following is one example:

Vincent Sartori cannot decide whether or not the government should guarantee incomes, because he cannot decide how much weight to give the value of productivity. He believes that the rich are mostly undeserving and . . . yet he is angry at “welfare cheats” who refuse to work. . . . Caught between his desire for equality and his knowledge of existing injustice, on the one hand, and his fear that a guaranteed income will benefit even shirkers, on the other, he remains ambivalent about policies toward the poor.

So Sartori could easily give different answers to the same survey question, depending on what he is thinking about at the time. But different answers say more about the issue's complexity than about his inability to make up his mind.

Fifth and finally, personal decision making is not always based on complete information, so why should political decision making be expected to conform to rational models that scholars use? Individuals often rely on cues and instincts to make decisions, rather than on analyses of detailed information. Scholars have termed such thinking low information rationality. There are two famous examples from presidential campaigns. In 1976, President Gerald R. Ford (1974–77), campaigning in Texas, bit into a tamale with the husk still on, a gaffe suggesting that he knew little about the foods and habits of the people he hoped would vote for him. In 1992, President George H. W. Bush (1989–93) asked what milk cost in grocery stores. His admission that he did not know suggested that he was out of touch with ordinary Americans, who do their own shopping. His competitor, William J. Clinton, knew the price of milk and other items, such as jeans. Simple things like not knowing how to eat a tamale or what groceries cost turned some voters against Ford and Bush. These individuals concluded that the candidates were not like them and were not likely to understand their problems. Small bits of information can be informative.

It is easy to make any member of the public—even a president!—look uninformed, and of course it would be better if the public knew more about politics. But individuals do appear to learn about the issues that matter to them. Gaining information is a gateway to influence because, individually, people learn what they need to know to advance their interests, and collectively voters do hold government officials accountable.
Is the Public Polarized?

The engaged and informed citizens of a democracy cannot be expected to agree on everything. They will naturally have different views on issues. When the differences become stark, however, the danger is that **polarization** will fuel controversy and personal attacks to the point that compromise and consensus become impossible. Congress has clearly become more polarized over the last thirty years. Figure 6.5 tries to capture the idea of polarization on a simple left–right continuum. In the 1970s the parties adopted positions that were closer to the middle; thirty years later, their positions are more at the extremes. In fact, Democrats and Republicans disagree on more issues now than at any time since the end of the Civil War.61

In the 1970s there were numerous liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats. By 2008 these two groups were nearly extinct. In 2009, for example, Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter, one of the few moderate Republicans left in Congress, bolted the Republican Party and became a Democrat. He switched parties because of what he saw as a swing to the right by the Republicans. The differences between the parties have grown.62 What is less clear is whether the public, too, is polarized.

Some scholars have argued that the public has polarized along with parties, but there is also evidence that the public is more moderate, even though the choices the parties offer them are not.63 For example, according to a series of surveys conducted by the Pew Center between 1987 and 2007, “the average difference between Republican and Democratic identifiers on forty political and social issues increased from 10 to 14 percent, a surprisingly small difference.”64 These data suggest that the public is more moderate than the choices that are laid before them in elections would suggest.65

Many observers worry that one effect of polarization will be more personal attacks on political figures and greater incivility in politics. Others argue, however, that increasing polarization indicates that people’s interest in elections has increased and that they care more about who wins. In fact, the share of the public that cares about which party wins the presidential election has increased since 1988. Interest in elections, generally, also seems to be on the rise. In 1988, 44 percent of the public paid “a lot” of attention to the presidential campaign. In 2000, the proportion stood at 53 percent, a notable gain. By 2008, the percentage was a whopping 72 percent.66 The 2008 increase surely reflects the response to the candidacy of Barack Obama, but it is also true that the differences between the candidates in recent elections have been stark enough to prompt lots of interest.

Having a clear choice engages people and gives them a stake in an election outcome. If the system became **depolarized** (see Figure 6.5), the public would lack a

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**FIGURE 6.5 Political Polarization in the United States.** When the parties are polarized they move toward the tail of these distributions. When parties are **depolarized** they adopt positions near each other. Currently the parties are polarized, but that was not the case in the 1970s.

*Source: The authors*

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**polarization**: Condition in which differences between parties and/or the public are so stark that disagreement breaks out, fueling attacks and controversy.

**depolarized**: Political system in which the parties adopt the same positions on issues and choice is limited, leading citizens to feel less compelled to participate in elections.
choice. It would no longer matter whether Democrats or Republicans won, because they would do the same thing once in office. For these reasons, many scholars in the 1950s called for responsible parties that would offer the public a real choice. Citizens, under such conditions, can more effectively hold officials accountable for misdeeds and reward successes.

Group Differences

Public opinion is shaped by partisanship and ideology. Social scientists find that demographics also matter—that is, the tendency for certain groups within the American population to hold similar views. These breakdowns by group are the microfoundations of public opinion. In this section, we look at the ways that socioeconomic status, religion, gender, race and ethnicity, and education tend to organize public opinion.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status is a combined measure of occupation, education, income, wealth, and relative social standing or lifestyle. It influences where one lives, what kind of work one does, whom one knows, the kinds of schools one attends, and the kind of opportunities one can take advantage of. These matters inevitably mold political attitudes. Working-class people are more likely than wealthier people to favor more government programs to help the poor and provide child care, more funding for public education, and more protection for Social Security. In 2004, 70 percent of Americans earning between $15,000 and $35,000 supported spending by government on such social services. Among those earning between $75,000 and $105,000, the proportion drops to about 55 percent.67

Part of the reason for the strong differences in opinion among different income groups is that political parties have a class bias. Republicans draw far more support from those who come from higher socioeconomic status than do Democrats. Starting in the 1980s, however, Republicans also began to draw support from working-class people who supported a conservative social agenda and a decreased role for government in the economy. These so-called Reagan Democrats were central to Republican success in the ensuing decades.

Age

Age also influences opinions on issues, because the stage of one’s life affects how one thinks about issues. For instance, 70 percent of people under 30 years of age favor increased spending on student loans. That drops to 42 percent among those over 55. This gap makes sense because younger people are more likely to need student loans. Younger people are much more likely to favor making marijuana legal than older people. Those under 30 also are more supportive of gay marriage than people over 55. In general, older citizens are more socially conservative than younger citizens,68 and there is evidence that people tend to become more conservative as they age.
Religion

Religious affiliation is another indicator of opinion. Overall, for example, Protestants are more conservative than Catholics or Jews. Only 12 percent of Jews describe themselves as conservative, compared to 36 percent of Protestants. On some issues, Muslims have been found to be more liberal than the general population and significantly more liberal than Protestants and Catholics. For example, 70 percent of Muslims favor an activist government, whereas just 43 percent of the public as a whole subscribes to that view. On social issues, however, Muslims show a much more conservative tendency. When asked “Which comes closer to your view? Homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society or homosexuality is a way of life that should be discouraged by society,” 61 percent of Muslims said that homosexual lifestyles should be discouraged. Only 38 percent of all Americans gave that response.

Recent studies of religion and public opinion have focused on differences within denominations, particularly with the rise of evangelical Christianity among Protestants. Starting in the 1970s, and especially after the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision made abortion legal under some conditions in 1973, evangelicals became more active in politics. They also strongly oppose gay rights and support school prayer. On the issue of abortion, in 2004 only 11 percent of evangelical Protestants described themselves as pro-choice. Among more secular Protestants, nearly 60 percent advocated pro-choice positions. The same pattern holds for supporting same-sex marriage. Secular Protestants were six times more likely than evangelical Protestants to favor same-sex marriage.

### TABLE 6.1 Religious Tradition and Views on Immigrants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The growing number of newcomers from other countries . . .</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>White Evangelical Protestant</th>
<th>White Mainline Protestant</th>
<th>White Non-Hispanic Catholic</th>
<th>Secular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threatens traditional American customs and values</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthens American society</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/Refused</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Immigrants today . . .</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>White Evangelical Protestant</th>
<th>White Mainline Protestant</th>
<th>White Non-Hispanic Catholic</th>
<th>Secular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are a burden because they take our jobs, housing, and health care</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen our country with their hard work and talents</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/Refused</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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</table>

CHAPTER 6: PUBLIC OPINION

Table 6.1 explores differences among Protestants on the issue of immigration. White evangelical Protestants take a much less favorable view of immigrants than do “mainline” Protestants (those belonging to older denominations such as the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches) and those who describe themselves as secular, that is, without religious affiliation. Among evangelicals, 63 percent see “newcomers” as threats to “traditional American customs and values.” Only 39 percent of seculars hold that opinion. A near majority of seculars (45 percent) believe that immigrants “strengthen our country with their hard work and talents.” Fewer than 30 percent of white evangelicals agree. These kinds of differences underscore the importance of looking within denominations for patterns in U.S. public opinion.

Gender

Starting in 1980 a gender gap emerged in U.S. politics. Before 1980 the differences in political attitudes among men and women were not large and did not draw much attention. However, in elections since Ronald Reagan’s 1980 victory over Jimmy Carter (1977–81), women have been generally more supportive of Democrats than of Republicans. In 1980 the gap was 8 percentage points: 54 percent of men backed Reagan and only 46 percent of women. The gap has varied from 4 percent in 1992 to 11 percent in 1996. Barack Obama secured 56 percent of the female vote and just 49 percent of the male vote. The differences are such that, if only women were allowed to vote, the Democrats might have won every presidential election since 1980 save for Reagan’s landslide against Walter Mondale in 1984.71

In general, women are more liberal than men, and gender gaps are also evident on specific issues. Women were less supportive of the Iraq War, believing in larger numbers in 2004 that the war “was not worth fighting.” Women favor more spending on social programs than men. In 2000, 67 percent of women favored more spending on child care, whereas 58 percent of men held this view. Men are much more likely to support the death penalty than are women (62 percent versus 38 percent). This gap is not nearly as wide when it comes to abortion. In 2009, 50 percent of women and 44 percent of men thought abortion should be legal.72

Race and Ethnicity

Another divide in public opinion involves race and ethnicity. The issue of slavery tore the nation apart, and more than one hundred years after the Civil War, Americans remained divided about issues involving race. In 1964 African Americans overwhelmingly endorsed desegregation, whereas white Americans were split on the issue. In 1974 only 25 percent of white Americans felt “government should help blacks,” whereas 63 percent of African Americans believed that government should take that role.73 Similar gaps exist in regard to support
for **affirmative action** policies that grant preferences to people (not only African Americans but also women) who have suffered discrimination in the past in job hiring, school admissions, and contracting. In 2004 only 11 percent of whites favored “preferences for hiring blacks.” Four times as many African Americans favored affirmative action.74

The term *Latino* is used to describe a broad array of groups that do not necessarily share common experiences, so opinion among Latinos tends to be divided. Some Latino families have lived in the Southwest for centuries, since before the area became part of the United States in 1848. Others came to the United States within the last few years from homelands throughout Central and South America. Cuban immigrants, who left their homeland following the rise of Fidel Castro and the Communists in the late 1950s, tend to be much more conservative than Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans. According to one study, about 60 percent of Cuban Americans are Republican identifiers, compared to only about 15 percent of Mexican Americans.75 Latinos are divided in other ways as well. According to one group of prominent scholars:

> On many key domestic issues, significant majorities of each [Latino] group take the liberal position. On other issues, there is no consensus and, depending on the issue, Mexicans may be on the right, while Cubans and many Puerto Ricans are on the left of the nation’s current political spectrum. Thus, labels such as liberal or conservative do not adequately describe the complexity of any one group’s political views.76

Thus, both parties compete for the support of the Latino community. In 2004 Latino support for President George W. Bush helped him defeat John Kerry. In 2008, however, Barack Obama gained two-thirds of the Latino vote, a shift partly owing to actions by Republicans in Congress to block immigration reform. As a group, Latinos support bilingual education and policies that favor immigration more than do Anglos. These differences surely reflect the fact that the issues are more salient to them.77

Asian American public opinion has not drawn the same level of attention as that of other groups. Asian Americans are, however, a growing segment of the population and constitute a sizable part of the population of some states, especially California. In general, Asians are a bit more liberal than white Americans. In 2004, for example, about 60 percent of Asian Americans supported John Kerry, whereas only 44 percent of white Americans did so. Their disapproval of the Iraq War was stronger than that of white Americans, but not nearly as strong as that of African Americans.78 Like Latinos, Asian Americans are diverse, including people from Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and China.

**Education**

One important change in the American population is the increasing level of education. Figure 6.6 charts the share of Americans who had attended college for at least a year over the last...
sixty years. The pattern is striking. In 1948 about one in seven Americans had gone to college for at least one year. By 2008 more than one in two Americans had attended college. The upward trend has been continuous since the end of World War II in 1945. There are two key reasons for this trend. The first is that more young people have access to a college education. The second is what is called “generational replacement.” That is, older, less-educated citizens have passed on, and the average level of education of the American public has thus increased.

That people in the United States are more educated matters. In broad strokes, there is a long-standing belief that a democracy is best able to endure when its citizens are engaged and informed. With more education, the public should be more aware of politics and better able to find ways to ensure that government responds to them. In the language of this book, a better-educated public should be in better position to travel through the gateways of influence and find ways around the many gates in the American political system.

Education level is also connected to public opinion. Views on the controversial issue of immigration reform offer an instructive example. Among college graduates in April 2009, 75 percent favored making it possible for those here illegally to become citizens (providing they pass background checks, pay relevant fines, and have jobs). Among those with a high school education or less, the proportion falls to 56 percent. The 20 percentage point gap is significant. Individuals with higher education generally take a more liberal position on a variety of social and economic issues ranging from government spending to defense policy to gay marriage.

Public Opinion and Public Policy: Military Action and Antiterrorism

To see how public opinion affects the policies pursued by government, we examine foreign policy, focusing on military action and antiterrorism measures. The relationship between public opinion and domestic policy is taken for granted, but with continuing terrorist attacks around the world and a war in Afghanistan, it is important to consider their relationship. Public opinion exerts a different type of influence on each.

Military Action

The president, as commander in chief, has always made the decision to engage in military action. Although Congress has formally declared war only five times, U.S. troops have been sent into conflicts and potential conflicts about 250 times since the beginning of the nation. Today, in making the decision to engage in military action, the president is heavily influenced by the recommendations of the secretary of defense, the national security adviser, and the director of the Central Intelligence Agency. For military missions that are publicized, not secret, a president usually enjoys widespread support if the mission can be
clearly tied to preserving national security. In cases in which the United States is attacked on its own soil, support for a military response is even higher. This so-called **rally-around-the-flag effect** is a surge in patriotic sentiment that translates into presidential popularity. For example, when President George H. W. Bush commenced the first Gulf War, his approval ratings shot up to 89 percent. His son, President George W. Bush, experienced a similar spike in popularity after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; his job approval ratings went from 52 percent to 90 percent, and they remained above 70 percent for almost an entire year.

The public’s influence on the president’s decision to engage in military action is always limited because the amount of information available to the public is purposely restricted, both to ensure the safety of the troops involved and to preserve military advantages in conflict. Simply put, the president and his military advisers have access to far greater amounts of information than the average citizen, and in turn, the average citizen expects the president to act on this information in a way that preserves national security. Even when Congress debates sending troops or funding military action, most classified information is held in secret and not revealed to the public. The fundamental imbalance of information held by the government and what the general public understands poses a major problem for the assumptions of a democracy because the people cannot hold the government fully accountable if they are not fully informed. Nevertheless, when a president decides to send troops, he has to anticipate public reaction and hope that the public maintains its trust and confidence in his decision to take such action.

As the rally-around-the-flag effect fades over time, public support for extended military engagements also declines, as the polls reveal. Americans do not like war, and this core value drives public opinion and U.S. defense policy. The fundamental problem for the American public is that once the United States enters into a military conflict, there are few ways for the public to effectively change military strategy or troop levels. Only when public opinion turns against a war effort is there any real pressure on the president and Congress to take steps to end it.

For example, Figure 6.7 tracks public opinion on two major conflicts, the Vietnam War and the Iraq War. At the beginning of each, there was considerable public support; only 25 percent of the public thought it was a mistake to go into the conflict. However, as time progressed and the number of American troops killed and wounded grew, public apprehension about the war also grew. From 1965 to 1968 the percentage of the public that thought the Vietnam War was a mistake more than doubled, and it became a major issue in the 1968 presidential campaign. Richard Nixon, the Republican presidential candidate, sensed a change in the public’s attitude toward the war and pledged to end the U.S. involvement in Vietnam by promising “peace with honor.” As president, Nixon did end the war, but it took him five years to do so.
In the case of the Iraq War, there is even stronger evidence that the number of casualties directly affects public support for military conflict. For example, in the 2006 House elections, voters punished Republican candidates in districts with higher causality rates. It also appears that the public’s support for conflict is a product of calculations involving the likely winner, the upward or downward trend in casualties, and the possible payoff from the conflict. From 2003 to 2008 the portion of the public that thought the Iraq War was a mistake grew from 25 percent to 60 percent, and in 2008 the Democratic nominee Barack Obama promised to withdraw the majority of American troops from Iraq within two years. Shortly after taking office, President Obama honored his campaign promise and began making plans to start troop withdrawal. Ten months later, however, Obama decided to send thirty thousand more troops to Afghanistan. The public was uncomfortable about such a move, given the problems in Iraq, but Obama nevertheless sought to secure public support. Although the power of public opinion is slow-moving, when a majority of the Americans oppose a military conflict, elected leaders recognize that they either must change course or find a way to rally the public to their side.

**Antiterrorism Measures**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, prompted a huge increase in government’s efforts to stop future terrorism against U.S. citizens at home and abroad. In general, public opinion was highly supportive of the steps that President George W. Bush claimed were necessary to fight terrorism. These steps were taken with advice from the same units that handle military policy,
with the important addition of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Justice. The Bush administration authorized the detention of suspects, whether U.S. citizens or not, without charges or trials, and wiretapping (eavesdropping) without a warrant. With the onset of the war in Iraq, the measures employed in the name of antiterror security increased. Then, in 2004 CBS News and the *New Yorker* magazine broke the story about the Abu Ghraib facility in Iraq, where Iraqi prisoners were subject to activities that violated international norms of treatment and might be considered torture. Subsequently, it was revealed that the U.S. interrogators used waterboarding, a near-drowning technique, as a means of getting information from prisoners about potential terrorist plots. The international community considers waterboarding to be torture, and many Americans also objected. The issue of treatment of detainees became a major issue in the 2008 presidential campaign. After he took office, President Obama declared that the United States would no longer engage in any practice that violated international norms.

The president also announced that the Guantánamo Bay facility located in Cuba, which was being used to detain and question suspected terrorists outside of the United States, would be closed. Despite an early consensus in the White House to close this controversial facility, deciding what to do with existing detainees and how best to handle others who may be engaged in terrorism has proven difficult.

Americans remain conflicted about the type of force necessary to preserve national security. As of 2009 a Gallup Poll reported majority support for the use of harsh interrogation techniques on suspected terrorists (see Figure 6.8). The same poll revealed, however, that 51 percent of the respondents favored an investigation into how these techniques

**FIGURE 6.8 Support for Harsh Interrogation Techniques.** A majority of the public supports the use of harsh interrogation techniques on terrorism suspects, and the more closely a person follows the story of the treatment of terrorism suspects, the more likely that person is to support the techniques.

Source: Gallup Poll daily tracking, April 24–25, 2009
were used. Here is the same dilemma the public faces with military action: by their very nature, antiterrorism policies must remain secret to be effective, and the only opportunity the public has to register an opinion about government action is after that action has been taken. If it can be shown that harsh interrogation techniques saved American lives by uncovering and then preventing a terrorist attack, the public will support the use of the techniques; otherwise, the public will want to limit their use. However, as the nature and shape of potential terrorist attacks are constantly changing, it is unlikely that the American public will ever seriously limit support for broad government flexibility ensuring national security.

Public Opinion and Democracy

For a country to be considered democratic, the views of the public must affect the course of government. For this reason, the public must be sufficiently well informed to be able to make good decisions and to ensure that politicians act in a way consistent with public preferences. Average Americans do not know a lot of details about politics, but the nation’s many successes indicate that the public is equal to the task of self-government. The people are not fools. In 2008, when most people thought the country was on the wrong track, they voted for change and put Barack Obama in office. By supporting Obama, the public signaled their desire for a clear break from the policies of the Bush administration.

Elections are one means by which the public expresses its will, but on a year-to-year, even day-to-day, basis, public officials can stay in touch with what the public thinks through public opinion polls. Scientific polling permits researchers to measure people’s thinking with considerable accuracy and gives average Americans a chance to speak out on policy and contribute to policy making. Scientific polling, introduced in the 1930s, not only created greater equality but also provided the gateways through which the public could affect the course of government. Polls are not perfect, but they do open up the democratic process.

Although it is clear that public officials are generally responsive to public opinion, there are legitimate questions about how responsive American government actually is. Some observers suggest that the connection between opinion and policy is weak. Others point out that the public has mixed feelings on many issues and does not have concrete opinions about some of the toughest questions, and can thus offer little guidance. Still others argue that politicians use policy to manipulate public opinion. That interaction is troubling and not the way a democratic system in which the government is accountable to the people should work. These concerns are why it is so instructive to look at the general patterns and the nation’s general successes.

It is also important to recognize that, in a democracy, politicians know the kinds of issues the public will respond to and rebel against, and so they adopt
views that will not arouse the electorate's anger. They are aware, in other words, of what political scientists call **latent public opinion**, and this awareness makes them responsive and accountable. The ability to anticipate public opinion is an invaluable skill, helping officials avoid quagmires and stress issues that hit a responsive chord with the public. Thus the power of public opinion in a democracy is both direct and indirect, and its effects are revealed in many ways.

**latent public opinion:** Underlying opinions and attitudes of the public that are not always captured in public opinion data but are recognized by public officials and influential in policy making.
CHAPTER 6: PUBLIC OPINION

1. Public opinion—the aggregate of citizen attitudes—is essential to the workings of a democracy. (pp. 4–8)
2. Scientific polling enables public officials to gauge public opinion with some degree of confidence, though polls can be in error. (pp. 8–15)
3. Citizens’ opinions and attitudes are shaped by environment, political socialization, generational effects, and self-interest. (pp. 15–17)
4. Elites do drive public opinion, but only to the extent that citizens are exposed and open to their message. (pp. 17–18)
5. Party identification can help predict individual attitudes, and liberal or conservative leanings shape views on political and social issues. Generally, the public has been becoming less liberal, although there has been a recent uptick. (pp. 18–22)
6. People generally know what advances their interests and hold government accountable. (pp. 22–24)
7. Although parties have grown more polarized in recent years, the electorate is more moderate than party choices allow. (pp. 24–25)
8. Political opinion also differs among demographic groups. (pp. 25–30)
9. In recent years, efficacy and public trust in government have fallen. (p. 8)
10. In national security issues, the public is often deliberately not informed, and public officials have to work hard to maintain public trust, especially as the American public has a strong preference for peace. (pp. 30–34)

Top Ten to Take Away

1. How was public opinion gauged before scientific polling?
2. Describe how polls may be in error.
3. How does environment shape political attitudes?
4. What other factors shape political attitudes?
5. Is the public rational? How do you know? What are some examples?
6. What is the relationship between partisanship and ideology?
7. What do liberals generally believe? What do conservatives generally believe?
8. How well informed, or uninformed, is the American public? Does it matter?
9. What are the effects of political polarization?
10. In what way does public opinion affect military action and antiterrorism policy?

A full narrative summary of the chapter is on the book’s website.

Ten to Test Yourself

1. How was public opinion gauged before scientific polling?
2. Describe how polls may be in error.
3. How does environment shape political attitudes?
4. What other factors shape political attitudes?
5. Is the public rational? How do you know? What are some examples?
6. What is the relationship between partisanship and ideology?
7. What do liberals generally believe? What do conservatives generally believe?
8. How well informed, or uninformed, is the American public? Does it matter?
9. What are the effects of political polarization?
10. In what way does public opinion affect military action and antiterrorism policy?

More review questions and answers and chapter quizzes are on the book’s website.

Timeline to Get Things in Order

Early Ways of Gauging Public Opinion
George Washington rides into the countryside to learn what the people think.
Newspapers conduct straw polls to learn what the people think.
Abraham Lincoln holds White House receptions to learn what the people think.
Franklin Roosevelt reads newspapers to learn what the people think.

- 1790s - 1840s-1930s - 1860s - 1930s
News networks cause confusion by calling the presidential election sooner than exit poll data support the call. Internet polls are on the rise. Telephone polls dominate. Survey research develops and expands.

**The Rise of Scientific Polling**

*The Literary Digest* misses in predicting the outcome of the presidential election. George Gallup correctly predicts the outcome and introduces scientific polling.

**Learning That Works**

**WHAT YOU NEED...**

**TO KNOW**
- How polls can be in error
- What polls can reveal
- The sources of public opinion
- The role of partisanship and ideology
- The relationship between demographics and public opinion
- How public opinion affects policy

**TO DO**
- Evaluate the validity of polls
- Determine whether politicians are responsive, fickle, or manipulative
- Recognize where your attitudes come from
- Consider whether the public makes rational choices
- Understand divisions in public opinion
- Assess citizen influence in a democracy

**Terms to Know and Use**

affirmative action (p. 29)
approval rating (p. 5)
census (p. 11)
confidence interval (p. 13)
conservatives (p. 21)
depolarized (p. 25)
efficacy (p. 8)
elite opinion (p. 9)
elites (p. 17)
elite theory (p. 18)
ext polls (p. 12)
Gallup Poll (p. 10)
gender gap (p. 28)
generational effects (p. 16)
Indepedents (p. 15)
latent public opinion (p. 35)
levels of conceptualization (p. 21)
liberals (p. 21)
low information rationality (p. 24)
moderates (p. 21)
nonattitudes (p. 14)
party identification (p. 20)
perceptual lens (p. 20)
polarization (p. 25)
political ideology (p. 21)
polling (p. 6)
population (p. 11)
public opinion (p. 6)
push polls (p. 13)
rally-around-the-flag effect (p. 31)
random sample (p. 10)
rationality (p. 17)
Reagan Democrats (p. 26)
representative sample (p. 11)
response rate (p. 15)
responsible parties (p. 26)
salient (p. 23)
sample (p. 11)
sampling error (p. 13)
scientific polling (p. 10)
self-interest (p. 17)
socialization (p. 15)
socioeconomic status (p. 26)
straw polls (p. 9)
tracking polls (p. 12)

Use the vocabulary flash cards on the book’s website.
Resources

Visit www.cengage.com/community/gatewaystodemocracy for

Websites
• American Association for Public Opinion Research (www.aapor.org): Leading website of public opinion and survey research professionals, with information about public opinion research and biographical data on researchers; access to specific data is restricted to members. The organization also publishes the journal Public Opinion Quarterly.
• American National Election Studies (ANES) (www.electionstudies.org): Provides voting and public opinion data, primarily on elections, for research, as well as data on numerous public opinion topics relating to electoral politics.
• Gallup Poll (www.gallup.com): One of the leading polling agencies in the United States, with up-to-date polling on an array of national and international topics. Accessing the results of polls is free, but a fee is charged to access the actual data.
• Pew Research Center (pewresearch.org): Nonpartisan “fact tank” that provides hard data, surveys, and reports on the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping the United States and the world.
• Political Arithmetik (http://politicalarithmetik.blogspot.com/): Blog of Professor Charles Franklin that provides analysis and commentary on public opinion data on certain topical issues in society (such as the presidential campaign, the Iraq War, and gay marriage). The website is useful for in-depth analysis of a limited number of topics.
• PollingReport.com (www.pollingreport.com): Good source for up-to-date information on types of polls from numerous polling agencies—campaign and election polls, media polls, and general political topics, at both the state and national levels. Most data are available free of charge.
• Pollster.com (www.pollster.com): Website developed by pollster Mark Blumenthal and Professor Charles Franklin (University of Madison—Wisconsin) dedicated to tracking the latest trends in political campaigns at the state and national levels. It also contains blogs by commentators on specific public opinion trends.
• Real Clear Politics (http://www.realclearpolitics.com/polls/): Popular political blog that posts up-to-date polling numbers from a host of polling agencies. The polls are limited to political campaigns, particularly presidential elections, but the site also provides polls on presidential and congressional approval, and the public’s views on government in general.
• Roper Center for Public Opinion Research (www.ropercenter.uconn.edu): Serves primarily as a databank for academic research, for which a subscription fee is required, but access to polls on numerous political topics is free of charge.
• World Public Opinion (www.worldpublicopinion.org): Website run by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland that provides data on global public opinion and also data and analysis on many topics pertaining specifically to the opinion of Americans regarding global issues.

Readings
• Gilens, Martin. Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Addresses common misconceptions about welfare policy in America, finding that the public supports the “deserving poor,” but that welfare is a racially charged issue driven by sensationalism in the media and misinformation from political elites.
• Hutchings, Vincent. Public Opinion and Democratic Accountability. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003. Contrary to the common wisdom that American voters are mostly uninformed about politics, demonstrates that voters can be knowledgeable and attentive when it comes to the issues they consider most important.
• Key, V. O. Public Opinion and American Democracy. New York: Knopf, 1961. Focuses on the system-level determinants of mass ideology and values,
attempting to illuminate the relationship among public opinion, political leaders, and processes.

- Stimson, James. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Argues that citizens only rarely pay enough attention to politics to act on their preferences, but that the incidences in which they are attentive can have hugely consequential implications for American government.


**Online**

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- More websites for polls
- More resources—online, print, film
- Animated PowerPoint slides
- Podcast summaries and more

- **Endnotes for this chapter**