



Mass Media and Public Opinion

Chapter 8



The Formation of Public Opinion

Section 1

- Public opinion refers to the attitudes of a significant number of people about public affairs, or matters of government and politics that concern the people at large. Political socialization is the process by which people learn ideas and develop opinions about issues. Many factors play a part in this process.
- Family and education are two of the most important factors in political socialization. Children pick up fundamental attitudes from their families. Schools teach children the value of the American political system and train them to become good citizens.
- Other important factors in developing political opinions include occupation and race. Additionally, the mass media—those means of communication that reach many people simultaneously, such as newspapers, television, and the Internet—have a huge effect on the formation of public opinion.

o Peer groups are the groups of people with whom one regularly associates, including friends, neighbors, classmates, and co-workers.

Members of peer groups usually share political opinions.

o Public opinions are also affected by the views expressed by opinion leaders—those people who can strongly influence the views of others.

Historic events, such as wars, affect people's lives and thus can also influence public opinion.

Measuring Public Opinion

Section 2

- 0 Government leaders make policy based on public opinion. Of the many ways to measure public opinion, some are more accurate than others.
- 0 A winning party and candidate often claim to have a mandate, or instructions from the constituency. Based on this they say that election results indicate public opinion, but few candidates receive true mandates.
- 0 Interest groups, or private organizations that work to shape public policy, often present their views as public opinion, but how many people they represent is unknown. Public officials can use the media and public contacts to gain some sense of public opinion.

- The best measures of public opinion are public opinion polls, or devices that collect information through questioning. Straw votes, which ask the same questions to many people, are not reliable because those who respond may not represent the total population.
- Scientific polling, which can be very accurate, breaks the polling process into steps. First, choose the “universe,” that is, the population the poll aims to measure. Then get a sample—a representative slice of the universe.
- Most pollsters will draw a random sample, or one in which members of the chosen universe are equally likely to be picked. Some polls use the less reliable quota sample, one that deliberately reflects several of the major characteristics of a given universe. Next pollsters prepare valid questions, select and control the polling process, and report the results.

The Mass Media

Section 3

- o A medium is a means of communication; media is the word's plural. The American public gets information about public issues through several forms of mass media.
- o Four major mass media are particularly important in American politics. Television has the most influence, followed by newspapers, radio, and magazines. Other media such as books and the Internet, also have an impact.
- o The media play a large part in setting the public agenda, or the public issues that people think and talk about. The media also have a central role in elections.

- For example, television has reduced the importance of political parties. In the past, candidates relied on their party members to reach the voters. Now, because television allows the candidates to reach the public directly, many candidates operate with only loose ties to a party.
- They work hard to get good media coverage and to provide the media with good sound bites—focused, snappy statement that can be aired in 35 to 45 seconds.
- The influence of the media is limited in some ways. Few people actually follow political issues carefully in the media. Also, those who do tend to watch, listen to, or read choose favorite sources rather than sources with contrary opinions to their own.
- For example, many Democrats do not watch the televised campaign appearances of Republican candidates, and vice versa.