

American Government

CHAPTER 20

Mass Media in the Digital Age



The Formation of Public Opinion 2

- **What is public opinion and why is it so difficult to define?**
- **How do family and education shape public opinion?**
- **What additional factors shape public opinion?**

What is Public Opinion?

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Public opinion can be described as those attitudes held by a significant number of people on matters of government and politics.

Different Publics

- The United States is made up of many groups, or publics, who share common news.



**Mayor Terence Roberts
of Anderson**

What is Public Opinion? (continued) 4

Public opinion can be described as those attitudes held by a significant number of people on matters of government and politics.

Public Affairs

- **Public affairs** are those events and issues that concern the public at large. In its proper sense, public opinion includes only those views that relate to public affairs.

What is Public Opinion? (continued) 5

Public opinion can be described as those attitudes held by a significant number of people on matters of government and politics.

Public Opinions

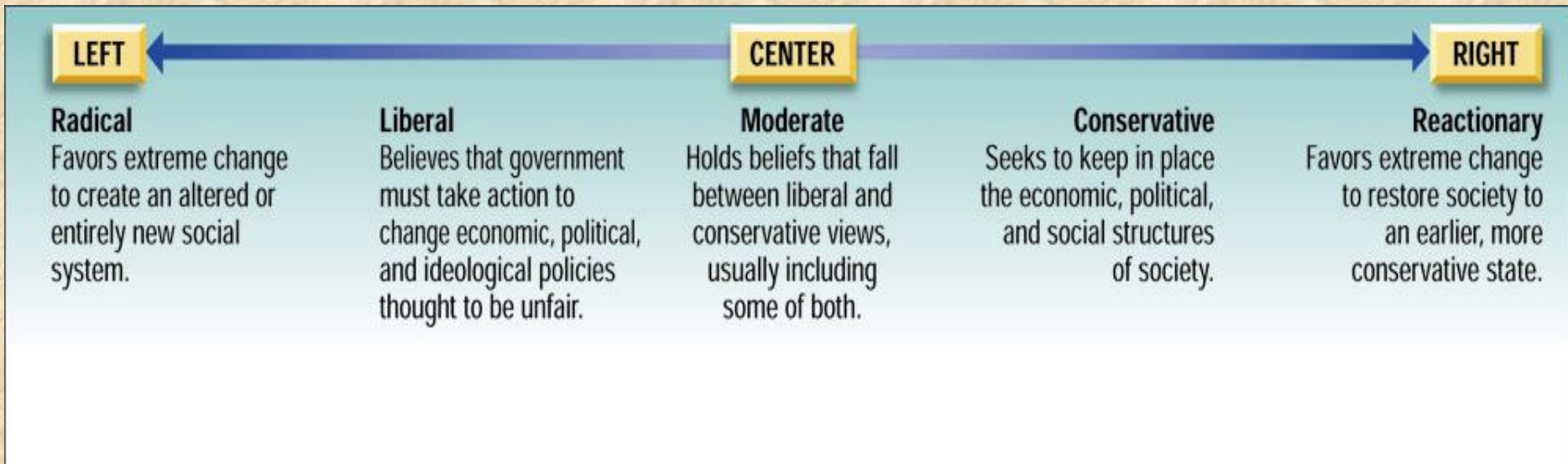
- More than one public opinion can exist at the same time, because there are many publics. A view or position must be expressed in the open in order to be a public opinion.



The Political Spectrum

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People who have similar opinions on political issues are generally grouped according to whether they are “left,” “right,” or “center” on the political spectrum.



Family and Education

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Many factors influence our political opinions and political socialization over the course of a lifetime.

The Family

- **Children first see the political world from within the family and through the family's eyes.**

Family and Education (continued) 8

Many factors influence our political opinions and political socialization over the course of a lifetime.

The Family

- **The strong influence the family has on the development of political opinions is due to the large amount of time children spend with the family.**

Family and Education (continued) 9

Many factors influence our political opinions and political socialization over the course of a lifetime.

The Schools

- **Children acquire political knowledge throughout their time in the classroom.**

Family and Education (continued) 10

Many factors influence our political opinions and political socialization over the course of a lifetime.

The Schools

- Students are taught about political systems, patriotism, and great Americans. Some are even required to take a course on government in high school.**



Representative Jeff Duncan
Third Congressional District of South Carolina

Other Factors Influencing Public Opinion

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1. Mass Media

The **mass media** include those means of communication that reach large, widely dispersed audiences (masses of people) simultaneously. The mass media has a huge effect on the formation of public opinion.

Other Factors Influencing Public Opinion (continued)

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2. Peer Groups

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

Other Factors Influencing Public Opinion (continued)

3. Opinion Leaders

An **opinion leader** is any person who, for any reason, has an unusually strong influence on the views of others.

Other Factors Influencing Public Opinion (continued)

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4. Historic Events

Historic events can have a major impact on public opinion. The Great Depression is one event that shaped the political views and opinions of a generation.

Section 1 Review

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1. Public opinion is difficult to define because

(a) everyone shares the same views.

(b) there are many groups and issues to account for.

(c) no one is allowed to have opinions.

(d) none of the above.

2. The mass media consist of

(a) friends and family.

(b) neighbors.

**(c) newspapers, magazines,
television, and the Internet.**

(d) peer groups.



Measuring Public Opinion

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- **What are the challenges involved in measuring public opinion?**
- **Why are opinion polls the best measure of public opinion?**
- **What are the five steps in the polling process?**
- **What are the challenges of evaluating polls?**
- **What are the limits on the impact of public opinion in a democracy?**

Elections

- **Candidates who win an election are said to have a **mandate**, or a command from the electorate, to carry out campaign promises. In reality, however, election results are seldom an accurate measure of public opinion.**

Measuring Public Opinion (continued)

Interest Groups

- **Interest groups** are private organizations whose members share certain views and work to shape public policy. Interest groups are a chief means by which public opinion is made known.



Senator Timothy Scott



Measuring Public Opinion (continued)

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The Media

- **The media are frequently described as “mirrors” as well as “molders” of opinion.**

Measuring Public Opinion (continued)

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Personal Contacts

- **Public officials rely on frequent and wide-ranging contacts with their constituents, such as reading their mail, answering calls, and meeting people in public.**

Public opinion is best measured by **public opinion polls**, devices that attempt to collect information by asking people questions.

Straw Votes

- A **straw vote** is a method of polling that seeks to read the public's mind simply by asking the same question of a large number of people.
- The straw-vote technique is highly unreliable, however.

Public opinion is best measured by **public opinion polls**, devices that attempt to collect information by asking people questions.

Scientific Polling

- **Serious efforts to take the public's pulse on a scientific basis date from the 1930s.**
- **There are now more than 1,000 national and regional polling organizations in this country, with at least 200 of these polling political preferences.**



Senator Lindsey Graham



Five steps in the Polling Process

1. Defining the Universe

- The *universe* is a term that means the whole population that the poll aims to measure.

Five steps in the Polling Process

2. Constructing a Sample

- A **sample** is a representative slice of the total universe. Most professional pollsters draw a **random sample**, also called a probability sample. A **quota sample** is one that is deliberately constructed to reflect several of the major characteristics of a given universe.

The Polling Process (continued) 26

Five steps in the Polling Process

3. Preparing Valid Questions

- The way in which questions are worded is very important. Wording can affect the reliability of any poll.**

The Polling Process (continued) 27

Five steps in the Polling Process

4. Interviewing

- **Pollsters communicate with the sample respondents using various methods including person-to-person interviews, telephone calls, and mail surveys.**

The Polling Process (continued) 28

Five steps in the Polling Process

5. Reporting

- **Pollsters use computers to store and manipulate data, which helps them analyze and report the results of the poll.**

Evaluating Polls and Their Limit on 29

Public Opinion

Evaluating Polls

- **On balance, most national and regional polls are fairly reliable. Still, they are far from perfect.**
- **Potential problems with polls include their inability to measure the intensity, stability, and relevance of the opinions they report.**

Evaluating Polls and Their Limit on Public Opinion (continued)

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Evaluating Polls (continued)

- **Another potential problem is that polls and pollsters are sometimes said to shape the opinions they are supposed to measure.**



John Roberts

**Chief Justice of the
Supreme Court**



Evaluating Polls and Their Limit on Public Opinion (continued) 31

Limits on the Impact of Public Opinion

- **Public opinion is the major, but by no means the only, influence on public policy in this country.**

Evaluating Polls and Their Limit on Public Opinion (continued) 32

Limits on the Impact of Public Opinion

- **Much of the American political system is designed to protect minority interests against the excesses of majority views and actions.**

Evaluating Polls and Their Limit on Public Opinion (continued)

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Limits on the Impact of Public Opinion

- **Finally, polls are not elections, nor are they substitutes for elections.**

Section 2 Review

1. A straw vote

(a) correctly predicted the outcome of the 1936 election.

(b) is a method of polling that asks a large amount of people the same question.

(c) is a very reliable type of polling.

(d) measures the opinion of only the rural community.

Section 2 Review

2. To pollsters, the *universe* is

- (a) a private organization whose members share certain views and work to shape public policy.
- (b) all of outer space.
- (c) a probability sample.
- (d) the whole population that a poll aims to measure.

The Mass Media

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- **How does the mass media fulfill its role to provide the public with political information?**
- **How does the mass media influence politics?**
- **What are the factors that limit the influence of the media?**

The Role of Mass Media

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A medium is a means of communication; it transmits some kind of information. Five major mass media are particularly important in American politics:

Newspapers

Television

Magazines

Internet











Radio

Media Statistics

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Access to media varies from country to country.

Access to Media in Selected Countries

| Country | Population in millions | Television sets per 1,000 persons | Radios per 1,000 persons | Daily newspaper circulation per 1,000 persons |
|--|------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
|  United States | 270.3 | 776 | 2,122 | 238 |
|  Japan | 125.9 | 619 | 799 | 578 |
|  Bangladesh | 127.6 | 5 | 65 | 0.4 |
|  Nigeria | 110.5 | 38 | 170 | 18 |
|  Mexico | 98.5 | 192 | 227 | 115 |
|  Italy | 56.8 | 436 | 790 | 126 |
|  India | 984 | 21 | 117 | 21 |
|  Chile | 14.8 | 280 | 305 | 101 |
|  Canada | 30.7 | 647 | 919 | 215 |
|  Nicaragua | 4.6 | 48 | 206 | 31 |

SOURCE: *The World Almanac*

The Public Agenda

- The media play a very large role in shaping the **public agenda**, the societal problems that political leaders and citizens agree need government attention.
- It is not correct that the media tell the people *what* to think; but it is clear that they tell the people what to think *about*.

The Media and Politics (continued) 40

Electoral Politics

- **Today, television allows candidates to appeal directly to the people, without the help of a party organization.**
- **Candidates regularly try to use media coverage to their advantage.**
- **Newscasts featuring candidates are usually short, sharply focused **sound bites**—snappy reports that can be aired in 30 to 45 seconds.**



- **Only a small part of the public actually takes in and understands much of what the media have to say about public affairs.**

- **Many media sources mostly skim the news, reporting only what their news editors judge to be the most important and/or most interesting stories of the day.**
- **In-depth coverage of public affairs is available to those who want it and will seek it out.**

1. Which of the following are major media?

(a) television

(b) newspapers

(c) magazines

(d) all of the above

Section 3 Review

2. According to the chart on international media usage found earlier in this section, which media source is accessible to the most Americans?

(a) newspapers

(b) radio

(c) television

(d) none of the above