CHAPTER 5

Public Opinion and Political Participation

CHAPTER OUTLINE
I. What Is Public Opinion?
II. How We Develop Our Beliefs and Opinions
   A. Agents of Political Socialization
   B. Adult Socialization
III. How Polls Work
IV. The Paradox of Public Opinion
V. Group Opinion: Diversity and Uniformity
VI. Avenues of Political Participation
   A. Acting on Opinions
   B. What Influences Participation
   C. A Closer Look at Women, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans
VII. Conclusion: Many Minorities, Much Activity

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Public opinion and participation in politics perform vitally important roles in a democracy. Exploring beyond the popular myths, this chapter examines the part that the public plays in shaping a government “of the people.”

This chapter defines and explains public opinion and examines its origins. Political socialization—the way we acquire our political beliefs and values—supplies the foundation of public opinion. What opinions emerge from that socialization? What do public opinion polls reveal? Answers to such questions about American public opinion often rely on the myth that there is a definite majority opinion to be discovered on almost all public issues. Although the content of American opinion does reveal common characteristics, important differences and paradoxes of public opinion make it difficult to identify the majority view on particular political topics. These differences and paradoxes also influence the kind of government we have and the policies our government pursues.

Public opinion, with all of its complexity, animates the second subject of this chapter, political participation. Any attempt to measure people’s level of involvement and participation in politics confronts many difficulties. Voting, of course, supplies one avenue of participation, but it is only the most obvious (and perhaps a misleading) indication of the people’s involvement in government. Judging only from voting turnout, one might conclude that Americans care little about politics, preferring not to get involved. Exploring other indicators of political participation in this country leads to more accurate conclusions about Americans’ willingness to participate in the democratic process.

Misunderstanding about public opinion and participation undoubtedly increases the amount of frustration with democracy in America. Why doesn’t the government follow the public will? Why don’t Americans care enough to get involved in politics? This chapter will lead you to a fuller and more accurate understanding of one of the most important, complex, and fascinating subjects in American politics.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After carefully reading and studying the chapter, you should be able to:
1. Identify the myth of majority opinion and describe the evidence that contradicts it.
2. Define political public opinion and discuss its major characteristics.
3. Define political socialization and discuss how we acquire our political values and beliefs, assessing the different roles played by the agents of political socialization.
4. Discuss the role of public opinion polls in politics and government, the factors important to carrying out an accurate poll, and the strengths and weaknesses of data from polls.
5. Summarize the American public’s attitudes toward democracy and representative government.
6. Describe the characteristics of various groups’ opinions about political issues, including gender groups, age groups, and racial, ethnic, and religious groups discussed in the chapter.
7. Define the term political participation, and discuss its different attributes and varieties. Summarize the factors that influence participation, especially for women, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans.
8. Evaluate the strength of political participation in the United States and describe the evidence pertaining to it.

READING TABLES AND GRAPHS
1. After reviewing Table 5.1, how would you describe the level of trust and confidence that Americans have in their federal government to handle international and domestic problems?
2. Are college-age men or women more moderate (less prone to extreme political positions), according to Table 5.2?
3. Do most college freshmen think that colleges have the right to ban extreme speakers from campus, according to Figure 5.1?
4. Look at Table 5.1. Regardless of gender, which category best describes the political orientation of most college freshman?

REVIEWING CHAPTER 5
Identifying Key Terms and Ideas
Fill in the following terms and definitions in the appropriate blanks:
1. The variable of public opinion that indicates the likelihood of change is_____.
   a. political public opinion
2. Institutions or forces that shape a person’s political attitudes and beliefs are called_____.
   b. political efficacy
3. The variable that indicates a person’s position for or against a particular issue is_____.
   c. political participation
4. The process by which political values and beliefs are acquired is_____.
   d. political ideology
5. The tendency to relate to, or feel oneself a member of, a particular political party is_____.

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6. A pattern of complex political ideas presented in an understandable structure that inspires people to act to achieve certain goals is a(n) _____.

7. A refusal to obey civil laws regarded as unjust by employing methods of passive resistance such as sit-ins and boycotts is______.

8. The activities of citizens who try to influence the government and its policies constitute______.

9. The variable of public opinion that indicates how strongly an opinion is held by an individual is______.

10. The ability of a person to influence the political system is called______.

11. Unsystematic polling methods in which no effort is made to ensure that respondents are representative of the whole population are known as______.

12. The variable of public opinion that indicates how much the individual cares about the issue is______.

13. The political values, beliefs, and attitudes held in common by a particular population of people constitute a(n)______.

14. A professional polling technique in which every person has the same chance as every other to be selected for questioning is called______.

15. The preference expressed by the people on political issues, policies, and individuals is their______.

Understanding Facts and Concepts

True/False: If any part of the statement is incorrect, mark it False and write in the reason(s) why the statement is false.

1. T F Pollsters accurately predicted that Barack Obama would defeat Hillary Clinton in the 2008 New Hampshire presidential primary.

2. T F While Americans have a wide variety of opinions about the role government should play in their lives, there is universal agreement on the political efficacy of the citizens.

3. T F Most Americans have a common, or core, political culture.
4. T F Religion can play only an indirect role as an agent of socialization.

5. T F Political socialization is completed before a person becomes an adult.

6. T F Despite some of their shortcomings, public opinion polls play a central role in shaping politics and policy in the United States.

7. T F Television network coverage of the Republican and Democratic conventions has been declining during the past fifty years.

8. T F Due to their strict sampling methods straw polls are generally very representative of the views held by the public at large.

9. T F Men and women have different political opinions on many issues, but they are not divided on the subject of poverty or the budget deficit.

10. T F Currently, African Americans are evenly divided in their political party loyalties.

11. T F Push polls rely upon the pollster asking leading questions to elicit a particular answer from a respondent.

12. T F In recent years political participation at all levels of campaigns and elections has improved.

13. T F By age grouping, the least active political participants in America are between eighteen and twenty-six years of age.
14. T F Americans have more trust and confidence in state and local government than in the national government.

15. T F Question wording has little impact on shaping a respondent’s answers.

16. T F The community in which you grow up affects your values and beliefs.

17. T F Fewer women than men consider themselves Democrats.

18. T F Men and women hold very different views on issues such as welfare reform and the right to choose an abortion.

19. T F Children tend to choose the same party as their parents (when parents show party identification).

20. T F The amount of schooling a person has does not influence the way that person forms opinions and views about the political world.

21. T F Public opinion is defined as the shared evaluations expressed by people on political issues, policies, and individuals.

22. T F Poorly designed and administered public opinion polls can provide inaccurate and misleading findings.

23. T F Opinions are never influenced by sex, ethnicity, religion, race, or educational background.
24. T F Voting is the only significant way for citizens to participate in government.

**PREPARING FOR AN EXAM**

**Multiple-Choice Questions**

*Circle the letter of the correct answer.*

1. The prevailing myth about public opinion in America is that
   a. polls reveal nothing about public opinion.
   b. public opinion doesn’t matter in American politics.
   c. there is a majority opinion on most political issues.
   d. the majority of Americans are wrong about most issues.

2. The possibility of a balanced budget amendment concerns Camilla much more than an antiabortion amendment. Therefore, her opinions on these two subjects show a difference in
   a. direction.
   b. knowledge.
   c. intensity.
   d. saliency.

3. The stability of public opinion is affected when
   a. public support changes on an issue.
   b. people have different opinions on an issue.
   c. some people think an issue is very important and others do not.
   d. some people have correct opinions and others have incorrect opinions.

4. If the people of a country share a common belief in the value of freedom and the rights of individuals, we would say that that belief was part of their
   a. public opinion.
   b. political culture.
   c. party identification.
   d. political participation.

5. Political socialization refers to the way
   a. people acquire political values.
   b. the government develops social programs.
   c. politicians introduce themselves to the public.
   d. different social classes influence the government.

6. Which of the following agents will have the greatest effect on a person’s general view of politics, including attitudes about one’s ability to influence the system?
   a. religion
   b. schools
   c. television
   d. family

7. Which of the following statements is *most* true about political socialization?
   a. It continues through adult life.
   b. It is not influenced by occupation.
   c. It is mainly dominated by television.
   d. It is limited to childhood experiences.
8. Public opinion polls about politics will be most reliable if they
   a. survey only the people who are interested in the subject.
   b. are based on simple yes-or-no questions.
   c. are conducted like a straw poll.
   d. rely on random sampling.
9. Adult political socialization can occur through events such as
   a. Hurricane Katrina.
   b. the Iraq War.
   c. the September 11 attacks.
   d. all of the above.
10. Which of the following is an element of a good poll?
    a. The poll is paid for by a political candidate.
    b. It contains a representative sample of the population.
    c. Millions of respondents participated.
    d. The results are reported by the media outlets.
11. Public opinion polls are used by all of the following public officials except
    a. federal judges.
    b. presidents.
    c. members of Congress.
    d. governors.
12. Which of the following explanations was not offered for why pollsters predicted the New Hampshire 2008 Democratic primary results inaccurately?
    a. Voters overreported their intention to vote for Barack Obama.
    b. Voters tailored their responses to what they thought pollsters wanted to hear.
    c. Bad sampling design let lots of unregistered voters participate in the polls.
    d. Preprimary enthusiasm for Obama didn’t translate into election-day support.
13. Which of the following are examples of political participation?
    a. attending political rallies
    b. donating money to a political campaign
    c. running for political office
    d. all of the above
14. Most Americans
    a. do not participate in politics.
    b. vote actively in all elections.
    c. are involved in civil disobedience.
    d. participate in limited ways in politics.
15. Which of the following terms, used by Verba and Nie, best describes individuals who vote and contact public officials only when their own self-interest is involved?
    a. voting specialists
    b. community activists
    c. campaigners
    d. parochial activists
16. Who is more likely to participate in American politics?
    a. Young people more than people over fifty
    b. Older people more than people under twenty-five
    c. Poor people more than wealthy people
    d. Independents more than political party members
17. The political participation of women during the past fifteen years  
a. has increased at the national level.  
b. has decreased at the state and local levels.  
c. has stayed about the same at the state and local levels.  
d. first increased but has decreased since 1980.  

18. Tom plans to conduct a poll to determine what the majority opinion is on a list of modern American political issues. Before he starts, he should know that  
a. a poll, if done scientifically, will always reveal the majority opinion.  
b. the majority opinion will usually be wrong.  
c. Americans do not share any common political opinions.  
d. there is no clear majority opinion on many issues.  

19. Which of the following statements about eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds in America is true?  
a. Their turnout in the 2008 presidential primaries and caucuses were at record lows.  
b. They vote less frequently than their counterparts in the EU.  
c. There is a decline in civic responsibility and engagement within this cohort.  
d. Aside from voting, eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds are not participating in politics.  

20. Which of the following statements best expresses the reality of political participation in the United States?  
a. Political participation in the United States is a lot lower than in other democratic countries.  
b. Voting turnout proves that Americans are very active participants in politics.  
c. Considering all forms of participation, Americans are quite politically active.  
d. Most Americans are complete activists when it comes to politics.  

21. Which of the following best exemplifies the fluctuating stability of public opinion over the last ten years?  
a. economic issues  
b. abortion  
c. anticommunism  
d. faith in democracy  

22. Which of the following reasons are offered up as explanations for nonparticipation in the political process?  
a. threats of violence  
b. work and family responsibilities  
c. participation will not impact results  
d. all of the above  

23. Which of the following issues displays a difference in response between men and women?  
a. welfare reform  
b. abortion  
c. poverty  
d. none of the above  

24. Which of the following is not currently a major barrier to political participation?  
a. illiteracy  
b. low income  
c. gender  
d. residency requirements
25. Which of the following statements best describes the current state of affairs regarding minorities in politics?
   a. The federal bench has offered the most opportunity for minorities to gain a public office.
   b. The proportion of minorities in public office positions roughly mirrors the proportion of the overall population.
   c. There are no women or African Americans on the current U.S. Supreme Court.
   d. Minority groups have made important gains but still do not have opportunities proportional to their population numbers.

Essay Questions
1. Discuss the problems involved in determining the majority opinion on political issues, including a consideration of the characteristics of public opinion as well as of public opinion polling.
2. Why do many people believe that Americans do not participate actively in politics? What evidence supports their point of view, and what is a more accurate view of American popular political participation?
3. Describe the characteristics of a well-designed poll.
4. What contributes to individual political opinions in America? Evaluate the influence of different agents in the process of developing political values and attitudes.
5. Describe the evidence supporting the argument that young people (eighteen- to twenty-nine-years-old) are more politically active than they might initially seem.
6. Discuss the major influences on individual political participation, describing the results of each.

ANSWER KEY

Reading Tables and Graphs
1. Over the past three decades, Americans’ trust and confidence in their government’s ability have decreased.
2. Women, according to Table 5.1, are less prone to extreme political positions, although the differences are small. (3.3% versus 5.1%)
3. No. Less than half (41%) of college freshman think that colleges should have the right to ban extreme speakers from campus.
4. Most freshman (43.4%) have their political ideologies described as being “middle of the road.”

Identifying Key Terms and Ideas
1. n
2. j
3. k
4. e
5. f
6. d
7. g
8. c
9. False. Indeed, the failure of pollsters to accurately make the correct prediction in this electoral contest was the subject of considerable discussion after the fact.

10. False. Political efficacy and its perceptions vary considerably from person to person. This effectiveness is shaped by many different factors.

11. True.

12. False. Some religious denominations take strong political positions that can directly influence their members’ political opinions.

13. False. There are numerous influences on socialization throughout adult life.

14. True.

15. True.

16. True.

17. False. Straw polls use an unsystematic approach to selecting their respondents and their results are not usually representative of the population in general.

18. False. Women are more concerned about poverty and hunger, while men are more concerned about the budget deficit.

19. False. African Americans are strongly Democratic.

20. True.

21. True.

22. True.
23. False. All of these categories not only affect our opinions on any number of subjects but also they are also important aspects of the processes by which we become rational reflective people—without these elements we are not who we are.

24. False. People can participate in government in many ways through organization, mobilization, and even just talking to one another.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. c
2. d
3. a
4. b
5. a
6. d
7. a
8. d
9. d
10. b
11. a
12. c
13. d
14. d
15. d
16. b
17. a
18. d
19. b
20. c
21. a
22. d
23. c
24. c
25. d

Essay Questions

1. Introduce the myth of majority opinion—opinion held by a majority of the people on any issue.
   - Public too plural
   - Public too dynamic
• Characteristics of political public opinion
• Direction
• Intensity
• Saliency
• Stability
• Development of public opinion
• Experiences of a person’s life
• Political ideologies
• Political culture
• Political socialization

2. Limited conception of political action in spite of the broad range of activities.
   • Limited or passive participation
   • Voting
   • Single candidate elections
   • Active participation
   • Civil disobedience
   • Donation

3. Well-designed polls have many elements, but at their core, they contain the following items:
   • Representative sample (achieved through random probability sampling)
   • Question wording (form and content)
   • Various levels of measurement (direction, intensity, salience, stability)
   • Distinguish between informed and uninformed responses.

4. There are many contributors to personal political opinion.
   • Media
   • Schools
   • Religion
   • Friends
   • Family

5. The belief and evidence for years has been that eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds are politically disengaged. However, there are some reasons to believe this trend has changed.
   • 42 percent voter turnout (2004 election)—higher numbers possible due to absentee voting
   • Record turnout in 2008 presidential primaries/caucuses
   • 25 percent gave money or participated in campaigns
   • Strong civic engagement (letter writing, community participation, protests)
• A desire to participate in politics in the future and recognition that being a community leader is important (36%)
• UCLA study—students are thinking about politics

6. Several factors contribute to how and if people participate in the political process.
• Age
• Feelings of connection to the process, such as employment in government bureaucracy
• Parents
• Race
• Gender
• Economic status