

CHAPTER 7

Public Opinion

REVIEWING THE CHAPTER

CHAPTER FOCUS

The purpose of this chapter is to explore what we mean by *public opinion* and to ask what sorts of effects public opinion has on our supposedly democratic form of government. After reading and reviewing the material in this chapter, you should be able to do each of the following:

1. List the sources of our political attitudes, and indicate which are the most important ones. Assess the influence of various religious traditions on political attitudes.
2. Explain why there is no single cleavage between liberals and conservatives in this country and why there are crosscutting cleavages. Explain the significance of these facts. Assess the significance of race in explaining political attitudes.
3. Define *political ideology* and state why most Americans do not think ideologically. Summarize the liberal positions on the economy, civil rights, and political conduct. Describe the major policy packages in the Democratic Party, and indicate which groups in the Democratic coalition can be identified with each package.
4. Identify which elite groups have become liberal, and compare their current attitudes with the past political preferences of these groups. Discuss the “new class” theory as an explanation for changes in attitudes. Analyze why these changes are causing strain in the political party system.

STUDY OUTLINE

- I. Introduction
 - A. Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address ... “of the people, by the people, for the people”
 1. Yet the federal government’s budget is not balanced
 2. Yet the people have opposed busing
 3. Yet the ERA was not ratified
 4. Yet most Americans favor term limits for Congress
 - B. Why government policy and public opinion may appear to be at odds
 1. Government not intended to do “what the people want”
 - a) Framers of Constitution aimed for substantive goals
 - b) Popular rule was only one of several means toward these goals
 - c) Large nations feature many “publics” with many “opinions”
 - (1) Framers hoped no single opinion would dominate
 - (2) Reasonable policies can command support of many factions
 2. Limits on effectiveness of opinion polling; difficult to know public opinion
- II. What is public opinion?
 - A. Influences and limitations
 1. Position taking on nonexistent legislation, contradictory opinions and inexplicable shifts

2. Political scientists and polling
 - a) 1940s: only a small group of citizens appeared to be informed
 - b) Later studies: many use limited information (cues) to support candidates, parties and policies that reflect their own personal values
 - B. How polling works
 1. Sampling techniques
 2. Sampling error
 3. High accuracy rates—in presidential elections
 - C. How opinions differ
 1. Saliency: some opinions matter more than others
 2. Stability: some opinions are more volatile than others
 3. Policy congruence: some opinions are reflected in government policy more closely than others
 4. Additional observations
 - a) Political socialization matters
 - b) Elite and mass opinion differ
- III. Political socialization
- A. The family
 1. Child absorbs party identification of family but becomes more independent with age
 2. Much continuity between generations
 3. Declining ability to pass on identification
 - a) Younger voters exhibit less partisanship; more likely to be independent
 - b) Meaning of partisanship unclear in most families; less influence on policy preferences
 - c) Age related differences in opinions on issues (gay marriage, women’s rights, vouchers, etc.)
 - d) Few families pass on clear ideologies
 - B. Religion
 1. Religious traditions affect families
 - a) Catholic families somewhat more liberal
 - b) Protestant families more conservative
 - c) Jewish families decidedly more liberal
 2. Two theories on differences
 - a) Social status of religious group
 - b) Content of religion’s tradition
 - C. The gender gap
 1. Journalists note women have “deserted” Republican candidates
 - a) It would be more correct to say men have “deserted” Democratic candidates
 - b) Difference (“gap”) in the political views of men and women has existed for a long time
 - c) Presents problems for both parties
 2. Females and voting
 - a) Turnout
 - (1) Right to vote obtained in 1920, Nineteenth Amendment
 - (2) Low turnout rate until 1980
 - b) Vote choice
 - (1) More likely to favor Democratic candidates
 - (2) Leaning also evident in mid-term congressional elections
 - (3) Reflection of differences in stances on issues
 - (a) Banning handguns
 - (b) Increased spending on anti-poverty programs

- (c) Limiting defense spending
 - (d) “Issue importance” rankings
- D. Schooling and information
1. Much research links college education to liberal attitudes
 2. Relationship was especially strong for students at high prestige institutions
 3. Increased schooling also correlated with higher levels of voting and political participation
 4. Generalizations less applicable today
 - a) Some evidence to suggest college students are more conservative than they used to be
 - (1) Concerns about “political correctness”
 - (2) Conservative students more vocal on campus
 - (3) Increase in enrollment of religious colleges and universities
 - b) Political participation among young people is down
 - c) Decline in reading of newspapers and newsmagazines
- IV. Cleavages in public opinion
- A. Social class: less important in United States than in Europe
1. More important in 1950s on unemployment, education, housing programs
 2. Less important in 1960s on poverty, health insurance, Vietnam, jobs
 3. Why the change?
 - a) Education: occupation depends more on schooling
 - b) Noneconomic issues now define liberal and conservative
- B. Race and ethnicity
1. African Americans: voting patterns and positions on issues
 - a) African Americans are overwhelmingly Democratic
 - (1) Younger African Americans are more likely than older ones to identify with the Republican Party
 - (2) Younger African Americans more likely than older ones to support school vouchers
 - b) Sharp differences between attitudes of whites and African Americans on public policies
 - (1) Blacks more likely to support affirmative action
 - (2) Blacks more likely to think the criminal justice system is biased against them
 - (3) Blacks more likely to oppose use of military force and less likely to think we should all be willing to fight for our country
 - (4) Blacks less likely to think believing in God is essential for a person to be moral
 - c) Areas of agreement
 - (1) Getting tough on crime
 - (2) Abortion
 - (3) Dependency on governmental aid
 - (4) The power to succeed
 2. Latinos and Asians
 - a) Latinos are the largest minority in America, but there are few studies of their opinions
 - (1) More likely to be Democrat, although not as much as African Americans
 - (2) Somewhat more liberal than whites or Asian Americans, although not as liberal as African Americans
 - (a) Favor big government
 - (b) Think the Democratic Party cares more about them

- (3) Those from Mexico are more Democrat, those from Cuba are more Republican, those from Puerto Rico somewhere in between
 - (4) Hispanics in Texas are more conservative than Hispanics in California
 - (5) Differences between native-born and foreign born ones
 - b) Asians
 - (1) Asian Americans identify more strongly with the Republican Party than whites
 - (2) Views on military and welfare programs, prayer in schools, and the death penalty are more similar to those of whites than those of blacks or Hispanics
 - (3) Japanese Americans are more conservative whereas Korean Americans are more liberal
- C. Region
 - 1. Southerners are more conservative than northerners on military and civil rights issues but differences are fading overall
 - 2. Southern lifestyle different
 - 3. Lessening attachment to Democratic Party
- V. Political ideology
 - A. Consistent attitudes
 - 1. Ideology: patterned set of political beliefs about who ought to rule, their principles and policies
 - 2. Measuring ideology
 - a) Self-identification
 - b) Searching for “constraint”
 - 3. Recent surveys
 - a) Moderates are the largest group among Americans
 - b) Conservatives are second, liberals are the smallest group
 - B. Concerns about self-identification in surveys
 - 1. Most Americans do not use the words liberal and conservative on their own and many do not have a clear idea of what they mean
 - 2. Inconsistency can be caused by a variety of factors
 - a) Nature of a problem may have changed
 - b) Wording of questions may have changed
 - c) People may have contradictory preferences
 - 3. Some respondents will hide their ideology
 - C. Mass ideologies: a typology
 - 1. Increasingly, searching for “constraint” is preferred
 - 2. Nine different groups identified by certain key values in one popular survey
 - a) Liberals and “disadvantaged Democrats” constitute one in three voters and over one quarter of the general public
 - b) Conservatives and Republican “enterprisers” comprise nearly one in two registered voters and over 40 percent of the general population
 - c) One in five Americans are “disaffected” or “bystanders”
 - D. Political elites
 - 1. Definition: those who have a disproportionate amount of some valued resource
 - 2. Elites, or activists, display greater ideological consistency
 - a) More information than most people
 - b) Peers reinforce consistency and greater differences of opinion than one finds among average voters
 - 3. Greater ideological consistency of elites can be seen in Congress
 - a) Democratic members tend to be consistently liberal

- b) Republican members tend to be consistently conservative
- VI. Political elites, public opinion, and public policy
- A. Elites influence public opinion in three ways
1. Raise and form political issues
 2. State norms by which to settle issues, defining policy options
 3. Elite views shape mass views
- B. Limits to elite influence on the public
1. Elites do not define problems
 2. Many elites exist; hence many elite opinions

KEY TERMS MATCH

Match the following terms and descriptions:

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| 1. The political party for which one or one's family usually votes | a. crosscutting cleavages |
| 2. Differences in political views between men and women | b. exit polling |
| 3. Differences in political preferences based on more than one variable | c. gender gap |
| 4. Term to describe the children of parents who participated in radical movements of the 1960s | d. Barry Goldwater |
| 5. A coherent and consistent set of beliefs about who ought to rule, what principles rulers should obey, and what policies they ought to pursue | e. ideological constraint |
| 6. People who have a disproportionate amount of political power | f. V.O. Key |
| 7. Researcher who found differences in political opinion were closely associated with occupation in the 1950s | g. norm |
| 8. Process by which personal and other background traits influence one's views about politics and government | h. party identification |
| 9. Features interviews with voters on election day in a representative sample of districts | i. political elites |
| 10. A standard of right or proper conduct that helps determine the range of acceptable social behavior and policy options | j. political ideology |
| 11. Refers to the degree to which a person's opinions are consistent across time, or from one issue to the next at any given point in time | k. political socialization |
| | l. poll |
| | m. random sample |
| | n. red diaper babies |
| | o. sampling error |

12. A survey of public opinion
13. The first major U.S. politician to refer to himself as a “conservative”
14. A sample selected in such a way that any member of the population being surveyed has an equal chance of being interviewed
15. The difference between the results of two surveys or samples

DATA CHECK

Figure 7.1 (Page 157): Opinions Voiced by College Students (2006)

1. What percentage of college students were of the opinion that we should begin to withdraw from Iraq?

2. What opinions did these college students express with respect to religion and the moral direction of the country?

3. Who would win the votes of college students in a presidential race between Republican John McCain and Democrat Hillary Clinton?

Table 7.1 (Page 158): Opinion on School Prayer, By Religion

4. What percentage of the general public strongly agrees with the position that prayer in schools violates the Constitution?

5. The majority of which religious group strongly agrees with the position that prayer in schools violates the Constitution?

6. How does the American public feel about having a “moment of silence” in schools?

Figure 7.2 (Page 159): Gender Gaps on Issue Importance (2006)

7. Who was more likely to see the war in Iraq as an issue of importance, men or women?

8. Who was more likely to see Social Security as an issue of importance, men or women?

9. Where is the largest gap for issue importance between men and women?
-

Table 7.2 (Page 165): Ideology Typology: Nine Groups and Their Key Values

10. What percentage of registered voters is categorized as “liberals?”
-

11. What percentage of registered voters is some form of “conservative?”
-

Figure 7.3 (Page 167): Policy Preferences Among Registered Voters (2006)

12. Which party’s members appear to be closer to the views of all registered voters on the topic of allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally?
-

13. Which party’s members are more likely to describe themselves as “conservative Christians?”
-

14. Which party’s members appear to be closer to the opinions of all registered voters on the topic of whether or not we should have used military force against Iraq?
-

PRACTICING FOR EXAMS

TRUE/FALSE QUESTIONS

Read each statement carefully. Mark true statements *T*. If any part of the statement is false, mark it *F*, and write in the space provided a concise explanation of why the statement is false.

1. T F The public supported the Equal Rights Amendment, but it was not ratified.
-

2. T F The Framers of the Constitution did not try to create a government that would do from day to day “what the people want.”
-

3. T F Studies of public opinion in the 1940s found most citizens had high levels of knowledge about government and policy.
-

4. T F Since 1952, the major polls have a modest record with respect to predicting the winner in presidential elections.
-

5. T F The majority of young people identify with their parents' political party.
-
6. T F The proportion of citizens who consider themselves Democrats or Republicans has steadily increased since the 1950s.
-
7. T F Younger voters have a weaker sense of partisanship than older ones.
-
8. T F "Red-diaper babies" are the sons and daughters of 1950s conservatives.
-
9. T F Studies suggest religious influences on public opinion are most pronounced with respect to economic issues.
-
10. T F The gender gap is a recent phenomenon in American politics.
-
11. T F The gender gap is not evident in midterm elections.
-
12. T F Women are much more likely than men to think that all handguns should be banned.
-
13. T F Today, there is evidence to suggest that college students are more conservative than they were twenty years ago.
-
14. T F Today's college students are much more likely to read newspapers and magazines.
-
15. T F Most blue-collar workers in Great Britain think of themselves as "middle class."
-
16. T F In the United States, public opinion is less divided by class than it is in Europe.
-
17. T F Class voting has declined in France, Great Britain and Germany since the 1940s.
-
18. T F African Americans are overwhelmingly Democrats.
-
19. T F Asian Americans tend to identify with the Republican Party.
-
20. T F Korean Americans appear to be more liberal than Japanese Americans.
-

21. T F Latinos from Mexico are more likely to be Democratic than those from Cuba.
-
22. T F The South has, on the whole, been less accommodating to business enterprises than other regions.
-
23. T F Ronald Reagan was the first presidential candidate to declare himself a “conservative.”
-
24. T F Clinton won the presidency in 1992 and 1996 without carrying the South.
-
25. T F The better informed people are about politics and the more interest they take in it, the less likely they are to have consistently liberal or conservative views.
-
26. T F Delegates to presidential nominating conventions tend to be more ideological than the average voter.
-
27. T F According to the text, elites do not define economic problems.
-

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

Circle the letter of the response that best answers the question or completes the statement.

1. Which of the following goals is *not* listed in the Preamble to the Constitution?
 - a. Justice.
 - b. Domestic tranquility.
 - c. The common defense.
 - d. Equality.
 - e. The general welfare.
2. Which of the following was intended to serve as a check on public opinion?
 - a. Representative government.
 - b. Federalism.
 - c. Separation of powers.
 - d. An independent judiciary.
 - e. All of the above.
3. The Framers of the Constitution understood that _____ would be the chief source of opinion on most matters.
 - a. the general public
 - b. elected representatives
 - c. factions and interest groups
 - d. political theorists and educators
 - e. intellectuals

4. The classic research on the Monetary Control Bill suggests we should be cautious in how we think about polling results because, in some instances, respondents will
 - a. support measures that are only beneficial to them.
 - b. express opinions about things that do not even exist.
 - c. favor state over federal legislation.
 - d. not answer questions that they feel are “threatening.”
 - e. share their opinions, but only if they are positive.
5. A properly conducted poll of 250 million people can capture “public opinion” with as few as _____ of them.
 - a. 1,500
 - b. 2,000
 - c. 3,000
 - d. 4,500
 - e. 5,000
6. Research indicates over half of children identify with the partisan preferences of at least one of their parents by the time they are
 - a. in the first grade.
 - b. in the fifth grade.
 - c. juniors in high school.
 - d. seniors in high school.
 - e. high school graduates.
7. In adulthood, people whose party identification differs from their parents’ usually call themselves
 - a. radicals.
 - b. independents.
 - c. neo-institutionalists.
 - d. conservatives.
 - e. Democrats.
8. In recent years the influence of the family on party identification has
 - a. decreased.
 - b. increased.
 - c. remained the same.
 - d. disappeared.
 - e. become too complex to study.
9. Younger Americans are more likely than older Americans to support
 - a. gay marriage.
 - b. vouchers for private or religious schools.
 - c. women’s rights.
 - d. letting citizens invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market.
 - e. all of the above.
10. The transfer of political beliefs from generation to generation does not appear in large national studies of political attitudes because
 - a. most Americans are quite conservative.
 - b. few Americans are either far left or far right of the political spectrum.
 - c. polling techniques change radically from one generation to the next.
 - d. most Americans are quite liberal.
 - e. some generations participate in polls more than others.

11. The “gender gap” refers to the tendency of female voters to _____ in recent elections.
 - a. support Democratic candidates
 - b. vote Republican
 - c. support Independent candidates
 - d. refrain from voting
 - e. contribute more money
12. The authors suggest the most plausible explanation for the “gender gap” is
 - a. the alignment of the policy views of the Democratic party with female voters.
 - b. recent efforts by Republicans to attract female voters.
 - c. a series of Supreme Court nominations which have alienated female voters.
 - d. the lack of support for equal rights in Congress.
 - e. the fact that men have “deserted” the Democratic party.
13. Which of the following statements regarding the voting behavior of males and females since 1980 is *correct*?
 - a. They have voted at about the same rate.
 - b. Females have voted at a somewhat higher rate.
 - c. Males have voted at a somewhat higher rate.
 - d. Males have voted much at much higher rates than females.
 - e. None of the above.
14. There is much research which indicates attending college tends to make people more _____ than the general population.
 - a. moderate
 - b. conservative
 - c. Democratic
 - d. Republican
 - e. liberal
15. Students attending more prestigious or selective colleges are more _____ than the general population.
 - a. liberal
 - b. conservative
 - c. Democratic
 - d. Republican
 - e. moderate
16. The political liberalizing effects of college among older Americans were probably attributable to the fact that yesteryear’s college graduates
 - a. had lower rates of political participation.
 - b. watched television.
 - c. read newspapers and news magazines.
 - d. were influenced by Vietnam and Watergate.
 - e. listened to talk radio.
17. In a classic study by V.O. Key in the 1950s, differences in political opinion were closely associated with
 - a. occupation.
 - b. race.
 - c. gender.
 - d. ethnicity.
 - e. education levels.

18. When political scientists see how accurately they can predict a person's view on one issue based on views on a different issue, then the focus is on
 - a. "constraint."
 - b. "salience."
 - c. "congruence."
 - d. "linearity."
 - e. "robustness."
19. In a typical ideological self-identification survey, the largest group of Americans will
 - a. classify themselves as liberal.
 - b. classify themselves as conservative.
 - c. classify themselves as moderate.
 - d. refuse to classify themselves in any manner.
 - e. none of the above.
20. In a typical ideological self-identification survey, the smallest group of Americans will
 - a. classify themselves as liberal.
 - b. classify themselves as conservative.
 - c. classify themselves as moderate.
 - d. refuse to classify themselves in any manner.
 - e. none of the above.
21. The terms liberal and conservative are _____ political elites.
 - a. irrelevant to
 - b. somewhat irrelevant to
 - c. avoided by
 - d. very meaningful for
 - e. consistently misunderstood by
22. Which group displays the most consistency in political attitudes?
 - a. Average citizens.
 - b. Political activists.
 - c. Females.
 - d. Blacks.
 - e. Manual workers.
23. The rate at which governments adopt policies supported by majorities in polls
 - a. has increased dramatically.
 - b. has increased somewhat.
 - c. has remained the same for some time now.
 - d. has decreased.
 - e. suggests politicians often pander to constituents.
24. Which of the following is an *incorrect* assessment of elite opinion?
 - a. Elites influence which issues will capture the public's attention.
 - b. Elites are unified in their interests and opinions.
 - c. Elites state the norms by which issues should be settled.
 - d. Elites raise and frame political issues.
 - e. Elites influence how issues are debated and decided.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Practice writing extended answers to the following questions. These test your ability to integrate and express the ideas that you have been studying in this chapter.

1. What are some explanations for why the American public clearly wants some things, but government policy is very much directed in the opposite direction?
2. What evidence do we have that political socialization takes place in families? What do we know about recent trends in the ability of the family to socialize its members?
3. Explain what the “gender gap” refers to and observe what the authors see as the causes of what we see with respect to men and women in voting and public opinion polls.
4. How have education and political viewpoint been related to each other historically? What might explain current trends with respect to this relationship?
5. Summarize what we know about the role of social class in American politics and recent trends in class voting in America and in Europe.
6. Explain the two ways that political scientists measure political ideology.
7. Why are political scientists increasingly skeptical of polls which ask Americans to identify themselves as liberal or conservative?

ANSWERS TO KEY TERMS MATCH QUESTIONS

1. h
2. c
3. a
4. n
5. j
6. i
7. f
8. k
9. b
10. g
11. e
12. l
13. d
14. m
15. o

ANSWERS TO DATA CHECK QUESTIONS

1. 60 percent.
2. 70 percent said religion was an important part of their life and 54 percent were concerned about the moral direction of the country.
3. The respondents in this survey had the same level of support for both candidates, 40 percent.
4. 21 percent.
5. Jewish (62 percent).
6. 53 percent support the idea.
7. Women.
8. Women.
9. Health care (13 points).
10. 19 percent.
11. 38 percent: Conservative Democrats (15 percent) + Social Conservatives (13 percent) + Pro-Government Conservatives (10 percent).
12. They are both 14 percentage points above or below the figure for all registered voters.
13. Republicans (66 percent).
14. The Democrats appear to be 7 percentage points closer to the opinions of all registered voters.

ANSWERS TO TRUE/FALSE QUESTIONS

1. T
2. T
3. F The vast majority knew next to nothing about government and had only vague notions even on much publicized public policy matters that affected them directly.
4. F Every major poll has correctly picked every winner in such races.
5. T
6. F The proportion of Independents has increased. Democrats and Republicans have decreased.
7. T
8. F They were the sons and daughters of radicals in the 1960s.
9. F Religious influences are most pronounced in social issues.
10. F The gap has been around a long, long time.
11. F It did not assert itself for some time but, today, it is also evident in midterm elections.
12. T
13. T
14. F They are much less likely to read newspapers and magazines.
15. F Most consider themselves “working class.”
16. T
17. T
18. T
19. T
20. T
21. T
22. F The South has been more accommodating.
23. F Barry Goldwater was the first.
24. T
25. F With higher levels of information typically comes higher levels of ideological constraint.
26. T
27. T

ANSWERS TO MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. d
2. e
3. c
4. b
5. a

6. b
7. b
8. a
9. e
10. b
11. a
12. e
13. b
14. e
15. a
16. c
17. a
18. a
19. c
20. a
21. d
22. b
23. d
24. b