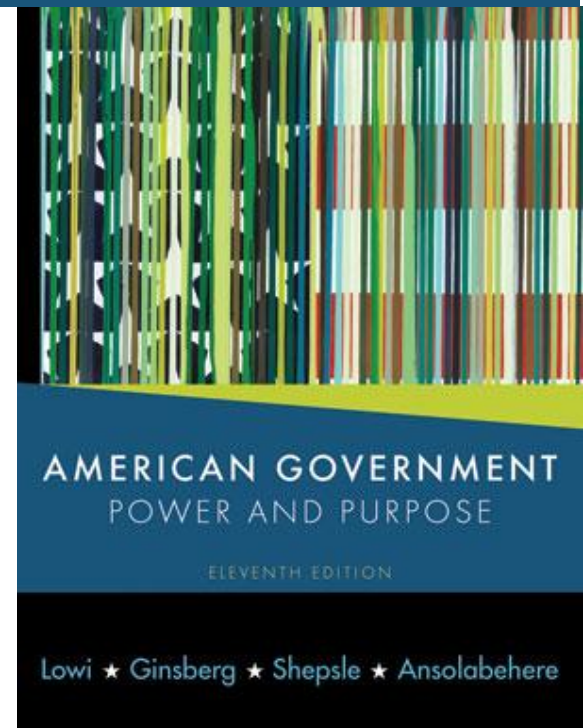


9

Public Opinion

AMERICAN GOVERNMENT POWER AND PURPOSE

Lowi ♦ Ginsberg ♦ Shepsle ♦ Ansolabehere



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America's Tyrannical Majority

Observing America in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville warned of the potential for the “tyranny of the majority.”

“I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America In America the majority raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion; within these barriers an author may write what he pleases, but woe to him if he goes beyond them.”

—Alexis de Tocqueville,
Democracy in America



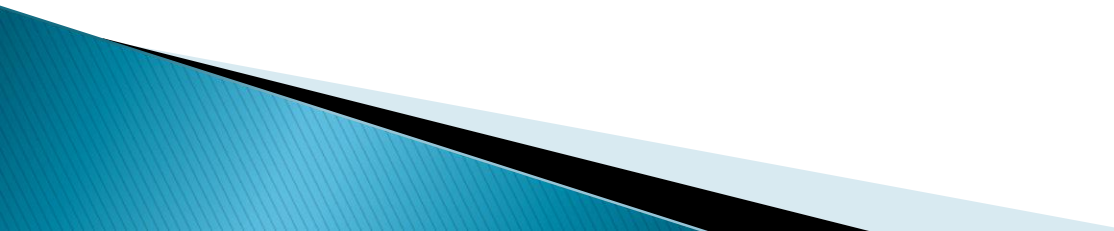


Tocqueville even argued that in America, the power of the majority was greater than that of a king:

“The authority of a king is physical and controls the actions of men without subduing their will. But the majority possesses a power that is physical and moral at the same time, which acts upon the will as much as upon the actions and represses not only all contest, but all controversy.”

In a democratic republic like the United States, where the ultimate authority for all government actions is “the people,” the will of the majority structures debate and itself guides public opinion.

In the United States, it may truly be said that public opinion is king.



Changes in Public Opinion

Opinion polls fluctuate greatly over time.

To the extent that contemporary politicians live by the polls, it is also true that their political power can evaporate quickly.





At the beginning of 2003, nearly 90 percent of the American public approved of George W. Bush's handling of the war on terrorism and over 60 percent approved of his handling of the economy.

By fall 2005, less than 50 percent approved of his handling of terrorism and approval on his handling of the economy dropped below 35 percent, where it remained more or less until the end of his presidency.

Barack Obama started out with high approval, but it flagged during the summer of 2009.

According to the Gallup organization, Obama's approval was as high as 69 percent in January of 2009, but it fell to about 50 percent by August and September 2009.

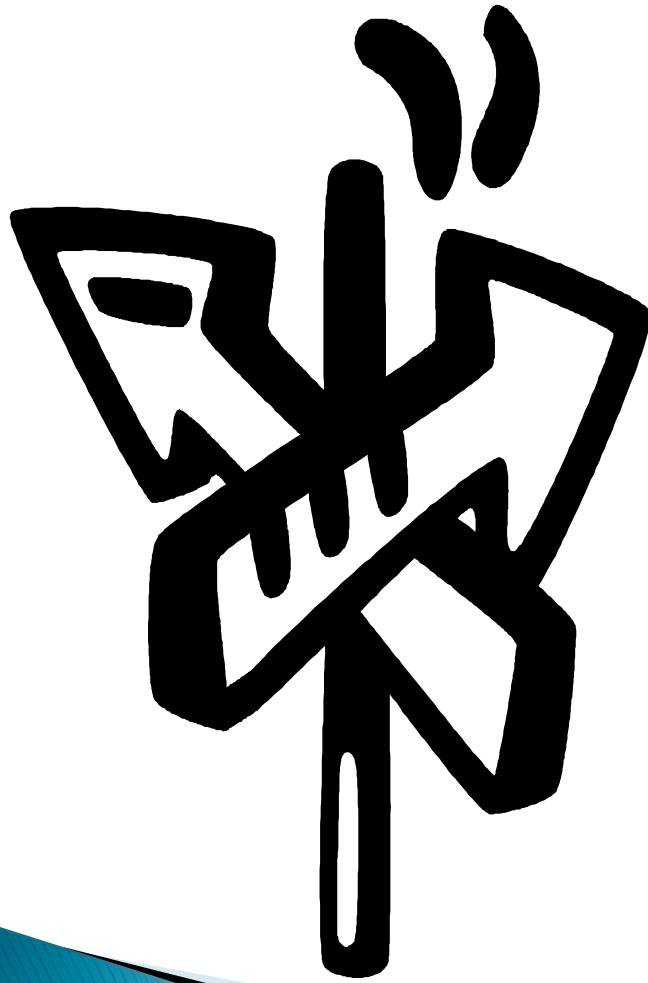
Characteristics of Public Opinion

Definition

Public opinion is “the values and attitudes that people have about issues, events, and personalities.”

Characteristics

1. Direction
2. Intensity
3. Saliency
4. Latency



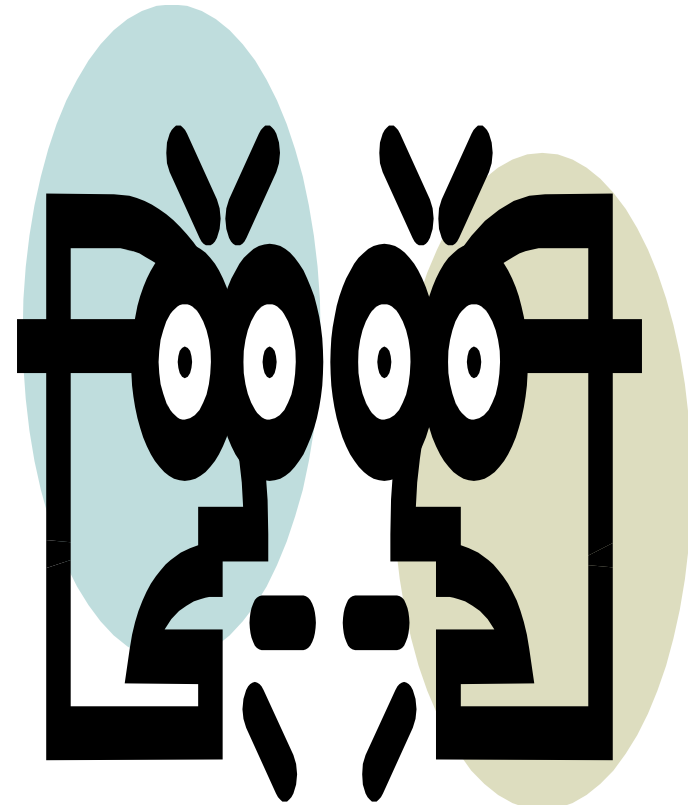
Public opinion has **direction**.

Whatever the response to a public opinion poll—“yes” or “no;” “more” or “less;” “1” or “100”—people have opinions about proper directions and preferred alternatives.

Liberals are said to be on the left and conservatives are said to be on the right.

If direction measures what people think, **intensity** refers to how deeply individuals hold a given opinion and how likely they are to act on it.

Not all opinions are equally felt by citizens, and thus not all opinions are equally consequential for politics.



President Obama's proposal to overhaul the nation's health care system met with opposition during the summer of 2009, when intense and vocal opponents (though arguably just a vocal minority) voiced their frustrations at town hall meetings and rallies.



If **direction** and **intensity** characterize individual opinions, **saliency** and **latency** characterize overall opinion.”

Salient opinion is that which enjoys widespread public attention and is a high priority.

Latent opinion may be widespread, but it generally remains in the background, un-molded, un-mobilized, and un-crystallized.

The Marketplace of Ideas

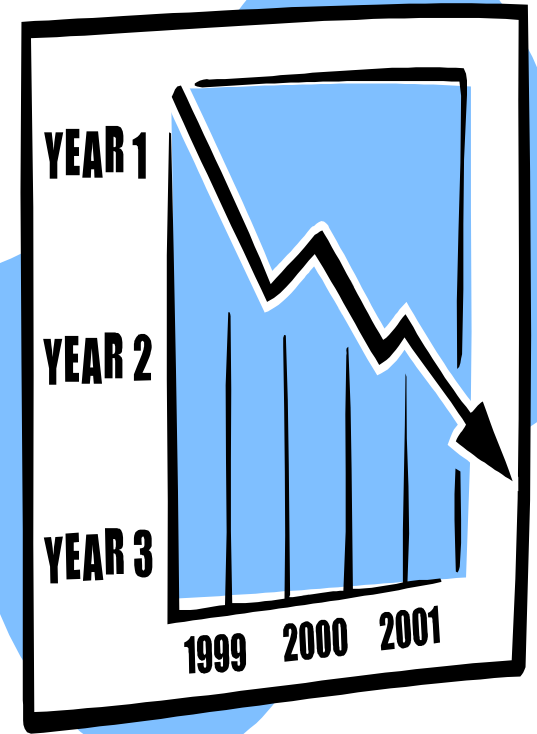


Different ideas and opinions compete for democratic acceptance and legitimacy in a “marketplace of ideas.”

In theory, the best or most popular issues will rise to the top having survived the competition of the “idea market.”

The American idea market has produced consensus around many core issues, some of which are so consensual that they are no longer actively debated. Such consensus is often a cause of latent opinion.

There is substantial consensus on broad concepts like democracy, liberty, and equality of opportunity.



As Tocqueville might have predicted, one negative consequence of the marketplace of ideas is that unpopular ideas, however good, may not be given a chance to compete.

Ideas that may be good, should they seem at first glance to be unpopular, are likely to go unexpressed. If they go unexpressed, they do not receive the consideration that might have, in the end, made them seem more appealing.

In this way, differences in public opinion can be very valuable.



Differences in Public Opinion

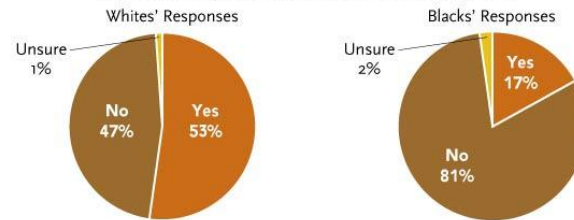
Despite widespread agreement, fundamental disagreements continue, both in terms of how we define our core areas of consensus and over specific issues.

Political divisions between liberals and conservatives reflect relatively consistent differences among Americans.

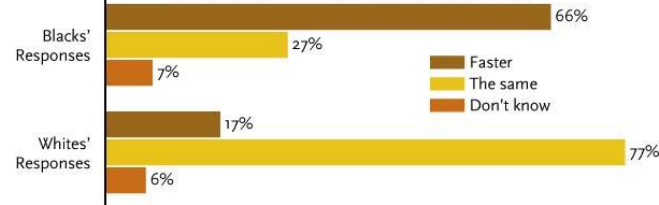
Moreover, demographic differences (between and among racial and ethnic groups and between men and women) persist and define many of the important political battles in American politics.

Disagreement Among Blacks and Whites

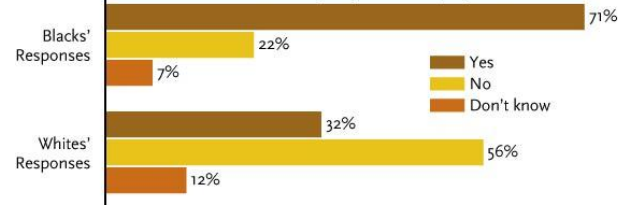
Do you feel that racial minorities in this country have equal job opportunities as whites, or not?



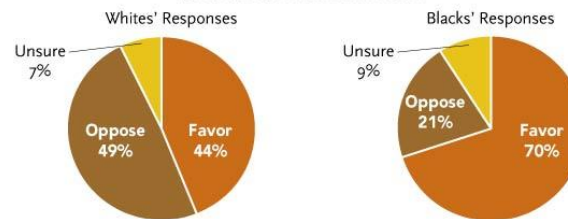
What would the government's response have been if most victims of Hurricane Katrina had been white?



Does the government's response to Hurricane Katrina show that racial inequality is still a major problem?



Do you generally favor or oppose affirmative action programs for racial minorities?



Changing Partisan Division in The Latino Community

Background	2004		2008	
	Dem. %	Rep. %	Dem. %	Rep. %
Cuban	17	52	53	20
Mexican	47	18	50	18
Puerto Rican	50	17	61	11

SOURCE: Mark Hugo Lopez and Susan Minushkin, "2008 National Survey of Latinos: Hispanic Voter Attitudes," Pew Hispanic Center Report, July 24, 2008, <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/90.pdf> (accessed 4/30/09).

Should Same-sex Marriage be Legalized?

Religious Group	In Favor (%)	Opposed (%)
White evangelical Protestant	14	81
White nonevangelical Protestant	43	47
White non-Hispanic Catholic	41	49
Black Protestant	15	79
Secular	60	30

SOURCE: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "A Stable Majority: Most Americans Still Oppose Same-Sex Marriage," April 1, 2008, <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=290> (accessed 3/24/09).

Disagreements Among Men and Women on Issues of War and Peace

Government Action	Approve of Action (%)	
	Men	Women
Going to war against Iraq (2003)	66	50
Brokering a cease-fire in Yugoslavia instead of using NATO air strikes (1999)	44	51
Ending the ban on homosexuals in the military (1993)	34	51
Engaging in a military operation against a Somali warlord (1993)	72	60
Going to war against Iraq (1991)	72	53

SOURCE: Gallup polls, 1991, 1993, and 1999; *Washington Post*, 2003.

Education and Public Opinion

Issues	Level of Education			
	Grade School	High School	Some College	College Graduate
Women and men should have equal roles.	73	82	90	90
Abortion should never be permitted.	27	17	12	9
The government should adopt national health insurance.	66	58	50	49
Helping to bring democracy to other nations is a very important.	36	27	21	12
Government should see to fair treatment in jobs for African Americans.	80	58	54	60
Government should provide fewer services to reduce government spending.	10	18	21	25

NOTE: The figures show the percentage of respondents in each category agreeing with the statement.

SOURCE: American National Election Studies 2008 data, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, www.electionstudies.org.

Beyond demographics, public opinion is also affected by other **agents of socialization** like membership in social groups and education levels.

Note the differences between religious groups and by education levels, for example.

Agents of socialization are the social institutions, including families and schools, that help shape an individual's basic political beliefs and values.

Typically, when we think of families as agents of socialization in public opinion, we imply that parental political awareness and attitudes influence children.

Still, some political observers noted that in 2008, younger voters were talking to their parents and grandparents about why they supported Barack Obama.

To what extent can we consider these younger voters as agents of socialization? To what extent are socialization and persuasion related? To what extent are they different?



Shaping Opinion

Political opinions are also shaped in the marketplace of ideas by:

- Political leaders;
- Private groups;
- The media.



Governments and politicians seek to monitor and shape public opinion to build public support for governmental actions and policies.

In recent years, politicians have increasingly used technologies such as public opinion polls and media appeals to shape public opinion.





Other political actors, such as **outside interest groups** and the **mass media** itself, seek to sell their ideas and influence “tastes” in the idea marketplace.

Measuring Public Opinion: Polls

Public opinion polls are prevalent in contemporary American politics.

Media organizations—a newspapers and television—often have in-house polling operations and report public opinion data on a regular basis.



The Policy Principle:

*Political outcomes
are the products of
individual
preferences and
institutional
procedures.*

Poll data results from the interaction between actual public opinion and the institutional means—in this instance, the poll—that was used to identify and collect that opinion.

Measuring Public Opinion

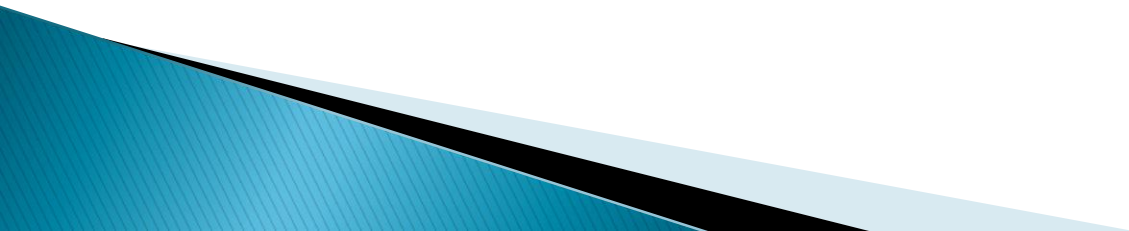
Public opinion polls, scientific instruments for measuring public opinion, are now prevalent in American politics.

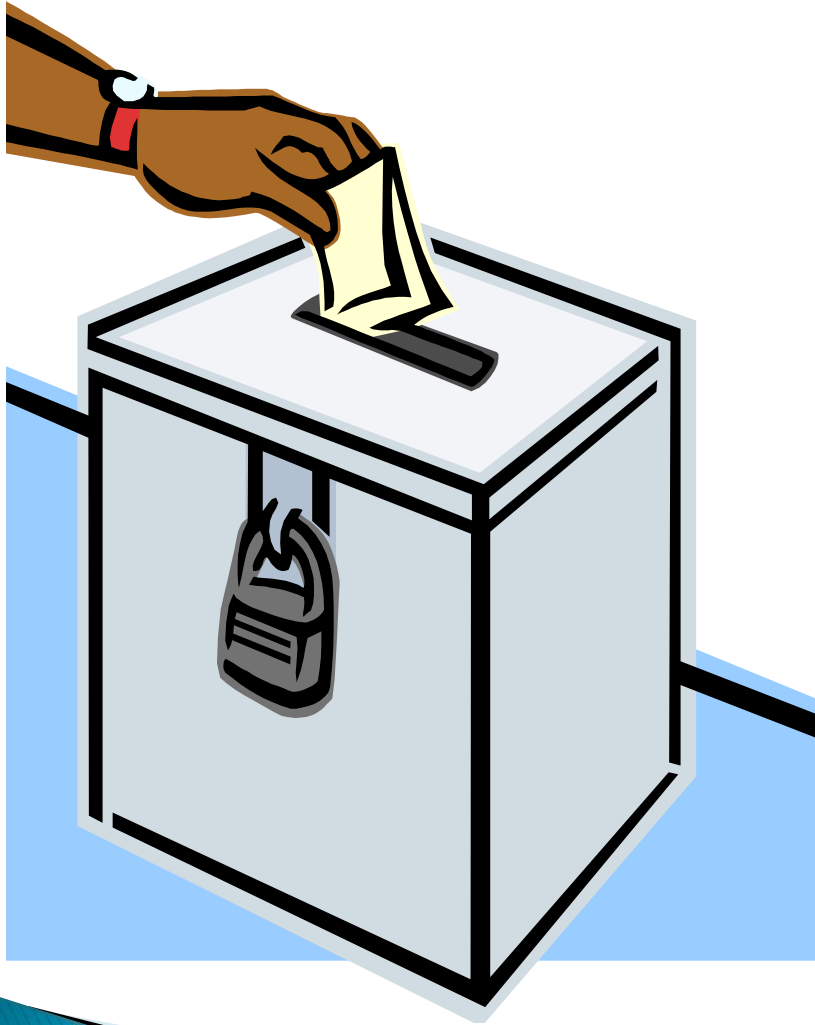
Media organizations—newspapers and television—often have in-house polling operations and report public opinion data on a regular basis.



Pollsters begin by choosing a small group of respondents to represent the most important characteristics of an entire population.

Selecting a representative **sample** is key to being able to make generalizations about a poll's results.





If done correctly, public opinion polls are remarkably accurate snapshots of public sentiment at any given time and reasonably good predictors of election outcomes.

Two Pollsters and Their Records

Year	Presidential Candidates	Harris	Gallup	Actual Outcome
2008	McCain	44	43	46
	Obama	50	51	53
2004	Bush, G. W.	49	49	51
	Kerry	48	49	48
	Nader	1	1	0
2000	Bush, G. W.	47	48	48
	Gore	47	46	49
	Nader	5	4	3
1996	Clinton	51	52	49
	Dole	39	41	41
	Perot	9	7	8
1992	Clinton	44	44	43
	Bush, G. H. W.	38	37	38
	Perot	17	14	19
1988	Bush, G. H. W.	51	53	54
	Dukakis	47	42	46
1984	Reagan	56	59	59
	Mondale	44	41	41
1980	Reagan	48	47	51
	Carter	43	44	41
	Anderson		8	
1976	Carter	48	48	51
	Ford	45	49	48

Two Pollsters and Their Records

1972	Nixon	59	62	61
	McGovern	35	38	38
1968	Nixon	40	43	43
	Humphrey	43	42	43
	Wallace	13	15	14
1964	Johnson	62	64	61
	Goldwater	33	36	39
1960	Kennedy	49	51	50
	Nixon	41	49	49
1956	Eisenhower	NA*	60	58
	Stevenson		41	42
1952	Eisenhower	47	51	55
	Stevenson	42	49	44
Year	Presidential Candidates	Harris	Gallup	Actual Outcome
1948	Truman	NA*	44.5	49.6
	Dewey		49.5	45.1

*Not asked

NOTE: Figures are percentages. All except those for 1948 are rounded.

SOURCE: Data from the Harris survey and the Gallup poll, Chicago Tribune–New York News Syndicate, various press releases, 1964–2008. Courtesy of Louis Harris & Associates and the Gallup Organization.



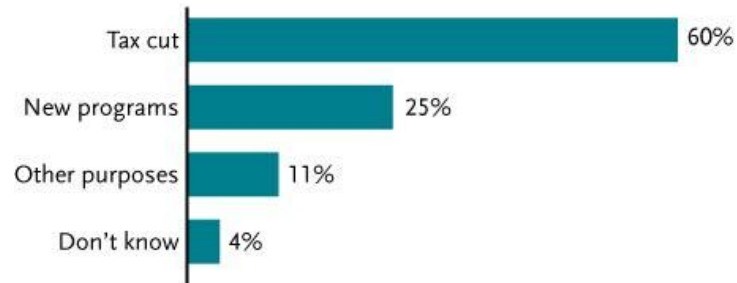
Poor construction and mistaken interpretations of polls can misrepresent public opinion. Problems include:

- Poor sampling;
- Question wording and ordering;
- Illusion of saliency;
- Illusion of central tendency.

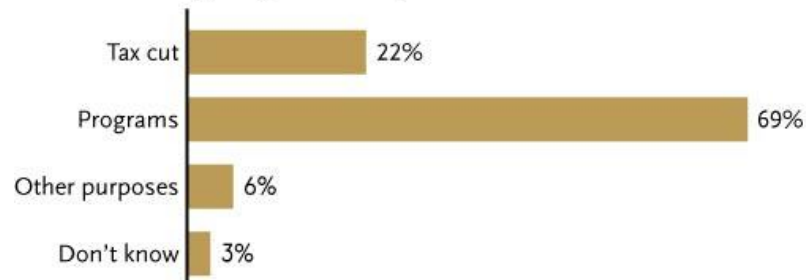
THE QUESTION

President Clinton has proposed setting aside approximately two thirds of an expected budget surplus to fix the Social Security system. What do you think the leaders in Washington should do with the remainder of the surplus?

Variation 1: Should the money be used for a tax cut, or should it be used to fund new government programs?



Variation 2: Should the money be used for a tax cut or should it be spent on programs for education, the environment, health care, crime fighting, and military defense?



Polls and their results can also influence public opinion.

Poll results can produce the **bandwagon effect**, whereby there is a shift in support to a candidate or opinion because the polls portray its popularity.

Push polling is a technique in which the questions asked in a poll are designed, not to measure a respondent's opinion, but to change it.

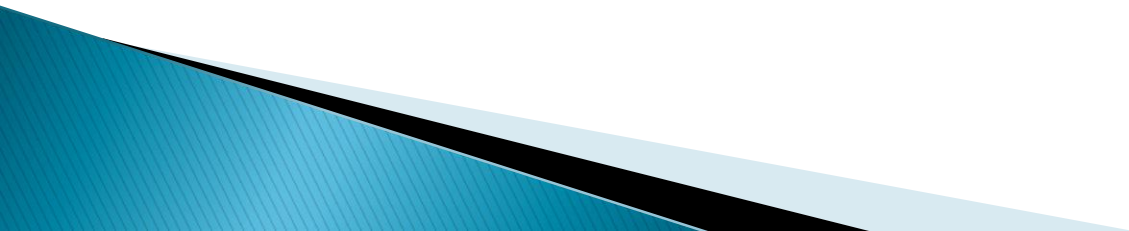
More than simply misunderstanding public opinion, polling actually *transforms* opinion and has an effect on its importance in politics.

Prior to widespread poll use, politicians used informal methods to measure public sentiment. They would:

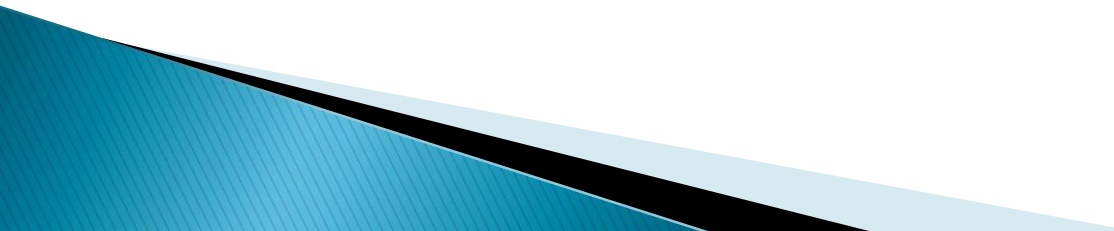
- ▶ Monitor press reports and editorials;
- ▶ Tabulate letters and phone calls from constituents;
- ▶ Consult “opinion surrogates” like barbers and cab drivers.

The Advent of Polling

When polling replaced these more informal methods of measuring public opinion, the new technology actually transformed the opinion that influenced politics.



In *The Captive Public*, Benjamin Ginsberg argued that polling transforms public opinion in ways that “domesticate” it and make it more manageable for politicians.

1. Polling transfers the cost of opinion expression from the public to pollsters.
 2. Polling changes public opinion expression from a potentially disruptive behavior to an attitude.
- 

3. Polling takes the expression of public opinion away from groups and individuates it.
4. Polling transforms opinion expression from a free assertion to a constrained response.

Still, when polls are conducted correctly, they are remarkably accurate. For this reason, politicians and political observers pay a great deal of attention to polling.




Public Opinion and Democracy

What is the proper use of polls in American politics?

To retain its democratic characteristics, American politics must reflect public opinion in important respects.

But to remain republican, American politics must avoid constant decision making by plebiscite.

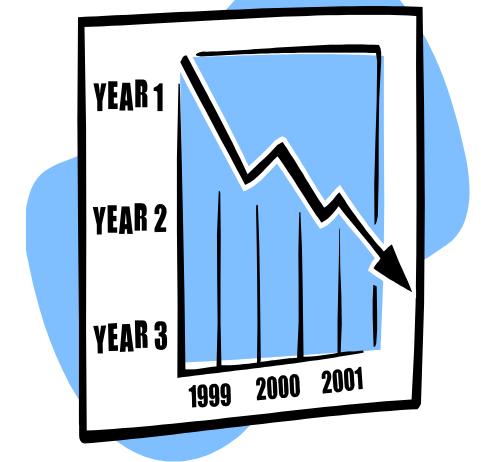


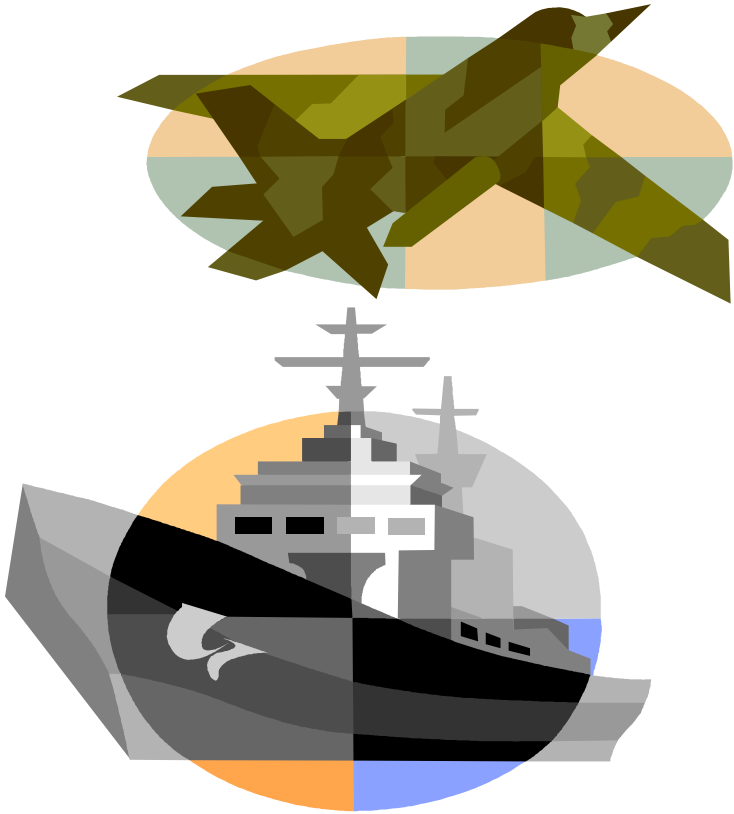
There are several problems associated with following polls to make policy.

- ▶ The American public frequently lacks adequate information on policies.
- ▶ Public opinion often lacks coherence and is internally contradictory.
- ▶ Public support is volatile and changes over time.

How do, and how should, politicians use polls in their decision making?

Although most politicians deny being “poll driven,” most politicians at the national level—and all modern presidents—use polls to make decisions.





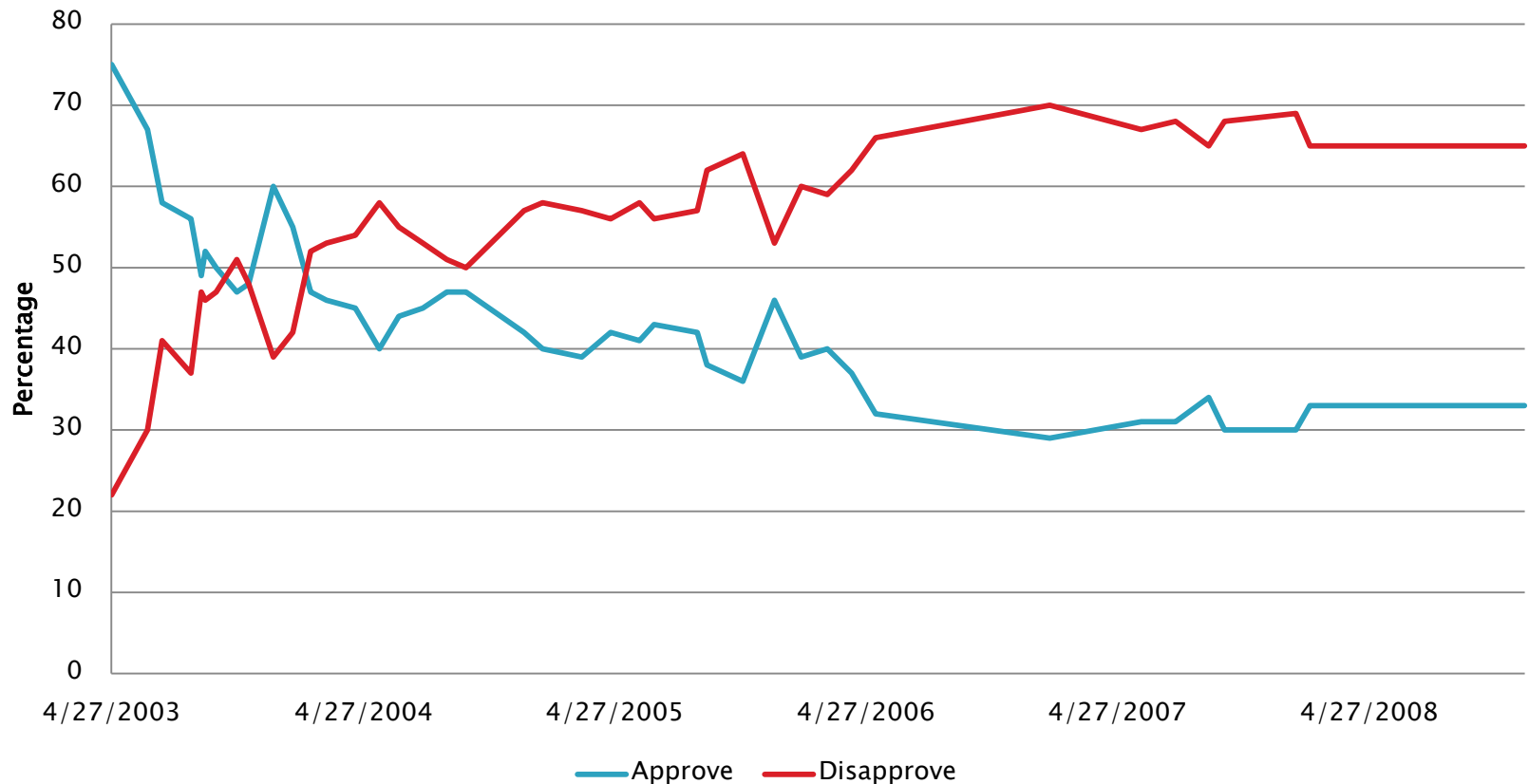
Is it appropriate for politicians to make decisions about international affairs, especially the decision to go to war, on the basis of public approval?

Although the American public gives presidents a great deal of deference and support during wartime, ultimately such approval may wane, based on media reports or failures in the policy.

President George W. Bush enjoyed high levels of public support at the beginning of the war with Iraq, but as the war dragged on and conditions on the ground worsened, public approval waned.



Public Approval/Disapproval of President George W. Bush's Handling of Iraq, 2003–2008



Source: ABC News/*Washington Post* Poll, various dates, 2003–2007. The question asked of respondents was, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bush is handling the situation in Iraq?” <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>, accessed 5/25/2006 and 12/19/2007 and updated 9/25/2009.

To what extent should public support for the war in Iraq matter for the making of U.S. foreign policy?

What are the downsides of conducting a war based on polls?

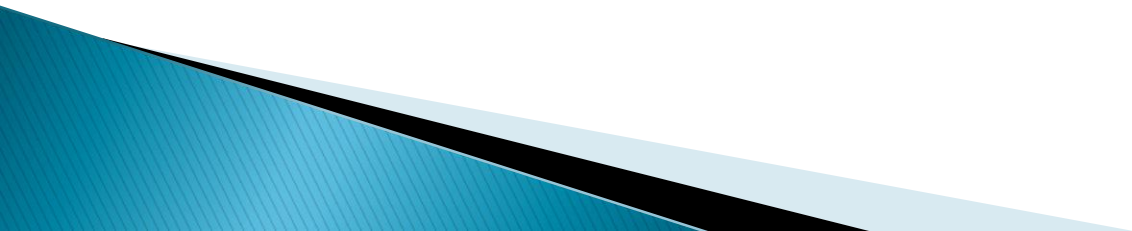
Still, what are the implications for a democracy where public opinion is not effective in determining foreign policy?



What do you think this long-term decline in public support for President Bush's prosecution of the war in Iraq portends for Barack Obama?

Do these trends reflect support for President Bush alone, support for the war in general, or a general public mood about U.S. use of military force throughout the world?

Additional Art for Chapter 9



ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE

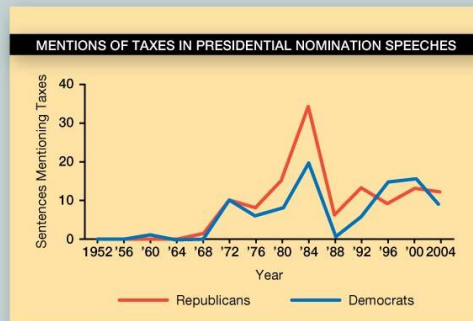
Public Opinion and Taxes

Nobody likes to pay taxes. The United States was founded in part due to disputes over taxes. Talk of taxes dominates political campaigns. Americans simply hate taxes, right?

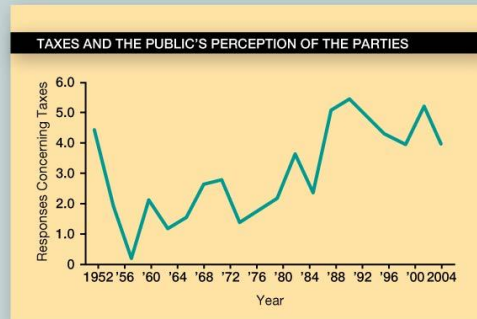
That wasn't always the case. Both the importance of taxes to politics and American dislike of taxes were lower during the 1950s and 1960s than during the period from the 1970s to the present. What changed after the 1960s? Why did taxes become more important to the public? What encouraged politicians to campaign on tax issues?

One measure of the centrality of taxes in political campaigns is the number of times the topic is mentioned in presidential nomination acceptance speeches. These data show that the word *taxes* barely passed the lips of the major-party nominees until after the 1960s. The numbers on the vertical axis represent the number of sentences mentioning taxes in nomination acceptance speeches.

Source: Author content analysis of acceptance speeches as compiled by the Woolley and Peters American Presidency Project.



In earlier decades, taxes weren't very important to members of the public, either. The National Election Study has asked respondents what they like and dislike about each of the political parties at least every four years since 1952. With the exception of 1952, when the presidential election featured talk of lowering taxes after World War II, the percentages of all "likes" and "dislikes" that concerned taxes were much lower during the 1950s and 1960s than in later decades. Here the vertical axis shows the percentages of all "likes" and "dislikes" (for Republicans and Democrats combined) that concern taxes.



Source: National Election Studies Cumulative File.

Political scientists don't have a definitive answer, but there are a number of plausible explanations. One factor could be the increasing effective costs of taxes. During the 1950s and 1960s, per capita taxes increased rapidly, but real wages grew even faster. With Americans' disposable income growing, the impact of taxes was muted. But during the 1970s, oil shocks and worldwide economic slowdown reduced wage growth. High inflation both ate into Americans' purchasing power and pushed them into higher and higher tax brackets (a phenomenon called *bracket creep*). As taxes took a bigger bite, their salience to the public grew.

Another explanation, popularized by the journalists Thomas and Mary Edsall in their 1992 book *Chain Reaction*, is that taxes became linked in the public mind with race-related policies. They hypothesized that with the Great Society policies of the 1960s, white Americans in particular came to resent the use of their tax dollars for welfare and other means-tested policies they believed they would never benefit from themselves.

The salience of taxes may also have been fueled by institutional changes within Congress. During the 1950s and 1960s, tax policy was dominated by the House Ways and Means Committee and its powerful chairman for much of this period, Wilbur Mills. The committee and its chair held both tight jurisdiction over taxes and tremendous power within the chamber, which allowed the containment of politics around taxes to a small tax policy community. Reforms in the late 1960s and early 1970s reduced the power of Ways and Means, which had to establish subcommittees for the first time, open its hearings to the public, and give up its control over committee assignments, previously an important source of leverage over House members. These changes opened up the insulated tax policy-making community, paving the way for tax politics as public spectacle.

Finally, tax revolts in some states demonstrated to politicians the expediency of taxes as a political issue. In 1978, California voters, frustrated that the state legislature had done nothing to cut taxes in a period of large budget surpluses and growing state and local tax burdens, took matters into their own hands by passing Proposition 13. The ballot initiative capped property tax rates and also instituted a two-thirds majority requirement in both houses of the state legislature for any subsequent increases in state taxes. Prop 13 convinced politicians, including the presidential candidate Ronald Reagan, that "tax cuts were good politics," according to the sociologist Isaac Martin.¹ Other entrepreneurial politicians, particularly in the Republican party, strove to keep taxes on the public agenda and to cement the GOP's image as the party of tax cuts.

It is likely that all of these factors contributed to the heightening of taxes as a political issue. And given the current budget deficit, growing national debt, and mismatch between projected revenues and likely spending on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid over the long term, taxes will undoubtedly be high on the political agenda for some time to come.

¹Isaac William Martin, *The Permanent Tax Revolt* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 15.

Source: Adapted from *How Americans Think about Taxes* by Andrea Louise Campbell (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

This concludes the presentation slides for Chapter 9: Public Opinion

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