

13. Public Opinion & Mass Media

Breakout Sessions

POLS 1101

12:40pm-1:30pm Park Hall 145

& 1:50pm-2:40pm Leconte Hall 135

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Public Opinion and Democracy

- **Majoritarianism:** A majority of the people holds **clear, consistent opinions** on government policy. The government should act as it's expected.
- **Pluralism:** The public as a whole **seldom** demonstrates clear, consistent opinion. The government should allow free expression from “minority publics”.
 - Opinion polls tend to support that the public is uniformed. -> **Is it accurate?**
 - How the sample is selected (random sample is better)
 - The size of the sample (larger sample is better)
 - The amount of variation in the population (**greater / less variation?**)
 - E.g. **If we wish to know the ideology distribution of the public through observing what they post on X (Twitter), what are the advantages and disadvantages?**
 - Shape of the opinion distribution, and its political implications
 - **Normal distribution** -> moderate government policy
 - **Skewed distribution** -> a high level of consensus, but can overlook minorities
 - > **Does the political process sometimes depend more on how many people strongly oppose an issue than on how many people strongly support it?**
 - **Bimodal distribution** -> political conflict

Stability of Public Opinion Matters!

- A **stable distribution**: opinions show little change over time.
- However, even the most enduring ideological labels were not always this way.
 - **Abortion**
 - *In the early years, there was much more ambiguity:* both parties had factions for and against abortion, and public opinion was not strongly split along party lines. (Biden was against the abortion right when he was newly elected as a senator!)
 - After the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion nationwide, conservative religious movements and Republican strategists turned abortion into a central cultural and electoral issue, while Democrats increasingly aligned with abortion-rights advocates.
 - Politicians choose sides, and voters follow. Now it's one of the most partisan-related issues in U.S.
 - **Same-sex marriage**
 - It gained more public approval in the past years (driven in part by President Trump's general acceptance of it, so that Republican Congress members could vote for their own view).
 - After *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, things may change...
 - **Public opinion can evolve under the impact of politics; can even totally turn to the opposite position! ("changing definitions of a problem")**

Stable Ideology-related Public Opinion

- A general conclusion: People's ideological and partisan orientations tend to represent fairly stable distributions. – **Risk of overlooking subgroups**
 - That's why we need random sampling, large sample size, and more heterogeneity.
- Fact: we hear about polarization every day, but there are still many people self recognized as "**moderate**".
- **Be cautious when labeling people – even for yourself!**
 - **Social identity confirmation:** You can tend to be what you claim to be!
- Does “value-free” or moderate position mean political apathy?
- Would you think political apathy something good (or bad)?
- Can the moderate majority, though seemingly ironic, be under-represented (because they don't like to reveal their preferences)? Especially, under the discursive power of elites and the ideology of “paying more attention to marginalized groups”?

Americans' Political Ideology, by Year

How would you describe your political views -- very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal or very liberal?

— % Conservative — % Moderate % Liberal



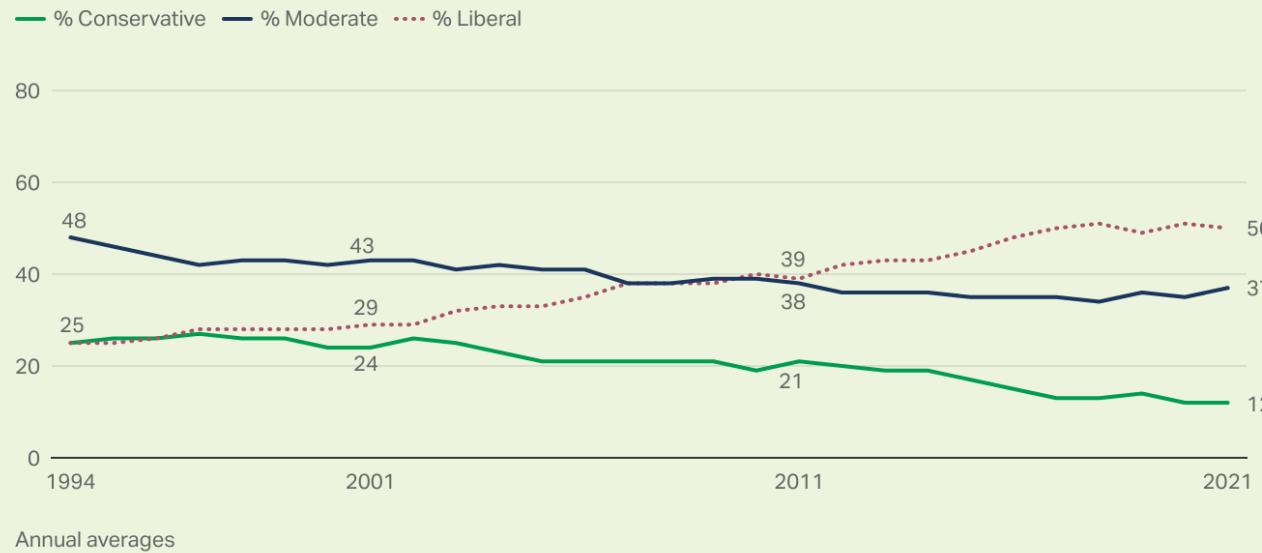
Shaded areas denote periods when gap between % conservative and % moderate was consistently two percentage points or less

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1. Which of the three ideological labels shows the greatest change in group proportion?
2. Has the proportion of moderates increased or decreased over time?
3. Whenever there are major political events (such as economic crises, elections, or social movements), do the proportions of these labels show short-term fluctuations?
4. Which forces might be driving this “relabeling” process?

Source: https://news.gallup.com/poll/388988/political-ideology-steady-conservatives-moderates-tie.aspx?utm_source=chatgpt.com

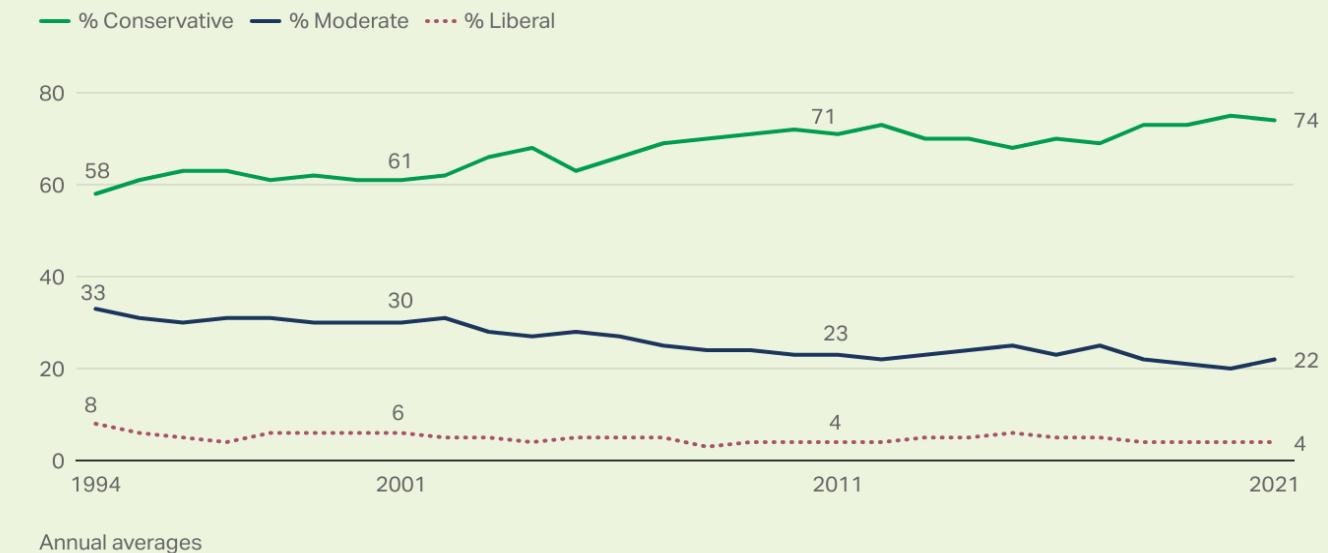
Democrats' Political Ideology, 1994-2021



✓ What do you find?

✓ Are there any fun and/or important facts?

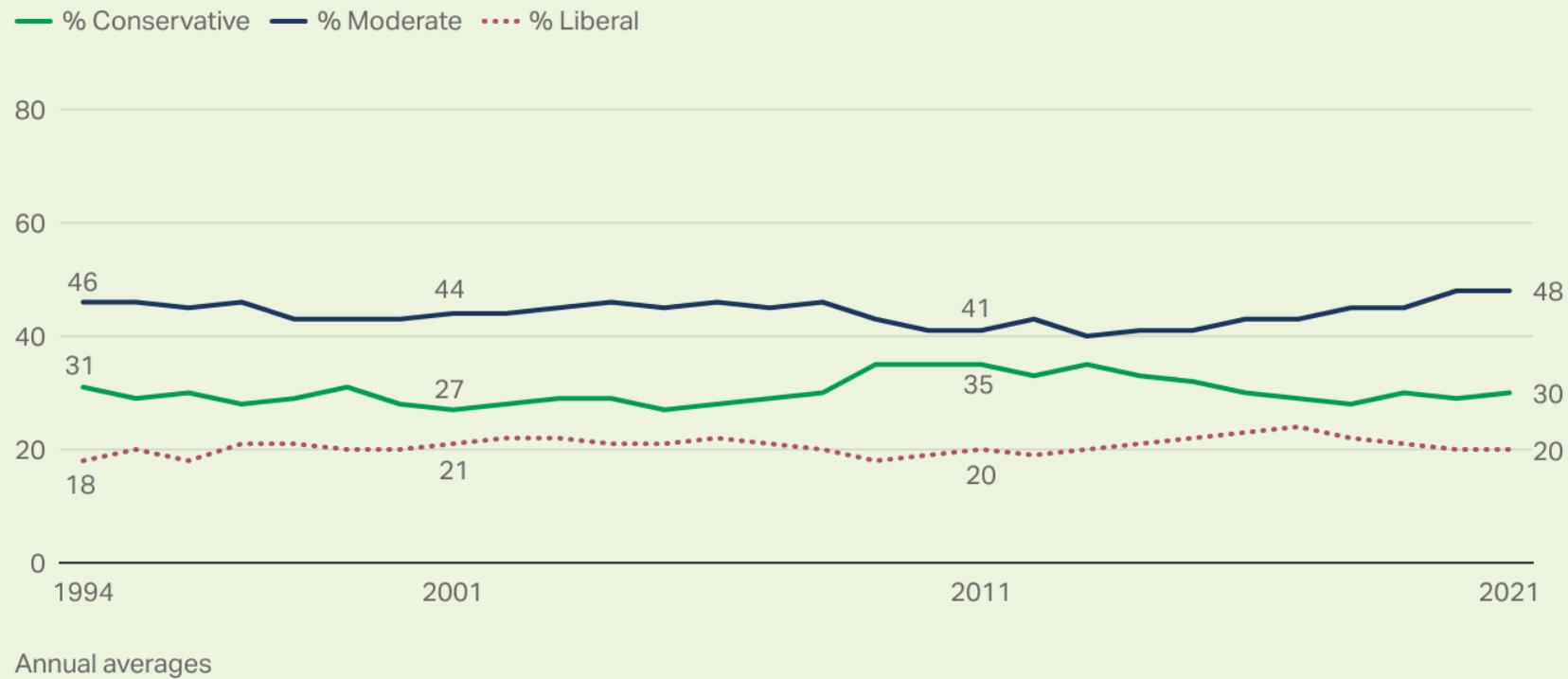
Republicans' Political Ideology, 1994-2021



Source: https://news.gallup.com/poll/388988/political-ideology-steady-conservatives-moderates-tie.aspx?utm_source=chatgpt.com

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Independents' Political Ideology, 1994-2021



✓ **What inspirations can we get from this trend (or almost “no clear trend”)?**

Source: https://news.gallup.com/poll/388988/political-ideology-steady-conservatives-moderates-tie.aspx?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Americans' Political Ideology by Subgroup, 2021

	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal
	%	%	%
U.S. adults	36	37	25
Gender			
Men	41	37	20
Women	32	37	29
Age			
18 to 29	23	41	34
30 to 49	33	40	25
50 to 64	43	36	19
65+	45	32	21
Education			
Postgraduate	27	36	36
College graduate only	31	38	30
Some college	38	39	22
No college	42	37	19
Household income			
\$100,000 or more	36	38	26
\$40,000 to <\$100,000	37	38	25
Less than \$40,000	35	39	25
Race/Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic White adults	42	34	23
Non-Hispanic Black adults	20	51	26
Hispanic adults	31	38	28

✓ **What do you find?**

✓ **Are there any fun and/or important facts?**

Region

East	31	39	29
Midwest	37	37	24
South	42	36	19
West	32	38	28

Party ID

Republicans	74	22	4
Independents	30	48	20
Democrats	12	37	50

Based on combined monthly data from January to December 2021

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Source: https://news.gallup.com/poll/388988/political-ideology-steady-conservatives-moderates-tie.aspx?utm_source=chatgpt.com

How People Form Their Opinions?

- **Political socialization**
 - Family (**transmission model**)
 - School (social order -> civic education -> more critical thinking)
 - Community & peers (homogeneity; “information bubble” as the result of self selection)
 - Continuing socialization (workplaces; **mass medias**)
- **Predictors of public opinion**
 - Education, income, region, ethnicity, race, religion, gender... (“SES”)
 - Political knowledge
 - <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/quiz/what-do-you-know-about-the-u-s-government/>
 - Cost-benefit analysis and cues, based on self-interest
 - “National interest” – “**sociotropic responses**”: how the country as a whole is doing can affect political preferences more strongly than one’s own personal circumstance.
 - **Do you have such experiences? (maybe, to some degree, related to “patriotism”?)**
 - Political leadership (**by issue framing**)



Mass Media



- Let's start with a 1-minute survey on media use!
- Print (Newspapers)
- Broadcast (Radio & Television)
 - “Higher-dimensional” information: compared with print media, they are more likely to influence public opinion. (by affecting **attentive policy elites** first; under the **two-step flow of communication**, elites inform their followers to pressure the government)
- Internet
 - Most convenient, but sometimes less reliable (too many sources of information!)
- In “Big data” era, should print and broadcast media still exist? Why or why not?

Private Ownership of the Media

- **What could happen if media is controlled by the government?**
- **The consequences of private ownership**
 - Market-driven entertaining news – newsworthiness lies in audience appeal.
 - E.g. **infotainment / soft news**: a mix of information and diversion oriented to personalities or celebrities; not linked to the day's events, and usually unrelated to public affairs / policy.
 - Concentration (Natural monopoly?)
- **Government regulation of the private media (See textbook)**
 - Should there be **any kind of media regulation** (e.g. in the name of protecting public morality or national security)? Why or why not?
 - How has the rise of **AI-generated content** changed the meaning or feasibility of media regulation?

Functions of the Mass Media

- **Reporting the news:** How the media cover political affairs
 - President: through the Office of the Press Secretary (e.g. news release); **Truth Social?**
 - Congress: press releases, congressional reports, members' social networking accounts
- **Interpreting and presenting:** What they choose to become news (**"Gate-keeper"**)
 - **Horse race journalism** in elections – because individuals have attractive personalities!
 - **Media events** that the mass media are compelled to cover
 - **Television hypothesis:** Television is to blame for the low level of citizens' political knowledge (fragmental information, personal view, under regulation of FCC – can discourage respect for different opinions and lead to political distrust) -> **Is it fair?**
- **Claims of ideological bias among the mass media may be overblown.**
 - Journalists are liberal, but there are no gatekeeping bias and minimal framing bias.
 - Journalists were just as likely to respond to very conservative candidates as very progressive candidates. They weren't more interested in covering a candidate of their own ideology.
 - Conservative newspapers are not overt Trump cheerleaders, and liberal outlets are not overly negative.

Journalist ideology

Distribution of ideology for a sample of 6,801 newspaper political reporters. More liberal attitudes are at the left of the scale, more conservative to the right.

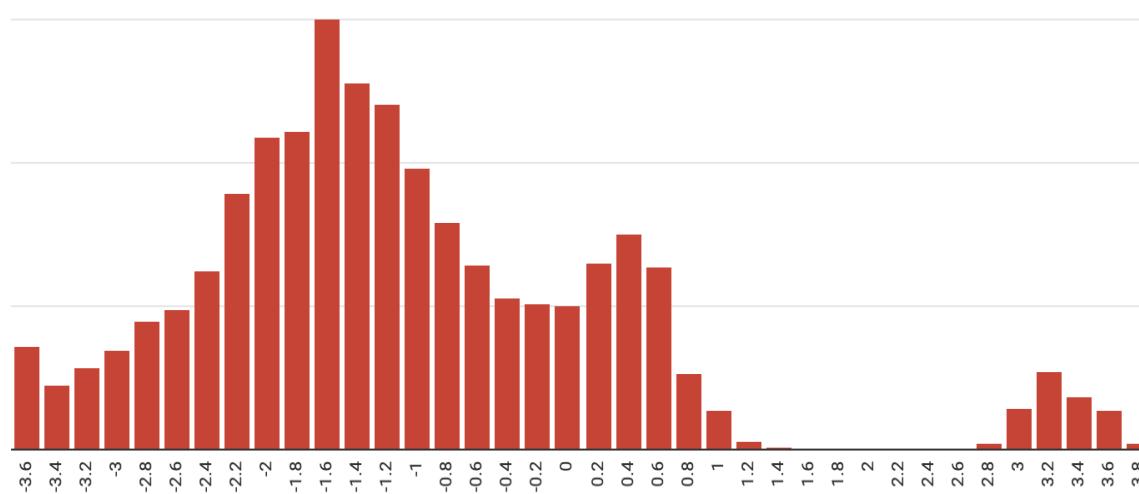


Chart: The Conversation CC-BY-ND • Source: [The American Journalist Survey](#) • Get the data

- ✓ What does this pattern mean,
 - ✓ when we wish to connect “attitude” with “behavior” in an unquestionable way?
 - ✓ when politicians claim that there are bias in the media to undermine negative coverage or avoid blame?

Paper ideology

Distribution of newspaper ideology for 697 newspapers in sample. Lower values indicate more liberal papers. Higher values indicate more conservative papers.

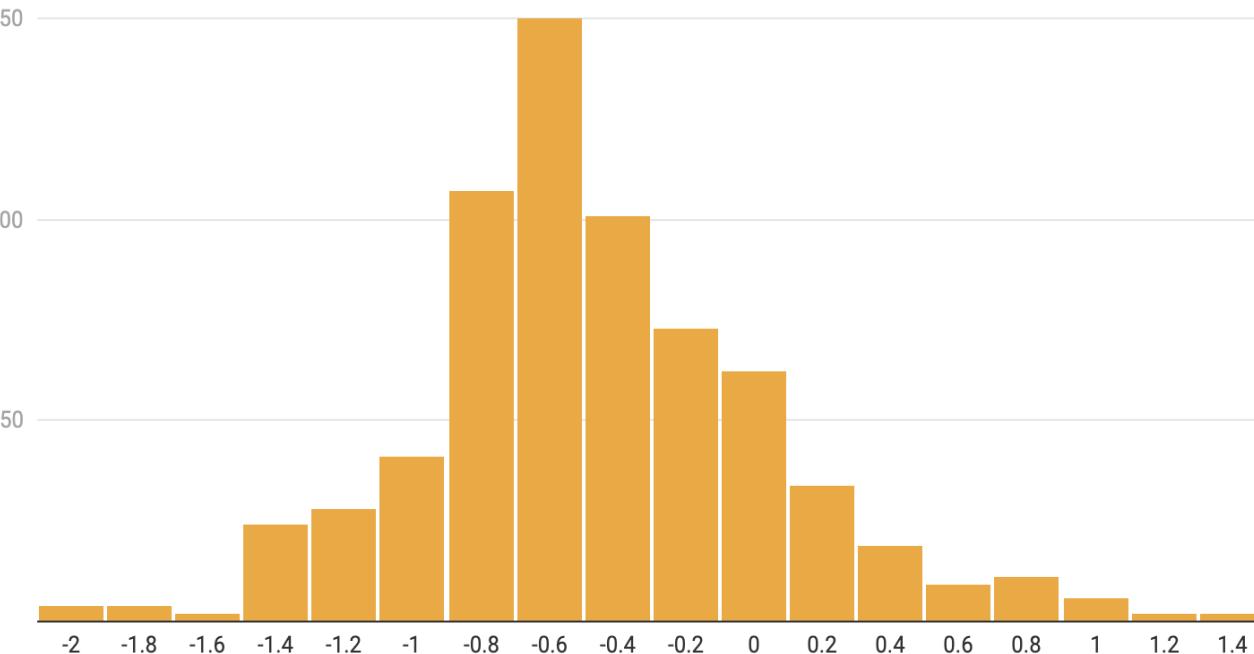


Chart: The Conversation CC-BY-ND • Source: [The American Journalist Survey](#) • Get the data

Functions of the Mass Media (cont'd)

- **Setting the political agenda:** Who follows the news
 - Forcing the government to confront issues identified as needing attention
 - Can also keep the agenda issues that perhaps should attract fewer public resources
 - **Can social media users set the political agenda in the same way traditional media do? Why or why not?**
- **Socializing the citizenry:** What they remember and learn
 - A channel for young people to be “socialized” (talked before)
 - Reinforce the hegemony of existing culture and order
 - **Contradictory roles:** to promote popular support for government, or to erode public confidence
 - **Is political socialization through media primarily a cognitive process (learning information) or an affective one (developing attachments and identities)?**

Evaluating the Mass Media

- Bias do exist (to some extent), but it doesn't matter sometimes.
 - Value-freedom is merely ideal type! And people can have “self-selection”.
- Contributions to democracy
 - **Watchdog journalism:** Journalism that scrutinizes public and business institutions and publicizes perceived misconduct.
 - **Use their polling expertise:** to generate more accurate knowledge of public opinion and to report that knowledge to public officials as well as to the public - so the public opinion influences policy, fit to the majoritarian model of democracy.
- Effects on freedom, order, and equality
 - Advancing **equality** (even at the cost of some personal **freedom**)
 - Resisting government attempts to exchange **freedom** of the press for **order**
 - Democracies sometimes sacrifice order when they preserve freedom
 - **Should journalists engage in a way of activism when reporting on moral issues? Under potential political pressure, should journalist still keep professional ethics?**

Next week...

- Read materials on **Participation & Voting** before class, and that will be helpful to participate in peer discussions.
- Feel free to email me if you have any questions!
- ENJOY YOUR WEEKEND!