

PUBLIC OPINION

J. Alexander Branham

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WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION?

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense.

V. O. Key

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- Standard by which we judge how democracy is functioning
 - Does policy reflect what people want?

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 - For example, elections, town hall meetings, protests, polls

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- **Beliefs** about the current circumstances and consequences of actions
- **Choices** presented

- Preferences reflect what people want

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- Preference *intensity* also important
 - Do you care more about LGBT rights or tax rates?

- What people know (or think they know)

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- What they believe the consequences of their actions will be
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- Beliefs don't have to be based in fact - can be grounded in (e.g.) political ideology or religion

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- In an election, the choices are the candidates
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- Adding (or deleting) choices may change individuals' responses

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- These are referred to as **latent** issues

VARIETY OF OPINION

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- But public opinion is varied - all Americans don't hold the same opinion
- We agree on some of the basics:
 - legitimacy of the Constitution, equality of opportunity, liberty, democracy
- But most issues the government deals with are areas where the public doesn't hold a single view

- Individuals express opinion in a variety of ways

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- Not always easy to interpret

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- Where does majority support lie? How intense is that support?

- Often helpful to think about as support/oppose a policy

INTERPRETATION OF PUBLIC OPINION, CONTINUED

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- Example:
 - Abortion pro-life vs pro-choice
 - But people have more refined opinions (in cases of rape, incest, parental consent, endangering the life of the mother, etc)

- Evaluations of actors and institutions

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 - How is the economy performing? How's your personal outlook?

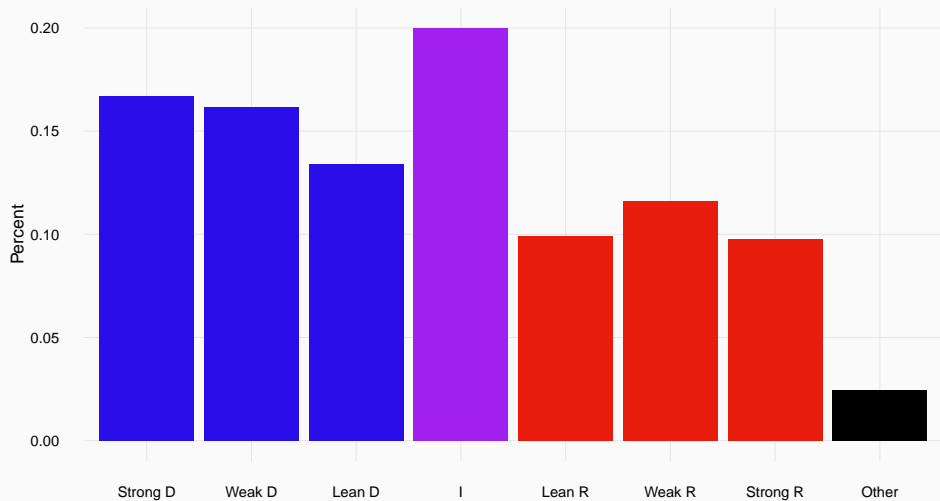
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- Political orientations
 - Party ID and ideology

PARTY ID (2014 GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY)



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- Why is that the case?

ORIGINS AND NATURE OF PUBLIC OPINION

- Self-interest

- Self-interest
- Values

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- Social groups

- Economic

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- Zoning laws, urban development, family laws, etc

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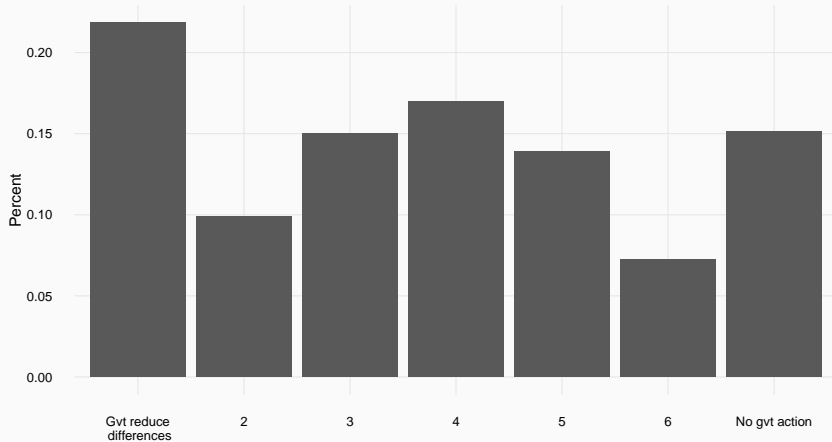
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- What's marriage?
 - Economic arrangement, interracial marriage, gay marriage

Some people think that the government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor. Others think that the government should not concern itself with reducing this income difference between the rich and the poor. Here is a card with a scale from 1 to 7. Think of a score of 1 as meaning that the government ought to reduce the income differences between rich and poor, and a score of 7 meaning that the government should not concern itself with reducing income differences. What score between 1 and 7 comes closest to the way you feel?

EQUAL WEALTH (2014 GSS)



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- **Socialization** is the process through which individuals assimilate collective preferences and norms through social interactions
 - This usually occurs relatively early in life (before 18), but continues at a slower pace throughout life

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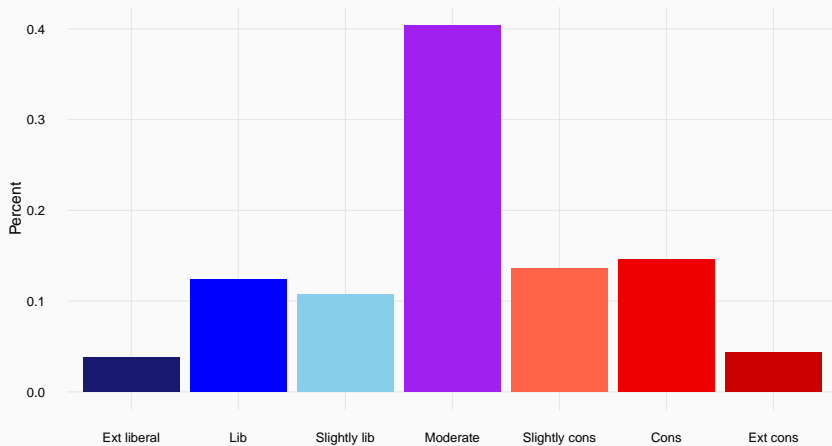
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- Generally, conservatives support the social and economic status quo, favor markets as solutions to social problems, and believe that large and powerful government pose a threat to citizens' freedoms

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- In general, the Democrats represent more liberal views and the Republicans more conservative

IDEOLOGY (2014 GSS)



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- People identify with certain groups because of shared social connections or values and interests
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 - For example, most consider themselves “American” and root for the US during the World Cup

- Political party

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- Political party
 - Usually stable, attachment developed in childhood and carried throughout life
 - The best predictor of how people will vote, even after taking into account self-interest, economics, and other identities
- Oftentimes identity politics refers to historically underrepresented groups

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- Nearly all black people support the Democratic party

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- Education, immigration instead of the economy
- More heterogeneity among Hispanics than black people due to different communities (Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc)
- Hispanics tend to be Democrats, though not to the extent that black people are

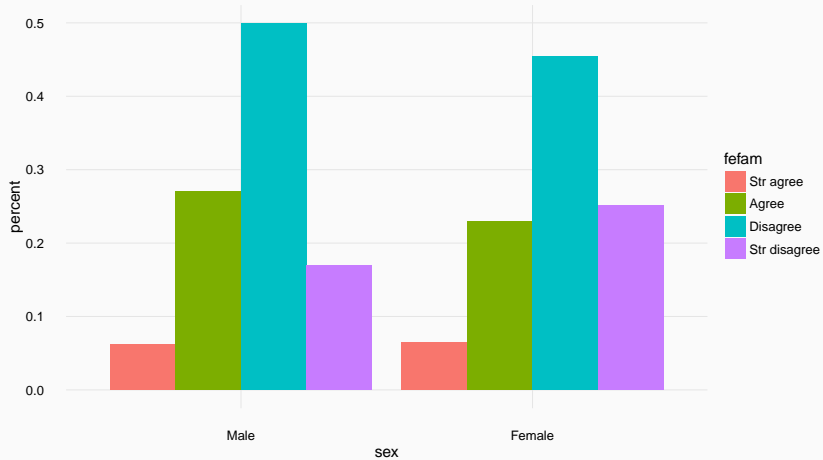
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Now I'm going to read several more statements. As I read each one, please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with it. It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.

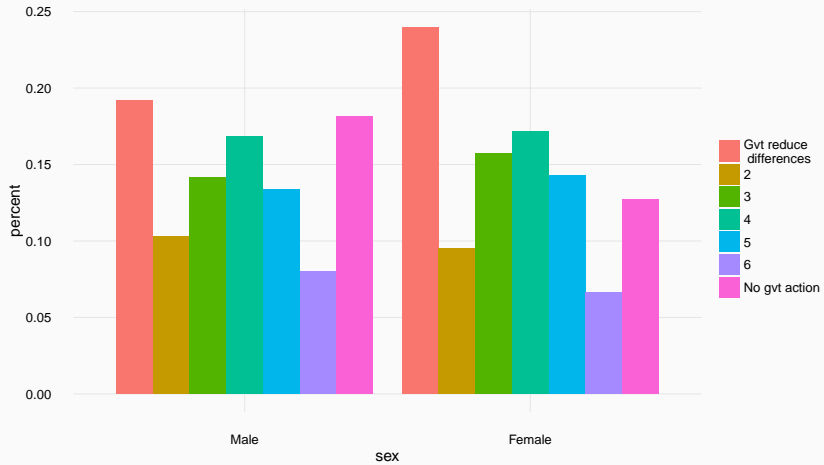
IDENTITY POLITICS - SEX



- Or they can be more difficult to understand why women and men have different views:

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 - Question from several slides ago about government's role in reducing income differences

IDENTITY POLITICS - SEX



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- This difference is relatively small - usually between 5 and 10 percentage points

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- Even neighborhoods that we live in or come from

PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

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- However, they can express (relatively) clear preferences across a broad range of issues
- The reason for this general ignorance is clear:
- It is costly (time, etc) to learn about politics, especially when there's little to no benefit in doing so

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- Another is to view policy proposals through the lens of ideology

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- Although political knowledge for any one individual is low, public opinion in the aggregate is quite stable
- Most people retain one partisanship throughout life
- Individuals' values remain basically stable

- One of democracy's great strengths lies in the aggregation of numbers

((Examples))

- One of democracy's great strengths lies in the aggregation of numbers
- Aggregation counteracts the effects of political ignorance

((Examples))

- Aggregate stability does not mean that opinion never changes

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- 1945 - 1970 civil rights
- 1960s - 1970s taxation

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- 1990 - now gay rights

SHAPING OPINION

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 - Media

- Government tries to convince citizens to think or act certain ways

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- Support for policies (wars, health campaigns, etc)

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- Polls, social media, TV, etc

- Interest groups try to sway public opinion to their side

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- AFL-CIO, Sierra Club, etc

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- Most Americans say that their primary source of information about politics is from the media - newspapers, cable and broadcast TV, radio, internet sites
- The media is the conduit through which information flows

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- Finally, the media can frame issues in a certain way

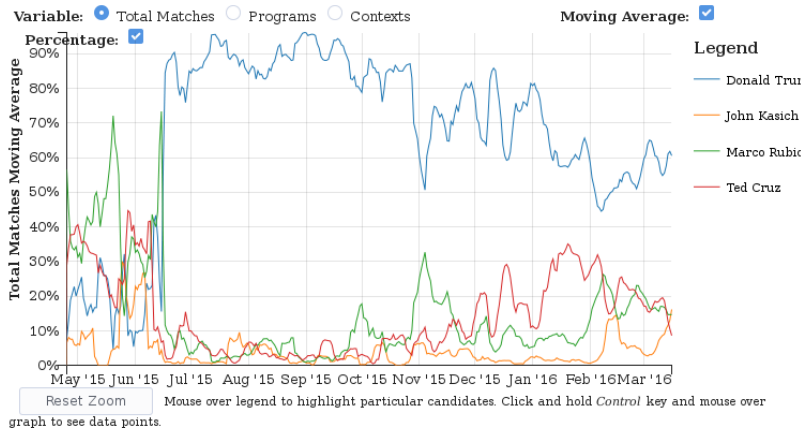
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 - For example, covering
- Finally, the media can **frame** issues in a certain way
 - For example, covering waste in the welfare system primes people to think about it in terms of governmental inefficiency

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- Framing can make us think about issues in a biased way
- These *usually* aren't a problem because competing sides are trying to prime/frame issues in opposing ways, resulting in information flowing freely

TRUMP'S MEDIA COVERAGE



Source

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

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- These rely on choosing a **sample** from the **population** we're interested in studying
 - The population here is oftentimes all Americans (or at least those over 18)
- The sample needs to accurately reflect the population

DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN!

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- So we use random-digit dialing instead
- Selection bias can skew the results of a poll
 - This happens when we make an error where our sample is not representative of the population we're trying to learn about

- The more people you survey, the more accurate you can be

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- **Sampling error** or **margin of error** is polling error that arises from the size of the sample

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- Consider welfare. Do we ask about welfare or assistance to the poor?

Do you think we're spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on (welfare) or (assistance to the poor)?

WELFARE VS ASSISTANCE TO THE POOR (2014 GSS)

