CHAPTER

7

Public Opinion

Public Opinion and Democracy

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Political Elites, Public Opinion, and Public Policy

WHO GOVERNS?

1. **How does public opinion in America today vary by race, gender, and other differences?**
2. **What is political ideology, and how does it affect political behavior and influence public policy?**

TO WHAT ENDS?

1. **What role did the Framers of the Constitution think public opinion should play in American democracy?**
2. **When, if ever, should public policies mirror majority opinion?**

The lead story on the Internet home page had this headline: "Americans See Gloom, Doom in 2007."[1] Two hours later, however, the lead story had this headline: "Americans Optimistic for 2007."[2] The same news organization released both stories. Each story was based on the same telephone poll of the same 1,000 adults conducted a little over two weeks earlier. Each story cited numerous statistics from the poll. For instance, the former story reported that 60 percent believed that America would suffer another terrorist attack in the year ahead, and that 90 percent believed that higher gas prices were likely. The latter story reported that 89 percent believed the new year would be good for themselves and their families, and that just 25 percent felt pessimistic about what it would bring for the country.

So far as one can tell, the poll on which all the statistics cited in each story were based was well-designed and well-conducted. The statistics in each case were correct. Each story, however, had a different writer.

You have now learned a not-to-be-forgotten lesson about our topic: even a good survey and valid statistics do not speak for themselves when it comes to interpreting "what the public really thinks."

Defined simply, **public opinion** refers to how people think or feel about particular things. In this chapter we take a close look at what "public opinion" is, how it is formed, and how opinions differ. In later chapters we examine the workings of political parties, interest groups, and government institutions and consider what impact they have on whether public opinion affects government policy. We begin, however, by exploring the role public opinion is meant to play in the country's representative democracy.

public opinion *How people think or feel about particular things.*

★ Public Opinion and Democracy

In the Gettysburg Address Abraham Lincoln said that the United States has a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." That suggests that the government should do what the people want. If that is the case, it is puzzling that:

- The federal government has often had a large budget deficit, but the people want a balanced budget.
- Courts have ordered that children be bused in order to balance the schools racially, but the people opposed busing.
- The Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution was not ratified, but polls showed that most people supported it.

American politics is intensely local, as when Rep. Loretta Sanchez shakes hands with a voter in her California district.

- Most people believe that there should be a limit on the number of terms to which U.S. senators and members of the U.S. House of Representatives can be elected, but Congress has not approved term limits.

Some people, reflecting on the many gaps between what the government does and what the people want, may become cynical and think our system is democratic in name only. That would be a mistake. There are several very good reasons why government policy will often appear to be at odds with public opinion.

First, the Framers of the Constitution did not try to create a government that would do from day to day "what the people want." They created a government for the purpose of achieving certain substantive goals. The preamble to the Constitution lists six of these: "to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty."

One means of achieving these goals was popular rule, as provided for by the right of the people to vote for members of the House of Representatives (and later for senators and presidential electors). But other means were provided as well: representative government, federalism, the separation of powers, a Bill of Rights, and an independent judiciary. These were all intended to be checks on public opinion. In addition the Framers knew that in a nation as large and diverse as the United States there would rarely be any such thing as "public opinion"; rather there would be many "publics" (that is, factions) holding many opinions. The Framers hoped that the struggle among these many publics would protect liberty (no one "public" would dominate) while at the same time permitting the adoption of reasonable policies that commanded the support of many factions.

Second, it is not as easy as one may suppose to know what the public thinks. We are so inundated these days with public opinion polls that we may imagine that they tell us what the public believes. That may be true on a few rather simple, clear-cut, and widely discussed issues, but it is not true with respect to most matters on which the government must act. The best pollsters know the limits of their methods, and the citizen should know them as well.

★ What Is Public Opinion?

Some years ago researchers at the University of Cincinnati asked twelve hundred local residents whether they favored passage of the Monetary Control Bill. About 21 percent said that they favored the bill, 25 percent said that they opposed it, and the rest said that they hadn't thought much about the matter or didn't know. But there was no such thing as the Monetary Control Bill. The researchers made it up. About 26 percent of the people questioned in a national survey also expressed opinions on the same nonexistent piece of legislation.[3] In many surveys, wide majorities favor expanding most government programs *and* paying less in taxes. On some issues, the majority in favor one month gives way to the majority opposed the next, often with no obvious basis for the shift.

How much confidence should we place in surveys that presumably tell us "what the American people think" about legislation and other issues, and how should we assess "public opinion"?

For businesses, understanding how people think or feel about particular things—for example, knowing whether consumers are likely to want a new product or be willing to pay more for an old one—can spell the difference between profit and loss. In the early twentieth century, corporations and marketing firms pioneered attempts to systematically measure public views. But political scientists were not far behind them.

The first major academic studies of public opinion and voting, published in the 1940s, painted a distressing picture of American democracy. The studies found

that, while a small group of citizens knew lots about government and had definite ideas on many issues, 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] In the ensuing decades, however, other studies painted a somewhat more reassuring picture. These studies suggested that, while most citizens are poorly informed about government and care little about most public policy issues, they are nonetheless pretty good at using limited information (or cues) to figure out what policies, parties, or candidates most nearly reflect their values or favor their interests, and then acting (or voting) accordingly.[5]

The closer scholars have studied public opinion on particular issues, the less uniformed, indifferent, or fickle it has appeared to be. For example, a study by political scientist Terry M. Moe analyzed public opinion concerning whether the government should provide parents with publicly funded grants, or vouchers, that they can apply toward tuition at private schools. He found that although most people are unfamiliar with the voucher issue, "they do a much better job of formulating their opinions than skeptics would lead us to expect."[6] When supplied with basic information, average citizens adopt "their positions for good substantive reasons, just as the informed do."[7]

How Polling Works

If properly conducted, a survey of public opinion—popularly called a **poll**—can capture the opinions of 300 million citizens by interviewing as few as 1,500 of them. There are many keys to good polling: posing comprehensible questions (asking people about things they have some basis for forming an opinion about); wording questions fairly (not using "loaded" or "emotional" words or indicating what the "right" answer is); and others.

But no poll, whatever it asks and however worded, can provide us with a reasonably accurate measure of how people think or feel unless the persons polled are a **random sample** of the entire population, meaning that any given voter or adult has an equal chance of being interviewed. Through a process called stratified or multistage area sampling, the pollster makes a list of all the geographical units in the country—say all the counties—and groups (or "stratifies") them by size of their population. The pollster then selects at random units from each group or stratum in proportion to its total population. Within each selected county smaller and smaller geographical units (down to particular blocks or streets) are chosen, and then, within the smallest unit, individuals are selected at random (by, for example, choosing the occupant of every fifth house). Repeat the process using equally randomized methods, and the pollster might get slightly different results. The difference between the results of two surveys or samples is called **sampling error.** For example, if one random sample shows that 70 percent of all Americans approve of the way the president is handling his job, and another random sample taken at the same time shows that 65 percent do, the sampling error is 5 percent.

Even if properly conducted, polls are hardly infallible. Since 1952 every major poll has in fact picked the winner of the presidential election. Likewise, **exit polls,** interviews with randomly selected voters conducted at polling places on election day in a representative sample of voting districts, have proven quite accurate. But as a result of sampling error and for other reasons, it is very hard for pollsters to predict the winner in a close election.

For any population over 500,000, pollsters need to make about 15,000 telephone calls to reach a number of respondents (technically, the number computes to 1,065) sufficient to ensure that the opinions of the sample differ only slightly (by a 3 percent plus or minus margin) from what the results would have been had they interviewed the entire population from which the sample was drawn. That can be very expensive to do, and with more people trying to avoid telemarketers (who sometimes pose as pollsters) and using call-screening devices, pollsters are finding it harder than ever to get people to answer their calls.[8] Low response rates can harm a poll's reliability.

poll *A survey of public opinion.*

random sample *Method of selecting from a population in which each person has an equal probability of being selected.*

sampling error *The difference between the results of random samples taken at the same time.*

exit polls *Polls based on interviews conducted on Election Day with randomly selected voters.*

How Opinions Differ

Nobody fully understands how public opinion influences everything from who wins an election to what gets politicians' attention to whether given bills become law, but a few things are clear: some people care

Children grow up learning, but not always following, their parents' political views.

more about certain issues than other people do (*opinion saliency*); on some issues or choices, opinions are pretty steady, while on others they tend to be more volatile (*opinion stability*); and, on some issues government seems largely in sync with popular views or majority sentiments, while on other issues it seems significantly out of sync (*opinion-policy congruence*). For example, most Americans have an opinion on U.S. involvement in Iraq, but some feel more strongly about it than others do, and opinions have changed in response to news of positive or negative developments. From 2004 through 2006, for example, much news on the situation in Iraq was negative, and mass public support for U.S. involvement fell.[9]

Studies also tell us that people with certain characteristics in common sometimes hold certain political beliefs in common. By no means do people with similar or even virtually identical family histories, religious affiliations, formal educations, or job experiences think or vote exactly the same way on all or most issues. But **political socialization**—the process by which personal and other background traits influence one's views about politics and government—matters. It is behind the fact, to be discussed in the next section, that children tend to share their parents' political orientations and party affiliations; and it helps to explain why, as we shall see, opinions seem to vary in interesting ways associated with class, race, religion, gender, and other characteristics.

political socialization *Process by which background traits influence one's political views.*

elite *People who have a disproportionate amount of some valued resource.*

Research has also made clear that mass and elite opinion differ. By "elite" we do not mean people who are "better" than others. Rather, as we discussed in Chapter 1, **elite** is a term used by social scientists to refer to people who have a disproportionate amount of some valued resource—money, schooling, prestige, political power, or whatever. Not only do political elites *know more* about politics than the rest of us, they *think differently* about it—they have different views and beliefs. As we explain later in this chapter, they are more likely than average citizens to hold a more or less consistent set of opinions as to the policies government ought to pursue. The government attends more to the elite views than to popular views, at least on many matters.

★ Political Socialization: The Family

The best-studied (though not necessarily the most important) case of opinion formation is that of party identification. The majority of young people identify with their parents' political party. A study of high school seniors showed that, of these young men and women, almost all (91 percent) knew accurately the presidential preference of their parents, the great majority (71 percent) knew accurately their parents' party identification, and most shared that identification (only 9 percent identified with the party opposite to that of their parents). This process begins fairly early in life: by the time they are in the fifth grade (age eleven), over half of all schoolchildren identify with one party or the other, and another fifth claim to be independents.[10]

Naturally, as people grow older, they become more independent of their parents in many ways, including politically, but there nonetheless remains a great deal of continuity between youthful partisanship, learned from one's parents, and adult partisanship. One study of adults found that around 60 percent still had the party identification—Democrat, Republican, or independent—of their parents. Of those who differed with their parents, the overwhelming majority did so not by identifying with the opposite party but by describing themselves as "independents."[11]

The ability of the family to inculcate a strong sense of party identification has declined in recent years.

The proportion of citizens who say they consider themselves to be Democrats or Republicans has become steadily smaller since the early 1950s. Accompanying this decline in partisanship has been a sharp rise in the proportion of citizens describing themselves as independents.

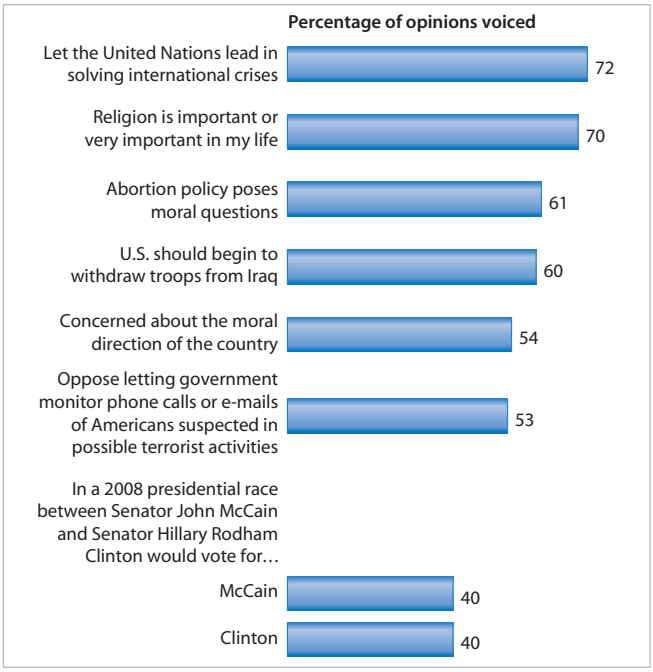
Part of this change results from the fact that young voters have always had a weaker sense of partisanship than older ones. But the youthfulness of the population cannot explain all the changes, for the decline in partisanship has occurred at all age levels. Moreover, those who reached voting age in the 1960s were less apt than those who matured in the 1950s to keep the party identification of their parents.[12]

Though we still tend to acquire some measure of partisanship from our parents, the meaning of that identification is far from clear. There are, after all, liberal and conservative Democrats, as well as liberal and conservative Republicans. So far the evidence suggests that children are more independent of their parents in policy preferences than in party identification.

There are also sizeable age-related differences in opinions on several issues. In some ways, younger citizens' opinion mixes break old ideological molds. For instance, compared to older Americans, citizens aged eighteen to twenty-nine are more likely to favor gay marriage and women's rights (generally labeled the liberal view on these issues), but also more likely to favor giving parents tax money in the form of vouchers for private or religious schools and letting people invest some of their Social Security contribution in the stock market (generally labeled the conservative view on these issues).[13] Today's college students seem to have rather complex political personalities. Figure 7.1 summarizes one recent national survey of their opinions.

In most families, the family dinner table is not a seminar in political philosophy but a place where people discuss school, jobs, dates, and chores. In some families, however, the dinner table is a political classroom. Fairly clear political ideologies (a term we shall define in a later section) seem to be communicated to that small proportion of children raised in families where politics is a dominant topic of conversation and political views are strongly held. Studies of the participants in various student radical movements in the 1960s suggested that college radicals were often the sons and daughters of people who had themselves been young radicals; some commentators dubbed them the "red-diaper babies." Presumably, deeply conservative people come disproportionately from families that were also deeply conservative. This transfer of political beliefs from one generation to the next does not appear in large national studies, because such a small proportion of the population is at either the far left or the far right of the political spectrum.

Figure 7.1 Opinions Voiced by College Students (2006)



Source: "Religion, Morality Playing Important Roles in Politics of College Students," Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, April 2006, www.iop.harvard.edu, reporting results of a survey of 1,200 college students drawn randomly from a national database of nearly 5.1 million students.

Religion

One way in which the family forms and transmits political beliefs is by its religious tradition. Religious differences make for political differences, but the differences are generally more complicated than first meets the eye. For example, opinions on school prayer and other issues differ by religion. Table 7.1 shows that Catholics basically mirror the general public in the extent to which they see school prayer as an effective way to shape young people's values and behavior, while Evangelicals differ widely with Jews and the

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more about certain issues than other people do (*opinion saliency*); on some issues or choices, opinions are pretty steady, while on others they tend to be more volatile (*opinion stability*); and, on some issues government seems largely in sync with popular views or majority sentiments, while on other issues it seems significantly out of sync (*opinion-policy congruence*). For example, most Americans have an opinion on U.S. involvement in Iraq, but some feel more strongly about it than others do, and opinions have changed in response to news of positive or negative developments. From 2004 through 2006, for example, much news on the situation in Iraq was negative, and mass public support for U.S. involvement fell.[9]

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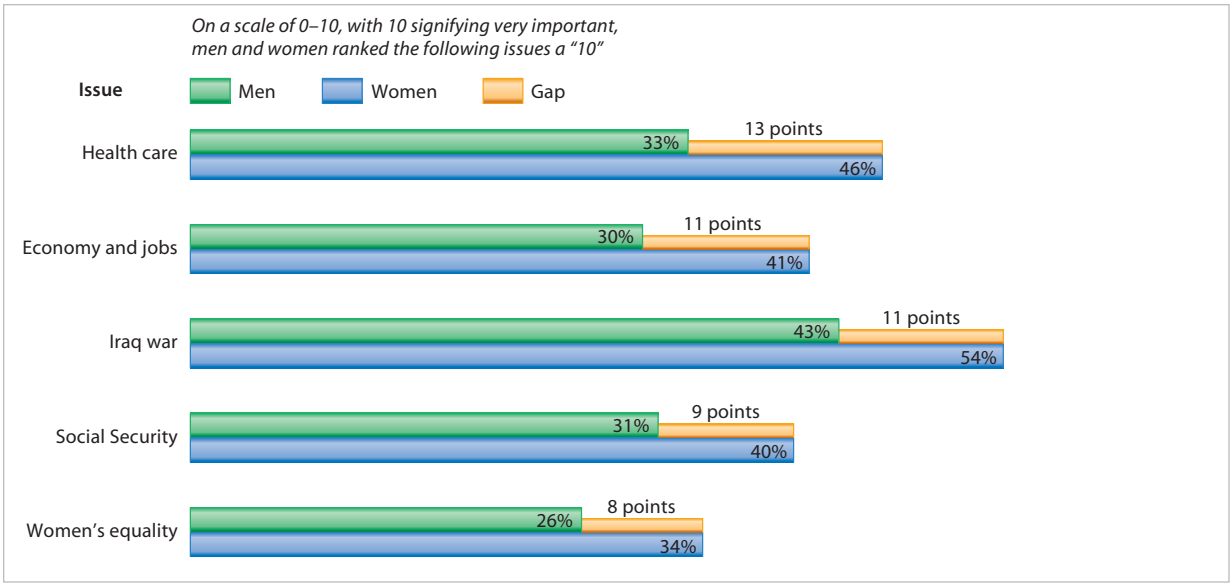
Figure 7.2 Gender Gaps on Issue Importance (2006)



Source: Ms. magazine/WDN Poll, Lake Research Partners, surveying 1,000 randomly selected likely voters November 6–7, 2006.

cial Security, and women's equality were very important (see Figure 7.2).

Schooling and Information

Americans born from the mid-1920s through the mid-1960s (the World War II generation and their baby-boomer children) went to college in record numbers. Much research has shown that attending college had a big impact on their political attitudes, usually making them more liberal.[16] This proved especially true for those who attended the most prestigious colleges. Related studies showed that increased schooling led to significant increases in voting and other political activity.[17] During the 1960s, many antiwar and other protest movements drew their members largely from college students who majored in liberal arts subjects.[18]

These generalizations apply less well to today's college students. Although more research is needed, there is evidence to suggest that while college students today are somewhat more conservative than students were several decades ago, their opinions are complicated in ways that defy simple categorization.

Over the past generation, increased schooling has not been associated with increased political activity; in fact, by many measures, political participation among college students has declined.[19] Many contemporary college students believe that volunteering is a more significant civic act than voting, and that community service is more worthwhile than political engagement.[20] Since the mid-1980s even elite colleges that have few conservative faculty members have been affected by concerns about "political correctness," and most now have (often small but vocal) conservative student groups on campus. Also, after decades of decline, many religious colleges and universities have increased their enrollments while reinforcing their traditional religious identities.

The politically liberalizing effects of college, at least among older Americans, were probably attributable in part to the fact that, compared to high school graduates, yesteryear's college graduates read newspapers and newsmagazines. Evidence collected by political scientist John Zaller shows that the level of political information one has is the best single predictor of being liberal on some kinds of issues, such as civil liberties and civil rights.[21] Information on these matters,

College students working to help rebuild a hurricane-hit area in New Orleans.

he suggests, is today produced by a predominantly liberal elite.

But surveys also find that today's college students seem much less apt to read newspapers and newsmagazines than previous generations of college students were.[22] With the Internet, all-day cable news channels, talk radio, and television programs that emphasize political themes, researchers are far from being able to measure precisely how much political information of given types college students or other citizens get, from what sources, embodying which biases, and with what (if any) short- or long-term effects on opinions; we will return to this topic when we discuss the media in Chapter 12.

★ Cleavages in Public Opinion

The way in which political opinions are formed helps explain the cleavages that exist among these opinions and why these cleavages do not follow any single political principle but instead overlap and crosscut in bewildering complexity. If, for example, the United States lacked regional differences and was composed almost entirely of white Protestants who had never attended college, there would still be plenty of political conflict—the rich would have different views from the poor; workers would have different views from farmers—but that conflict would be much simpler to describe and explain. It might even lead to political parties that were more clearly aligned with competing political philosophies than those we now have. In fact some democratic nations in the world today do have a population very much like the one we have asked you to imagine, and the United States itself, during the first half of the nineteenth century, was overwhelmingly white, Protestant, and without much formal schooling.

Today, however, there are crosscutting cleavages based on race, ethnicity, religion, region, and education, in addition to those created by income and occupation. To the extent that politics is sensitive to public opinion, it is sensitive to a variety of different and even competing publics. Not all these publics have influence proportionate to their numbers or even to their numbers adjusted for the intensity of their feelings. As will be described later, a filtering process occurs that makes the opinions of some publics more influential than those of others.

Whatever this state of affairs may mean for democracy, it creates a messy situation for political scientists. It would be so much easier if everyone's opinion on political affairs reflected some single feature of his or her life, such as income, occupation, age, race, or sex. Of course, some writers have argued that political opinion is a reflection of one such feature, social class, usually defined in terms of income or occupation, but that view, though containing some truth, is beset with inconsistencies: poor blacks and poor whites disagree sharply on many issues involving race; well-to-do Jews and well-to-do Protestants often have opposing opinions on social welfare policy; and low-income elderly people are much more worried about crime than are low-income graduate students. Plumbers and professors may have similar incomes, but they rarely have similar views, and business people in New York City often take a very different view of government than business people in Houston or Birmingham.

In some other democracies a single factor such as class may explain more of the differences in political attitudes than it does in the more socially heterogeneous United States. Most blue-collar workers in America think of themselves as being "middle-class," whereas most such workers in Britain and France describe themselves as "working-class."

Social Class

Americans speak of "social class" with embarrassment. The norm of equality tugs at our consciences, urging us to judge people as individuals, not as parts of some social group (such as "the lower class"). Social scientists speak of "class" with confusion. They know it exists but quarrel constantly about how to define it: by income? occupation? wealth? schooling? prestige? personality?

Let's face up to the embarrassment and skip over the confusion. Truck drivers and investment bankers look different, talk differently, and vote differently. There is nothing wrong with saying that the first group consists of "working-class" (or "blue-collar") people and the latter of "upper-class" (or "management") people. Moreover, though different definitions of class produce slightly different groupings of people, most definitions overlap to such an extent that it does not matter too much which we use.

However defined, public opinion and voting have been less determined by class in the United States than in Europe, and the extent of class cleavage has declined in the last few decades in both the United States and Europe. In the 1950s V. O. Key, Jr., found that differences in political opinion were closely associated with occupation. He noted that people holding managerial or professional jobs had distinctly more conservative views on social welfare policy and more internationalist views on foreign policy than did manual workers.[23]

During the next decade this pattern changed greatly. Opinion surveys done in the late 1960s showed that business and professional people had views quite similar to those of manual workers on matters such as the poverty program, health insurance, American policy in Vietnam, and government efforts to create jobs.[24]

The voting patterns of different social classes have also become somewhat more similar. Class voting has declined sharply since the late 1940s in the United States, France, Great Britain, and Germany and declined moderately in Sweden.

Class differences remain, of course. Unskilled workers are more likely than affluent white-collar workers to be Democrats and to have liberal views on economic policy. And when economic issues pinch—for example, when farmers are hurting or steelworkers are being laid off—the importance of economic interests in differentiating the opinions of various groups rises sharply.

Union members protest against President Bush outside the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City.

Still, many of the issues that now lead us to choose which party to support and that determine whether we think of ourselves as liberals or conservatives are noneconomic issues. In recent years our political posture has been shaped by the positions we take on race relations, abortion, school prayer, environmentalism, and terrorism, issues that do not clearly affect the rich differently than the poor (or at least do not affect them as differently as do the union movement, the minimum wage, and unemployment). Moral, symbolic, and foreign policy matters do not divide rich and poor in the same way as economic ones. Thus we have many well-off people who think of themselves as liberals because they take liberal positions on these noneconomic matters, and many not-so-well-off people who think of themselves as conservatives because that is the position they take on these issues.

Race and Ethnicity

African Americans are overwhelmingly Democratic, though younger ones are a bit more likely than older ones to identify with the Republican party.[25] Younger blacks are also much more likely to support the idea of using school vouchers to pay for education than are older ones. There are sharp differences between white and black attitudes on many public policy questions. For example, blacks are much more likely than whites to support affirmative action, to think that the criminal

justice system is biased against them, to oppose the use of military force, to doubt that we all should be willing to fight for our country, and to think that believing in God is essential for a person to be moral.[26]

But there are also many areas of agreement. Both blacks and whites want our courts to be tougher in handling criminals, oppose the idea of making abortion legal in all cases, agree that people have become too dependent on government aid, and think that everyone has it in their own power to succeed.[27]

Latinos are now the largest minority group in America, numbering over 40 million people. Unfortunately studies of Latino public opinion have been called "small, disproportionately oriented toward immigration, and relatively silent on the influence of gender" and other possible intragroup opinion cleavages.[28] Likewise, despite the country's growing Asian population, there is as yet also virtually no literature on Asian public opinion. However, an early survey of ethnic groups in California, a state where fully one-third of all recent immigrants to this country live, gives us some hint of how Latinos and Asian Americans feel about political parties and issues. Latinos identify themselves as Democrats, but much less so than do blacks, and Asian Americans are even more identified with the Republican party than Anglo whites. On issues such as spending on the military and welfare programs, prayer in public schools, and the imposition of the death penalty for murder, Asian American views are much more like those of Anglo whites than those of either blacks or Hispanics. Latinos are somewhat more liberal than Anglos or Asian Americans, but much less liberal than blacks, except with respect to bilingual education programs.[29]

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa speaks to supporters.

These figures conceal important differences within these ethnic groups. For example, Japanese Americans are among the more conservative Asian Americans, whereas Korean Americans (perhaps because they are among the most recent immigrants) are more liberal. Similarly, Latinos, the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States, are a diverse mix of Cuban Americans, Mexican Americans, Central Americans, and Puerto Ricans, each with distinct political views. Most studies of Latino voting show that people from Mexico vote heavily Democratic, those from Cuba mostly Republican, and those from Puerto Rico somewhere in between.[30] But local conditions will affect these views. Hispanics in Texas often vote for more conservative candidates than do those in California.

Hispanic majorities seem to favor bigger government, oppose making abortions generally available, and think that the Democratic party cares more about them and is better able to handle economic and other issues. But these views are complicated not only because Latinos come from many nations but also because some were born here and some abroad. For example, in 2005 most Latinos believed that U.S. troops should be withdrawn from Iraq, but there were important differences in the views of native-born and foreign-born Latinos.[31]

Latinos have less money and are younger than non-Hispanic white Americans. About four-fifths of all Latinos, but only half of all non-Hispanic whites, are younger than forty-five. It is possible that these differences affect their views.[32]

Despite these differences, there are broad areas of agreement between Latinos and non-Hispanic whites here. Almost exactly the same percentage of both groups favor allowing people to invest some of their Social Security taxes into stock-market funds.[33] We would like to know more about these opinions, but pollsters have not yet fully explored Hispanic attitudes.

Region

It is widely believed that geographic region affects political attitudes and in particular that southerners and northerners disagree significantly on many policy questions. At one time white southerners were conspicuously less liberal than easterners, midwesterners, or westerners on questions such as aid to minorities, legalizing marijuana, school busing, and

enlarging the rights of those accused of crimes. Although more conservative on these issues, they held views on economic issues similar to those of whites in other regions of the country. This helps to explain why the South was for so long a part of the Democratic party coalition: on national economic and social welfare policies, southerners expressed views not very different from those of northerners. That coalition was always threatened, however, by the divisiveness produced by issues of race and liberty.

The southern lifestyle is in fact different from that of other regions of the country. The South has, on the whole, been more accommodating to business enterprise and less so to organized labor than, for example, the Northeast; it gave greater support to the third-party candidacy of George Wallace in 1968, which was a protest against big government and the growth of national political power as well as against civil rights; and it was in the South that the greatest opposition arose to income-redistribution plans such as the Family Assistance Plan of 1969. Moreover, there is some evidence that white southerners became by the 1970s more conservative than they had been in the 1950s, at least when compared to white northerners.[34] Finally, white southerners have become less attached to the Democratic party: whereas over three-fourths described themselves as Democrats in 1952, only a third do so today.[35]

These changes in the South can have great significance, as we shall see in the next three chapters when we consider how elections are fought. It is enough for now to remember that, without the votes of the southern states, no Democrat except Lyndon Johnson in 1964 would have been elected president from 1940 through 1976. (Without the South, Roosevelt would have lost in 1944, Truman in 1948, Kennedy in 1960, and Carter in 1976. And even though Carter carried the South, he did not win a majority of white southern votes.) Clinton won in 1992 and 1996 without carrying the South, but those were three-man races.

★ Political Ideology

Up to now the words *liberal* and *conservative* have been used here as if everyone agreed on what they meant and as if they accurately described general sets of political beliefs held by large segments of the population. Neither of these assumptions is correct. Like many useful words—*love, justice, happiness*—they are as vague as they are indispensable.

POLITICALLY SPEAKING

Liberals and Conservatives

Both words—*liberal* and *conservative*—first came into use in the early nineteenth century. At that time a liberal was a person who favored personal and economic liberty—that is, freedom from the controls and powers of government or the state. An economic liberal, for example, supported the free market and opposed government regulation of trade. By contrast, a conservative was a person who opposed the bloody excesses of the French Revolution and its emphasis on personal freedom and favored instead a restoration of the power of the church and the aristocracy.

The terms' meanings changed in the 1930s. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt used *liberal* to refer to his New Deal program calling for an active national government that would intervene in the economy, create social welfare programs, and help certain groups (such as labor unions) acquire greater bargaining power. Roosevelt's opponents began using the term *conservative* to describe themselves. In 1964, Barry Goldwater was the first presidential candidate to declare himself a "conservative," by which he meant someone favoring a free market rather than a regulated one, states' rights over national supremacy, and greater reliance on individual choice in economic affairs.

Roosevelt was a Democrat. Goldwater was a Republican. Roosevelt, however, would not instantly recognize as liberals today's staunchly pro-choice, secular Democrats. Several times before he died in 1998, Goldwater scolded Republicans who invoked religious reasons for wanting to outlaw abortion and gay rights; they were not, he insisted, conservatives. And today we have self-described "neo-liberals," "neo-conservatives," "compassionate conservatives," and many other twists on these terms.

Still, the two words remain in general use, convey some significant meaning, and point to real and persistent differences on many issues between, for example, the liberal and conservative wings of the Democratic and Republican parties.

When we refer to people as liberals, conservatives, socialists, or radicals, we are implying that they have a patterned set of beliefs about how government and other important institutions in fact operate and how they ought to operate, and in particular about what kinds of policies government ought to pursue. They are said to display to some degree a **political ideology**—that is, a more or less consistent set of beliefs about what policies government ought to pursue. Political scientists measure the extent to which people have a political ideology in two ways: first, by seeing how frequently people use broad political categories (such as "liberal," "conservative," "radical") to describe their own views or to justify their preferences for various candidates and policies, and second, by seeing to what extent the policy preferences of a citizen are consistent over time or are based at any one time on consistent principles.

This second method involves a simple mathematical procedure: measuring how accurately one can predict a person's view on a subject at one time based on his or her view on that subject at an earlier time, or measuring how accurately one can predict a person's view on one issue based on his or her view on a different issue. The higher the accuracy of such predictions (or correlations), the more we say a person's political opinions display "constraint" or ideology.

Despite annual fluctuations, ideological self-identification surveys from the last three decades typically find that moderates are the largest group among American voters (roughly 40 percent), conservatives the second largest (about 30 percent), and liberals the smallest (about 20 percent).[36] For three reasons, however, these self-identification survey averages do not really tell us much at all about how or whether most people think about politics in an ideological manner. First, except when asked by pollsters, most Americans do not actually employ the words *liberal, conservative,* or *moderate* in explaining or justifying their preferences for parties, candidates or policies, and not many more than half can give plausible definitions of these terms. The vast majority of Americans simply do not think about politics in an ideological or very coherent manner.

political ideology
A more or less consistent set of beliefs about what policies government ought to pursue.

Second, over the last decade, survey research scholars have rediscovered old truths about the limitations of polling as a window into "the public mind."[37] Public opinion polls must of necessity ask rather simple questions. The apparent "inconsistency" in the answers people give at different times may mean only that the nature of the problem and the wording of the question have changed. Or it could simply mean that many people consistently want from politics or government things that, as a practical matter, they cannot have, or at least cannot have all at once or at a price they are willing to pay—for instance, a bigger military, more expansive public health insurance coverage for all, and greater funding for public schools, but no military draft, no new or increased taxes, and no government budget deficits, either. Ideological liberals might consistently covet everything on that list except the bigger military, and be willing to pay higher taxes to get it. Ideological conservatives might want only the bigger military, but only if getting it requires no tax increases. But most citizens are more inclined to pick and choose their positions without regard to conventional liberal or conservative views, and without feeling any need to be "consistent."

Third, when being surveyed in person (including by telephone), some people will hide what they think to be socially or morally unacceptable self-identifications or positions behind a "don't know" or "middle-ground" response.[38] This can happen not only when the questions concern specific labels like "liberal" or "conservative," or particular issues like racial integration or immigration restrictions, but also when the question seems to ask about fundamental values, patriotism, or "Americanism." As we saw in Chapter 4, most Americans share a distinctive political culture—a belief in freedom, in equality of political condition and economic opportunity, and in civic duty. Trying to determine precisely where political culture ends and ideology begins is often difficult or impossible.

Mass Ideologies: A Typology

Partly in recognition of these and related limitations, pollsters have increasingly taken a fresh approach to documenting and analyzing average Americans' ideological cast and character. Essentially, rather than ask people to identify themselves as "liberal," "conservative," or "moderate," they ask people multiple questions about politics and government, and then use the answers to sort them into a half-dozen or more different groups.

The oldest ideological typology survey of this sort started in 1987 and has been updated three times since. (To see where you fit, you can take the survey for

yourself at http://typology.people-press.org/typology). Americans, it finds, are divided into nine different groups, each defined by certain key values (see Table 7.2). Measured by both their presence among registered voters and in the general population, "liberals" are the largest single ideological bloc. Together with "disadvantaged Democrats," they number nearly one in three registered voters and over a quarter of the general public.

But various types of conservatives ("social," "pro-government," and conservative Democrats), together with heavily Republican "enterprisers," comprise nearly one in two registered voters and over 40 percent of the general population. And nearly one in five Americans ("disaffected" plus "bystanders") hold views that lead them to be cynical about politics or pay it no mind. Dig deeper into the data on these nine groups (also available via the same web site cited above), such as the related survey findings regarding each group's socioeconomic status and views on religion and other matters that affect politics, and you will see that the old three-way (liberal-conservative-moderate) self-identification surveys probably obscured more than they revealed about what most average Americans think about politics.

Liberal and Conservative Elites

Still, while the terms *liberal* and *conservative* do not describe the political views held by most average Americans, they do capture the views held by many, perhaps most, people who are in the country's political elite. As we discussed in Chapter 1, every society has an elite, because in every society government officials will have more power than ordinary folk, some persons will make more money than others, and some people will be more popular than others. In the former Soviet Union they even had an official name for the political elite—the *nomenklatura.* But, in America, we often refer to **political elites** more casually as "activists"—people who hold office, run for office, work in campaigns or on newspapers, lead interest groups and social movements, and speak out on public issues. Being an activist is not an all-or-nothing proposition: people display differing degrees of activism, from full-time politicians to persons who occasionally get involved in a campaign (see Chapter 8). But the more a person is an activist, the more likely it is that he or she will display ideological consistency on the conventional liberal-conservative spectrum.

The reasons for this greater consistency seem to be information and peers. First, information: in general, the better informed people are about politics and the more interest they take in politics, the more likely they are to have consistently liberal or conservative views.[39] This higher level of information and interest may lead them to find relationships among issues that others don't see and to learn from the media and elsewhere what are the "right" things to believe. This does not mean that there are no differences within liberal elites (or within conservative ones), only that the differences occur within a liberal (or conservative) consensus that is more well defined, more consistent, and more important to those who share it than would be the case among ordinary citizens.

Second, peers: politics does not make strange bedfellows. On the contrary, politics is a process of likes attracting likes. The more active you are in politics, the more you will associate with people who agree with you on some issues; and the more time you spend with those people, the more your other views will shift to match theirs.

The greater ideological consistency of political elites can be seen in Congress. As we shall note in Chapter 13, Democratic members of Congress tend to be consistently liberal, and Republican members of Congress tend to be consistently conservative—*far more* consistently than Democratic voters and Republican voters. By the same token we shall see in Chapter 9 that the delegates to presidential nominating conventions are far more ideological (liberal in the Democratic convention, conservative in the Republican one) than is true of voters who identify with the Democratic or Republican party.

political elites
Persons with a disproportionate share of political power.

Still, on a large number of issues, the policy preferences of average Republican and Democratic voters do differ significantly from one another (see Figure 7.3). Some political scientists argue that Republican and Democratic leaders in Congress are more polarized because voters are more polarized.

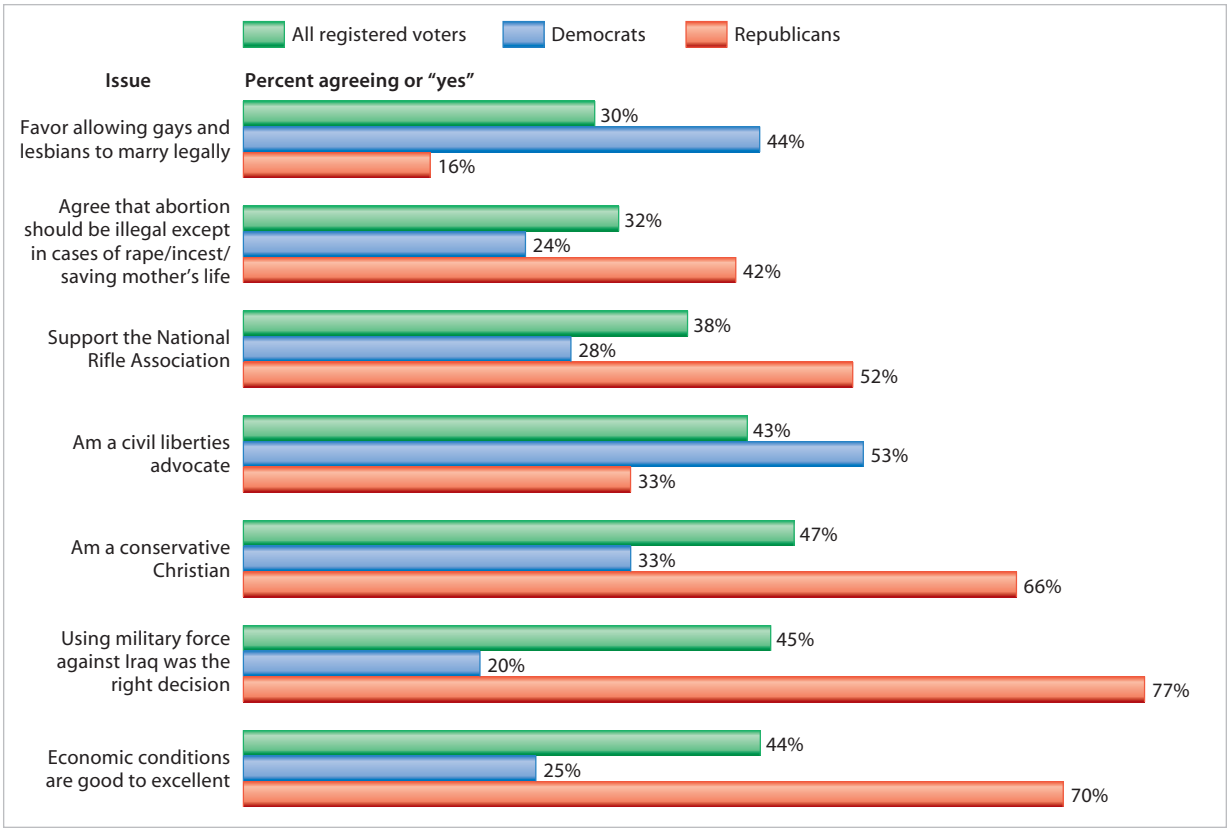
Other political scientists, however, analyze the available polling and election data differently. They find that ideological changes among voters have been "marginal at best," while public opinion among Democrats voting in districts represented by Democrats and among Republicans voting in districts represented by Republicans has been remarkably stable.[40] Which side is right? We have no data that will allow

Table 7.2 Ideology Typology: Nine Groups and Their Key Values

Group (Other Names) *Key Values*	Registered Voters	Adult Population	Democrat/Republican/Independent
Liberals			
(Seculars; 60s Democrats)	19%	17%	59%/1%/40%
Pro-choice; diplomacy over military force; protect the environment			
Conservative Democrats			
(Socially Conservative Democrats; New Dealers)	15	14	89/0/11
Religion vital to morality; oppose same-sex marriage; support antipoverty programs			
Social Conservatives			
(Moralists)	13	11	0/82/18
Pro-life; assertive foreign policy; oppose welfare			
Upbeats			
(New Prosperity Independents)	13	11	39/5/56
Economic growth; pro-government and pro-business; pro-immigration			
Pro-Government Conservatives			
(Populist Republicans)	10	9	2/58/40
Government must promote morality; for anti-poverty programs and business regulation			
Enterprisers			
(Staunch Conservatives)	10	9	1/81/18
Patriotic; anti-regulation, including the environment			
Disaffecteds			
(Disaffected Voters)	10	9	30/2/68
Cynical about government; unhappy with own economic situation; anti-immigration			
Disadvantaged Democrats			
(Partisan Poor)	10	10	84/0/16
Extremely anti-business; strong support for anti-poverty programs; deep mistrust of elected leaders			
Bystanders			
(N/A)	0	10	22/22/56
Vote in single digits even in presidential elections; ignore most political news			

Source: Adapted from "Profiles of the Typology Groups: Beyond Red and Blue," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2005.

Figure 7.3 Policy Preferences Among Registered Voters (2006)



Source: Adapted from "Democrats and Republicans See Different Realities," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, November 6, 2006.

us to compare in each district what voters think and how their representatives behave. To amass such data would require polls of perhaps five hundred voters in each congressional district taken several years apart. Nobody thinks it is worth spending millions of dollars to interview over ten thousand voters at different times just to answer this one academic puzzle.

★ Political Elites, Public Opinion, and Public Policy

Though the elites and the public see politics in very different ways, and though there are often intense antagonisms between the two groups, the elites influence public opinion in at least two important ways.

First, elites, especially those in or having access to the media (see Chapter 12), raise and frame political issues. At one time environmentalism was not on the political agenda; at a later time not only was it on the agenda, it was up near the top of government concerns. At some times the government had little interest in what it should do in South Africa or Central America; at other times the government was preoccupied with these matters. Though world events help shape the political agenda, so also do political elites. A path-breaking study by John Zaller shows in fact that elite views shape mass views by influencing both what issues capture the public's attention and how those issues are debated and decided.[41] Contrary to the myth of the pandering politician, recent evidence suggests that what scholars of the subject call opinion-policy

congruence (essentially the rate at which governments adopt crime, health, trade, and other policies supported by majorities in polls) has been declining, not rising, since 1980, a trend that may reflect greater elite influence over how policy options are presented to the public.[42]

Second, elites state the norms by which issues should be settled. (A **norm** is a standard of right or proper conduct.) By doing this they help determine the range of acceptable and unacceptable policy options. For example, elites have for a long time emphasized that racism is wrong. Of late they have emphasized that sexism is wrong. Over a long period the steady repetition of views condemning racism and sexism will at least intimidate, and perhaps convince, those of us who are racist and sexist.

A recent example of this process has been the public discussion of AIDS and its relationship to homosexuality. The initial public reaction to AIDS was one of fear and loathing. But efforts to quarantine people infected with AIDS were met with firm resistance from the medical community and from other policy elites. The elites even managed to persuade some legislatures to bar insurance companies from testing insurance applicants for the disease.

norm *A standard of right or proper conduct.*

There are limits to how much influence elites can have on the public. For instance, elites do not define economic problems—people can see for themselves that there is or is not unemployment, that there is or is not raging inflation, that there are or are not high interest rates. Elite opinion may shape the policies, but it does not define the problem. Similarly, elite opinion has little influence on whether we think there is a crime or drug problem; it is, after all, *our* purses being snatched, cars being stolen, and children being drugged. On the other hand, elite opinion does define the problem as well as the policy options with respect to most aspects of foreign affairs; the public has little firsthand experience with which to judge what is going on in Iraq.

Because elites affect how we see some issues and determine how other issues get resolved, it is important to study the differences between elite and public opinion. But it is wrong to suppose that there is one elite, unified in its interests and opinions. Just as there are many publics, and hence many public opinions, there are many elites, and hence many different elite opinions. Whether there is enough variety of opinion and influence among elites to justify calling our politics "pluralist" is one of the central issues confronting any student of government.

★ SUMMARY ★

"Public opinion" is a slippery notion, partly because there are many publics, with many different opinions, and partly because opinion on all but relatively simple matters tends to be uninformed, unstable, and sensitive to different ways of asking poll questions. Polling is a difficult and expensive art, not an exact science.

Political attitudes are shaped by family, schooling, and other experiences. Opinions vary in America according to class, gender, and other characteristics. Americans are also divided by their political ideologies but not along a single liberal-conservative dimension. There are several kinds of issues on which people may take "liberal" or "conservative" positions, and they often do not take the same position on all issues. The most comprehensive and up-to-date surveys sort average Americans into a half-dozen or more ideological groupings.

Political elites are much more likely to display a consistently liberal or consistently conservative ideology. Elites are important because they have a disproportionate influence on public policy and even an influence on mass opinion (through the dissemination of information and the evocation of political norms).

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

MEMORANDUM

To: *Cecilia Kennedy, U.S. Representative*
From: *Ronald Edwards, legislative assistant*
Subject: *Vote on comprehensive immigration reform*

The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) sought to stem illegal immigration by imposing penalties on employers who hire them, while permitting the estimated 3 million illegal immigrants at the time to attain legal status. Since then, however, the number of illegal immigrants in the United States has quadrupled, while law enforcement efforts to punish employers or deport those immigrants have been minimal. Your district is not directly affected by immigration, but voters have concerns both about maintaining law and order, and providing economic opportunities for people who have resided in this country for many years.

U.S. House Considers Comprehensive Immigration Reform

March 4 WASHINGTON, D.C.

The U.S. House of Representatives is weighing a bill that would result in the most comprehensive immigration reform in more than a decade. Proponents say it will both improve border security and provide opportunities for legal residency for the more than 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States. The bill received a mixed reception, however, as critics denounced the provisions for illegal immigrants, saying they amount to "amnesty" for law-breakers . . .

Arguments for:

1. Your district contains a large proportion of first-generation Americans, who favor a "path to citizenship" for immigrants who have lived in this country for years, regardless of their legal status.
2. Illegal immigrants often take menial jobs that nobody else wants, and contribute to the U.S. economy by paying taxes and buying goods and services.
3. A "path to citizenship," with fines and other penalties for being in the country illegally, is the most realistic option for individuals who have family and other long-term ties in the United States.

Arguments against:

1. Your party leaders oppose comprehensive immigration reform, saying that enhanced border security must be a higher priority.
2. Illegal immigrants take jobs away from native-born Americans, and cost more in public services, such as education and emergency health care, than they contribute to the economy.
3. People who entered the country illegally must not be rewarded for breaking the law, and enforcement can be effective with sufficient resources.

Your decision:

Vote for bill _____ Vote against bill _____

RECONSIDERING WHO GOVERNS?

1. ***How does public opinion in America today vary by race, gender, and other differences?***

   There are cleavages in American public opinion, but they change over time, and it is hard to generalize meaningfully about how they affect politics and government. For example, on some issues, the opinions of whites and blacks are similar or narrowing, but on other issues, wide opinion gaps remain between whites and blacks. Surprisingly, little major research exists on the opinions and partisan preferences of the country's over 40 million Latinos. People who attend worship services regularly are more conservative and far more likely to vote Republican in presidential elections than people who attend worship services rarely if ever. Women are far more sympathetic to liberal causes and Democratic candidates than men, but these so-called gender gaps in opinion and voting behavior are more pronounced in some elections than in others.

2. ***What is political ideology, and how does it affect political behavior and influence public policy?***

   Political ideology is a more or less consistent set of beliefs about the policies government ought to pursue. Political scientists measure the extent to which people have a political ideology by seeing how frequently people use broad political categories (such as "liberal" and "conservative") to describe their own views or to justify their preferences for candidates and policies. They also measure it by seeing to what extent the policy preferences of a citizen are consistent over time or are based at any one time on consistent principles. Many scholars believe that Americans are becoming more ideological. On many issues, for example, the policy preferences of average Republican and Democratic voters now differ significantly from one another. There is clear evidence that political elites are more ideological today than they were just a generation or two ago. The government attends more to the elite views than to popular views, at least on many matters.

RECONSIDERING TO WHAT ENDS?

1. ***What role did the Framers of the Constitution think public opinion should play in American democracy?***

   Basically, a rather limited role. Turn to the Appendix and read *Federalist* No. 10 by James Madison. In it, Madison makes plain his view that the public interest is not always, or even often, the same as what most people demand from the government. Instead members of Congress are to be "proper guardians of the public weal," representatives who serve "the permanent and aggregate interests" of the country. He holds that "the regulation of these various and interfering interests" is the "principal task" of representatives.

2. ***When, if ever, should public policies mirror majority opinion?***

   For most of us, the answer depends on the issue in question. (Which, if any, of the gaps between majority opinion and public policy mentioned on the first page of this chapter would you wish to see closed?) When it comes to civil rights and civil liberties (see Chapters 5 and 6), few of us would be willing, strictly speaking, to trust our freedoms to a popular vote. On the other hand, few of us would consider our system truly democratic if government only rarely did pretty much what most people wanted. The Framers of the Constitution offer one principled answer. They believed temporary or transient popular majorities should carry little weight with representatives, but persistent popular majorities—for example, ones that persist over the staggered terms of House and Senate and over more than a single presidential term—should be heard and in many, though not in all, cases heeded.

WORLD WIDE WEB RESOURCES

Roper Center for Public Opinion Research: **www.ropercenter.uconn.edu**
CBS News poll: **cbsnews.cbs.com**
Gallup opinion poll: **www.gallup.com**
Los Angeles Times poll: **www.latimes.com/news/custom/timespoll**
The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press: **www.people-press.org**
Zogby International: **www.zogby.com**

SUGGESTED READINGS

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