Public Opinion

1. **What Public Opinion Is and Is Not?**

DEF: *public opinion concerns people’s reaction to specific and immediate policies and problems*

Political culture focuses on long-standing values, attitudes and ideas that people learn.

Public opinion refers to citizen’s reactions to current, specific issues and events, not private matters.

Unitary public opinion is rare, it involves small, conflicting groups and the undecided: it is an array of diverse attitudes that can change quickly.

Public opinions often show ignorance: some say that current politicians pay too much attention to public opinion, so it can be seen as a backup and detailing device for imputing mass views in politics, a way to fine-tune elections. (it can also be manipulated by interest groups)

Because of its volatility, public opinion should be one of the many factors that government use to determine public policy. In a democracy crossing public opinion can lead to losing the next election, while in undemocratic regimes it can lead to overthrowing of leaders. In the end, the lack of public support can end regimes.

1. **The Shape of Public Opinion**

The factors that produce public-opinion views:

SOCIAL CLASS:

DEF: *a broad layer of society, usually based on income and often labelled lower, middle and upper*

Social class can be hard to measure. There are two main ways to do so:

* the objective way, asking for annual income or quality of neighbourhood.
* the subjective way, asking the respondents which class they think they belong to

the famous American social mobility is dying they lost the belief that coming generations would always be better off.

EDUCATION:

Educational levels also contribute to polarization: people with college degrees get paid better and can afford to give their children better education, locking in their class position.

In the U.S educated people are more liberal on noneconomic issue but more conservative on economic ones.

REGION:

It is unclear whether a country’s south is more conservative or more liberal than its north.

Outlying regions usually Harbord resentment against the capital, creating what are called centre-periphery tensions.

In recent years, the U.S south conservativism has aligned with the Republican Party while the Northeast liberalism has moved towards the Democratic Party.

RELIGION:

One of the biggest divisions in Catholic countries is between clericalists and anticlericalists.

DEF: *anticlericalism is the movement in catholic countries to get the Church out of politics.*

Conservative parties are usually pro-church while the parties of the left are hostile to its influence.

In the United States protestant tend to vote Republican, while Catholics vote Democratic. This tendency eroded when the Democratic Party endorsed pro-choice positions. Catholics and Protestants now have a common cause in fighting abortion.

AGE:

There are two theories on how age affects political opinions:

* the life cycle argues that people change as they age, young people are naturally radical and older people moderate or even conservative.
* generation theory argues that great events of young adulthood permanently colour political views.

GENDER:

Even before the women’s movement, traditionally in catholic countries, women were more conservative and concerned with family, home and morality.

Women work outside the home and develop their own perspectives: in the United States, a gender gap appeared in the 1980s as women became more liberal and Democratic than men. The gap is much smaller once marital status and face are figured in.

RACE AND ETHNICITY:

Race ad ethnicity play a major role in the United States, where some ethnic groups form political subcultures.

Usually, WASPs and northern Europeans are conservative, while people of southern and easter European origin with Asians are more liberal.

ELITE AND MASS OPINION:

There is often a gap between elite and mass opinion.

The mass public does not understand much about complicated issues but can react after decisions have been made.

Elites, educated and influential people, usually have more complex and sophisticated perspectives. The masses often misunderstand and resent decisions.

Mass public opinion can be poorly informed and angry, a poor basis for sound policy.

1. **Public-Opinion Polls**

Surveys are designed to measure opinions so that we can say the results are reflective of a broader population. They are useful for policymakers and candidates.

do the opinions people express really reflect how they feel about issues? Most people pay little attention to politics most of the time, thus on most issues, only a small portion of the total public is attentive enough to news reports and editorials to hold a clear opinion.

Policymakers must balance what they learn from polls with their own knowledge about the issues.

* 1. **Polling Techniques**

SAMPLING FROM A POPULATION

A pollster has to decide whose opinions they want the survey to represent. Usually they are interested likely voters (*population of adults likely to vote in an upcoming election based on their voting history or intention*). The people the poll results represent is the population.

Pollsters take a sample of the population and use the sample’s answers to the questions to infer the opinions of the whole population. As long as the sample is representative, inference is possible.

In every survey there is margin of error (*range around sample’s results within which the population’s opinions likely fall*), which goes down as the sample size gets larger.

The most basic way to create a representative sample is through a simple random sample, a subset of population chosen by random chance.

Whatever sampling method is used, they must all meet the standard that each member of the target population has an equal chance of being selected for the poll to be valid.

REACHING THE SAMPLE

The next step is to get the respondents to answer the pollster’s questions.

The most common polling method in the United States is the telephone survey. Pollsters either use Random Digit Dialing (RDD), which randomly selects phone numbers in a targeted area code, or Registration Based Sampling (RBS), which uses samples of names from voter registration files.

Telephone surveys are more affordable than in-person interviews, but the growing reluctance of people to answer their phone or pollsters’ questions threatens the reliability.

ASKING THE QUESTIONS

The unbiased wording of questions to avoid conditioning responses is also important.

The pollster must also avoid tones of voice or sympathetic looks that might encourage one response over another and skew the results.

* 1. **How Reliable Are the Polls?**

Public-opinion surveys are generally reliable. Candidates’ commissions use these polls to predict the election outcome and to understand the issues voters care about.

Public opinion is volatile, able to change quickly under the impact of events. Volatility can also result if pollsters ask questions that respondents know nothing about. New or complex issues are the most likely to result in non-attitudes. Another threat to the reliability of telephone surveys is increasing “no response” rates. With falling response rates, the survey is likely not random or representative.

Any survey that records only those who want to participate is invalid. Pollsters have to continually update their methods as technology and public habits change ex. growth of the use of cell phones.

1. **American Opinion**
   1. **Presidential Ratings**

One of the oldest and most important items in U.S. public-opinion polls asks how the president is handling the job: typically, presidents start with high support and then decline. During their first few months to a year in office, they enjoy a honeymoon with the press and the public.

After some years, however, problems accumulate, the economy sours, or foreign policies fail. This brings an approval low point.

Sometimes, when presidents come under intense pressure or take a major action, they gain rally events, which are occurrences that temporarily boosts presidents’ support.

Some suspect that presidents, especially later in their terms of office, deliberately try to appear decisive in a dramatic way to boost their sagging popularity. Foreign policy provides for dramatic moves and the best television coverage. When a humiliating situation lasts a long time, however, presidential popularity sinks (a long war and economic recession are also bad for popularity, while a good economy is great for presidents)

* 1. **Liberals and Conservatives**

Political scientists debate whether the divide between liberals and conservatives is just a flap among elites or whether the American public has lost its unimodal distribution and become bimodal on ideology.

Some scholars caution that we should focus on those who pay attention to politics, not the uninformed. The politically engaged have polarized, liberals and conservatives agree on less and less.

* 1. **Who Pays Attention?**

Public opinion is fragmented; groups are interested in different questions. A time when some groups are satisfied may be a time when others are dissatisfied.

The attentive public (*those citizens who follow politics, especially national and international affairs*), although relatively few in number, has great political impact because those who pay attention have ideas and articulate them, demonstrating political competence. Sometimes they can rouse the general public.

This is why all regimes treat intellectuals with caution and sometimes with suspicion. In Washington, administration officials devote much time and energy to win over the attentive public to minimize criticism that might influence the general public and the next election.

Elites must decide questions because they are the only ones following them. The general public’s indifference and fragmentation mean that their views have little impact on decision making. Intensely held views of a few often override large numbers of indifferent people.

* 1. **Is Polling Fair?**

Polls do not merely monitor public opinion; they also help make it. Critics charge that published or broadcast poll results can distort an election.

Such publicity, claim underdog candidates, devastates their campaigns by making supporters and contributors lose interest. Those who lead in the early polls get more contributions, more news coverage, and thus more supporters.

One current controversy is the effect of “exit polls,” in which voters are questioned just as they leave the balloting place. With the three-hour time difference between the East and West Coasts, exit polls enable television to predict winners in the East while westerners still have hours in which to cast a ballot.

Even if the early prediction of the presidential election is accurate, a falloff in voters could hurt state and local candidates who may have won if more people had voted.

* 1. **Should the United States be Governed by Polls?**

United States should not be governed by polls.

First, public attention varies widely. On many issues, the general public has no knowledge or opinion, which lets the intensity of a minority dominate poll results.

The wording of the questions and the selection of the sample can seriously skew results.

Decisions made on the basis of a survey may turn sour when the consequences sink in. Top officials who “go with the polls” may be trapping themselves. Polls, if done well, are useful snapshots of public opinion at a given moment but are no substitute for careful analyses and prudent anticipation.