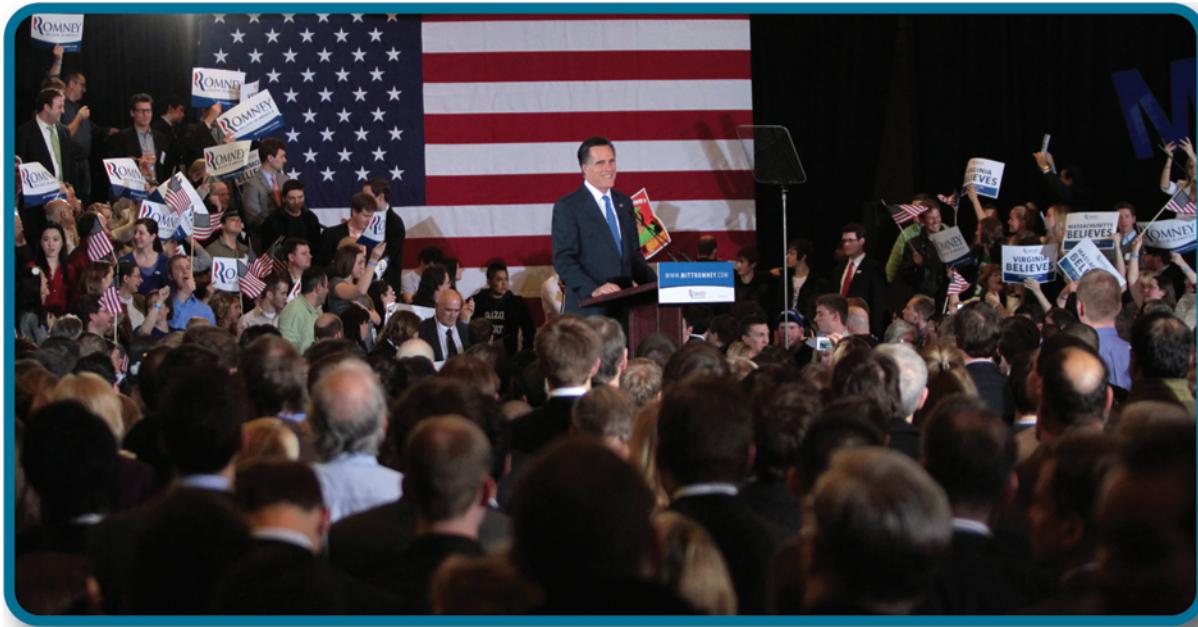


## Chapter 6

# The Politics of Public Opinion



**Figure 6.1** Governor and presidential candidate Mitt Romney takes the stage in Boston, Massachusetts, to give his “Super Tuesday” victory speech (credit: modification of work by BU Interactive News/Flickr).

### Chapter Outline

- 6.1 The Nature of Public Opinion
- 6.2 How Is Public Opinion Measured?
- 6.3 What Does the Public Think?
- 6.4 The Effects of Public Opinion

### Introduction

On November 7, 2012, the day after the presidential election, journalists found Mitt Romney’s transition website, detailing the Republican candidate’s plans for the upcoming inauguration celebration and criteria for Cabinet and White House appointees and leaving space for video of his acceptance speech.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Romney had lost his bid for the White House.

Romney’s campaign staff had been so sure he would win that he had not written a concession speech. How could they have been wrong? Romney’s staff blamed the campaign’s own polls. The staff believed Republican voters were highly motivated, leading Romney pollsters to overestimate how many would turn out (Figure 6.1).<sup>2</sup> The campaign’s polls showed Romney close to President Barack Obama, although non-campaign polls showed Obama ahead.<sup>3</sup> On election night, Romney gave his hastily drafted concession speech, still unsure how he had lost.

In the 2016 election, most polls showed Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton with an advantage nationwide and in the battleground states in the days leading up to the election. However, Republican nominee Donald Trump was elected president as many new voters joined the process, voters who were not studied in the polls as likely voters. As many a disappointed candidate knows, public opinion matters. The way opinions are formed and the way we measure public opinion also matter. But how much, and

why? These are some of the questions we'll explore in this chapter.

## 6.1 The Nature of Public Opinion

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### Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Define public opinion and political socialization
- Explain the process and role of political socialization in the U.S. political system
- Compare the ways in which citizens learn political information
- Explain how beliefs and ideology affect the formation of public opinion

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The collection of public opinion through polling and interviews is a part of American political culture. Politicians want to know what the public thinks. Campaign managers want to know how citizens will vote. Media members seek to write stories about what Americans want. Every day, polls take the pulse of the people and report the results. And yet we have to wonder: Why do we care what people think?

### WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION?

Public opinion is a collection of popular views about something, perhaps a person, a local or national event, or a new idea. For example, each day, a number of polling companies call Americans at random to ask whether they approve or disapprove of the way the president is guiding the economy.<sup>4</sup> When situations arise internationally, polling companies survey whether citizens support U.S. intervention in places like Syria or Ukraine. These individual opinions are collected together to be analyzed and interpreted for politicians and the media. The analysis examines how the public feels or thinks, so politicians can use the information to make decisions about their future legislative votes, campaign messages, or propaganda.

But where do people's opinions come from? Most citizens base their political opinions on their beliefs<sup>5</sup> and their attitudes, both of which begin to form in childhood. *Beliefs* are closely held ideas that support our values and expectations about life and politics. For example, the idea that we are all entitled to equality, liberty, freedom, and privacy is a belief most people in the United States share. We may acquire this belief by growing up in the United States or by having come from a country that did not afford these valued principles to its citizens.

Our *attitudes* are also affected by our personal beliefs and represent the preferences we form based on our life experiences and values. A person who has suffered racism or bigotry may have a skeptical attitude toward the actions of authority figures, for example.

Over time, our beliefs and our attitudes about people, events, and ideas will become a set of norms, or accepted ideas, about what we may feel should happen in our society or what is right for the government to do in a situation. In this way, attitudes and beliefs form the foundation for opinions.

### POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

At the same time that our beliefs and attitudes are forming during childhood, we are also being *socialized*; that is, we are learning from many information sources about the society and community in which we live and how we are to behave in it. **Political socialization** is the process by which we are trained to understand and join a country's political world, and, like most forms of socialization, it starts when we are very young. We may first become aware of politics by watching a parent or guardian vote, for instance, or by hearing presidents and candidates speak on television or the Internet, or seeing adults honor the American flag at an event (**Figure 6.2**). As socialization continues, we are introduced to basic political information in school. We recite the Pledge of Allegiance and learn about the Founding Fathers, the Constitution, the two major

political parties, the three branches of government, and the economic system.



(a)



(b)

**Figure 6.2** Political socialization begins early. Hans Enoksen, former prime minister of Greenland, receives a helping hand at the polls from five-year-old Pipaluk Petersen (a). Intelligence Specialist Second Class Tashawbaba McHerrin (b) hands a U.S. flag to a child visiting the USS *Enterprise* during Fleet Week in Port Everglades, Florida. (credit a: modification of work by Leiff Josefson; credit b: modification of work by Matthew Keane, U.S. Navy)

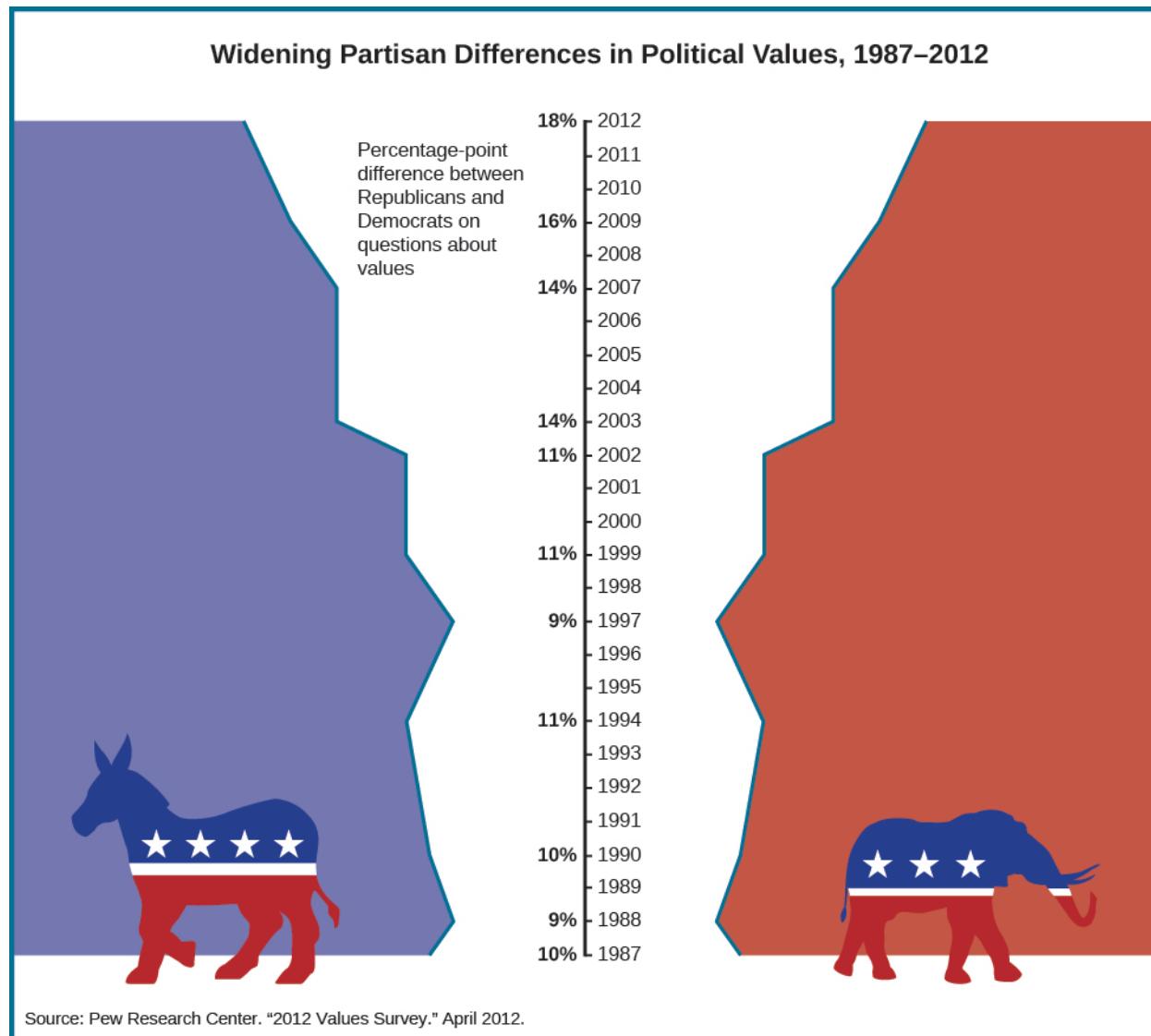
By the time we complete school, we have usually acquired the information necessary to form political views and be contributing members of the political system. A young man may realize he prefers the Democratic Party because it supports his views on social programs and education, whereas a young woman may decide she wants to vote for the Republican Party because its platform echoes her beliefs about economic growth and family values.

Accounting for the process of socialization is central to our understanding of public opinion, because the beliefs we acquire early in life are unlikely to change dramatically as we grow older.<sup>6</sup> Our political ideology, made up of the attitudes and beliefs that help shape our opinions on political theory and policy, is rooted in who we are as individuals. Our ideology may change subtly as we grow older and are introduced to new circumstances or new information, but our underlying beliefs and attitudes are unlikely to change very much, unless we experience events that profoundly affect us. For example, family members of 9/11 victims became more Republican and more political following the terrorist attacks.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, young adults who attended political protest rallies in the 1960s and 1970s were more likely to participate in politics in general than their peers who had not protested.<sup>8</sup>

If enough beliefs or attitudes are shattered by an event, such as an economic catastrophe or a threat to personal safety, ideology shifts may affect the way we vote. During the 1920s, the Republican Party controlled the House of Representatives and the Senate, sometimes by wide margins.<sup>9</sup> After the stock market collapsed and the nation slid into the Great Depression, many citizens abandoned the Republican Party. In 1932, voters overwhelmingly chose Democratic candidates, for both the presidency and Congress. The Democratic Party gained registered members and the Republican Party lost them.<sup>10</sup> Citizens' beliefs had shifted enough to cause the control of Congress to change from one party to the other, and Democrats continued to hold Congress for several decades. Another sea change occurred in Congress in the 1994 elections when the Republican Party took control of both the House and the Senate for the first time in over forty years.

Today, polling agencies have noticed that citizens' beliefs have become far more polarized, or widely opposed, over the last decade.<sup>11</sup> To track this polarization, Pew Research conducted a study of Republican and Democratic respondents over a twenty-five-year span. Every few years, Pew would poll respondents, asking them whether they agreed or disagreed with statements. These statements are referred to as "value questions" or "value statements," because they measure what the respondent values. Examples of statements include "Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good," "Labor

unions are necessary to protect the working person," and "Society should ensure all have equal opportunity to succeed." After comparing such answers for twenty-five years, Pew Research found that Republican and Democratic respondents are increasingly answering these questions very differently. This is especially true for questions about the government and politics. In 1987, 58 percent of Democrats and 60 percent of Republicans agreed with the statement that the government controlled too much of our daily lives. In 2012, 47 percent of Democrats and 77 percent of Republicans agreed with the statement. This is an example of polarization, in which members of one party see government from a very different perspective than the members of the other party (Figure 6.3).<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 6.3** Over the years, Democrats and Republicans have moved further apart in their beliefs about the role of government. In 1987, Republican and Democratic answers to forty-eight values questions differed by an average of only 10 percent, but that difference has grown to 18 percent over the last twenty-five years.

Political scientists noted this and other changes in beliefs following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, including an increase in the level of trust in government<sup>13</sup> and a new willingness to limit liberties for groups or citizens who "[did] not fit into the dominant cultural type."<sup>14</sup> According to some scholars, these shifts led partisanship to become more polarized than in previous decades, as more citizens began thinking of themselves as conservative or liberal rather than moderate.<sup>15</sup> Some believe 9/11 caused a number of citizens to become more conservative overall, although it is hard to judge whether such a shift

will be permanent.<sup>16</sup>

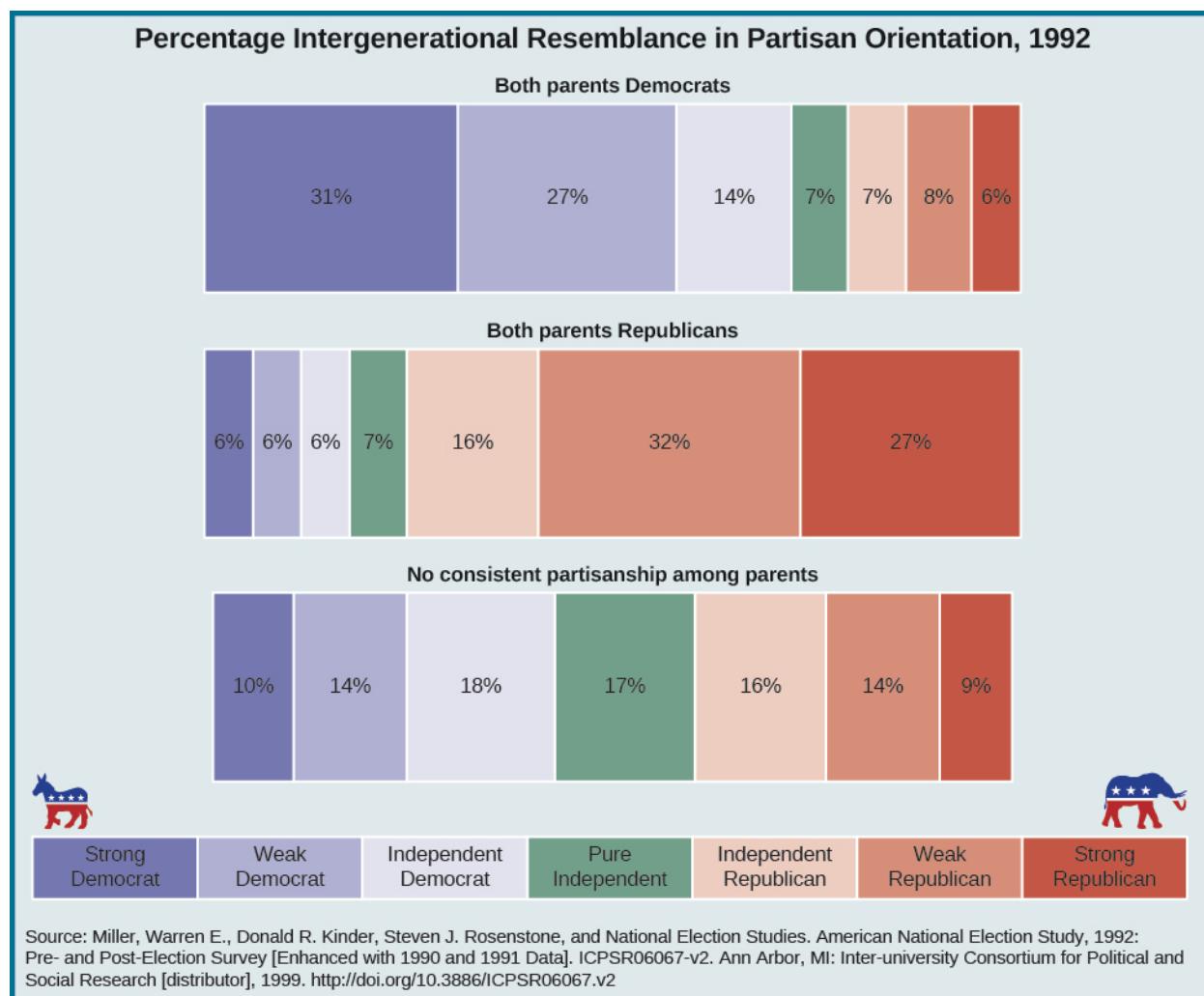
## SOCIALIZATION AGENTS

An **agent of political socialization** is a source of political information intended to help citizens understand how to act in their political system and how to make decisions on political matters. The information may help a citizen decide how to vote, where to donate money, or how to protest decisions made by the government.

The most prominent agents of socialization are family and school. Other influential agents are social groups, such as religious institutions and friends, and the media. Political socialization is not unique to the United States. Many nations have realized the benefits of socializing their populations. China, for example, stresses nationalism in schools as a way to increase national unity.<sup>17</sup> In the United States, one benefit of socialization is that our political system enjoys **diffuse support**, which is support characterized by a high level of stability in politics, acceptance of the government as legitimate, and a common goal of preserving the system.<sup>18</sup> These traits keep a country steady, even during times of political or social upheaval. But diffuse support does not happen quickly, nor does it occur without the help of agents of political socialization.

For many children, family is the first introduction to politics. Children may hear adult conversations at home and piece together the political messages their parents support. They often know how their parents or grandparents plan to vote, which in turn can socialize them into political behavior such as political party membership.<sup>19</sup> Children who accompany their parents on Election Day in November are exposed to the act of voting and the concept of civic duty, which is the performance of actions that benefit the country or community. Families active in community projects or politics make children aware of community needs and politics.

Introducing children to these activities has an impact on their future behavior. Both early and recent findings suggest that children adopt some of the political beliefs and attitudes of their parents (**Figure 6.4**).<sup>20</sup> Children of Democratic parents often become registered Democrats, whereas children in Republican households often become Republicans. Children living in households where parents do not display a consistent political party loyalty are less likely to be strong Democrats or strong Republicans, and instead are often independents.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 6.4** A parent's political orientation often affects the political orientation of his or her child.

While family provides an informal political education, schools offer a more formal and increasingly important one. The early introduction is often broad and thematic, covering explorers, presidents, victories, and symbols, but generally the lessons are idealized and do not discuss many of the specific problems or controversies connected with historical figures and moments. George Washington's contributions as our first president are highlighted, for instance, but teachers are unlikely to mention that he owned slaves. Lessons will also try to personalize government and make leaders relatable to children. A teacher might discuss Abraham Lincoln's childhood struggle to get an education despite the death of his mother and his family's poverty. Children learn to respect government, follow laws, and obey the requests of police, firefighters, and other first responders. The Pledge of Allegiance becomes a regular part of the school day, as students learn to show respect to our country's symbols such as the flag and to abstractions such as liberty and equality.

As students progress to higher grades, lessons will cover more detailed information about the history of the United States, its economic system, and the workings of the government. Complex topics such as the legislative process, checks and balances, and domestic policymaking are covered. Introductory economics classes teach about the various ways to build an economy, explaining how the capitalist system works. Many high schools have implemented civic volunteerism requirements as a way to encourage students to participate in their communities. Many offer Advanced Placement classes in U.S. government and history, or other honors-level courses, such as International Baccalaureate or dual-credit courses. These courses can introduce detail and realism, raise controversial topics, and encourage students to make comparisons

and think critically about the United States in a global and historical context. College students may choose to pursue their academic study of the U.S. political system further, become active in campus advocacy or rights groups, or run for any of a number of elected positions on campus or even in the local community. Each step of the educational system's socialization process will ready students to make decisions and be participating members of political society.

We are also socialized outside our homes and schools. When citizens attend religious ceremonies, as 70 percent of Americans in a recent survey claimed,<sup>22</sup> they are socialized to adopt beliefs that affect their politics. Religion leaders often teach on matters of life, death, punishment, and obligation, which translate into views on political issues such as abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty, and military involvement abroad. Political candidates speak at religious centers and institutions in an effort to meet like-minded voters. For example, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) announced his 2016 presidential bid at Liberty University, a fundamentalist Christian institution. This university matched Cruz's conservative and religious ideological leanings and was intended to give him a boost from the faith-based community.

Friends and peers too have a socializing effect on citizens. Communication networks are based on trust and common interests, so when we receive information from friends and neighbors, we often readily accept it because we trust them.<sup>23</sup> Information transmitted through social media like Facebook is also likely to have a socializing effect. Friends "like" articles and information, sharing their political beliefs and information with one another.

Media—newspapers, television, radio, and the Internet—also socialize citizens through the information they provide. For a long time, the media served as gatekeepers of our information, creating reality by choosing what to present. If the media did not cover an issue or event, it was as if it did not exist. With the rise of the Internet and social media, however, traditional media have become less powerful agents of this kind of socialization.

Another way the media socializes audiences is through framing, or choosing the way information is presented. Framing can affect the way an event or story is perceived. Candidates described with negative adjectives, for instance, may do poorly on Election Day. Consider the recent demonstrations over the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland. Both deaths were caused by police actions against unarmed African American men. Brown was shot to death by an officer on August 9, 2014. Gray died from spinal injuries sustained in transport to jail in April 2015. Following each death, family, friends, and sympathizers protested the police actions as excessive and unfair. While some television stations framed the demonstrations as riots and looting, other stations framed them as protests and fights against corruption. The demonstrations contained both riot and protest, but individuals' perceptions were affected by the framing chosen by their preferred information sources (**Figure 6.5**).<sup>24</sup>



(a)



(b)

**Figure 6.5** Images of protestors from the Baltimore "uprising" (a) and from the Baltimore "riots" (b) of April 25, 2015. (credit a: modification of work by Pete Santilli Live Stream/YouTube; credit b: modification of work by "Newzulu"/YouTube)

Finally, media information presented as fact can contain covert or overt political material. **Covert content** is political information provided under the pretense that it is neutral. A magazine might run a story on climate change by interviewing representatives of only one side of the policy debate and downplaying the opposing view, all without acknowledging the one-sided nature of its coverage. In contrast, when the writer or publication makes clear to the reader or viewer that the information offers only one side of the political debate, the political message is **overt content**. Political commentators like Rush Limbaugh and publications like *Mother Jones* openly state their ideological viewpoints. While such overt political content may be offensive or annoying to a reader or viewer, all are offered the choice whether to be exposed to the material.

## SOCIALIZATION AND IDEOLOGY

The socialization process leaves citizens with attitudes and beliefs that create a personal ideology. Ideologies depend on attitudes and beliefs, and on the way we prioritize each belief over the others. Most citizens hold a great number of beliefs and attitudes about government action. Many think government should provide for the common defense, in the form of a national military. They also argue that government should provide services to its citizens in the form of free education, unemployment benefits, and assistance for the poor.

When asked how to divide the national budget, Americans reveal priorities that divide public opinion. Should we have a smaller military and larger social benefits, or a larger military budget and limited social benefits? This is the *guns versus butter* debate, which assumes that governments have a finite amount of money and must choose whether to spend a larger part on the military or on social programs. The choice forces citizens into two opposing groups.

Divisions like these appear throughout public opinion. Assume we have four different people named Garcia, Chin, Smith, and Dupree. Garcia may believe that the United States should provide a free education for every citizen all the way through college, whereas Chin may believe education should be free only through high school. Smith might believe children should be covered by health insurance at the government's expense, whereas Dupree believes all citizens should be covered. In the end, the way we prioritize our beliefs and what we decide is most important to us determines whether we are on the liberal or conservative end of the political spectrum, or somewhere in between.

## Get Connected!

### Express Yourself

You can volunteer to participate in public opinion surveys. Diverse respondents are needed across a variety of topics to give a reliable picture of what Americans think about politics, entertainment, marketing, and more. One polling group, Harris Interactive, maintains an Internet pool of potential respondents of varied ages, education levels, backgrounds, cultures, and more. When a survey is designed and put out into the field, Harris emails an invitation to the pool to find respondents. Respondents choose which surveys to complete based on the topics, time required, and compensation offered (usually small).

Harris Interactive is a subsidiary of Nielsen, a company with a long history of measuring television and media viewership in the United States and abroad. Nielsen ratings help television stations identify shows and newscasts with enough viewers to warrant being kept in production, and also to set advertising rates (based on audience size) for commercials on popular shows. Harris Interactive has expanded Nielsen's survey methods by using polling data and interviews to better predict future political and market trends.

Harris polls cover the economy, lifestyles, sports, international affairs, and more. Which topic has the most surveys? Politics, of course.

*Wondering what types of surveys you might get? The results of some of the surveys will give you an idea. They are available to the public on the Harris website. For more information, log in to **Harris Poll Online** (<https://www.openstaxcollege.org/l/29harrispole>).*

## IDEOLOGIES AND THE IDEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM

One useful way to look at ideologies is to place them on a spectrum that visually compares them based on what they prioritize. Liberal ideologies are traditionally put on the left and conservative ideologies on the right. (This placement dates from the French Revolution and is why liberals are called left-wing and conservatives are called right-wing.) The ideologies at the ends of the spectrum are the most extreme; those in the middle are moderate. Thus, people who identify with left- and right-wing ideologies identify with beliefs to the left and right ends of the spectrum, while moderates balance the beliefs at the extremes of the spectrum.

In the United States, ideologies at the right side of the spectrum prioritize government control over personal freedoms. They range from fascism to authoritarianism to conservatism. Ideologies on the left side of the spectrum prioritize equality and range from communism to socialism to liberalism (Figure 6.6). Moderate ideologies fall in the middle and try to balance the two extremes.



**Figure 6.6** People who espouse left-wing ideologies in the United States identify with beliefs on the left side of the spectrum that prioritize equality, whereas those on the right side of the spectrum emphasize control.

**Fascism** promotes total control of the country by the ruling party or political leader. This form of government will run the economy, the military, society, and culture, and often tries to control the private lives of its citizens. Authoritarian leaders control the politics, military, and government of a country, and often the economy as well.

Conservative governments attempt to hold tight to the traditions of a nation by balancing individual rights with the good of the community. **Traditional conservatism** supports the authority of the monarchy and the church, believing government provides the rule of law and maintains a society that is safe and organized. **Modern conservatism** differs from traditional conservatism in assuming elected government will guard individual liberties and provide laws. Modern conservatives also prefer a smaller government that stays out of the economy, allowing the market and business to determine prices, wages, and supply.

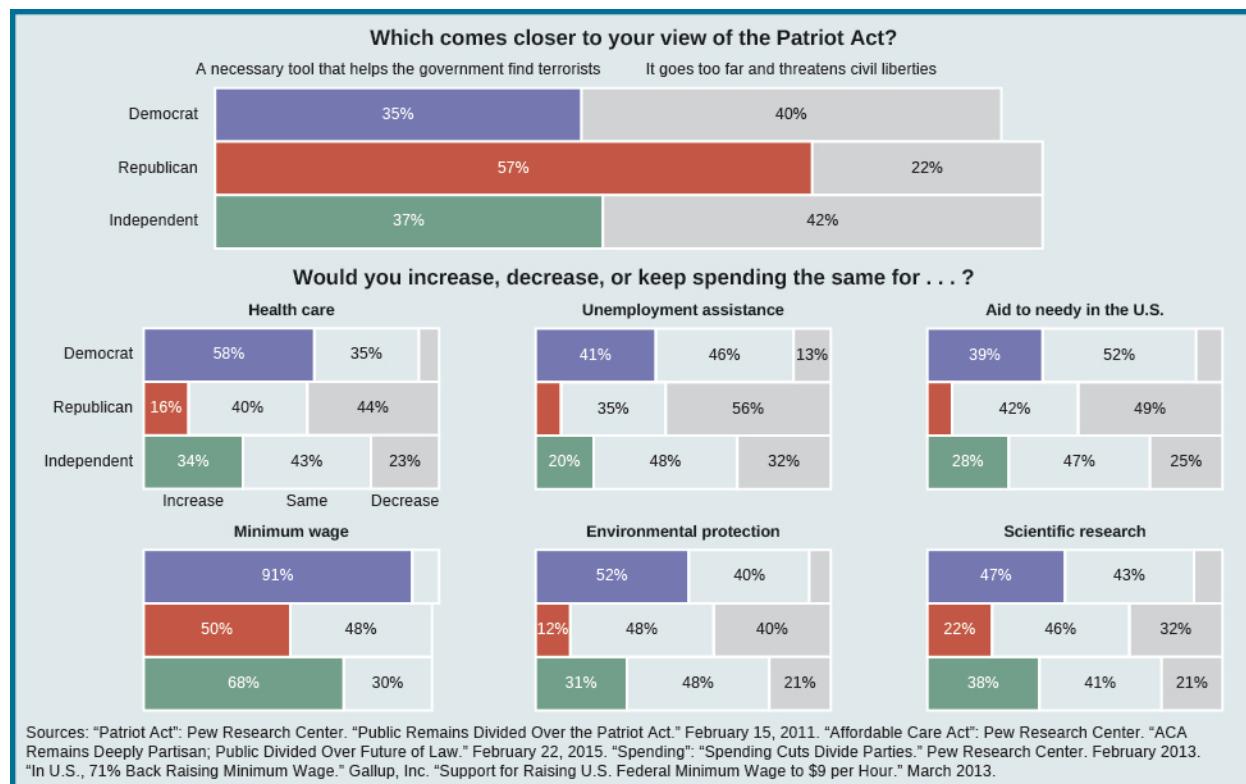
**Classical liberalism** believes in individual liberties and rights. It is based on the idea of free will, that people are born equal with the right to make decisions without government intervention. It views government with suspicion, since history includes many examples of monarchs and leaders who limited citizens' rights. Today, **modern liberalism** focuses on equality and supports government intervention in society and the economy if it promotes equality. Liberals expect government to provide basic social and educational programs to help everyone have a chance to succeed.

Under **socialism**, the government uses its authority to promote social and economic equality within the country. Socialists believe government should provide everyone with expanded services and public programs, such as health care, subsidized housing and groceries, childhood education, and inexpensive college tuition. Socialism sees the government as a way to ensure all citizens receive both equal opportunities and equal outcomes. Citizens with more wealth are expected to contribute more to the state's revenue through higher taxes that pay for services provided to all. Socialist countries are also likely to have higher minimum wages than non-socialist countries.

In theory, **communism** promotes common ownership of all property, means of production, and materials. This means that the government, or states, should own the property, farms, manufacturing, and businesses. By controlling these aspects of the economy, Communist governments can prevent the exploitation of workers while creating an equal society. Extreme inequality of income, in which some citizens earn millions of dollars a year and other citizens merely hundreds, is prevented by instituting wage controls or by abandoning currency altogether. Communism presents a problem, however, because the practice differs from the theory. The theory assumes the move to communism is supported and led by the proletariat, or the workers and citizens of a country.<sup>25</sup> Human rights violations by governments of actual Communist countries make it appear the movement has been driven not by the people, but by leadership.

We can characterize economic variations on these ideologies by adding another dimension to the ideological spectrum above—whether we prefer that government control the state economy or stay out of it. The extremes are a command economy, such as existed in the former Soviet Russia, and a laissez-faire (“leave it alone”) economy, such as in the United States prior to the 1929 market crash, when banks and corporations were largely unregulated. Communism prioritizes control of both politics and economy, while libertarianism is its near-opposite. Libertarians believe in individual rights and limited government intervention in private life and personal economic decisions. Government exists to maintain freedom and life, so its main function is to ensure domestic peace and national defense. Libertarians also believe the national government should maintain a military in case of international threats, but that it should not engage in setting minimum wages or ruling in private matters, like same-sex marriage or the right to abortion.<sup>26</sup>

The point where a person's ideology falls on the spectrum gives us some insight to his or her opinions. Though people can sometimes be liberal on one issue and conservative on another, a citizen to the left of liberalism, near socialism, would likely be happy with the passage of the Raise the Wage Act of 2015, which would eventually increase the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$12 an hour. A citizen falling near conservatism would believe the Patriot Act is reasonable, because it allows the FBI and other government agencies to collect data on citizens' phone calls and social media communications to monitor potential terrorism (**Figure 6.7**). A citizen to the right of the spectrum is more likely to favor cutting social services like unemployment and Medicaid.



**Figure 6.7** Public opinion on a given issue may differ dramatically depending on the political ideology or party of those polled.

### Link to Learning



Where do your beliefs come from? The Pew Research Center offers a **typology quiz** (<https://www.openstaxcollege.org/l/29typologyquiz>) to help you find out. Ask a friend or family member to answer a few questions with you and compare results. What do you think about government regulation? The military? The economy? Now compare your results. Are you both liberal? Conservative?

Moderate?

## 6.2 How Is Public Opinion Measured?

### Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how information about public opinion is gathered
- Identify common ways to measure and quantify public opinion
- Analyze polls to determine whether they accurately measure a population's opinions

Polling has changed over the years. The first opinion poll was taken in 1824; it asked voters how they voted as they left their polling places. Informal polls are called **straw polls**, and they informally collect opinions of a non-random population or group. Newspapers and social media continue the tradition of

unofficial polls, mainly because interested readers want to know how elections will end. Facebook and online newspapers often offer informal, pop-up quizzes that ask a single question about politics or an event. The poll is not meant to be formal, but it provides a general idea of what the readership thinks.

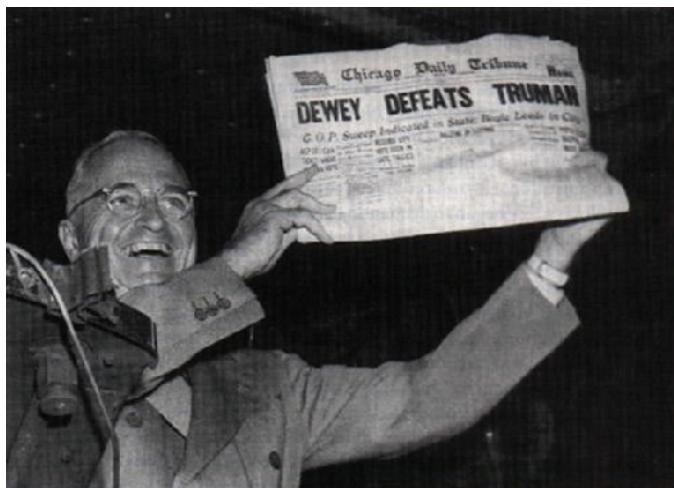
Modern public opinion polling is relatively new, only eighty years old. These polls are far more sophisticated than straw polls and are carefully designed to probe what we think, want, and value. The information they gather may be relayed to politicians or newspapers, and is analyzed by statisticians and social scientists. As the media and politicians pay more attention to the polls, an increasing number are put in the field every week.

## TAKING A POLL

Most public opinion polls aim to be accurate, but this is not an easy task. Political polling is a science. From design to implementation, polls are complex and require careful planning and care. Mitt Romney's campaign polls are only a recent example of problems stemming from polling methods. Our history is littered with examples of polling companies producing results that incorrectly predicted public opinion due to poor survey design or bad polling methods.

In 1936, *Literary Digest* continued its tradition of polling citizens to determine who would win the presidential election. The magazine sent opinion cards to people who had a subscription, a phone, or a car registration. Only some of the recipients sent back their cards. The result? Alf Landon was predicted to win 55.4 percent of the popular vote; in the end, he received only 38 percent.<sup>27</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt won another term, but the story demonstrates the need to be scientific in conducting polls.

A few years later, Thomas Dewey lost the 1948 presidential election to Harry Truman, despite polls showing Dewey far ahead and Truman destined to lose (Figure 6.8). More recently, John Zogby, of Zogby Analytics, went public with his prediction that John Kerry would win the presidency against incumbent president George W. Bush in 2004, only to be proven wrong on election night. These are just a few cases, but each offers a different lesson. In 1948, pollsters did not poll up to the day of the election, relying on old numbers that did not include a late shift in voter opinion. Zogby's polls did not represent likely voters and incorrectly predicted who would vote and for whom. These examples reinforce the need to use scientific methods when conducting polls, and to be cautious when reporting the results.



**Figure 6.8** Polling process errors can lead to incorrect predictions. On November 3, the day after the 1948 presidential election, a jubilant Harry S. Truman triumphantly displays the inaccurate headline of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* announcing Thomas Dewey's supposed victory (credit: David Erickson/Flickr).

Most polling companies employ statisticians and methodologists trained in conducting polls and analyzing data. A number of criteria must be met if a poll is to be completed scientifically. First, the methodologists identify the desired population, or group, of respondents they want to interview. For

example, if the goal is to project who will win the presidency, citizens from across the United States should be interviewed. If we wish to understand how voters in Colorado will vote on a proposition, the population of respondents should only be Colorado residents. When surveying on elections or policy matters, many polling houses will interview only respondents who have a history of voting in previous elections, because these voters are more likely to go to the polls on Election Day. Politicians are more likely to be influenced by the opinions of proven voters than of everyday citizens. Once the desired population has been identified, the researchers will begin to build a sample that is both random and representative.

A **random sample** consists of a limited number of people from the overall population, selected in such a way that each has an equal chance of being chosen. In the early years of polling, telephone numbers of potential respondents were arbitrarily selected from various areas to avoid regional bias. While landline phones allow polls to try to ensure randomness, the increasing use of cell phones makes this process difficult. Cell phones, and their numbers, are portable and move with the owner. To prevent errors, polls that include known cellular numbers may screen for zip codes and other geographic indicators to prevent regional bias. A **representative sample** consists of a group whose demographic distribution is similar to that of the overall population. For example, nearly 51 percent of the U.S. population is female.<sup>28</sup> To match this demographic distribution of women, any poll intended to measure what most Americans think about an issue should survey a sample containing slightly more women than men.

Pollsters try to interview a set number of citizens to create a reasonable sample of the population. This sample size will vary based on the size of the population being interviewed and the level of accuracy the pollster wishes to reach. If the poll is trying to reveal the opinion of a state or group, such as the opinion of Wisconsin voters about changes to the education system, the sample size may vary from five hundred to one thousand respondents and produce results with relatively low error. For a poll to predict what Americans think nationally, such as about the White House's policy on greenhouse gases, the sample size should be larger.

The sample size varies with each organization and institution due to the way the data are processed. Gallup often interviews only five hundred respondents, while Rasmussen Reports and Pew Research often interview one thousand to fifteen hundred respondents.<sup>29</sup> Academic organizations, like the American National Election Studies, have interviews with over twenty-five-hundred respondents.<sup>30</sup> A larger sample makes a poll more accurate, because it will have relatively fewer unusual responses and be more representative of the actual population. Pollsters do not interview more respondents than necessary, however. Increasing the number of respondents will increase the accuracy of the poll, but once the poll has enough respondents to be representative, increases in accuracy become minor and are not cost-effective.<sup>31</sup>

When the sample represents the actual population, the poll's accuracy will be reflected in a lower margin of error. The **margin of error** is a number that states how far the poll results may be from the actual opinion of the total population of citizens. The lower the margin of error, the more predictive the poll. Large margins of error are problematic. For example, if a poll that claims Hillary Clinton is likely to win 30 percent of the vote in the 2016 New York Democratic primary has a margin of error of  $+/-6$ , it tells us that Clinton may receive as little as 24 percent of the vote ( $30 - 6$ ) or as much as 36 percent ( $30 + 6$ ). A lower of margin of error is clearly desirable because it gives us the most precise picture of what people actually think or will do.

With many polls out there, how do you know whether a poll is a good poll and accurately predicts what a group believes? First, look for the numbers. Polling companies include the margin of error, polling dates, number of respondents, and population sampled to show their scientific reliability. Was the poll recently taken? Is the question clear and unbiased? Was the number of respondents high enough to predict the population? Is the margin of error small? It is worth looking for this valuable information when you interpret poll results. While most polling agencies strive to create quality polls, other organizations want fast results and may prioritize immediate numbers over random and representative samples. For example, instant polling is often used by news networks to quickly assess how well candidates are performing in a debate.

## Insider Perspective

### The Ins and Outs of Polls

Ever wonder what happens behind the polls? To find out, we posed a few questions to Scott Keeter, Director of Survey Research at Pew Research Center.

#### **Q: What are some of the most common misconceptions about polling?**

A: A couple of them recur frequently. The first is that it is just impossible for one thousand or fifteen hundred people in a survey sample to adequately represent a population of 250 million adults. But of course it is possible. Random sampling, which has been well understood for the past several decades, makes it possible. If you don't trust small random samples, then ask your doctor to take all of your blood the next time you need a diagnostic test.

The second misconception is that it is possible to get any result we want from a poll if we are willing to manipulate the wording sufficiently. While it is true that question wording can influence responses, it is not true that a poll can get any result it sets out to get. People aren't stupid. They can tell if a question is highly biased and they won't react well to it. Perhaps more important, the public can read the questions and know whether they are being loaded with words and phrases intended to push a respondent in a particular direction. That's why it's important to always look at the wording and the sequencing of questions in any poll.

#### **Q: How does your organization choose polling topics?**

A: We choose our topics in several ways. Most importantly, we keep up with developments in politics and public policy, and try to make our polls reflect relevant issues. Much of our research is driven by the news cycle and topics that we see arising in the near future.

We also have a number of projects that we do regularly to provide a look at long-term trends in public opinion. For example, we've been asking a series of questions about political values since 1987, which has helped to document the rise of political polarization in the public. Another is a large (thirty-five thousand interviews) study of religious beliefs, behaviors, and affiliations among Americans. We released the first of these in 2007, and a second in 2015.

Finally, we try to seize opportunities to make larger contributions on weighty issues when they arise. When the United States was on the verge of a big debate on immigration reform in 2006, we undertook a major survey of Americans' attitudes about immigration and immigrants. In 2007, we conducted the first-ever nationally representative survey of Muslim Americans.

#### **Q: What is the average number of polls you oversee in a week?**

A: It depends a lot on the news cycle and the needs of our research groups. We almost always have a survey in progress, but sometimes there are two or three going on at once. At other times, we are more focused on analyzing data already collected or planning for future surveys.

#### **Q: Have you placed a poll in the field and had results that really surprised you?**

A: It's rare to be surprised because we've learned a lot over the years about how people respond to questions. But here are some findings that jumped out to some of us in the past:

1) In 2012, we conducted a survey of people who said their religion is "nothing in particular." We asked them if they are "looking for a religion that would be right" for them, based on the expectation that many people without an affiliation—but who had not said they were atheists or agnostic—might be trying to find a religion that fit. Only 10 percent said that they were looking for the right religion.

2) We—and many others—were surprised that public opinion about Muslims became more favorable after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It's possible that President Bush's strong appeal to people not to blame Muslims in general for the attack had an effect on opinions.

3) It's also surprising that basic public attitudes about gun control (whether pro or anti) barely move after highly publicized mass shootings.

*Were you surprised by the results Scott Keeter reported in response to the interviewer's final question? Why*

*or why not? Conduct some research online to discover what degree plans or work experience would help a student find a job in a polling organization.*

## TECHNOLOGY AND POLLING

The days of randomly walking neighborhoods and phone book cold-calling to interview random citizens are gone. Scientific polling has made interviewing more deliberate. Historically, many polls were conducted in person, yet this was expensive and yielded problematic results.

In some situations and countries, face-to-face interviewing still exists. Exit polls, focus groups, and some public opinion polls occur in which the interviewer and respondents communicate in person (Figure 6.9). Exit polls are conducted in person, with an interviewer standing near a polling location and requesting information as voters leave the polls. Focus groups often select random respondents from local shopping places or pre-select respondents from Internet or phone surveys. The respondents show up to observe or discuss topics and are then surveyed.



**Figure 6.9** On November 6, 2012, the Connect2Mason.com team conducts exit surveys at the polls on the George Mason University campus. (credit: Mason Votes/Flickr).

When organizations like Gallup or Roper decide to conduct face-to-face public opinion polls, however, it is a time-consuming and expensive process. The organization must randomly select households or polling locations within neighborhoods, making sure there is a representative household or location in each neighborhood.<sup>32</sup> Then it must survey a representative number of neighborhoods from within a city. At a polling location, interviewers may have directions on how to randomly select voters of varied demographics. If the interviewer is looking to interview a person in a home, multiple attempts are made to reach a respondent if he or she does not answer. Gallup conducts face-to-face interviews in areas where less than 80 percent of the households in an area have phones, because it gives a more representative sample.<sup>33</sup> News networks use face-to-face techniques to conduct exit polls on Election Day.

Most polling now occurs over the phone or through the Internet. Some companies, like Harris Interactive, maintain directories that include registered voters, consumers, or previously interviewed respondents. If pollsters need to interview a particular population, such as political party members or retirees of a specific pension fund, the company may purchase or access a list of phone numbers for that group. Other organizations, like Gallup, use random-digit-dialing (RDD), in which a computer randomly generates phone numbers with desired area codes. Using RDD allows the pollsters to include respondents who may have unlisted and cellular numbers.<sup>34</sup> Questions about ZIP code or demographics may be asked early in

the poll to allow the pollsters to determine which interviews to continue and which to end early.

The interviewing process is also partly computerized. Many polls are now administered through computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) or through robo-polls. A CATI system calls random telephone numbers until it reaches a live person and then connects the potential respondent with a trained interviewer. As the respondent provides answers, the interviewer enters them directly into the computer program. These polls may have some errors if the interviewer enters an incorrect answer. The polls may also have reliability issues if the interviewer goes off the script or answers respondents' questions.

Robo-polls are entirely computerized. A computer dials random or pre-programmed numbers and a prerecorded electronic voice administers the survey. The respondent listens to the question and possible answers and then presses numbers on the phone to enter responses. Proponents argue that respondents are more honest without an interviewer. However, these polls can suffer from error if the respondent does not use the correct keypad number to answer a question or misunderstands the question. Robo-polls may also have lower response rates, because there is no live person to persuade the respondent to answer. There is also no way to prevent children from answering the survey. Lastly, the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (1991) made automated calls to cell phones illegal, which leaves a large population of potential respondents inaccessible to robo-polls.<sup>35</sup>

The latest challenges in telephone polling come from the shift in phone usage. A growing number of citizens, especially younger citizens, use only cell phones, and their phone numbers are no longer based on geographic areas. The Millennial generation (currently aged 21–37) is also more likely to text than to answer an unknown call, so it is harder to interview this demographic group. Polling companies now must reach out to potential respondents using email and social media to ensure they have a representative group of respondents.

Yet, the technology required to move to the Internet and handheld devices presents further problems. Web surveys must be designed to run on a varied number of browsers and handheld devices. Online polls cannot detect whether a person with multiple email accounts or social media profiles answers the same poll multiple times, nor can they tell when a respondent misrepresents demographics in the poll or on a social media profile used in a poll. These factors also make it more difficult to calculate response rates or achieve a representative sample. Yet, many companies are working with these difficulties, because it is necessary to reach younger demographics in order to provide accurate data.<sup>36</sup>

## PROBLEMS IN POLLING

For a number of reasons, polls may not produce accurate results. Two important factors a polling company faces are timing and human nature. Unless you conduct an **exit poll** during an election and interviewers stand at the polling places on Election Day to ask voters how they voted, there is always the possibility the poll results will be wrong. The simplest reason is that if there is time between the poll and Election Day, a citizen might change his or her mind, lie, or choose not to vote at all. Timing is very important during elections, because surprise events can shift enough opinions to change an election result. Of course, there are many other reasons why polls, even those not time-bound by elections or events, may be inaccurate.

### Link to Learning



Created in 2003 to survey the American public on all topics, Rasmussen Reports is a [new entry](https://www.openstaxcollege.org/ll29rasmussenrep) (<https://www.openstaxcollege.org/ll29rasmussenrep>) in the polling business. Rasmussen also conducts exit polls for each national election.

Polls begin with a list of carefully written questions. The questions need to be free of framing, meaning

they should not be worded to lead respondents to a particular answer. For example, take two questions about presidential approval. Question 1 might ask, “Given the high unemployment rate, do you approve of the job President Obama is doing?” Question 2 might ask, “Do you approve of the job President Obama is doing?” Both questions want to know how respondents perceive the president’s success, but the first question sets up a frame for the respondent to believe the economy is doing poorly before answering. This is likely to make the respondent’s answer more negative. Similarly, the way we refer to an issue or concept can affect the way listeners perceive it. The phrase “estate tax” did not rally voters to protest the inheritance tax, but the phrase “death tax” sparked debate about whether taxing estates imposed a double tax on income.<sup>37</sup>

Many polling companies try to avoid **leading questions**, which lead respondents to select a predetermined answer, because they want to know what people really think. Some polls, however, have a different goal. Their questions are written to guarantee a specific outcome, perhaps to help a candidate get press coverage or gain momentum. These are called push polls. In the 2016 presidential primary race, MoveOn tried to encourage Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) to enter the race for the Democratic nomination (Figure 6.10). Its poll used leading questions for what it termed an “informed ballot,” and, to show that Warren would do better than Hillary Clinton, it included ten positive statements about Warren before asking whether the respondent would vote for Clinton or Warren.<sup>38</sup> The poll results were blasted by some in the media for being fake.



(a)



(b)

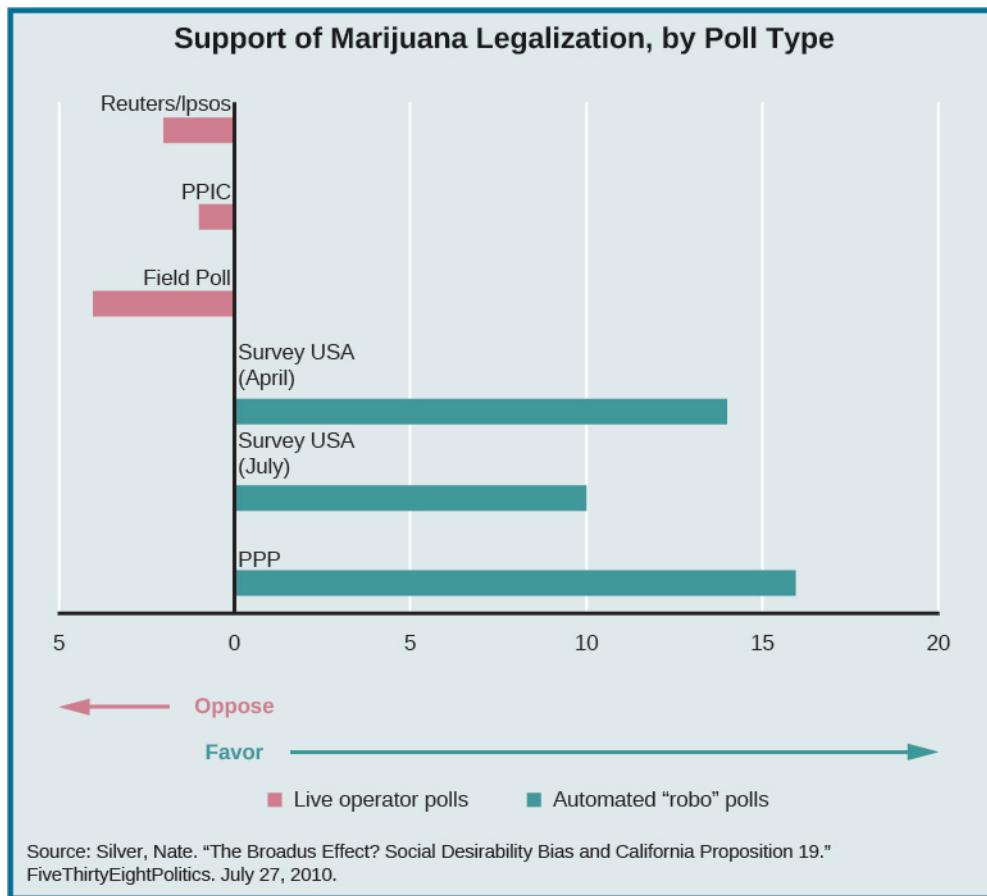
**Figure 6.10** Senator Elizabeth Warren (a) poses with Massachusetts representatives Joseph P. Kennedy III (left) and Barney Frank (right) at the 2012 Boston Pride Parade. Senator Hillary Clinton (b) during her 2008 presidential campaign in Concord, New Hampshire (credit a: modification of work by “ElizabethForMA”/Flickr; credit b: modification of work by Marc Nozell)

Sometimes lack of knowledge affects the results of a poll. Respondents may not know that much about the polling topic but are unwilling to say, “I don’t know.” For this reason, surveys may contain a quiz with questions that determine whether the respondent knows enough about the situation to answer survey questions accurately. A poll to discover whether citizens support changes to the Affordable Care Act or Medicaid might first ask who these programs serve and how they are funded. Polls about territory seizure by the Islamic State (or ISIS) or Russia’s aid to rebels in Ukraine may include a set of questions to determine whether the respondent reads or hears any international news. Respondents who cannot answer correctly may be excluded from the poll, or their answers may be separated from the others.

People may also feel social pressure to answer questions in accordance with the norms of their area or peers.<sup>39</sup> If they are embarrassed to admit how they would vote, they may lie to the interviewer. In the 1982 governor’s race in California, Tom Bradley was far ahead in the polls, yet on Election Day he lost. This result was nicknamed the **Bradley effect**, on the theory that voters who answered the poll were afraid to admit they would not vote for a black man because it would appear politically incorrect and racist. In the 2016 presidential election, the level of support for Republican nominee Donald Trump may have been

artificially low in the polls due to the fact that some respondents did not want to admit they were voting for Trump.

In 2010, Proposition 19, which would have legalized and taxed marijuana in California, met with a new version of the Bradley effect. Nate Silver, a political blogger, noticed that polls on the marijuana proposition were inconsistent, sometimes showing the proposition would pass and other times showing it would fail. Silver compared the polls and the way they were administered, because some polling companies used an interviewer and some used robo-calling. He then proposed that voters speaking with a live interviewer gave the socially acceptable answer that they would vote against Proposition 19, while voters interviewed by a computer felt free to be honest (Figure 6.11).<sup>40</sup> While this theory has not been proven, it is consistent with other findings that interviewer demographics can affect respondents' answers. African Americans, for example, may give different responses to interviewers who are white than to interviewers who are black.<sup>41</sup>



**Figure 6.11** In 2010, polls about California's Proposition 19 were inconsistent, depending on how they were administered, with voters who spoke with a live interviewer declaring they would vote against Proposition 19 and voters who were interviewed via a computer declaring support for the legislation. The measure was defeated on Election Day.

## PUSH POLLS

One of the newer byproducts of polling is the creation of **push polls**, which consist of political campaign information presented as polls. A respondent is called and asked a series of questions about his or her position or candidate selections. If the respondent's answers are for the wrong candidate, the next questions will give negative information about the candidate in an effort to change the voter's mind.

In 2014, a fracking ban was placed on the ballot in a town in Texas. Fracking, which includes injecting pressurized water into drilled wells, helps energy companies collect additional gas from the earth. It is controversial, with opponents arguing it causes water pollution, sound pollution, and earthquakes. During the campaign, a number of local voters received a call that polled them on how they planned to vote on the proposed fracking ban.<sup>42</sup> If the respondent was unsure about or planned to vote for the ban, the questions shifted to provide negative information about the organizations proposing the ban. One question asked, "If you knew the following, would it change your vote . . . two Texas railroad commissioners, the state agency that oversees oil and gas in Texas, have raised concerns about Russia's involvement in the anti-fracking efforts in the U.S.?" The question played upon voter fears about Russia and international instability in order to convince them to vote against the fracking ban.

These techniques are not limited to issue votes; candidates have used them to attack their opponents. The hope is that voters will think the poll is legitimate and believe the negative information provided by a "neutral" source.

## 6.3 What Does the Public Think?

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### Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain why Americans hold a variety of views about politics, policy issues, and political institutions
- Identify factors that change public opinion
- Compare levels of public support for the branches of government

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While attitudes and beliefs are slow to change, ideology can be influenced by events. A student might leave college with a liberal ideology but become more conservative as she ages. A first-year teacher may view unions with suspicion based on second-hand information but change his mind after reading newsletters and attending union meetings. These shifts may change the way citizens vote and the answers they give in polls. For this reason, political scientists often study when and why such changes in ideology happen, and how they influence our opinions about government and politicians.

### EXPERIENCES THAT AFFECT PUBLIC OPINION

Ideological shifts are more likely to occur if a voter's ideology is only weakly supported by his or her beliefs. Citizens can also hold beliefs or opinions that are contrary or conflicting, especially if their knowledge of an issue or candidate is limited. And having limited information makes it easier for them to abandon an opinion. Finally, citizens' opinions will change as they grow older and separate from family.<sup>43</sup>

Citizens use two methods to form an opinion about an issue or candidate. The first is to rely on **heuristics**, shortcuts or rules of thumb (cues) for decision making. Political party membership is one of the most common heuristics in voting. Many voters join a political party whose platform aligns most closely with their political beliefs, and voting for a candidate from that party simply makes sense. A Republican candidate will likely espouse conservative beliefs, such as smaller government and lower taxes, that are often more appealing to a Republican voter. Studies have shown that up to half of voters make decisions using their political party identification, or party ID, especially in races where information about candidates is scarce.<sup>44</sup>

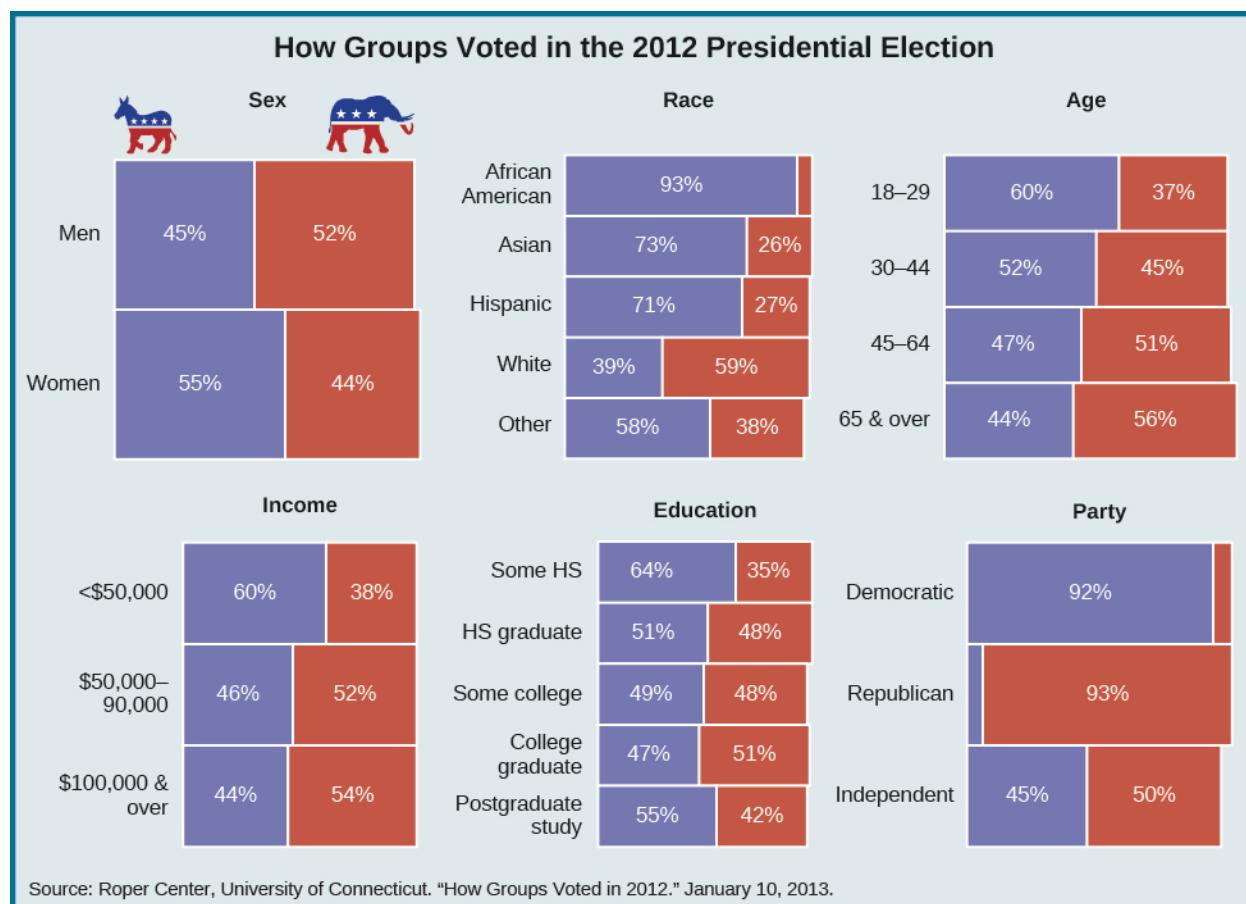
In non-partisan and some local elections, where candidates are not permitted to list their party identifications, voters may have to rely on a candidate's background or job description to form a quick opinion of a candidate's suitability. A candidate for judge may list "criminal prosecutor" as current employment, leaving the voter to determine whether a prosecutor would make a good judge.

The second method is to do research, learning background information before making a decision. Candidates, parties, and campaigns put out a large array of information to sway potential voters, and the media provide wide coverage, all of which is readily available online and elsewhere. But many voters are unwilling to spend the necessary time to research and instead vote with incomplete information.<sup>45</sup>

Gender, race, socio-economic status, and interest-group affiliation also serve as heuristics for decision making. Voters may assume female candidates have a stronger understanding about social issues relevant to women. Business owners may prefer to vote for a candidate with a college degree who has worked in business rather than a career politician. Other voters may look to see which candidate is endorsed by the National Organization of Women (NOW), because NOW's endorsement will ensure the candidate supports abortion rights.

Opinions based on heuristics rather than research are more likely to change when the cue changes. If a voter begins listening to a new source of information or moves to a new town, the influences and cues he or she meets will change. Even if the voter is diligently looking for information to make an informed decision, demographic cues matter. Age, gender, race, and socio-economic status will shape our opinions because they are a part of our everyday reality, and they become part of our barometer on whether a leader or government is performing well.

A look at the 2012 presidential election shows how the opinions of different demographic groups vary (**Figure 6.12**). For instance, 55 percent of women voted for Barack Obama and 52 percent of men voted for Mitt Romney. Age mattered as well—60 percent of voters under thirty voted for Obama, whereas 56 percent of those over sixty-five voted for Romney. Racial groups also varied in their support of the candidates. Ninety-three percent of African Americans and 71 percent of Hispanics voted for Obama instead of Romney.<sup>46</sup> These demographic effects are likely to be strong because of shared experiences, concerns, and ideas. Citizens who are comfortable with one another will talk more and share opinions, leading to more opportunities to influence or reinforce one another.



**Figure 6.12** Breaking down voters by demographic groups may reveal very different levels of support for particular candidates or policies among the groups.

The political culture of a state can also have an effect on ideology and opinion. In the 1960s, Daniel Elazar researched interviews, voting data, newspapers, and politicians' speeches. He determined that states had unique cultures and that different state governments instilled different attitudes and beliefs in their citizens, creating **political cultures**. Some states value tradition, and their laws try to maintain longstanding beliefs. Other states believe government should help people and therefore create large bureaucracies that provide benefits to assist citizens. Some political cultures stress citizen involvement whereas others try to exclude participation by the masses.

State political cultures can affect the ideology and opinions of those who live in or move to them. For example, opinions about gun ownership and rights vary from state to state. Polls show that 61 percent of all Californians, regardless of ideology or political party, stated there should be more controls on who owns guns.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, in Texas, support for the right to carry a weapon is high. Fifty percent of self-identified Democrats—who typically prefer more controls on guns rather than fewer—said Texans should be allowed to carry a concealed weapon if they have a permit.<sup>48</sup> In this case, state culture may have affected citizens' feelings about the Second Amendment and moved them away from the expected ideological beliefs.

The workplace can directly or indirectly affect opinions about policies, social issues, and political leaders by socializing employees through shared experiences. People who work in education, for example, are often surrounded by others with high levels of education. Their concerns will be specific to the education sector and different from those in other workplaces. Frequent association with colleagues can align a person's thinking with theirs.

Workplace groups such as professional organizations or unions can also influence opinions. These

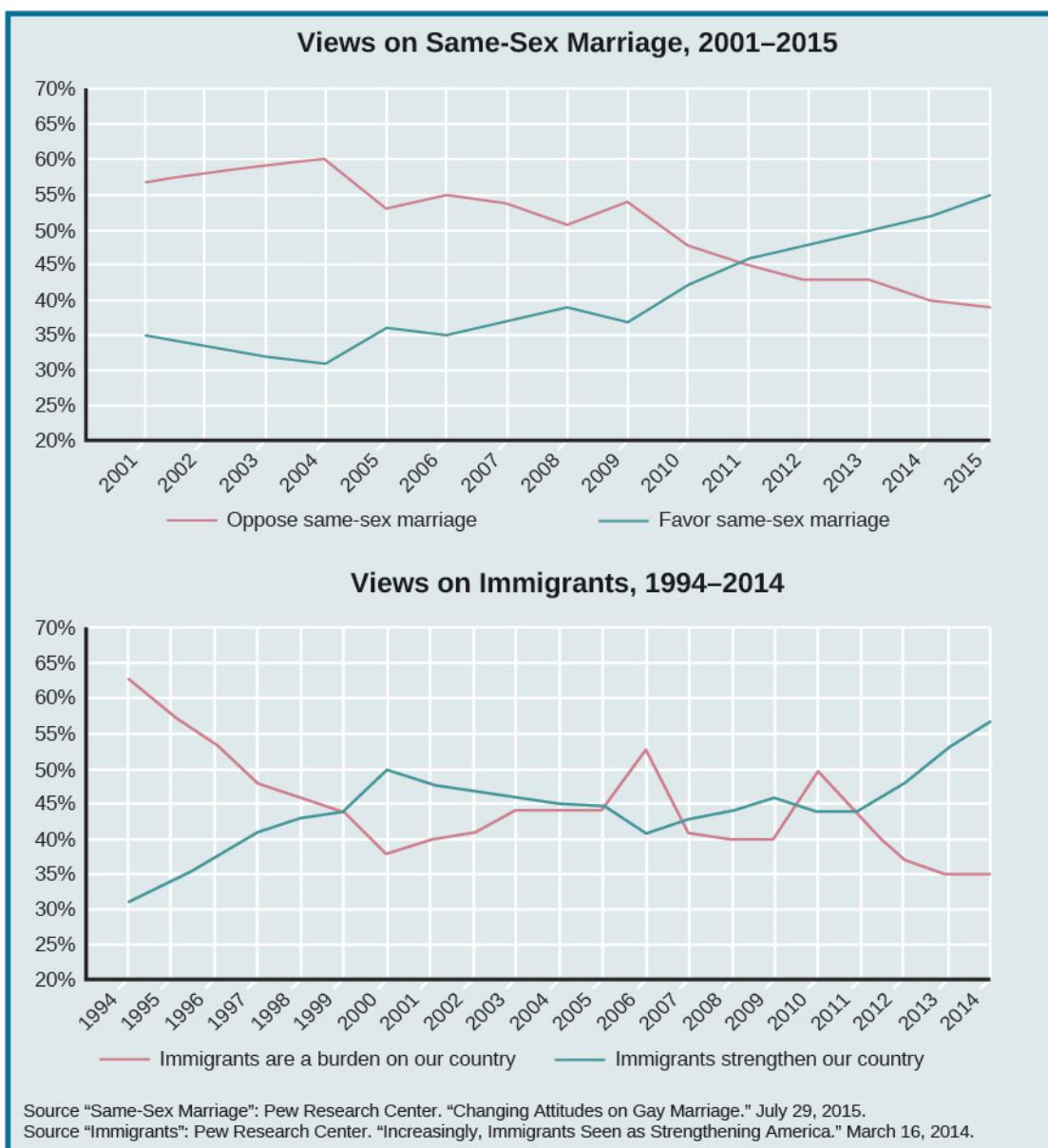
organizations provide members with specific information about issues important to them and lobby on their behalf in an effort to better work environments, increase pay, or enhance shared governance. They may also pressure members to vote for particular candidates or initiatives they believe will help promote the organization's goals. For example, teachers' unions often support the Democratic Party because it has historically supported increased funding to public schools and universities.

Important political opinion leaders, or **political elites**, also shape public opinion, usually by serving as short-term cues that help voters pay closer attention to a political debate and make decisions about it. Through a talk program or opinion column, the elite commentator tells people when and how to react to a current problem or issue. Millennials and members of Generation X (currently ages 38–53) long used Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* and later Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report* as shortcuts to becoming informed about current events. In the same way, older generations trusted Tom Brokaw and *60 Minutes*.

Because an elite source can pick and choose the information and advice to provide, the door is open to covert influence if this source is not credible or honest. Voters must be able to trust the quality of the information. When elites lose credibility, they lose their audience. News agencies are aware of the relationship between citizens and elites, which is why news anchors for major networks are carefully chosen. When Brian Williams of NBC was accused of lying about his experiences in Iraq and New Orleans, he was suspended pending an investigation. Williams later admitted to several misstatements and apologized to the public, and he was removed from *The Nightly News*.<sup>49</sup>

## OPINIONS ABOUT POLITICS AND POLICIES

What do Americans think about their political system, policies, and institutions? Public opinion has not been consistent over the years. It fluctuates based on the times and events, and on the people holding major office (Figure 6.13). Sometimes a majority of the public express similar ideas, but many times not. Where, then, does the public agree and disagree? Let's look at the two-party system, and then at opinions about public policy, economic policy, and social policy.



**Figure 6.13** Public opinion may change significantly over time. Two issues that have undergone dramatic shifts in public opinion during the last twenty years are same-sex marriage and immigration.

The United States is traditionally a two-party system. Only Democrats and Republicans regularly win the presidency and, with few exceptions, seats in Congress. The majority of voters cast ballots only for Republicans and Democrats, even when third parties are represented on the ballot. Yet, citizens say they are frustrated with the current party system. Only 32 percent identify themselves as Democrats and only 23 percent as Republicans. Democratic membership has stayed relatively the same, but the Republican Party has lost about 6 percent of its membership over the last ten years, whereas the number of self-identified independents has grown from 30 percent in 2004 to 39 percent in 2014.<sup>50</sup> Given these numbers, it is not surprising that 58 percent of Americans say a third party is needed in U.S. politics today.<sup>51</sup>

Some of these changes in party allegiance may be due to generational and cultural shifts. Millennials and Generation Xers are more likely to support the Democratic Party than the Republican Party. In recent polling, 51 percent of Millennials and 49 percent of Generation Xers stated they did, whereas only 35 percent and 38 percent, respectively, supported the Republican Party. Baby Boomers (currently aged

54–72) are slightly less likely than the other groups to support the Democratic Party; only 47 percent reported doing so. The Silent Generation (born in the 1920s to early 1940s) is the only cohort whose members state they support the Republican Party as a majority.<sup>52</sup>

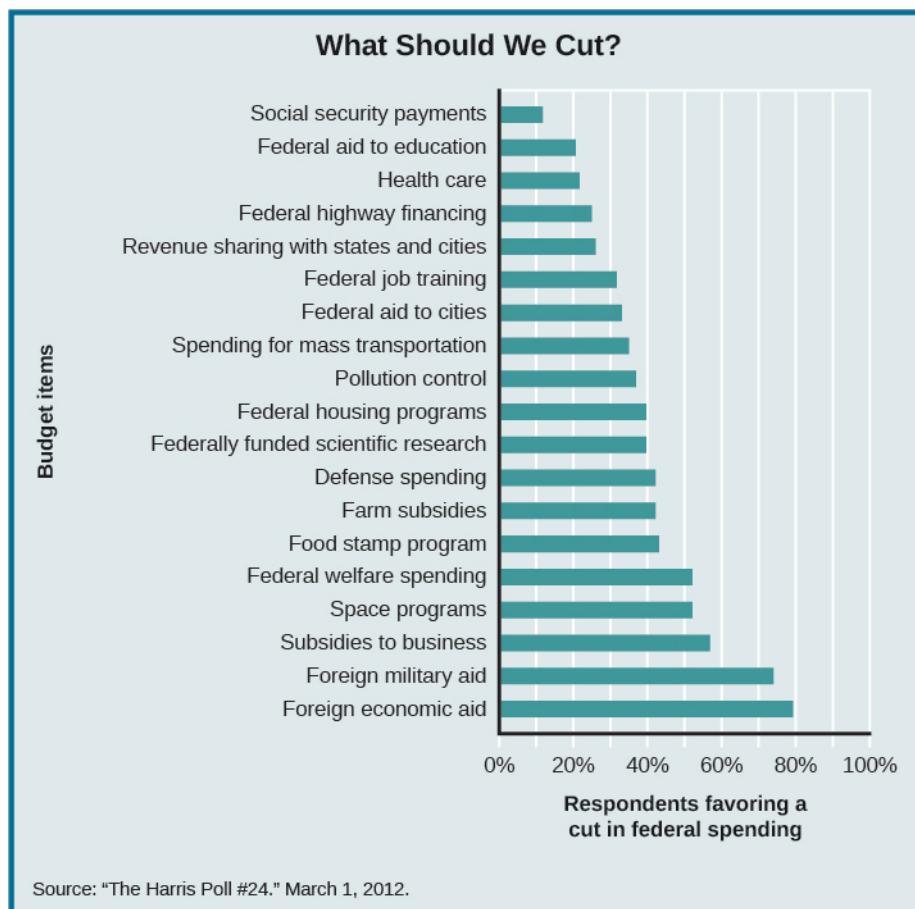
Another shift in politics may be coming from the increasing number of multiracial citizens with strong cultural roots. Almost 7 percent of the population now identifies as biracial or multiracial, and that percentage is likely to grow. The number of citizens identifying as both African American and white doubled between 2000 and 2010, whereas the number of citizens identifying as both Asian American and white grew by 87 percent. The Pew study found that only 37 percent of multiracial adults favored the Republican Party, while 57 percent favored the Democratic Party.<sup>53</sup> As the demographic composition of the United States changes and new generations become part of the voting population, public concerns and expectations will change as well.

At its heart, politics is about dividing scarce resources fairly and balancing liberties and rights. Public policy often becomes messy as politicians struggle to fix problems with the nation's limited budget while catering to numerous opinions about how best to do so. While the public often remains quiet, simply answering public opinion polls or dutifully casting their votes on Election Day, occasionally citizens weigh in more audibly by protesting or lobbying.

Some policy decisions are made without public input if they preserve the way money is allocated or defer to policies already in place. But policies that directly affect personal economics, such as tax policy, may cause a public backlash, and those that affect civil liberties or closely held beliefs may cause even more public upheaval. Policies that break new ground similarly stir public opinion and introduce change that some find difficult. The acceptance of same-sex marriage, for example, pitted those who sought to preserve their religious beliefs against those who sought to be treated equally under the law.

Where does the public stand on economic policy? Only 26 percent of citizens surveyed in 2015 thought the U.S. economy was in excellent or good condition,<sup>54</sup> yet 42 percent believed their personal financial situation was excellent to good.<sup>55</sup> While this seems inconsistent, it reflects the fact that we notice what is happening outside our own home. Even if a family's personal finances are stable, members will be aware of friends and relatives who are suffering job losses or foreclosures. This information will give them a broader, more negative view of the economy beyond their own pocketbook.

When asked about government spending, the public was more united in wanting policy to be fiscally responsible without raising taxes. In 2011, nearly 73 percent of interviewed citizens believed the government was creating a deficit by spending too much money on social programs like welfare and food stamps, and only 22 percent wanted to raise taxes to pay for them.<sup>56</sup> When polled on which programs to cut in order to balance the nation's budget, however, respondents were less united (**Figure 6.14**). Nearly 21 percent said to cut education spending, whereas 22 percent wanted to cut spending on health care. Only 12 percent said to cut spending on Social Security. All these programs are used by nearly everyone at some time, which makes them less controversial and less likely to actually be cut.



**Figure 6.14** When asked about budget cuts, poll respondents seldom favor cutting programs that directly affect them, such as Social Security or health care.

In general, programs that benefit only some Americans or have unclear benefits cause more controversy and discussion when the economy slows. Few citizens directly benefit from welfare and business subsidies, so it is not surprising that 52 percent of respondents wanted to cut back on welfare and 57 percent wanted to cut back business subsidies. While some farm subsidies decrease the price of food items, like milk and corn, citizens may not be aware of how these subsidies affect the price of goods at the grocery store, perhaps explaining why 44 percent of respondents stated they would prefer to cut back on agricultural subsidies.<sup>57</sup>

Social policy consists of government's attempts to regulate public behavior in the service of a better society. To accomplish this, government must achieve the difficult task of balancing the rights and liberties of citizens. A person's right to privacy, for example, might need to be limited if another person is in danger. But to what extent should the government intrude in the private lives of its citizens? In a recent survey, 54 percent of respondents believed the U.S. government was too involved in trying to deal with issues of morality.<sup>58</sup>

Abortion is a social policy issue that has caused controversy for nearly a century. One segment of the population wants to protect the rights of the unborn child. Another wants to protect the bodily autonomy of women and the right to privacy between a patient and her doctor. The divide is visible in public opinion polls, where 51 percent of respondents said abortion should be legal in most cases and 43 percent said it should be illegal in most cases. The Affordable Care Act, which increased government involvement in health care, has drawn similar controversy. In a 2015 poll, 53 percent of respondents disapproved of the act, a 9-percent increase from five years before. Much of the public's frustration comes from the act's

mandate that individuals purchase health insurance or pay a fine (in order to create a large enough pool of insured people to reduce the overall cost of coverage), which some see as an intrusion into individual decision making.<sup>59</sup>

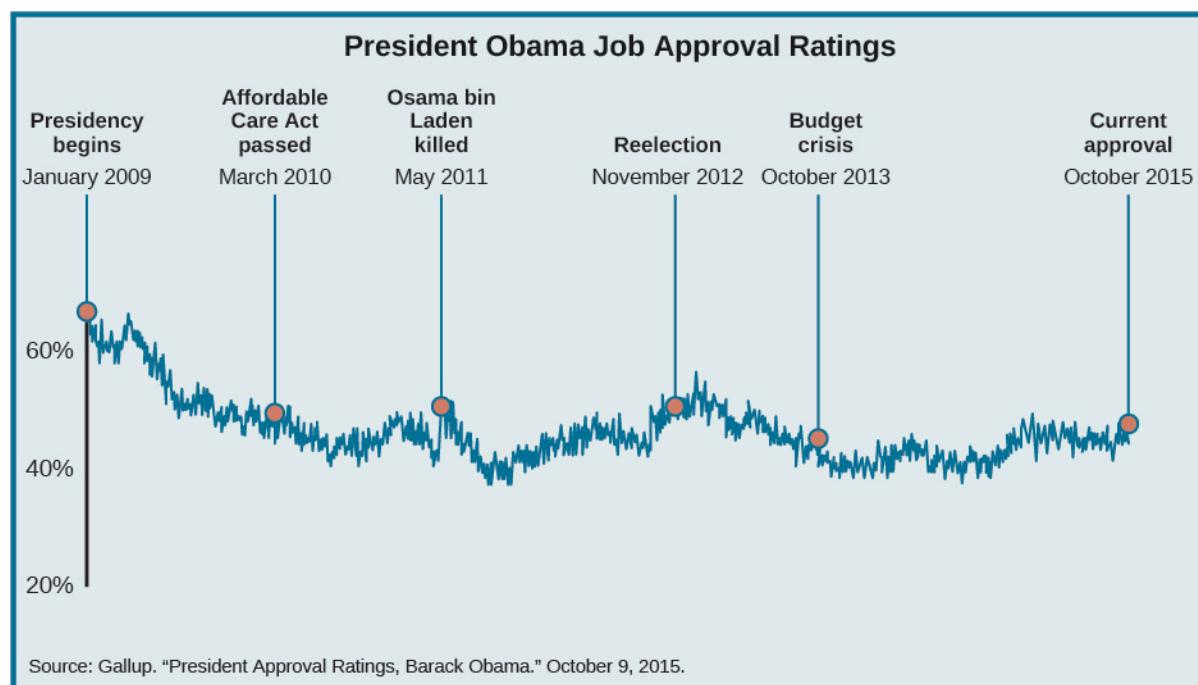
Laws allowing same-sex marriage raise the question whether the government should be defining marriage and regulating private relationships in defense of personal and spousal rights. Public opinion has shifted dramatically over the last twenty years. In 1996, only 27 percent of Americans felt same-sex marriage should be legal, but recent polls show support has increased to 54 percent.<sup>60</sup> Despite this sharp increase, a number of states had banned same-sex marriage until the Supreme Court decided, in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), that states were obliged to give marriage licenses to couples of the same sex and to recognize out-of-state, same-sex marriages.<sup>61</sup> Some churches and businesses continue to argue that no one should be compelled by the government to recognize or support a marriage between members of the same sex if it conflicts with their religious beliefs.<sup>62</sup> Undoubtedly, the issue will continue to cause a divide in public opinion.

Another area where social policy must balance rights and liberties is public safety. Regulation of gun ownership incites strong emotions, because it invokes the Second Amendment and state culture. Of those polled nationwide, 52 percent believed government should protect the right of citizens to own guns, while 46 percent felt there should be stronger controls over gun ownership.<sup>63</sup> These numbers change from state to state, however, because of political culture. Immigration similarly causes strife, with citizens fearing increases in crime and social spending due to large numbers of people entering the United States illegally. Yet, 72 percent of respondents did believe there should be a path to citizenship for non-documented aliens already in the country. And while the national government's drug policy still lists marijuana as an illegal substance, 45 percent of respondents stated they would agree if the government legalized marijuana.<sup>64</sup>

## PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Public opinion about American institutions is measured in public approval ratings rather than in questions of choice between positions or candidates. The congressional and executive branches of government are the subject of much scrutiny and discussed daily in the media. Polling companies take daily approval polls of these two branches. The Supreme Court makes the news less frequently, and approval polls are more likely after the court has released major opinions. All three branches, however, are susceptible to swings in public approval in response to their actions and to national events. Approval ratings are generally not stable for any of the three. We next look at each in turn.

The president is the most visible member of the U.S. government and a lightning rod for disagreement. Presidents are often blamed for the decisions of their administrations and political parties, and are held accountable for economic and foreign policy downturns. For these reasons, they can expect their approval ratings to slowly decline over time, increasing or decreasing slightly with specific events. On average, presidents enjoy a 66 percent approval rating when starting office, but it drops to 53 percent by the end of the first term. Presidents serving a second term average a beginning approval rating of 55.5 percent, which falls to 47 percent by the end of office. President Obama's presidency followed the same trend. He entered office with a public approval rating of 67 percent, which fell to 54 percent by the third quarter, dropped to 52 percent after his reelection, and, as of the presidential election in November 2016, was at 46 percent (**Figure 6.15**).



**Figure 6.15** As President Obama's ratings demonstrate, presidential approval ratings generally decline over time but may fluctuate based on specific events or policies.

Events during a president's term may spike his or her public approval ratings. George W. Bush's public approval rating jumped from 51 percent on September 10, 2001, to 86 percent by September 15 following the 9/11 attacks. His father, George H. W. Bush, had received a similar spike in approval ratings (from 58 to 89 percent) following the end of the first Persian Gulf War in 1991.<sup>65</sup> These spikes rarely last more than a few weeks, so presidents try to quickly use the political capital they bring. For example, the 9/11 rally effect helped speed a congressional joint resolution authorizing the president to use troops, and the "global war on terror" became a reality.<sup>66</sup> The rally was short-lived, and support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan quickly deteriorated post-2003.<sup>67</sup>

Some presidents have had higher or lower public approval than others, though ratings are difficult to compare, because national and world events that affect presidential ratings are outside a president's control. Several chief executives presided over failing economies or wars, whereas others had the benefit of strong economies and peace. Gallup, however, gives an average approval rating for each president across the entire period served in office. George W. Bush's average approval rating from 2001 to 2008 was 49.4 percent. Ronald Reagan's from 1981 to 1988 was 52.8 percent, despite his winning all but thirteen electoral votes in his reelection bid. Bill Clinton's average approval from 1993 to 2000 was 55.1 percent, including the months surrounding the Monica Lewinsky scandal and his subsequent impeachment. To compare other notable presidents, John F. Kennedy averaged 70.1 percent and Richard Nixon 49 percent.<sup>68</sup> Kennedy's average was unusually high because his time in office was short; he was assassinated before he could run for reelection, leaving less time for his ratings to decline. Nixon's unusually low approval ratings reflect several months of media and congressional investigations into his involvement in the Watergate affair, as well as his resignation in the face of likely impeachment.

## Link to Learning



Gallup polling has tracked approval ratings for all presidents since Harry Truman. The **Presidential Job Approval Center** (<https://www.openstaxcollege.org/1129presapproval>) allows you to compare weekly approval ratings for all tracked presidents, as well as their average approval ratings.

## Milestone

### Public Mood and Watershed Moments

Polling is one area of U.S. politics in which political practitioners and political science scholars interact. Each election cycle, political scientists help media outlets interpret polling, statistical data, and election forecasts. One particular watershed moment in this regard occurred when Professor James Stimson, of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, developed his aggregated measure of public mood. This measure takes a variety of issue positions and combines them to form a general ideology about the government. According to Professor Stimson, the American electorate became more conservative in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, as demonstrated by Republican gains in Congress. With this public mood measure in mind, political scientists can explain why and when Americans allowed major policy shifts. For example, the Great Society's expansion of welfare and social benefits occurred during the height of liberalism in the mid-1960s, while the welfare cuts and reforms of the 1990s occurred during the nation's move toward conservatism. Tracking conservative and liberal shifts in the public's ideology allows policy analysts to predict whether voters are likely to accept or reject major policies.

*What other means of measuring the public mood do you think might be effective and reliable? How would you implement them? Do you agree that watershed moments in history signal public mood changes? If so, give some examples. If not, why not?*

Congress as an institution has historically received lower approval ratings than presidents, a striking result because individual senators and representatives are generally viewed favorably by their constituents. While congressional representatives almost always win reelection and are liked by their constituents back home, the institution itself is often vilified as representing everything that is wrong with politics and partisanship.

As of August 2015, public approval of Congress sat at around 20 percent.<sup>69</sup> For most of the last forty years, congressional approval levels have bounced between 20 percent and 60 percent, but in the last fifteen years they have regularly fallen below 40 percent. Like President George W. Bush, Congress experienced a short-term jump in approval ratings immediately following 9/11, likely because of the rallying effect of the terrorist attacks. Congressional approval had dropped back below 50 percent by early 2003 (Figure 6.16).



**Figure 6.16** Congressional approval ratings over the past forty years have generally fallen between 20 and 50 percent; however, these ratings spiked to over 80 percent in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

While presidents are affected by foreign and domestic events, congressional approval is mainly affected by domestic events. When the economy rebounds or gas prices drop, public approval of Congress tends to go up. But when party politics within Congress becomes a domestic event, public approval falls. The passage of revenue bills has become an example of such an event, because deficits require Congress to make policy decisions before changing the budget. Deficit and debt are not new to the United States. Congress and presidents have attempted various methods of controlling debt, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. In the past three decades alone, however, several prominent examples have shown how party politics make it difficult for Congress to agree on a budget without a fight, and how these fights affect public approval.

In 1995, Democratic president Bill Clinton and the Republican Congress hit a notable stalemate on the national budget. In this case, the Republicans had recently gained control of the House of Representatives and disagreed with Democrats and the president on how to cut spending and reduce the deficit. The government shut down twice, sending non-essential employees home for a few days in November, and then again in December and January.<sup>70</sup> Congressional approval fell during the event, from 35 to 30 percent.<sup>71</sup>

Divisions between the political parties, inside the Republican Party, and between Congress and the president became more pronounced over the next fifteen years, with the media closely covering the political strife.<sup>72</sup> In 2011, the United States reached its debt ceiling, or maximum allowed debt amount. After much debate, the Budget Control Act was passed by Congress and signed by President Obama. The act increased the debt ceiling, but it also reduced spending and created automatic cuts, called sequestrations, if further legislation did not deal with the debt by 2013. When the country reached its new debt ceiling of \$16.4 trillion in 2013, short-term solutions led to Congress negotiating both the debt ceiling and the national budget at the same time. The timing raised the stakes of the budget, and Democrats and Republicans fought bitterly over the debt ceiling, budget cuts, and taxes. Inaction triggered the automatic cuts to the budget in areas like defense, the courts, and public aid. By October, approximately 800,000 federal employees had been sent home, and the government went into partial shut-down for sixteen

days before Congress passed a bill to raise the debt ceiling.<sup>73</sup> The handling of these events angered Americans, who felt the political parties needed to work together to solve problems rather than play political games. During the 2011 ceiling debate, congressional approval fell from 18 to 13 percent, while in 2013, congressional approval fell to a new low of 9 percent in November.<sup>74</sup>

The Supreme Court generally enjoys less visibility than the other two branches of government, which leads to more stable but also less frequent polling results. Indeed, 22 percent of citizens surveyed in 2014 had never heard of Chief Justice John Roberts, the head of the Supreme Court.<sup>75</sup> The court is protected by the justices' non-elected, non-political positions, which gives them the appearance of integrity and helps the Supreme Court earn higher public approval ratings than presidents and Congress. To compare, between 2000 and 2010, the court's approval rating bounced between 50 and 60 percent. During this same period, Congress had a 20 to 40 percent approval rating.

The Supreme Court's approval rating is also less susceptible to the influence of events. Support of and opinions about the court are affected when the justices rule on highly visible cases that are of public interest or other events occur that cause citizens to become aware of the court.<sup>76</sup> For example, following the *Bush v. Gore* case (2000), in which the court instructed Florida to stop recounting ballots and George W. Bush won the Electoral College, 80 percent of Republicans approved of the court, versus only 42 percent of Democrats.<sup>77</sup> Twelve years later, when the Supreme Court's ruling in *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius* (2012) let stand the Affordable Care Act's requirement of individual coverage, approval by Democrats increased to 68 percent, while Republican support dropped to 29 percent.<sup>78</sup> Currently, following the handing down of decisions in *King v. Burwell* (2015) and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), which allowed the Affordable Care Act's subsidies and prohibited states from denying same-sex marriage, respectively, 45 percent of people said they approved of the way the Supreme Court handled its job, down 4 percent from before the decisions.<sup>79</sup>

## 6.4 The Effects of Public Opinion

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### Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the circumstances that lead to public opinion affecting policy
- Compare the effects of public opinion on government branches and figures
- Identify situations that cause conflicts in public opinion

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Public opinion polling is prevalent even outside election season. Are politicians and leaders listening to these polls, or is there some other reason for them? Some believe the increased collection of public opinion is due to growing support of delegate representation. The **theory of delegate representation** assumes the politician is in office to be the voice of the people.<sup>80</sup> If voters want the legislator to vote for legalizing marijuana, for example, the legislator should vote to legalize marijuana. Legislators or candidates who believe in delegate representation may poll the public before an important vote comes up for debate in order to learn what the public desires them to do.

Others believe polling has increased because politicians, like the president, operate in permanent campaign mode. To continue contributing money, supporters must remain happy and convinced the politician is listening to them. Even if the elected official does not act in a manner consistent with the polls, he or she can mollify everyone by explaining the reasons behind the vote.<sup>81</sup>

Regardless of why the polls are taken, studies have not clearly shown whether the branches of government consistently act on them. Some branches appear to pay closer attention to public opinion than other branches, but events, time periods, and politics may change the way an individual or a branch of government ultimately reacts.

## PUBLIC OPINION AND ELECTIONS

Elections are the events on which opinion polls have the greatest measured effect. Public opinion polls do more than show how we feel on issues or project who might win an election. The media use public opinion polls to decide which candidates are ahead of the others and therefore of interest to voters and worthy of interview. From the moment President Obama was inaugurated for his second term, speculation began about who would run in the 2016 presidential election. Within a year, potential candidates were being ranked and compared by a number of newspapers.<sup>82</sup> The speculation included **favorability polls** on Hillary Clinton, which measured how positively voters felt about her as a candidate. The media deemed these polls important because they showed Clinton as the frontrunner for the Democrats in the next election.<sup>83</sup>

During presidential primary season, we see examples of the **bandwagon effect**, in which the media pays more attention to candidates who poll well during the fall and the first few primaries. Bill Clinton was nicknamed the “Comeback Kid” in 1992, after he placed second in the New Hampshire primary despite accusations of adultery with Gennifer Flowers. The media’s attention on Clinton gave him the momentum to make it through the rest of the primary season, ultimately winning the Democratic nomination and the presidency.

### Link to Learning



Wondering how your favorite candidate is doing in the polls? The site **RealClearPolitics** (<https://www.openstaxcollege.org/l/29realclearpol>) tracks a number of major polling sources on the major elections, including the presidential and Senate elections.

Polling is also at the heart of **horserace coverage**, in which, just like an announcer at the racetrack, the media calls out every candidate’s move throughout the presidential campaign. Horserace coverage can be neutral, positive, or negative, depending upon what polls or facts are covered (Figure 6.17). During the 2012 presidential election, the Pew Research Center found that both Mitt Romney and President Obama received more negative than positive horserace coverage, with Romney’s growing more negative as he fell in the polls.<sup>84</sup> Horserace coverage is often criticized for its lack of depth; the stories skip over the candidates’ issue positions, voting histories, and other facts that would help voters make an informed decision. Yet, horserace coverage is popular because the public is always interested in who will win, and it often makes up a third or more of news stories about the election.<sup>85</sup> Exit polls, taken the day of the election, are the last election polls conducted by the media. Announced results of these surveys can deter voters from going to the polls if they believe the election has already been decided.



**Figure 6.17** In 2016, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump became the center of the media's horserace coverage. As the field winnowed from over twenty candidates down to three, the media incessantly compared everyone else in the field to Trump. (credit: Max Goldberg)

## Finding a Middle Ground

### Should Exit Polls Be Banned?

Exit polling seems simple. An interviewer stands at a polling place on Election Day and asks people how they voted. But the reality is different. Pollsters must select sites and voters carefully to ensure a representative and random poll. Some people refuse to talk and others may lie. The demographics of the polled population may lean more towards one party than another. Absentee and early voters cannot be polled. Despite these setbacks, exit polls are extremely interesting and controversial, because they provide early information about which candidate is ahead.

In 1985, a so-called gentleman's agreement between the major networks and Congress kept exit poll results from being announced before a state's polls closed.<sup>86</sup> This tradition has largely been upheld, with most media outlets waiting until 7 p.m. or later to disclose a state's returns. Internet and cable media, however, have not always kept to the agreement. Sources like Matt Drudge have been accused of reporting early, and sometimes incorrect, exit poll results.

On one hand, delaying results may be the right decision. Studies suggest that exit polls can affect voter turnout. Reports of close races may bring additional voters to the polls, whereas apparent landslides may prompt people to stay home. Other studies note that almost anything, including bad weather and lines at polling places, dissuades voters. Ultimately, it appears exit poll reporting affects turnout by up to 5 percent.<sup>87</sup>

On the other hand, limiting exit poll results means major media outlets lose out on the chance to share their carefully collected data, leaving small media outlets able to provide less accurate, more impressionistic results. And few states are affected anyway, since the media invest only in those where the election is close. Finally, an increasing number of voters are now voting up to two weeks early, and these numbers are updated daily without controversy.

*What do you think? Should exit polls be banned? Why or why not?*

Public opinion polls also affect how much money candidates receive in campaign donations. Donors assume public opinion polls are accurate enough to determine who the top two to three primary candidates will be, and they give money to those who do well. Candidates who poll at the bottom will

have a hard time collecting donations, increasing the odds that they will continue to do poorly. This was apparent in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, and Martin O’Malley each campaigned in the hope of becoming the Democratic presidential nominee. In June 2015, 75 percent of Democrats likely to vote in their state primaries said they would vote for Clinton, while 15 percent of those polled said they would vote for Sanders. Only 2 percent said they would vote for O’Malley.<sup>88</sup> During this same period, Clinton raised \$47 million in campaign donations, Sanders raised \$15 million, and O’Malley raised \$2 million.<sup>89</sup> By September 2015, 23 percent of likely Democratic voters said they would vote for Sanders,<sup>90</sup> and his summer fundraising total increased accordingly.<sup>91</sup>

Presidents running for reelection also must perform well in public opinion polls, and being in office may not provide an automatic advantage. Americans often think about both the future and the past when they decide which candidate to support.<sup>92</sup> They have three years of past information about the sitting president, so they can better predict what will happen if the incumbent is reelected. That makes it difficult for the president to mislead the electorate. Voters also want a future that is prosperous. Not only should the economy look good, but citizens want to know they will do well in that economy.<sup>93</sup> For this reason, daily public approval polls sometimes act as both a referendum of the president and a predictor of success.

## PUBLIC OPINION AND GOVERNMENT

The relationship between public opinion polls and government action is murkier than that between polls and elections. Like the news media and campaign staffers, members of the three branches of government are aware of public opinion. But do politicians use public opinion polls to guide their decisions and actions?

The short answer is “sometimes.” The public is not perfectly informed about politics, so politicians realize public opinion may not always be the right choice. Yet many political studies, from the *American Voter* in the 1920s to the *American Voter Revisited* in the 2000s, have found that voters behave rationally despite having limited information. Individual citizens do not take the time to become fully informed about all aspects of politics, yet their collective behavior and the opinions they hold as a group make sense. They appear to be informed just enough, using preferences like their political ideology and party membership, to make decisions and hold politicians accountable during an election year.

Overall, the collective public opinion of a country changes over time, even if party membership or ideology does not change dramatically. As James Stimson’s prominent study found, the public’s mood, or collective opinion, can become more or less liberal from decade to decade. While the initial study on public mood revealed that the economy has a profound effect on American opinion,<sup>94</sup> further studies have gone beyond to determine whether public opinion, and its relative liberalness, in turn affect politicians and institutions. This idea does not argue that opinion never affects policy directly, rather that collective opinion also affects the politician’s decisions on policy.<sup>95</sup>

Individually, of course, politicians cannot predict what will happen in the future or who will oppose them in the next few elections. They can look to see where the public is in agreement as a body. If public mood changes, the politicians may change positions to match the public mood. The more savvy politicians look carefully to recognize when shifts occur. When the public is more or less liberal, the politicians may make slight adjustments to their behavior to match. Politicians who frequently seek to win office, like House members, will pay attention to the long- and short-term changes in opinion. By doing this, they will be less likely to lose on Election Day.<sup>96</sup> Presidents and justices, on the other hand, present a more complex picture.

Public opinion of the president is different from public opinion of Congress. Congress is an institution of 535 members, and opinion polls look at both the institution and its individual members. The president is both a person and the head of an institution. The media pays close attention to any president’s actions, and the public is generally well informed and aware of the office and its current occupant. Perhaps this is why public opinion has an inconsistent effect on presidents’ decisions. As early as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration in the 1930s, presidents have regularly polled the public, and since Richard Nixon’s term

(1969–1974), they have admitted to using polling as part of the decision-making process.

Presidential responsiveness to public opinion has been measured in a number of ways, each of which tells us something about the effect of opinion. One study examined whether presidents responded to public opinion by determining how often they wrote amicus briefs and asked the court to affirm or reverse cases. It found that the public's liberal (or non-liberal) mood had an effect, causing presidents to pursue and file briefs in different cases.<sup>97</sup> But another author found that the public's level of liberal ness is ignored when conservative presidents, such as Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush, are elected and try to lead. In one example, our five most recent presidents' moods varied from liberal to non-liberal, while public sentiment stayed consistently liberal.<sup>98</sup> While the public supported liberal approaches to policy, presidential action varied from liberal to non-liberal.

Overall, it appears that presidents try to move public opinion towards personal positions rather than moving themselves towards the public's opinion.<sup>99</sup> If presidents have enough public support, they use their level of public approval indirectly as a way to get their agenda passed. Immediately following Inauguration Day, for example, the president enjoys the highest level of public support for implementing campaign promises. This is especially true if the president has a *mandate*, which is more than half the popular vote. Barack Obama's recent 2008 victory was a mandate with 52.9 percent of the popular vote and 67.8 percent of the Electoral College vote.<sup>100</sup> In contrast, President Donald Trump's victory over Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton was a closer contest. While Trump finished with a solid lead in the Electoral College, Clinton vastly outstripped Trump in the popular vote.

When presidents have high levels of public approval, they are likely to act quickly and try to accomplish personal policy goals. They can use their position and power to focus media attention on an issue. This is sometimes referred to as the *bully pulpit* approach. The term "bully pulpit" was coined by President Theodore Roosevelt, who believed the presidency commanded the attention of the media and could be used to appeal directly to the people. Roosevelt used his position to convince voters to pressure Congress to pass laws.

Increasing partisanship has made it more difficult for presidents to use their power to get their own preferred issues through Congress, however, especially when the president's party is in the minority in Congress.<sup>101</sup> For this reason, modern presidents may find more success in using their popularity to increase media and social media attention on an issue. Even if the president is not the reason for congressional action, he or she can cause the attention that leads to change.<sup>102</sup>

Presidents may also use their popularity to ask the people to act. In October 2015, following a shooting at Umpqua Community College in Oregon, President Obama gave a short speech from the West Wing of the White House (**Figure 6.18**). After offering his condolences and prayers to the community, he remarked that prayers and condolences were no longer enough, and he called on citizens to push Congress for a change in gun control laws. President Obama had proposed gun control reform following the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut, but it did not pass Congress. This time, the president asked citizens to use gun control as a voting issue and push for reform via the ballot box.



**Figure 6.18** In the wake of a shooting at Umpqua Community College in Oregon in October 2015, President Obama called for a change in gun control laws (credit: The White House).

In some instances, presidents may appear to directly consider public opinion before acting or making decisions. In 2013, President Obama announced that he was considering a military strike on Syria in reaction to the Syrian government's illegal use of sarin gas on its own citizens. Despite agreeing that this chemical attack on the Damascene suburbs was a war crime, the public was against U.S. involvement. Forty-eight percent of respondents said they opposed airstrikes, and only 29 percent were in favor. Democrats were especially opposed to military intervention.<sup>103</sup> President Obama changed his mind and ultimately allowed Russian president Vladimir Putin to negotiate Syria's surrender of its chemical weapons.

However, further examples show that presidents do not consistently listen to public opinion. After taking office in 2009, President Obama did not order the closing of Guantanamo Bay prison, even though his proposal to do so had garnered support during the 2008 election. President Bush, despite growing public disapproval for the war in Iraq, did not end military support in Iraq after 2006. And President Bill Clinton, whose White House pollsters were infamous for polling on everything, sometimes ignored the public if circumstances warranted.<sup>104</sup> In 1995, despite public opposition, Clinton guaranteed loans for the Mexican government to help the country out of financial insolvency. He followed this decision with many speeches to help the American public understand the importance of stabilizing Mexico's economy. Individual examples like these make it difficult to persuasively identify the direct effects of public opinion on the presidency.

While presidents have at most only two terms to serve and work, members of Congress can serve as long as the public returns them to office. We might think that for this reason public opinion is important to representatives and senators, and that their behavior, such as their votes on domestic programs or funding, will change to match the expectation of the public. In a more liberal time, the public may expect to see more social programs. In a non-liberal time, the public mood may favor austerity, or decreased government spending on programs. Failure to recognize shifts in public opinion may lead to a politician's losing the next election.<sup>105</sup>

House of Representatives members, with a two-year term, have a more difficult time recovering from decisions that anger local voters. And because most representatives continually fundraise, unpopular decisions can hurt their campaign donations. For these reasons, it seems representatives should be susceptible to polling pressure. Yet one study, by James Stimson, found that the public mood does not directly affect elections, and shifts in public opinion do not predict whether a House member will win or lose. These elections are affected by the president on the ticket, presidential popularity (or lack thereof) during a midterm election, and the perks of incumbency, such as name recognition and media coverage. In fact, a later study confirmed that the incumbency effect is highly predictive of a win, and public opinion is not.<sup>106</sup> In spite of this, we still see policy shifts in Congress, often matching the policy preferences of the public. When the shifts happen within the House, they are measured by the way members vote. The study's authors hypothesize that House members alter their votes to match the public mood, perhaps in an effort to strengthen their electoral chances.<sup>107</sup>

The Senate is quite different from the House. Senators do not enjoy the same benefits of incumbency, and they win reelection at lower rates than House members. Yet, they do have one advantage over their colleagues in the House: Senators hold six-year terms, which gives them time to engage in fence-mending to repair the damage from unpopular decisions. In the Senate, Stimson's study confirmed that opinion affects a senator's chances at reelection, even though it did not affect House members. Specifically, the study shows that when public opinion shifts, fewer senators win reelection. Thus, when the public as a whole becomes more or less liberal, new senators are elected. Rather than the senators shifting their policy preferences and voting differently, it is the new senators who change the policy direction of the Senate.<sup>108</sup>

Beyond voter polls, congressional representatives are also very interested in polls that reveal the wishes of interest groups and businesses. If AARP, one of the largest and most active groups of voters in the United States, is unhappy with a bill, members of the relevant congressional committees will take that response into consideration. If the pharmaceutical or oil industry is unhappy with a new patent or tax policy, its members' opinions will have some effect on representatives' decisions, since these industries contribute heavily to election campaigns.

### Link to Learning



The website of the **Policy Agendas Project** (<https://www.openstaxcollege.org/II-29polagendasprj>) details a National Science Foundation-funded policy project to provide data on public opinion, presidential public approval, and a variety of governmental measures of activity. All data are coded by policy topic, so you can look for trends in a policy topic of interest to you to see whether government attention tracks with public opinion.

There is some disagreement about whether the Supreme Court follows public opinion or shapes it. The lifetime tenure the justices enjoy was designed to remove everyday politics from their decisions, protect them from swings in political partisanship, and allow them to choose whether and when to listen to public opinion. More often than not, the public is unaware of the Supreme Court's decisions and opinions. When the justices accept controversial cases, the media tune in and ask questions, raising public awareness and affecting opinion. But do the justices pay attention to the polls when they make decisions?

Studies that look at the connection between the Supreme Court and public opinion are contradictory. Early on, it was believed that justices were like other citizens: individuals with attitudes and beliefs who would be affected by political shifts.<sup>109</sup> Later studies argued that Supreme Court justices rule in ways that maintain support for the institution. Instead of looking at the short term and making decisions day to day, justices are strategic in their planning and make decisions for the long term.<sup>110</sup>

Other studies have revealed a more complex relationship between public opinion and judicial decisions, largely due to the difficulty of measuring where the effect can be seen. Some studies look at the number of reversals taken by the Supreme Court, which are decisions with which the Court overturns the decision of a lower court. In one study, the authors found that public opinion slightly affects cases accepted by the justices.<sup>111</sup> In a study looking at how often the justices voted liberally on a decision, a stronger effect of public opinion was revealed.<sup>112</sup>

Whether the case or court is currently in the news may also matter. A study found that if the majority of Americans agree on a policy or issue before the court, the court's decision is likely to agree with public opinion.<sup>113</sup> A second study determined that public opinion is more likely to affect ignored cases than heavily reported ones.<sup>114</sup> In these situations, the court was also more likely to rule with the majority opinion than against it. For example, in *Town of Greece v. Galloway* (2014), a majority of the justices decided that ceremonial prayer before a town meeting was not a violation of the Establishment Clause.<sup>115</sup> The

fact that 78 percent of U.S. adults recently said religion is fairly to very important to their lives<sup>116</sup> and 61 percent supported prayer in school<sup>117</sup> may explain why public support for the Supreme Court did not fall after this decision.<sup>118</sup>

Overall, however, it is clear that public opinion has a less powerful effect on the courts than on the other branches and on politicians.<sup>119</sup> Perhaps this is due to the lack of elections or justices' lifetime tenure, or perhaps we have not determined the best way to measure the effects of public opinion on the Court.

## Key Terms

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**agent of political socialization** a person or entity that teaches and influences others about politics through use of information

**bandwagon effect** increased media coverage of candidates who poll high

**Bradley effect** the difference between a poll result and an election result in which voters gave a socially desirable poll response rather than a true response that might be perceived as racist

**classical liberalism** a political ideology based on belief in individual liberties and rights and the idea of free will, with little role for government

**communism** a political and economic system in which, in theory, government promotes common ownership of all property, means of production, and materials to prevent the exploitation of workers while creating an equal society; in practice, most communist governments have used force to maintain control

**covert content** ideologically slanted information presented as unbiased information in order to influence public opinion

**diffuse support** the widespread belief that a country and its legal system are legitimate

**exit poll** an election poll taken by interviewing voters as they leave a polling place

**fascism** a political system of total control by the ruling party or political leader over the economy, the military, society, and culture and often the private lives of citizens

**favorability poll** a public opinion poll that measures a public's positive feelings about a candidate or politician

**heuristics** shortcuts or rules of thumb for decision making

**horserace coverage** day-to-day media coverage of candidate performance in the election

**leading question** a question worded to lead a respondent to give a desired answer

**margin of error** a number that states how far the poll results may be from the actual preferences of the total population of citizens

**modern conservatism** a political ideology that prioritizes individual liberties, preferring a smaller government that stays out of the economy

**modern liberalism** a political ideology focused on equality and supporting government intervention in society and the economy if it promotes equality

**overt content** political information whose author makes clear that only one side is presented

**political culture** the prevailing political attitudes and beliefs within a society or region

**political elite** a political opinion leader who alerts the public to changes or problems

**political socialization** the process of learning the norms and practices of a political system through others and societal institutions

**public opinion** a collection of opinions of an individual or a group of individuals on a topic, person, or event

**push poll** politically biased campaign information presented as a poll in order to change minds

**random sample** a limited number of people from the overall population selected in such a way that each has an equal chance of being chosen

**representative sample** a group of respondents demographically similar to the population of interest

**socialism** a political and economic system in which government uses its authority to promote social and economic equality, providing everyone with basic services and equal opportunities and requiring citizens with more wealth to contribute more

**straw poll** an informal and unofficial election poll conducted with a non-random population

**theory of delegate representation** a theory that assumes the politician is in office to be the voice of the people and to vote only as the people want

**traditional conservatism** a political ideology supporting the authority of the monarchy and the church in the belief that government provides the rule of law

## **Summary**

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### **6.1 The Nature of Public Opinion**

Public opinion is more than a collection of answers to a question on a poll; it represents a snapshot of how people's experiences and beliefs have led them to feel about a candidate, a law, or a social issue. Our attitudes are formed in childhood as part of our upbringing. They blend with our closely held beliefs about life and politics to form the basis for our opinions. Beginning early in life, we learn about politics from agents of socialization, which include family, schools, friends, religious organizations, and the media. Socialization gives us the information necessary to understand our political system and make decisions. We use this information to choose our ideology and decide what the proper role of government should be in our society.

### **6.2 How Is Public Opinion Measured?**

The purpose of a poll is to identify how a population feels about an issue or candidate. Many polling companies and news outlets use statisticians and social scientists to design accurate and scientific polls and to reduce errors. A scientific poll will try to create a representative and random sample to ensure the responses are similar to what the actual population of an area believes. Scientific polls also have lower margins of error, which means they better predict what the overall public or population thinks. Most polls are administered through phones, online, or via social media. Even in scientific polls, issues like timing, social pressure, lack of knowledge, and human nature can create results that do not match true public opinion. Polls can also be used as campaign devices to try to change a voter's mind on an issue or candidate.

### **6.3 What Does the Public Think?**

When citizens change their sources of information, their opinions may change. The influence of elites and workplaces, life experiences, and state political culture can all help change our opinions. Economic and social policies are likely to cause controversy if the government has to serve the needs of many different groups or balance rights and liberties, all with limited resources.

What Americans think about their government institutions shifts over time as well. Overall approval for presidents begins high and drops over time, with expected increases and decreases occurring due to domestic and international events. Approval for Congress changes more dramatically with domestic events and partisan behavior. The public has a lower opinion of Congress than of the president, and recent congressional approval levels have hovered between 10 and 20 percent. The Supreme Court has the most stable public approval ratings, possibly due to its less visible nature. But the court's ratings can be affected

by controversial decisions, such as its 2015 decisions on the Affordable Care Act and same-sex marriage.

#### 6.4 The Effects of Public Opinion

Public opinion polls have some effect on politics, most strongly during election season. Candidates who do well in polls receive more media coverage and campaign donations than candidates who fare poorly. The effect of polling on government institutions is less clear. Presidents sometimes consider polls when making decisions, especially if the polls reflect high approval. A president who has an electoral mandate can use that high public approval rating to push policies through Congress. Congress is likely to be aware of public opinion on issues. Representatives must continually raise campaign donations for bi-yearly elections. For this reason, they must keep their constituents and donors happy. Representatives are also likely to change their voting behavior if public opinion changes. Senators have a longer span between elections, which gives them time to make decisions independent of opinion and then make amends with their constituents. Changes in public opinion do not affect senators' votes, but they do cause senators to lose reelection. It is less clear whether Supreme Court justices rule in ways that maintain the integrity of the branch or that keep step with the majority opinion of the public, but public approval of the court can change after high-profile decisions.

### Review Questions

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1. Which of the following is *not* an agent of political socialization?
  - a family member
  - a religious leader
  - a teacher
  - a U.S. senator
2. How are most attitudes formed?
  - in adulthood, based on life choices
  - in childhood, based on early childhood experiences
  - in college, based on classes and majors
  - after college, based on finances
3. \_\_\_\_\_ political content is given by a media source that lets the reader or viewer know upfront there is a political bias or position.
  - Overt
  - Covert
  - Explanatory
  - Expository
4. Where do your beliefs originate?
5. Which agents of socialization will have the strongest impact on an individual?
6. The Bradley effect occurs when people \_\_\_\_\_.
  - say they will vote for a candidate based on the candidate's name
  - say they will vote against a candidate because of the candidate's race
  - say they will vote for a candidate but then vote against him or her
  - say they will vote in the next election but instead stay home
7. Which of the following is *not* part of a scientific poll design?
  - a leading question
  - a random sample
  - a representative sample
  - a low margin of error
8. A poll states that Hillary Clinton will receive 43 percent of the vote. There is an 8 percent margin of error. What do you think of the poll?
  - It is a good poll and the margin of error is small.
  - It is a good poll and the margin of error is acceptable.
  - It is a non-representative poll and the margin of error is too high.
  - The poll accurately predicts Clinton will receive 43 percent of the vote.

9. Why do pollsters interview random people throughout the country when trying to project which candidate will win a presidential election?

10. How have changes in technology made polling more difficult?

11. Why are social policies controversial?

- They require people to accept the authority of the government.
- They require government to balance the rights and liberties of different groups.
- They require the government to increase spending.
- They require a decrease in regulations and laws.

12. Which factor affects congressional approval ratings the most?

- presidential actions
- foreign events
- Supreme Court actions
- domestic events

13. Which institution has the highest average public approval ratings?

- the presidency
- the U.S. House of Representatives
- the U.S. Senate
- the Supreme Court

14. Why might one branch's approval ratings be higher than another's?

15. When are social and economic issues more likely to cause polarization in public opinion?

16. How do polls affect presidential elections?

- Polls help voters research information about each of the candidates.
- Polls tell voters the issues that candidates support.
- Polls identify the top candidates and the media interview those candidates.
- Polls explain which candidates should win the election.

17. Presidential approval ratings \_\_\_\_\_ over a president's term of office.

- increase
- decline
- stay relatively stable
- seesaw

18. Which body of government is least susceptible to public opinion polls?

- the president
- U.S. Senate
- U.S. House of Representatives
- U.S. Supreme Court

19. Why would House of Representative members be more likely than the president to follow public opinion?

20. How do the media use public opinion polls during election season?

### Critical Thinking Questions

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21. Why is diffuse support important to maintaining a stable democracy? What happens when a government does not have diffuse support?

22. What are the ways the media socialize a person?

23. Is public opinion generally clear, providing broad signals to elected leaders about what needs to be done? Why or why not?

24. When should political leaders *not* follow public opinion, and why?

25. Why should a poll be scientific rather than informal?

26. What heuristics, or cues, do voters use to pick a presidential candidate? Are these a good way to pick a president?

## **Suggestions for Further Study**

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