

# CHAPTER 11 PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

## Narrative Lecture Outline

Public opinion and polling was front page news and the opening story in November 2000. Television and Web-based news organizations called the state of Florida for Al Gore early in the evening based on exit polls. Shortly thereafter, they had to retract that call and Florida remained hotly contested for weeks! Recounts, vilification, lawsuits, and weeks of distress followed before the U.S. Supreme Court stopped all further vote counting essentially granting the election to George W. Bush. Polls flew, predictions vacillated, and pundits pontificated. The loser in all of this may have been political polling and the tradition of calling elections based on projections instead of actual votes. Americans learned that elections were not high tech in many places and that there were lots of mistakes, spoiled ballots, and problems in American elections. We also learned that there are bad polls out there. How do you tell a bad poll from a good one? Let's examine attitudes, where they come from, and how you measure them.

### Political Socialization

Political attitudes are grounded in values. We learn these values by a process known as political socialization. Many factors influence opinion formation. (I usually ask the students how they think their political attitudes have formed and what factors have influenced them the most. I also ask them about their formative political experiences— nowadays many only remember 9/11 or the death of Princess Di—and how that affects them. You can use Table 11.2 as a jump off point. It is also useful to discuss the nature of their own civic education. Have them read the box titled, “Join the Debate: Teaching Civics in American High Schools” and discuss it.) The most important factors are:

**The Family School and Peers The Mass Media Religious Groups Race and Ethnicity  
Gender Age or Generation Region The Impact of Events**

We then discuss what each of these factors is and how they affect political attitudes. For example, if your parents are Republicans, what are you likely to be and why? Is this always the case? How might religion affect political attitudes? The most obvious might be the Christian Coalition or Jews supporting Israel...but what else? Do race and gender matter, and if so, how and when? What effect do events have? Watergate affected an entire generation...will the Clinton troubles affect this one? How and why? What effect does region have? If you look up the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress on Wikipedia on the Web, there is a chart listing party affiliation of members of Congress by region. What can this tell us?

## **Public Opinion and Polling**

Public opinion is “what the people think about an issue or set of issues at any given point in time,” and opinions are normally measured by opinion polls. Polls are interviews or surveys of a sample of citizens (it is too expensive and time-consuming to ask everyone!) used to estimate how the public feels about an issue or set of issues.

Seems straightforward, but I see several problems in the definitions. Let’s see how many problems we can discover here. First, the phrase “at any given point in time” implies that opinions change over time. Second, we are assuming that people know what they think and that polls measure those thoughts. Is this a fair assumption? Sampling can also be problematic. How can a subset of the population represent the views of everyone? We are going to use polls to “estimate” public opinion—hmmm. And those are just a few of the problems of polls. In this lecture, we will address the problems and the nature of public opinion and polling. Also, we’ll look at the uses of polls and whether those uses are in the public good or whether polls are a serious problem for democracy.

I usually ask students to surf the Web and bring in examples of what they see as good and bad polls. All of the students turn them in and I choose a few as examples to illustrate possible problems and possible benefits of polling. Some even hand in direct mail polls that are a lot of fun to discuss in class.

## **The History of Public Opinion Research**

Public opinion polling as we know it today developed in the 1930s. Pollsters used scientific methods to measure attitudes. Methods of gathering and analyzing data improved over the years, and survey data began to play an important role in politics and social life. Political leaders today believe that polling and public opinion are important as policy-making tools, so it is important to understand its history and the current uses of public opinion polling.

As early as 1824, newspapers have tried to predict election winners using polls. In 1883, the Boston Globe used exit polls to try to predict winners. And in 1916, Literary Digest mailed survey postcards to potential voters in an attempt to predict the outcome. From 1920 to 1932, they predicted every presidential election correctly.

Literary Digest used straw polls that are now seen as highly problematic. They lucked out by correctly predicting four elections, but their luck ran out in 1936 when they predicted that Alf Landon would beat FDR. FDR won in a landslide, taking all but two states.

Straw polls simply ask as many people as possible a given set of questions. They do not choose a sample in a random and scientific manner, thereby ensuring that the sample will represent the population. Literary Digest made several important errors: 1) They sampled from telephone directories and car ownership records, thus over-sampling upper and middle class people and those with Republican sympathies; 2) They mailed their questionnaires in early September and opinion changed before the November elections; and 3) They committed the sin of self-selection. Only highly motivated people returned the survey, so the survey over-sampled better educated, politically interested, and wealthier people; again more Republicans.

George Gallup, however, successfully predicted the 1936 election. His company, the Gallup Corporation, continues to be very successful in predicting electoral outcomes.

The American Voter was published in 1960 and continues to influence the way we think of mass attitudes and behavior. This book studied the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections and discussed how class coalitions led to party affiliation. These early studies led to the National Elections Study (NES), which still drives the research of political scientists interested in voting behavior.

### **Traditional Public Opinion Polls**

Public officials learn about public opinion in many ways: through election results; citizen contact such as phone calls, faxes, and e-mails about issues and policies; letters to the editor in newspapers or magazines; and public opinion polls or surveys. Polls help public officials (and others interested in public opinion) have a broader and more scientific understanding of what the public collectively wants. Good polls produce good information. Bad polls do not. So how do we figure out if a poll is good or bad? To do so, we need to look at question wording, sampling, and how respondents are contacted.

1) **Question wording:** The respondent needs to know how the questions are phrased. Bad questions lead to bad results. There are thousands (or more) bad polls out there. An example of a bad question might be, “If the government takes our guns that we use to protect our families away from us, only criminals will have guns and we will all be in danger. Are you in favor of placing your family in greater danger? Yes/No”

2) **Sampling:** In order for a poll to be reliable, the sample must be taken accurately. The best method is a scientific random sample. Such a sample guarantees that each person in the population has the same statistical chance of being selected.

There are a number of sampling techniques. Some of the techniques are poor and should be avoided. These include nonstratified sampling, straw polls, and most nonprobability sampling methods. A more reliable nonprobability method is a quota sample in which a pollster ensures representativeness using quotas. For example, in a citywide survey, respondents should reflect the make-up of the city: 30 percent African American, 15 percent Hispanic, and so on.

Most national surveys use stratified sampling. A simple random sample of the American population would not be a very good predictor of election results, since not everyone votes and the survey could end up with a sample that excludes women, a minority group, region, or the like. As we recall from our discussion of political socialization, these things matter.

3) **Contacting respondents:** The method of contact is important. Since 95 percent of Americans have a telephone, random phone calling would be a valid method. However, this should not be the method of choice in Sudan. The rising use of cell phones might cause problems, especially among younger people, but so far, this has not been a major concern. Some surveys are done in person, but many worry that the presence of the interviewer causes problems.

In general, you should never trust a poll that does not tell you the question wording, the sampling method, and the ways in which respondents were contacted. Reputable and reliable pollsters will also inform you of the number of respondents (the “n”) and the error rate (+ or – 5 percent) so that you can determine for yourself whether to believe the results. Any poll that tells you to call 555-9712 for “yes” and 555-9713 for “no” is unscientific and unreliable. The same is true of Internet polls that ask you to register your opinion now. These are not random samples at all!

**Political Polls Tracking polls:** continuous surveys that enable a campaign to chart its daily rise and fall in popularity. These are small samples and conducted every 24 hours. They are fraught with reliability problems, but may be a decent measure of trends.

**Push polls:** try to lead the subject to a specified conclusion and the worst are designed simply to “push” subjects away from candidates by linking them to negative events or traits in the question.

**Exit polls:** polls conducted at polling places on Election Day.

### **Shortcomings of Polling**

Bad reporting and bad polling can change political campaigns, hurt careers, and have other bad consequences. There are large numbers of bad polls out there! It is our job to learn how to consume polls critically so that we ignore the bad polls and take “good” polls with an understanding of their shortcomings.

**Sampling Error:** the margin of error. The sampling error is quite small if the sample is carefully selected. All polls contain some error, and 3 to 5 percent is considered a reasonably small rate of error. A 3 percent error rate means that the poll is 97 percent accurate! These rates become extremely important if a race is close:

John Kerry 48% George Bush 52% Margin of Error: 5%

Do these numbers tell us anything? No. The contestants are only four points apart, and given the error rate, the real race could look like this:

John Kerry 53% (48% plus 5) George Bush  
47% (52% minus 5)

**Limited Respondent Options:** Have you ever taken a survey (or a test) and did not like any of the answers? If the options are not broad enough, you get bad results. This is a common shortcoming of many polls.

**Lack of Information:** If surveys ask questions about subjects that the respondents don't understand or don't know about, the answers will often be invalid. The use of filter questions is helpful, such as, "have you thought about...?"

**Intensity:** Polls do not measure intensity well. We can learn a position on an issue, but not how strong that opinion might be.

### **Why We Form and Express Political Opinions**

**Personal Benefits:** Conventional wisdom holds that Americans are more "me-oriented" today than ever before. People therefore tend to choose policies that will benefit them. For example, the elderly favor Social Security. When policies don't affect us personally, we often have difficulty forming an opinion. Foreign policy is a prime example, since most Americans know little about the rest of the world. The public good seems to be a waning commodity.

**Political Knowledge:** Americans are highly literate and over 82 percent graduate from high school. We also have access to a wide range of higher education. However, we don't know much about politics! In 2002, a Department of Education report found that most high school seniors have a poor grasp of history. Only 33 percent of people can identify their own representative to Congress. We are also generally geographically illiterate, with most Americans unable to locate the Persian Gulf or Vietnam on a map. However, most of us have political opinions guided by issues, events, people, ideology, or something else entirely.

**Cues from Leaders:** Low levels of knowledge make public opinion highly changeable. Rapid opinion shifts are common when the public does not have much information on an issue or if the information is bad. Political leaders and the media can often have a large effect on public opinion, since we are often uninformed and may not care to become knowledgeable about current issues.

**Political Ideology:** When people espouse an ideology, even if they don't fully understand it, the ideology affects their opinions. Americans tend to assert that they are liberal, conservative, or moderate. Sometimes these labels can be meaningful. American conservatives generally favor smaller government and less regulation. American liberals generally believe the government can do a good job providing for the poor or elderly. But this seems to play out differently today. A person's conception of what it means to be a Republican or Democrat can determine their answers to a poll, regardless of what a more thoughtful consideration of the issue might lead them to believe.

### **How Polling and Public Opinion Affect Politicians, Politics, and Policy**

Now come the most important questions of all: So what? Do polls affect the political process? If so, how and to what effect? Are they benign ways of measuring the attitudes of a democratic citizenry, or are they malignant attempts to control and manipulate the people?

Politicians and others (including the media) spend millions of dollars on polls. How are they used? What is their effect? These are difficult questions to answer. How good and accurate are most polls? Do politicians know much about polling? Do they attempt to make sure that their polls are accurate, reliable, and scientific? Or not?

Polls can actually change opinions too. Is all this polling really measuring public opinion or forming it? And is the answer to this question a problem or concern?

Public opinion fluctuates—sometimes wildly. Should politicians follow public opinion? Lead it? Ignore it? Guide it?

After discussing polls and attitudes, what do you think?