

The background of the slide is a solid light blue. It is decorated with various abstract geometric shapes, including rectangles, squares, and L-shapes, in dark blue, white, and red. Some shapes are solid, while others are just outlines. In the top right corner, there is a red L-shape and a blue square outline. In the bottom right corner, there is a small black square containing the white letters 'AP'.

THE **LOGIC** OF **AMERICAN** **POLITICS**

Chapter 10: Public Opinion

SAMUEL KERNELL
GARY C. JACOBSON
THAD KOUSSER
LYNN VAVRECK

8th
EDITION

Public Opinion

- Important Questions -

- Do policy advocates try so hard to move public opinion because people's views are so easy to manipulate or because they are so difficult to manipulate?
- Polls often present conflicting evidence about the public's opinions on political issues. When can we believe polling results?

Public Opinion

- Important Questions -

- How can stable and coherent public opinion arise from a population that often is uninformed about basic political facts and lacks consistent political views?
- To what extent does public opinion determine public policy?

Public Opinion

- What Is Public Opinion? -

- One simple definition that has endured three decades states that public opinion consists of:
- “Those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed.” — V.O. Key
- This definition suggests that all governments should pay attention to public opinion.

Public Opinion

- What Is Public Opinion? -

- Democracies differ from other forms of government in terms of which persons government finds it necessary to heed.
- In the United States, potential voters and those who can sway voters are most critical because of our use of elections.

Public Opinion

- What Is Public Opinion? -

- In the United States, we have basic constitutional guarantees:
 - regular elections, broad suffrage, freedom of speech and press, freedom to form and join political organizations, etc.

Public Opinion

- What Is Public Opinion? -

- These allow citizens to express their views freely and compel government leaders to take the public's opinion into account if they want to keep their jobs.

Public Opinion

- What Is Public Opinion? -

- Public opinion in America has always been treated as a political force to be alternatively shaped, mollified, or exploited.
 - Examples: Object of the Federalist itself was to sway educated public opinion in favor of the Constitution.
 - When the public demanded a bill of rights, political leaders bent to its will and ensured ratification.

Public Opinion

- What Is Public Opinion? -

- The leaders of various movements have all fought to mold public opinion and then to serve as agents for its political expression.
 - dedicated to the abolition of slavery
 - prohibition of alcoholic beverages
 - suffrage for blacks and women
 - the end of the spoils system
 - passing health care

Public Opinion

- Measuring Public Opinion -

- Then, as now, interest group entrepreneurs sought to mobilize public opinion as a weapon in the policy wars, threatening electoral retaliation against leaders who refused to support their cause.
 - Modern efforts to measure, shape, and exploit public opinion have spawned two linked industries:
 - Scientific polling (random sampling!)
 - Public relations

Public Opinion

- Measuring Public Opinion -

- Before the advent of scientific polling, politicians had to gauge public opinion haphazardly:
 - relied on information supplied by editorials, pamphleteers, local leaders, and so on.

Public Opinion

- Measuring Public Opinion -

- Straw polls were used by newspapers and magazines to gauge public opinion. But generally these were badly biased.
- Why?
- It was not until the twentieth century that scientific polling was developed.

Public Opinion

- Measuring Public Opinion -

- Basic techniques
 - Select a random sample of the population.
 - Ask the people in the sample some appropriate question about their views.
 - Count up their answers.

Public Opinion

- Measuring Public Opinion -

- The larger the sample, the more closely the sample's answers will reflect the answers the pollster would get if everybody in the population could be asked.
- Does a sample get better the larger and larger it grows?
- To a point. After about 1200—1500 the rate of improvement of accuracy actually declines.

Public Opinion

- Measuring Public Opinion -

- A truly random sample of any population is rarely feasible.
 - Why?
 - Because there is no single directory where everyone is conveniently listed and so can be given a perfectly equal chance of being selected.

Public Opinion

- Measuring Public Opinion -

- Another problem associated with polling is sample bias.
 - With a phone survey the 6% without phones will not be reached.
 - Those who only use cell phones (about 14%) are sometimes omitted because they require drawing a separate sample, which adds to the expense.

Public Opinion

- Measuring Public Opinion -

- People who answer generally tend to be richer, more educated, and more politically knowledgeable.
- Methods have been developed to adjust for these problems—most often weighing the responses of people in underrepresented demographic categories more heavily.

Public Opinion

- Measuring Public Opinion -

- Another problem lies in the questions.
 - Respondents may not understand them or may answer incorrectly.
 - Even the most carefully designed question is subject to some measurement error because the fit between words and concepts used in questions and how people actually think about issues is never perfect.

Public Opinion

- Measuring Public Opinion -

- “George W. Bush: Great President or the Greatest President?”
 - Question asked by Stephen Colbert, *Colbert Report*. Dec.15, 2008

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion: Attitudes -

- Where do the individual opinions that collectively constitute public opinion come from?
 - Underlying attitudes.
 - Basically, an attitude is “an organized and consistent manner of thinking, feeling, and reacting with regard to people, groups, social issues, or more generally, any event in one’s environment.”

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion: **Attitudes -**

- When one states an opinion it is the expression of the underlying attitudes evoked by whatever choice is presented.
- Combines feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and predispositions to act a certain way.

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion: Attitudes -

- Individuals differ widely in the attitudes they bring to bear on political choices.
- Some people have an elaborate set of informed, organized, internally consistent attitudes that allow them to understand, evaluate, and respond to political phenomena.
 - These individuals are atypical.
 - “rock-ribbed Republicans” and “yellow-dog Democrats”

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion: Attitudes -

- Most people have more loosely structured sets of political attitudes, not necessarily consistent with each other or well informed by facts and concepts.
- Some have only rudimentary attitudes that offer little guidance in making sense of politics.

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion: Ideologies -

- Elaborately organized sets of political attitudes often take the form of political ideologies.
- Ideologies work to promote consistency by connecting attitudes to something greater, a more general principle or set of principles.

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion: Ideologies -

- The ideological labels commonly used in American politics are liberal and conservative, but these terms do not guide the political thinking of most citizens.

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion: Ideologies -

- Nor do the opinions most people express fall neatly into one ideological category or the other.

Ideologies: Conservatives

- Conservatives
 - Distrust government
 - and have greater faith in private enterprise and free markets.

Ideologies: Conservatives

- But they are willing to use government to enforce traditional moral standards.
- They favor a larger military and a more assertive pursuit of national self-interest.
- Conservatives advocate lower taxes, particularly on investment income, to stimulate growth and to restrict the government's capacity to finance social welfare programs.

Ideologies: Liberals

- Liberals
 - Today liberals typically favor using government to:
 - reduce economic inequalities,
 - champion the rights of the disadvantaged,

Ideologies: Liberals

- and tolerate a more diverse range of social behaviors.
- They also believe the rich should be taxed at higher rates to finance social welfare programs.

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion: Ideologies -

- Some studies suggest that a person's political values reflect a small number of core values, such as
 - individualism,
 - support for equal opportunity,
 - moral traditionalism,
 - or opposition to big government.

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion: Ideologies -

- People do not like to be inconsistent in their beliefs.
- People are likely to change one attitude or the other to reduce inconsistency when they are aware of it.

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion: Ideologies -

- Often, though, people remain blissfully unaware, keeping them separate so they do not clash.
- Can you think of an example?

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion:

Partisanship -

- The political attitude that shapes opinions and organizes other attitudes most consistently is a person's attitude toward the political parties.
- Partisanship is central to voting.
- Large majority of Americans identify themselves as Democrats and Republicans.

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion:

Partisanship -

- Party identification
 - Psychological phenomenon
 - Practical aspects
 - Cue some voters, but personal identity for others.
 - Polarization

Public Opinion

- Origins of Public Opinion:

Partisanship -

- Affects beliefs as well as opinions
 - The more ambiguous the situation, the more prior attitudes such as party identification shape beliefs.
 - Example: Who won the Florida recount in 2000?

Public Opinion

- Acquiring Opinions -

- Attitudes derive from experience
 - Growing up and living in the social and political world

Public Opinion

- Acquiring Opinions -

- Most often the experience is indirect, interpreted, and passed along by families, schools, friends, opinion leaders, and the mass media through the process of political socialization.

Public Opinion

- Acquiring Opinions -

- This process is most influential during childhood and young adulthood, but new experiences can alter attitudes at any stage of life.

Public Opinion

- Acquiring Opinions -

- People adopt values and beliefs that pay off in some way in:
 - confirming their identity with a group.
 - pleasing people that are important to them.
 - making the world comprehensible.
 - validating material or psychological aspirations.

Public Opinion

- Acquiring Opinions -

- New experiences can alter attitudes at any stage of life.
 - Does not have to be personal experience; can also be collective experiences.

Public Opinion

- Acquiring Opinions -

- People tend to develop more complex, richly informed attitudes when the cost of doing so is lower and the payoff higher.

Public Opinion

- Acquiring Opinions -

- Because political attitudes are learned, different experiences produce different perspectives on politics and different levels of political sophistication.

Public Opinion

- Acquiring Opinions -

- Most people live in environments where politics is not that high on the discuss list, so they are less likely to develop sophisticated political attitudes.

Public Opinion

- Acquiring Opinions -

- Cognitive misers
 - Reluctant to pay the cost of acquiring information that has no practical payoff.
 - Result: The opinions they express on issues often appear to be uninformed and unstable.

Public Opinion

- Framing and Priming -

- The most important source of instability in public opinion is probably ambivalence.
 - Particular issues may evoke attitudes and beliefs that pull in opposite directions; the response to a pollster's questions depends on which considerations come to mind first and seem most weighty.

Public Opinion

- Framing and Priming -

- The messages sent by the media and the candidates do not have to change underlying attitudes to change expressed opinion.
 - They simply have to frame the issue in a way that draws out one response rather than the other.
 - For example, Social welfare as “helping the poor” or “social engineering.”

Public Opinion

- Framing and Priming -

- Simply by covering some issues and ignoring others, the news media help to define the political agenda.
- They can set the agenda for what the public thinks is important.

Public Opinion

- Framing and Priming -

- And by covering certain things more than others, the media may influence which considerations are in the foreground when citizens make political judgments. This is called priming.
- They prime their audience to use particular frames responding to political phenomena.

Public Opinion

- Is Public Opinion Meaningful? -

- If large segments of the public are
 - politically ignorant,
 - hold inconsistent views,
 - and can be manipulated by varying the words or context of questions...
- How can public opinion play its assigned role in democratic politics?

Public Opinion

- Is Public Opinion Meaningful? -

- It does so because public opinion is meaningful in the aggregate if not always at the individual level.
- The sum of the public's attitudes is both stable and coherent, exhibiting little change over the course of decades in some areas.

Public Opinion

- Is Public Opinion Meaningful? -

- However, and more importantly, when substantial changes occur, they reflect intelligible historical trends or responses to changed conditions.
 - Public sentiment turning against discrimination.
 - Public opinion turning against higher defense spending amid growing disillusion with the war in Iraq.

Public Opinion

- Is Public Opinion Meaningful? -

- Other studies have detected broad cyclical changes in public opinion across a wide range of issues, with opinions swinging back and forth between liberal and conservative “moods.”
- Aggregate opinion also varies in coherent ways over the shorter term, for example, the president’s level of public approval

Public Opinion

- Is Public Opinion Meaningful? -

- Another reason is found through the use of cues that are generated by opinion leaders.
 - We use information generated from them because it is economical to do so.
 - Uninformed and inattentive majority free-ride in this manner.
 - Delegation of duty?

Public Opinion

- Is Public Opinion

Meaningful? -

- Cognitive shortcuts of this sort are available because interested people and groups have a stake in gathering and disseminating political information.