

PUBLIC OPINION

WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION?

Public opinion is the distribution of individual attitudes toward a particular issue, candidate, or political institution. Although the definition is simple enough, public opinion encompasses the attitudes of millions of diverse people from many racial, ethnic, age, and regional groups. As a result, the study of American public opinion is especially complex, but also very important.

- Definitions
 - Public opinion is the distribution of individual preferences for or evaluations of a given issue, candidate, or institution within a specific population
 - Distribution means the proportion of the population that holds one opinion or viewpoint as compared to those with opposing opinions or those with no opinion at all
 - Individual preference means that when we measure public opinion, we are asking individuals about their opinions

THE FORMATION OF PUBLIC OPINION

An event takes place

The media reports on the event

Without reporting by the media, political events would depend on eye witnesses and word of mouth communication. How the media report on an event, and whether they report the event at all, becomes critically important.

Individuals respond to the event

Two individuals may respond to the same event in entirely different ways: one may put a conservative and the other a liberal spin on the event.

Peer and secondary groups form opinions

The various publics respond to events that are brought to their attention in terms of their prior socialization, group memberships, and political knowledge. How they respond to events depends on their prior political education.

Polls measure national public opinion about the event

PUBLIC OPINION IS FORMED

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

The measurement of public opinion is a complex process often conveying unreliable results. Elections, interest groups, the media, and personal contacts may signal public opinion on certain issues; however, the most reliable measure of public opinion is the public opinion poll. Businesses, governments, political candidates, and interest groups use polls.

Should politicians monitor the polls? Candidates have been criticized for "WAFFLING" — shifting their positions based on the results of public opinion polls. But if a politician is supposed to represent the true will of the people, shouldn't public opinion be highly regarded.

Poll results must be carefully and accurately compiled and reported. This is not always an easy task, especially for tracking polls that are measuring changing public opinion. A good example is an election poll. Statistics that are a week old are not usually very reliable when trying to predict a close presidential race.

Polls can never be completely accurate because a sample cannot replicate the universe exactly. Pollsters allow for this slight chance of inaccuracy with a margin of error. Standard samples of about 1,000 to 1,500 individuals can usually represent a universe of millions of people with only a small amount of error. A typical margin of error — a measure of the accuracy of a public opinion poll — is about 3%.

- By elections: deceiving — does not tell us WHY people voted as they did
- By straw polls — inaccuracies
- By scientific polls
 - Random means = each person in universe has an equal chance of being selected (most important factor)
 - National polls typically require ~1,500-2,000 respondents
 - Margin of error: expressed in +/- terms
 - Can reduce margin of error by adding more respondents, but at some point diminishing returns set in
 - Questions must carefully worded and avoid a bias
- Uses of polls (remember - polls are a snapshot of opinion at a point in time)
 - Informing the public; Informing candidates; Informing office-holders
 - Making election night projections through the use of exit polls
- Abuses of polls
 - "Horse race" mentality emphasized during campaigns at expense of issues >> Focus on who is in the lead
 - Pandering to whims of public by candidates and office-holders
 - Early projections from exit polls may discourage voter turnout, esp. in West

TYPE OF OPINIONS

- Stable = Change very little (e.g., death penalty)
- Fluid = Change frequently (e.g., presidential popularity)
- Latent = Dormant, but may be aroused (e.g., military draft)
- Salient = Personal importance to individuals (e.g., Brady and gun control)
- Consensus = Shared by 75% of the people or more (e.g., balanced budget)
- Polarized = Shared by less than 75% (e.g., gun control)