**Public Opinion…. Voice of the People**

**\*The following link will take you to the video. The video has three parts but they come on one after another ☺**

**http://www.learner.org/courses/democracyinamerica/dia\_11/dia\_11\_video.html**

Before watching the video, answer the following questions:

 What is public opinion?

 What role should public opinion play in a democracy?

 What role does it play in democracy?

 What are the consequences of relying heavily on polls to understand public opinion?

**Video #1 A Change of Heart About Federalizing Airport Security**

Shortly after the terrible events of September 11, 2001, the nation's air traffic system came to a halt. But even after the airports reopened, millions of Americans remained afraid to fly as they believed the existing methods of screening for weapons and other security risks were inadequate. Congress immediately introduced legislation to improve airport security, and soon hearings in both the House and Senate were underway. Despite President Bush's strong backing, the legislation stalled. The problem was that although everyone agreed on the need for more airport screeners and better equipment, there were deep disagreements over whether the airport screeners should be federal employees. Democrats wanted security personnel working directly for the government, where recruiting, pay, benefits, training, and supervision could be standardized and controlled. Republicans, on the other hand, felt that the federal government should set broad standards, but let private contractors actually employ and supervise the screeners. Clearly, the Republicans gave in to the Democrats' demands when they realized that their position conflicted with public sentiment on the issue. On November 16, President Bush signed the bill.

 Why did the Republicans eventually give in on the airport security bill?

 How did political leaders know what the public wanted?

 Is this example atypical of the power of public opinion?

**Video #2 The voice of the people. Really?**

Every four years, the presidential election brings with it a barrage of public opinion polls designed to gauge who's up and who's down, and which issues are in and which are out. The better polls use carefully crafted questions that are arranged in a precise order and a sample that accurately reflects the make-up of the larger population. But many Americans believe that a poll with more respondents will always be better than one with fewer respondents and few are sensitive to the precise wording necessary to conducting a good poll.

 What was wrong with Mr. Perot's poll?

 What would he have needed to do to create a better poll?

 What kinds of things should we, as consumers of polls, know about polling in order to evaluate their accuracy?

**Video #3 The Case of Vermont and Its Civil Unions Legislation**  
  
In the spring of 2000, the Vermont legislature passed a controversial bill that gave gay and lesbian couples the same legal protections as those afforded to married couples in the state. While Vermont was the first state in the U.S. to pass such legislation, the action was not without opposition. Several public opinion polls run prior to the vote showed that a majority of those surveyed did not favor passage of the legislation. In addition to polls showing that more Vermonters opposed than supported the bill, huge rallies and a letter-writing campaign organized by opponents showed that the intensity of feelings on the issue ran high. Vermont's lawmakers clearly knew they were treading on dangerous political waters regarding this issue.

* How did Vermont's citizens express their views on civil unions?
* Polls can show what position people may take on issues, but it does not do a good job of showing the intensity of those feelings. Given that, should they be ignored in favor of participation in rallies or letter-writing campaigns?
* Given public opinion on this issue, did Senator MacDonald do the right thing?