# UNIT 2: Political Beliefs and Behaviors

***Chapter 3*** *Public Opinion*

***Chapter 4*** *Political Participation*

What the public thinks and how that thinking is conveyed to government officials are factors in shaping public policies. Professionals try to measure public opinion for a variety of reasons, using a method that makes the results as accurate as possible. Analysts and citizens alike should consider the legitimacy of a poll as much as its general finding, since if its method is faulty, its findings will be as well.

Public opinion changes, but the factors that help determine public opinion remain fairly constant. Voters' backgrounds, professions, and a range of demographic traits all have an impact on their political opinions. The family has the largest impact, since it is an early source of political information and the understanding of that information.

At the time of the American founding, only the elite classes could vote. Since then, however, state laws, constitutional amendments, and subsequent congressional statutes have expanded voting rights to nearly all men and women over the age of 18. Voting participation, however, has fluctuated over the last 20 years.

### Key Concepts

Political Beliefs and Behaviors

- Beliefs that citizens hold about their government and its leaders
- Processes by which citizens learn about politics
- The nature, sources, and consequences of public opinion
- The ways in which citizens vote and otherwise participate in political life
- Factors that influence citizens to differ from one another in terms of political beliefs and behaviors

**Source:** *AP® United States Government and Politics Course and Exam Description*

3

# Public Opinion

*"Polls can help make government more efficient and responsive; they can improve the quality of candidates for public office; they can make this a truer democracy."*

—George Gallup, 1965

**Essential Question:** How do Americans form opinions, and how do these opinions influence government?

Public opinion is the grand, collective set of beliefs the public holds. Sometimes public opinion forms a clear consensus. For example, nearly everyone agrees children should attend school and that the government should punish violent criminals. However, Americans also disagree on many issues. For example, exactly what topics should schools teach? What is the appropriate punishment for premeditated murder? Policymakers try to answer these questions in a society of diverse, constantly shifting views. The Framers built processes into the Constitution to temper rash governmental action influenced by public opinion. Judges, for example, are given life terms so they can make fair, even if unpopular, decisions. The Electoral College system tempered public passions in electing the president.

## The Roots of Public Opinion

How is public opinion formed? Why do certain members of society have dramatically different opinions from others? What forces cause different people to think different ways? What groups tend to cluster around certain beliefs, and why? Those who study public opinion and its role in governance have developed some answers to these questions.

### *Ideology*

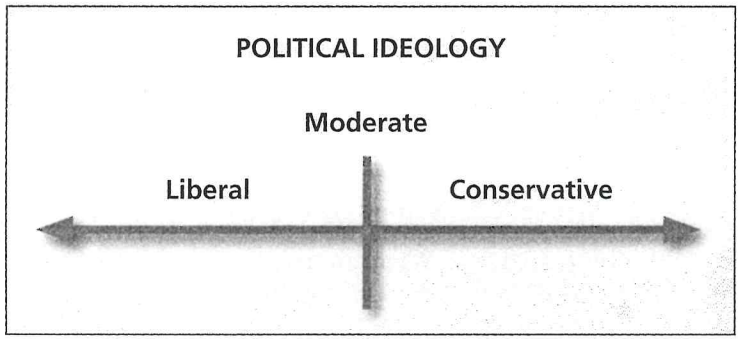
People take positions on public issues and develop a political philosophy on how government should act in line with their ideology. An ideology is a comprehensive and mutually consistent set of ideas. When there are two or more sides to an issue, voters tend to fall into different camps, either a conservative or a liberal ideology or philosophy. However, this diverse nation has a variety of ideologies that overlap one another.

Regardless of ideology, for example, most Americans agree that the government should regulate dangerous industries, educate children at public expense, and protect free speech, at least to a degree. Everyone wants a strong economy and national security. These are **valence issues**—concerns or policies that are viewed in the same way by people with a variety of ideologies. When political candidates debate valence issues, "the dialogue can be like a debate between the nearly identical Tweedledee and Tweedledum," says congressional elections expert Paul Herrnson.

**Wedge issues**, in contrast, sharply divide the public. These include the issues of abortion and the 2003 invasion and later occupation of Iraq. The more divisive issues tend to hold a high **saliency**, or importance, to an individual or a group. For senior citizens, for example, questions about reform of the Social Security system hold high saliency. For people 18 to 20 years old, the legal drinking age may have high saliency.

**The Liberal-Conservative Spectrum** For lack of a better system, political scientists use the terms **liberal** and **conservative**, as well as "left" and "right," to label each end of an ideological continuum. Most Americans are **moderate** and never fall fully into one camp or the other. Many others may fall into a conservative way of thinking on some issues while holding liberal beliefs on others.

The two leading political parties—Democrats and Republicans—tend to embody the liberal and the conservative ideology, respectively. Yet, labeling the two parties as liberal or conservative is an oversimplification. Some self-described conservatives want nothing to do with the Republican party, and many Democrats dislike the "liberal" label.




The meaning of the terms *liberal* and *conservative* has changed over history. In early America, a "liberal" government was one that did little. Thomas Jefferson believed in a high degree of liberty, declaring that a government that governs best is one that governs least. With this statement, Jefferson described the government's liberal approach toward the people, allowing citizen freedom, a free flow of ideas, free markets, fewer laws, and fewer restrictions. This construct on the word continued into the late nineteenth century.

In the Progressive Era, the federal government expanded its activity, going outside the confines of traditional government. In the 1930s, Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt proposed a "liberal" plan for emergency legislation. His New Deal agenda was new and revolutionary. The government took on new responsibilities in ways it never had. The government acted in a liberal way, less constrained by tradition or limitations that guided earlier governments. Since the 1930s, the term *liberal* has usually meant open to allowing the government to flexibly expand beyond established constraints.

The term *conservative* describes those who believe in following tradition and having reverence for authority. Modern-day conservatives often invoke Jefferson and argue that government should do less and thus allow its people more freedom. Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, the 1964 Republican presidential nominee, embraced the conservative label and published his book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, en route to his nomination. He and much of his party felt Roosevelt's party had unwisely altered the role of government. Goldwater and his party wanted less economic regulation and more responsibility on the citizenry. Many conservatives call themselves "fiscal conservatives" because they want to see less taxation and less spending overall.

Since FDR's presidency and Goldwater's nomination these political terms have further evolved, and now it is difficult to know exactly what they mean. Roosevelt would likely not support some of the more liberal goals of the Democratic party today, and Goldwater, in retirement, supported Democratic President Bill Clinton's initiatives to open the door for gays in the military. Additionally, an array of cultural and social issues that came to the forefront in the 1960s and 1970s changed the dynamic between those who consider themselves conservative and those who consider themselves liberal, and thus also changed the terms' meanings.

Traditional Christian voters, family values groups, and others who oppose abortion and gay marriage and support prayer in school have adopted the conservative label and have aligned themselves with the Republican party. However, policies that restrict abortion, censor controversial material in books or magazines, or seek to more tightly define marriage actually require more, not less, law and regulation. For supporters of these policies, then, the label conservative is not necessarily accurate. People who believe in more regulation on industry, stronger gun control, and a desire for diversity are generally seen as liberal. But when government acts to establish these goals, Jefferson might say, it is not necessarily acting liberally in relation to the rights of the people.

**Off the Line** If you find it difficult to find the precise line between liberal and conservative, you are not alone. Cleavages, or gaps, in public opinion make understanding where the public stands on issues even more difficult. Few people, even regular party members, agree with every conservative or every liberal idea. Many people simply do not fall on the linear continuum diagrammed earlier but rather align themselves with one of several other notable political philosophies: **libertarian, populist**, or **progressive**.

Libertarian voters generally oppose government intervention or regulation. As their name suggests, they have a high regard for civil liberties, those rights outlined in the Bill of Rights. They oppose censorship, want lower taxes, and dislike government-imposed morality. Though a rather small Libertarian party

exists, more citizens claim the libertarian (small "l") label than formally belong to the Libertarian party. In 2008, Libertarian party candidate Bob Barr received less than one percent of the national vote. And libertarian-minded citizens can be found in both the Republican and Democratic parties. In short, they are conservative on fiscal or economic issues, such as government spending or raising the minimum wage, while they are liberal on moral or social issues. Most are pro-choice on abortion and believe in equal treatment of gays. As Nick Gillespie and Matt Welch write of Libertarians in their book *Declaration of Independents*, "We believe that you should be able to think what you want, live where you want, trade for what you want, eat what you want, smoke what you want, and wed whom you want."

Populists have a very different profile. They generally attend a Protestant church and follow fundamental Christian ideas: love thy neighbor, contribute to charity, and follow a strict moral code. More populists can be found in the South and Midwest than along each American coast. They tend to come from working-class families. In many ways, they think like the Democrat and Populist party candidate a century ago, William Jennings Bryan. Bryan was an influential Nebraska congressman in the late 1800s who fought for farmers and factory workers, for more regulation on corporations to protect the working class. He was also a deeply religious man who invoked Christian principles. His claims to fame include an impassioned 1896 "Cross of Gold" speech that criticized the gold standard for U.S. currency and his public support for Tennessee's anti-evolution law during the Scopes Trial of 1925. A modern-day populist would largely agree with Bryan, favoring the freedom to pray in public schools while also supporting a higher minimum wage and a supportive welfare system.

The Progressive Movement grew in cities from roots in the Republican party and peaked in the United States in the early 1900s when reformers challenged government corruption that ran counter to the values of equality, individualism, democracy, and advancement. At that time, the Republican party split into its two wings: conservative and progressive. Progressives criticized traditional political establishments that concentrated too much power in one place, such as government and business. To be sure, progressives were capitalists, but they also looked out for workers. Modern progressives are aligned with labor unions. They believe in workers' rights over corporate rights, and they believe the wealthier classes should pay a much larger percentage of taxes than they currently do.

With some variation, about 40 to 50 percent of America is moderate, nearly 30 percent consider themselves conservative, and about 20 percent consider themselves liberal. Bear in mind, when asked this question, every respondent holds a slightly different definition of these terms. Also, notice how self-described liberals come in third, yet the Democratic party (with which most liberals align) has been strong and popular in its current form for two generations. A poll, however, that asks voters if they are "moderate," "conservative," or "liberal" is starkly different from one that might ask if respondents are "Democrat," "Republican," or "independent."

The American National Election Study found in 2008 that 51 percent claimed to be Democrats or leaning Democrat, 37 percent called themselves Republicans, and only 11 percent claimed to be independent. In answering a parallel question, only 32 percent considered themselves "strongly partisan." The Democratic party won more elections in 2008. Two years later, Republicans won more House and Senate seats. A large swath of the populace finds itself between these ideologies and between the two-party organizations, going back and forth from election to election. Many voters feel no need to be consistent when consistency is defined by party platforms, political scientists, and pollsters.

## Political Socialization

If you try to pinpoint yourself with an X on the ideological spectrum shown on page 5, where would you fall? Would you be on the continuum at all, or would you fall into one of the other ideologies you read about? If you are not sure, think of someone you know, maybe a parent or good friend, and decide where that person might fall. Just how did you or the person you chose arrive at that point on the continuum? What influences or factors caused you, or anyone, to think about politics and policy in particular ways?

**Political socialization** is the process by which one develops political opinions. The process begins as soon as one is old enough to start forming opinions on public matters, and it never really ends. Attending college, getting married, purchasing a home, and having children can have enormous impact on one's thinking. Even career politicians whose positions are well known modify or switch somewhat due to an evolving world with countless circumstances. Every political constituent and political participant is affected by a variety of influences that assist in political development.

**Source:** Thinkstock

Family is the most important influence in shaping political development.

### Family

The single biggest influence on one's political socialization is family. As children begin to inquire about world events or local issues, parents begin to explain these. Most moms or dads have some degree of opinion that will likely influence their children. At the dinner table, families discuss "kitchen table politics," considering events currently happening and what impact they might have on the family.

Children can differ from their parents in political opinions. Teenagers who strongly differ from their parents in nonpolitical ways may find themselves adopting far different political views as well. Moms and dads often differ from each other anyway. Younger voters vote less frequently than older ones and, not surprisingly, have less consistent views. Citizens ages 18–24 are not solidly aligned with their parents in great numbers, yet those who hold strong opinions do not veer far from their parents. Studies show that among high school seniors, only about 10 percent identified with the party opposite their parents.

The children's magazine *Weekly Reader* has conducted a poll, unscientific though it may be, on presidential elections since 1956. Responding children, however, generally answer as their parents would, and thus the massive sample becomes reflective of the parent population at large. The *Weekly Reader* presidential poll has been wrong only one time in its entire history.

How do these children differ from their elders once they reach adulthood or after they have voted in a few elections? About 60 percent of adults carry the same **party identification** as their parents, including independents. Most who differ from their parents proclaim political independence instead of aligning with the opposite party.

### School and College

Both teachers and peer groups can have a large impact on students' beliefs. In school, topics come up in classes that may allow a teacher to influence students politically, intentionally or not. There is no solid evidence that the K–12 experience makes one more conservative or liberal.

College campuses are places where professional scholars and students can discuss new ideas and explore revolutionary theories. Colleges have more flexible rules than the average high school. College deans and professors encourage a free flow of ideas in classroom discussion. Such openness and a more diverse student body today than a generation ago has caused colleges to forge a certain open-mindedness that lends itself to liberalism.

From the 1950s to the early 1980s, fewer high school graduates attended college than do so today. In fact, in 1968 only about 13 percent of Americans had a four-year college degree. In 2012, more than 33 percent of Americans aged 24–29 had attended college and earned a degree. Because such large numbers of people attend college and because so many post-college forces impact one's beliefs, it is not possible to say that people with an undergraduate degree tend to adhere to one particular ideology.

Graduate school, however, is a different story. When researchers examin voters with advanced degrees—people with master and doctoral degrees– they find they more frequently vote Democrat and hold more liberal attitudes This could be due in part to the fact that more college professors are libera than conservative. A study by Daniel Klein found that across all disciplines Democrats get 15 votes from college professors for every one vote going t a Republican. Another study showed that nearly 48 percent of college facult consider themselves liberal, while just about 14 percent call themselve conservative.

### Religion

Churches and other places of worship also influence individuals' politica thought. The National Elections Study estimates that 33 percent of American attend church on a weekly or near-weekly basis. Churches are more ideologica and convey a more coherent philosophy than does a typical school. There ar so many different churches, religions, and sects in this nation that there is nc way to say how religion in general influences where the average voter lies or the political spectrum. However, people who attend church are more likely thar those who don't to vote or participate in politics in another way.

Specific religious affiliations, though, can be directly tied to a politica stance. Fundamentalists and Evangelical Christians have a strong politica presence in the South and somewhat in the Midwest. Fundamentalists believe in a literal interpretation of the Holy Bible. Evangelicals promote the Christian faith. Both tend to take conservative positions and vote Republican. Catholics have traditionally voted with the Democratic party, though their vote is not as attached to Democratic candidates today. Jews make up a small part of the national electorate and tend to vote for Democrats.

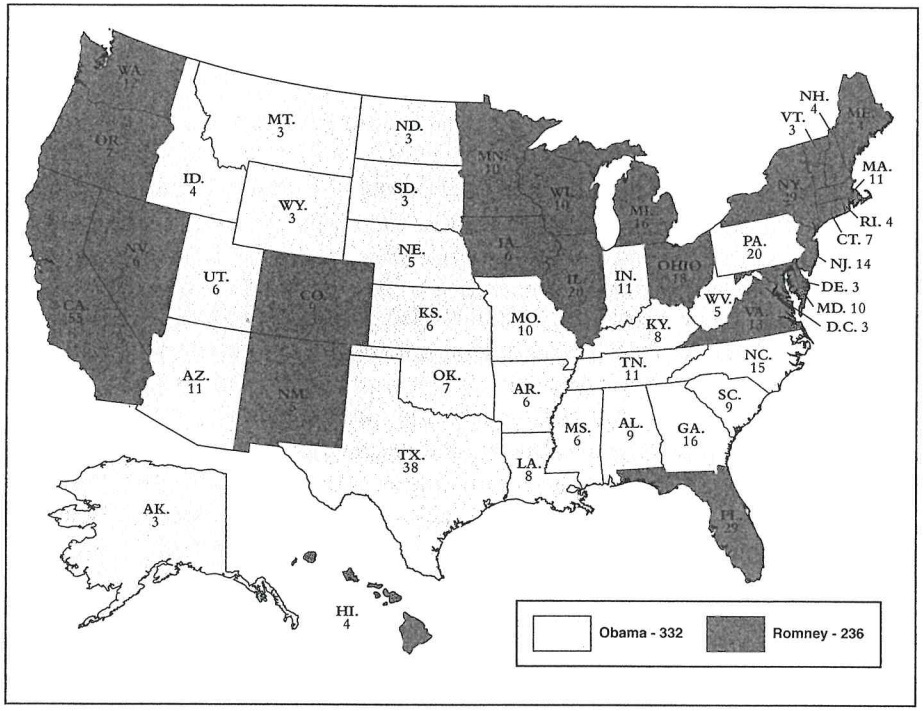
### Race and Ethnicity

Race or ethnic heritage are other factors that play a major role in determining one's outlook on the world and how one votes. African Americans have closely allied with the Democratic party since 1932 and even more strongly since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Hispanics, in recent years, have cast more Democratic than Republican votes, usually by 55 to 65 percent. Asian Americans vote more often with the conservative Republican party, though exit polls in 2012 showed Asian American support for President Obama. New American citizens or voters with strong ties to a foreign country will consider their votes in the context of their culture or how an issue might affect the relationship between the United States and their country of origin.

### Location

Geographic location plays a key role in the way people think or approach certain issues. For example, for a century after the Civil War, the most identifiable Democratic region was the South. The party went through a long-term metamorphosis that shifted that affiliation (see Chapter 5). A close look at

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTORAL MAP 2012




Electoral College results from a recent election will give you some indication where the two parties, and thus the two ideologies, are strong or weak. The candidate with the most votes in each state received the electoral votes for that state.

In the Northeast, Democrats dominate and more liberal policies prevail: higher tax rates, for example, fund more services, such as public transportation. Vermont and Massachusetts were among the first states to legalize civil unions and gay marriage. New York has followed. Democrats dominate the congressional delegations from New England, New York, and New Jersey. California and other western states also lean Democratic with liberal philosophies, having a strong concern for the environment and a tolerance for diverse lifestyles.

The South is more influenced by conservative Christian values than is the Northeast and West. Southern states contain higher percentages of gun ownership than in other regions and are less friendly to organized labor. The South is more religious than other parts of the country. Church attendance is higher, and voters are decidedly more Protestant. Roughly 76 percent of the South is Protestant versus about 49 percent for the remainder of the nation. There is also a high concern for issues related to farming and agriculture.

Republicans have enjoyed southern majorities in the last several national elections, but there are still many southern voters that remain Democrat, reflecting generations of party loyalty and the growth of southern cities. Th working-class southerner may side with the Democratic party on econom issues such as worker pay and employee benefits, but these same workin class voters want tighter immigration enforcement, and they tend to vote wi traditional values in mind.

## Measuring Public Opinion

Who cares about public opinion? Professionals in several different fields wa to know what others think. In a capitalist society, manufacturers of produc and providers of services want to know their customers' desires in order better serve them and to increase sales. Marketing firms hold taste tests include product surveys with packaged goods. Before fully launching a ne product, companies allow small groups to test new prototypes and take the feedback into account.

Candidates running for office need to know their chances of winnin what groups support them, and which ones do not. Once elected, membe of Congress want to know how their constituents regard proposed bills an how they view different types of government spending. These elected officia can determine public opinion by reading letters or emails, holding a tow hall meeting, or conducting a survey in their districts. News services rely c public opinion polls in order to report to readers and viewers. Academics an political scientists also have an interest in the public's viewpoints. And averag Americans want to know what others think to put their own opinions int context.

Polling is the most reliable way to assess public opinion. It entails posin well-developed, objective questions to a small group of people to find out wha a much larger group thinks. Public opinion polling developed in the early t mid-twentieth century and now follows a sophisticated methodology.

### *Polling History*

Polling has evolved from making ballpark estimates to an accurate, reliabl science. In the 1860s, newspapers conducted **straw polls**—simple, non scientific tallies of 50 or 60 selected voters to make rough predictions o upcoming elections. Formal polling and scientific surveys began to surfac around 1900 and gained legitimacy in the 1920s and 1930s.

One notable poll, ***Literary Digest's* 1936 poll** of presidential candidates offers an insight into methodology. The popular magazine began conductin this survey through mailed questionnaires in 1916. It successfully predicte the victorious candidate in every contest from 1920 through 1932, provin to be an authority on the process. The magazine's luck ran out in 1936 whe it incorrectly predicted that Kansas Republican Alfred Landon would defea incumbent president Franklin D. Roosevelt.

*Literary Digest* obtained a large sampling of American adults from stat auto registration lists and phone books. Then it mailed out 10 million letter with a questionnaire and a sample ballot for would-be voters to mark whom

hey would choose on election day, Landon or Roosevelt. Two million people esponded. Once the magazine tallied the vote, it projected Landon would win with 57 percent of the vote, while FDR would only receive 43 percent.

In reality, Roosevelt won his second presidential election in a complete landslide over Landon and went on to win two more elections. The drastic miscalculation by *Literary Digest* caused people to question polling. The misread is understandable, however, if you consider the magazine's procedure. Only people who owned a car or a telephone received the questionnaire. In the middle of the Great Depression, this sample did not mirror average America, but rather the upper-middle class. A higher percentage of this sample favored Landon and the Republican party. We'll discuss this notoriously problematic survey more, but we should first look at who got it right in 1936: George Gallup.

George Gallup is the father of modern public opinion polling. In college, Gallup researched newspaper readership and the effects of advertising. He became vastly interested in *The Pulse of America*, a title for one of his books. Working at a New York marketing firm, he began looking into elections and forecasting their results.

Elmo Roper and Lou Harris also established themselves as polling leaders. Roper began as a jewelry salesman, where he learned the value of trying to determine customers' opinions. Lou Harris, one of Roper's protégés, created Harris and Associates in 1956 and became one of the first professional pollsters to work for a presidential candidate, John F. Kennedy, in 1960. He became a leader in polling for the next generation.

Since the groundbreaking efforts of Gallup, Roper, and Harris, the field of measuring Americans' views has become its own industry. Many universities have established polling centers, and major television networks and large newspapers have created their own polling departments.

| POLLING ORGANIZATIONS |
|---|
| Gallup |
| Harris Interactive |
| Zogby International |
| Rasmussen Reports |
| Quinnipiac University |

## *Methodology*

Pollsters take great pains to ensure their measurements are legitimate and reflective of the public. With modern technology, they have honed methods Gallup, Roper, and Harris pioneered. Today, researchers must construct a questionnaire with properly worded and properly ordered questions, select a representative sample, correctly interview the respondents, analyze the data appropriately, and draw the correct conclusions.

Pollsters must carefully phrase survey questions to not skew the results. The wording should be objective, not emotionally charged. Poll results on highly emotional issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and affirmative action can be totally distorted depending on the wording. On foreign aid, imagine how the following two questions would bring noticeably different results: "Should the U.S. provide foreign aid to other nations while American children suffer from hunger?" and "Should the U.S. give foreign aid to other nations to help them resist terrorism?"

Despite the complexity of issues explored, good polls avoid open-ended questions that allow for lengthy and uncontrolled responses and instead ask closed-ended questions that require a 'yes' or 'no,' 'agree' or 'disagree,' or multiple-choice answer. These allow for more conclusive results and for a quantifiable presentation, often with a chart or graph.

Question order can greatly impact the results. According to polling expert Herbert Asher, in a 2002 poll on President George W. Bush's performance, researchers tried the same basic questions but in a different sequence. When people were asked first about the performance of the president and then the direction of the country, the president fared better. If they were asked about the state of the country first, which many said was bad, then the president's approval dropped by 6 percent.

Most political questions are complicated and require more than a simple for-or-against orientation. In considering how the public views the legality of abortion, for example, researchers found that only 28 percent of Americans believe abortion should be legal under all circumstances, while many more say it should be legal under only certain circumstances, as the chart below shows.

| BY THE NUMBERS<br>When Should Abortion Be Legal? | |
|---|---|
| When a woman's life is endangered | 84% |
| When a woman's physical health is endangered | 81% |
| When the pregnancy was caused by rape or incest | 78% |
| When the woman's mental health is endangered | 64% |
| When there is evidence the baby may be physically or mentally impaired | 53% |
| When the woman or family cannot afford to raise the child | 34% |

**Source:** R. Michael Alvarez and John Brehm, Hard Choices, Easy Answers, 2002.

**What do the numbers show?** How does wording the question differently affect opinions? How do people differ on the legality of abortion? What factors in the question make the policy more or less favorable?

Who is polled is just as important as the question's nature and wording. The pollster takes a **sample**, a group of people meant to represent the large group in question, known as the **universe**. Let's say you are trying to figure out students' pizza preference. If the school has 750 students, you need not ask

everyone to determine what the majority wants. How many should you ask? Surely you should ask more than two or three friends. After asking 30 students, you find that 25 preferred pepperoni pizza and only five preferred anchovy pizza. Should you keep asking, or do you have a pretty good idea? Probably the latter, but that would depend on who you asked and how you found them.

Pollsters work hard to find the right sample of the right size. Today a national poll with a proper sample needs to have about 1,500 respondents. A properly collected sample of citizens is reliably reflective of the universe. The larger the sample, the more reflective it is, so asking 1,600 respondents is better than 1,500. Yet the size of a sample is not as nearly as important as its representativeness.

Pollsters must obtain a **random sample**. That is, every single member of the universe must have an equal chance of selection. A reporter or marketer standing on a street corner asking questions to passersby may determine some indication of public opinion, but this system is not random, and not every person in that universe has an equal chance at being interviewed. Those who do not walk in that area have no chance of selection. Surveys that require respondents to go to the survey, whether approaching the researcher on the street or logging onto an Internet poll, are self-selected and thus not a cross section of the overall population.

The pollster must find a way to potentially reach everyone in the universe. Though *Literary Digest* erred with phone books in 1936, telephone ownership has dramatically increased. Since the 1980s, pollsters have used telephones as the primary contact for surveys, though concerns still exist. For example, roughly 30 percent of the populace has an unlisted number either by choice or because of mobility. To make polling more reliable and efficient, pollsters use **random-digit dialing**. A computer randomly calls possible numbers in a given area until enough people respond to establish a sample.

Once the pollster has enough respondents, he or she checks to see if the demographics in the sample are reflective of those of the universe. If disproportionately more women than men answer the phone and take the poll, the pollster will remove some female respondents from the sample in order to balance it. If a congressional district contains roughly 25 percent African Americans in the population, the sample needs to mirror that. Assuring this balance is known as **stratification**.

Even the most cautious survey with appropriate sampling techniques cannot guarantee absolute precision. The only way to know what everyone thinks is to ask everyone and hope they are entirely honest, both of which are impossible. Every poll has a **margin of error**. The sample size and the margin of error have an inverse relationship. That is, as the sample gets larger, the margin of error decreases. The way to determine this **sampling error**, the difference between poll outcomes, is to measure the outcomes in two or more polls. For example, the same basic poll with two similar samples revealed that 55 percent of the first sample opposed a particular congressional bill, while 58 percent of the second sample favored the law. This poll has a sampling error of 3 percent. A margin of error of plus-or-minus 4 percent or less is usually considered satisfactory.

The simplest yet most perplexing problem in public opinion polling is the presence of nonattitudes. Many people do not have strong opinions on the issues of the day, or they are uninformed or simply concerned about their privacy. Just over half of eligible voters actually cast votes in presidential elections. Matters of extreme importance to journalists and policymakers may not matter at all to average citizens. Pollsters now offer an "I don't know" option. When offering a middle or noncommittal option in a given poll, pollsters find that, on average, 25 percent more people choose it.

Another phenomenon affecting polls is the high frequency of uninformed citizens responding. Political Scientist Herb Asher explains a poll asking about the repeal of the Public Affairs Act. In reality, no such act or repeal effort existed, but fully 43 percent of those questioned had an opinion of the non-existent law. Pollsters often ask screening questions to establish a respondent's knowledge or to ensure they are registered voters, like "Do you plan to vote in the November election?" Such a question, however, does not eliminate the problem entirely. In fact, more than 90 percent of people answering phone surveys claim they will vote, but far fewer do so. Discerning polls may ever ask, "Where do you vote?" or "On what day is the election?" to increase the chances that the respondent is a bona fide voter.

How the interviewer contacts and interacts with the respondent and how the respondent views the interviewer can also impact a poll. The difference between mailed questionnaires and telephone interviews are stark. People are more honest or frank with the anonymity of a paper questionnaire than a live telephone call. Some studies show women and men answering differently to male or female callers. Eighty-four percent of females agreed to a woman's right to choose an abortion when interviewed by females, while only 64 percen gave a pro-choice response to a male caller. Race, or perceived race, can matte as well. Asher claims African Americans are more critical of the political and criminal justice system to black interviewers while more supportive or positive to white interviewers. White respondents are less likely to reveal attitudes o racial hostility when interviewed by blacks than by whites.

Still other problems exist because not everyone conducting a poll is an objective journalist or an academic. Fund-raising under the guise of pollin has cheapened polling's reputation. Political parties and candidates use th phone and mail surveys to assess where their followers stand and then ask fo a donation. Also, **push polling** via telephone has become a common practice This is basically a telephone poll with an ulterior motive. Rather than a serie of neutral questions meant to determine public opinion on a candidate, th caller, or more commonly a tape-recorded voice, offers positive points abou the candidate or negative points about the opponent. Sometimes the voice take an almost sinister tone. The call may end with a request for a vote on electio day or to not vote for the other candidate.

Internet polling can be problematic due to self-selection, administration, the nature of people who go online. When directed toward an Internet only those strongly motivated will participate. With some online polls, e's no limit to how many times one can take it. Internet users also tend to ounger, better educated, more affluent, white, and suburban and do not esent a genuine cross section of society.

### THINK AS A POLITICAL SCIENTIST: ASSESS THE CREDIBILITY OF A PUBLIC OPINION POLL

Your research and any conclusions you draw from it are no better than he credibility and reliability of your sources. To assess the credibility of nost informational sources, ask yourself these questions.

- Is the source current? Be sure to avoid out-of-date information.
- Is the author an established authority in the field?
- Is the source free from obvious bias?
- Can you verify the information in other sources?

When assessing poll results and other collected data, you also eed to evaluate the methodology of the study. Review pages 62–65 to dentify possible problems in polling methodology.

**Practice:** Examine the parts of the fictional poll below to assess its redibility. In what ways did this poll follow appropriate methodology? n what ways did it not? What might be some concerns of validity?

### REAL CURRENT POLITICS: "GOV. SAMUELS PREDICTED TO WIN ELECTORAL COLLEGE"

**Question:** "If the presidential election were today, would you vote for Bill Samuels, John Knox (order alternated), or another candidate?"

**Results:**

| | |
|---|---|
| Samuels | 37 |
| Knox | 33 |
| Other | 21 |
| No choice | 9 |

**Sample:** 233 likely voters answering prerecorded landline survey in NY, TX, CA Sept. 17–19

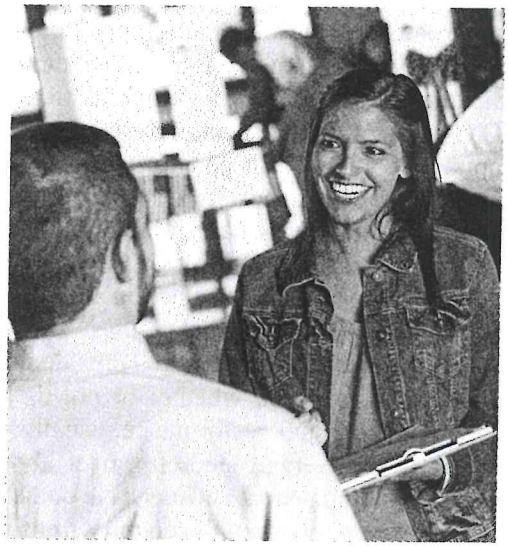
## *Media and Polling*

Reporters refer to polls to convey the views of the citizenry. One examination of three leading news magazines showed that roughly 30 percent of their cover stories cited public opinion polls. Nightly television news broadcasts provide polling results to accompany their reports. Journalists' quest to explain public opinion is a good thing; however, the modern media's use and misuse of polling is not.

In reporting on political campaigns, reporters begin to sound like an announcer at a horse race, concentrating on which candidate is ahead and which candidate is behind, instead of focusing on the issues, candidates' views, or qualifications. A conflict of interest exists when polling departments are located down the hall from newsrooms. When CBS, the *Washington Post,* or local news stations conduct their own polls, they become not just the reporters of news but creators of the same with no critique of their own methods and a less than objective analysis.

The difference in how an academic analyst and a journalist approach polls can sometimes distort the big picture. One Gallup poll about attitudes on race relations caused differing headlines in national newspapers. *USA Today* printed atop its front page, "Poll: Whites Increasingly Accept Blacks," while the *New York Times* chose as its title, "New Survey Shows Americans Pessimistic on Race Relations." How could the same poll results bring such differing headlines?

As Frank Newport, editor of the Gallup Poll, tells us, the nature of modern journalism is in direct conflict with the proper approach to measuring citizens' views. Good reporting is sharply focused with relatively unambiguous conclusions. Good survey research, however, often reveals uncertainty, ambiguity, and low levels of public interest on matters of public policy. Reporters with tight deadlines don't have the time to study, reflect on, or contemplate poll results, particularly at election time. News reporting needs to be dramatic enough to raise interest yet simple enough to be digested quickly. Poll findings are often complex, equivocal, and not necessarily easy to explain. When placed against the mandates of journalism, scientific measures of public opinion on complicated issues do not always translate well into sound bites and brief headlines.



**Source:** iStockphoto

Exit polls are a staple of election days but can yield misleading results, as in 2004 when they suggested John Kerry would win the presidency.

Polls that examine complex issues give inconclusive results. Uncertain answers irritate average viewers who do not delve into the intricacies of public opinion. An astute pollster could convey ambiguous poll findings, but television news is dependent on good, interesting, and simple video. A talking head who can convey a full understanding will simply bore most viewers. Newport offers this list of how news reporters handle poll findings:

**Reporting Poll Results**

- Clearly positive or clearly negative findings are more likely reported than mixed findings.
- A single conclusion makes a better story than a complex or uncertain explanation.
- A poll finding that contradicts conventional wisdom is cited more than one that confirms it.
- A finding that can be boldly stated at the beginning of a news story will be used sooner than one that must follow with an explanation.

## *Common Measurements*

Pollsters use different kinds of polls to gather information at different times. **Tracking polls** ask people the same or similar questions over time to "track" the path of public opinion. These are used heavily during election season to show how public opinion changes or to assess a candidate's strength. Candidates also use these to shape their campaigns. **Exit polls** are conducted outside a polling place on election day to predict the outcome of the election, to gain insight into the thoughts and behaviors of voters, or to analyze demographic voting trends.

**Focus groups** are small groups of citizens—10 to 40 people—gathered to hold conversations about issues or candidates. These are obviously much smaller samples, but they allow for elaboration of views. In 1988, when Vice President George H. W. Bush's team heard a focus group reveal a strong disdain for his opponent's anti-death penalty position, Bush's team created commercials to emphasize Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis's unpopular positions. As political analysts Mark Halperin and John Heilemann report, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney began wearing jeans more often when campaigning in the 2012 election after focus groups responded more positively to him in jeans than formal clothes.

Researchers have measured presidential approval regularly since the 1930s. Pollsters simply ask whether or not the respondent approves, yes or no, of the president's job performance, usually over a three-day period. Presidential approval on average tends to hover above 50 percent. Some of the highest presidential **approval ratings** have come when the nation prospers, especially economically, or when the country finds itself in a crisis and rallies around its elected chief. Two of the highest presidential approval ratings were recorded on the days immediately following Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan to end World War II and following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in support for George W. Bush. Approval ratings, however, can change drastically. Truman found himself in a tight election three years later and at a low rating of 22 percent approval when he fired World War II hero General Douglas MacArthur during the Korean Conflict. President Bush left office in 2009 with one of the lower approval ratings on record, 29 percent.

The "right-track-wrong-track" question is commonly asked to determine Americans' satisfaction with government leaders. A positive right-track response usually means incumbents will fare well in their re-election campaigns, while a high wrong-track response will make incumbents uncomfortable. The generic party ballot simply asks respondents if they will be voting for "Republicans" or "Democrats" during an upcoming election without mentioning candidates' names to determine the parties' relative strength.

**REFLECT ON THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION**

**Essential Question:** *How do Americans form opinions, and how do these opinions influence government?* On separate paper, complete a chart like the one below to gather details to answer that question.

| How Public Opinion Forms | How Public Opinion Influences Government |
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