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Public Opinion

Chapter 11

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In this chapter we will learn about

- The role of public opinion in a democracy
- How public opinion can be measured
- Where our opinions come from
- What our opinions are
- The relationship of citizenship to public opinion

The role of public opinion in a democracy

Why public opinion ought to matter:

- The government's legitimacy rests on the idea that government exists to serve the interests of its citizens.

Why public opinion does matter:

- If politicians don't listen to the people, then they are unlikely to be reelected.

Two competing views of citizenship

The ideal democratic citizen

- A virtuous citizen concerned for the common good
- Recognizes that democracy carries obligations as well as rights

The apolitical, self-interested citizen

- Inattentive and ill informed
- Easily manipulated
- Politically intolerant
- Unlikely to participate



Measuring and tracking public opinion

- Informal measures of public opinion
 - E.g., personal contacts, mail from citizens
 - Allows politicians to pick up issues that could be missed in polls
 - Likely to have a sample bias

Measuring and tracking public opinion, cont'd.

- Development of modern public opinion polls
 - Straw polls
 - *Literary Digest* and the 1936 presidential election
 - The 1948 presidential election

Measuring and tracking public opinion, cont'd.

- The sample
 - 1,000-2,000 people
 - Sampling error
- Eliminating sample bias
 - Random samples

Measuring and tracking public opinion, cont'd.

- Importance of asking the right question
 - Respondents should be asked things they know and have thought about.
 - Questions should not be ambiguous.
 - Questions should not be loaded.

Holocaust survey mishap

- Double-negative question
 - Does it seem possible or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of Jews never happened?
- Better question
 - Does it seem possible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened, or do you feel certain that it happened?

Measuring and tracking public opinion, cont'd.

- Types of polls:
 - National polls (e.g., CBS News/*New York Times*)
 - Campaign polls
 - Benchmark poll
 - Tracking poll
 - Exit poll
 - Pseudo-polls
 - Internet poll
 - Call-in poll
 - Push poll

Measuring and tracking public opinion, cont'd.

- How accurate are the polls?
 - Generally can pick the winner of the election
 - Not correct to the percentage point because of margin of error
 - More accurate the closer one gets to the election

Four criteria for ideal democratic citizens

1. Political knowledge
2. Ideology
3. Tolerance
4. Participation

What influences our opinions about politics?

- Family
- Schools and education
- Groups
 - The spiral of silence
- Political and social events

Sources of division in public opinion

- Self-interest
- Education
- Age
 - Political generations

Sources of division in public opinion, cont'd.

- Gender
 - Gender gap
 - Marriage gap
- Race and ethnicity

Sources of division in public opinion, cont'd.

- Religion
- Geographical region

The citizens and public opinion

- Shortcuts to political knowledge
 - On-line processing
 - Two-step flow of information
 - Opinion leaders
- The rational electorate
 - Rational ignorance