

Wilson - Ch. 6 - Public Opinion and the Media

Question 1) Which of the following statements, A through D, is false?

- ✔ A) A "telepoll" that asks viewers to call a telephone number listed on the screen to register their opinions is a reliable method of drawing a representative sample from which to accurately measure public opinion.

Only random sampling can produce a representative sample from which to gain a reliable measurement of public opinion. Random sampling means that each individual in the target population must have an equal chance of being interviewed.

Explanation: Any self-selection method (as in telepolling) produces a non-representative sample because it over-samples those most interested and under-samples those least interested and these two groups rarely hold the same opinions.

Telepolls are becoming increasingly common on television because selecting samples in a random fashion is far more difficult, time-consuming, and costly.

- ✘ B) Randomly drawn samples become more representative as their size increases.

A randomly drawn sample of less than 150 voters out of 150 million voters will not be very representative. However, you can be 95 percent certain that a randomly drawn sample of just over a 1000 voters out of 150 million will give an estimate of that larger electorate's vote choice within plus or minus 3 percent (at the time the sample is drawn).

Explanation:

Hence, if one candidate is leading another by more than 3 percent, you can be pretty confident that the leading candidate would win if the election were the same day that the 1000 people in the sample were interviewed. All of this is why reliable pre-election polls close to election day almost always randomly select at least 1100 respondents.

- ✘ C) Many other factors besides sample selection can make public-opinion polls unreliable.

Explanation: Yes, these other factors are called "non-sampling errors." Common non-sampling errors include drawing the sample too soon (if the public's attitudes are changing) or asking questions in the poll that are poorly worded (using unclear or biased language).

- ✘ D) From 1952 to the present, in most presidential elections, every major national pre-election poll taken immediately before election day has correctly predicted the winner of the presidential election.

However, in the close elections of 1960 (Kennedy-Nixon), 1976 (Carter-Ford), and 2000 (Gore-Bush) predictions were much more difficult and required larger-than-normal samples to give the pre-election pollers confidence.

Explanation:

Also difficult to predict are elections like 1980 (Reagan-Carter) when many voters wait until the last day to decide whether and for whom they will vote. The Reagan win was correctly predicted by pre-election polls, but his margin of victory was underestimated because of the many late deciders.

- ✘ E) None of the preceding four statements, A through D, is false.

Question 2) Which of the following statements, A through D, is false?

- ✘ A) Children, whose parents are both Republican, tend to grow up to be Republicans; children, whose parents are both Democratic, tend to grow up to be Democratic.

Explanation: Children, whose parents have different party identifications, tend to adopt the party identification of

the parent that they felt emotionally closer to in their childhood and youth.

Children, whose parents do not express a clear or consistent party identification, tend to grow up not identifying with either major political party.

The correlation between children and parents' policy preferences is much lower than the correlation between children and parents' party identification. Perhaps this generation gap is because most issues change from one generation to the next. Or, perhaps it is because it is simpler and easier for children to pick up parental party preference than their parents' attitudes on a more complex range of issues.

- B) Among whites, Protestant families are somewhat more liberal and Democratic than Catholic families, especially on economic issues.

No, it's just the other way around -- white Catholics are generally more liberal and Democratic than white Protestants.

Explanation:

Furthermore, Jewish families are decidedly more liberal and Democratic, on both economic and non-economic issues, than either white Catholic or white Protestant families.

- C) Religious conservatives (whether evangelicals, fundamentalists, Pentecostals, or charismatics) constitute about 25 percent of American adults.

This is about 38 million out of the 150 million people in the U.S. electorate. Most (but not all) of them live in the South, and most (but not all) are Protestants (mainly Baptists).

Explanation:

Many religious conservatives have been mobilized at the grassroots level by the Christian Coalition and other religious political groups. Since 1960, evangelical Christians have become more attached to Republican presidential candidates (except in 1976, when Jimmy Carter ran).

- D) During the 1950s, women were more likely to identify with and vote for Republicans; since the 1960s they have become more likely to be Democrats and vote Democratic.

The primary reason for the shift is that the political parties have changed their positions on the kinds of issues to which women respond differently from men – particularly over the use of government power to address social problems and over the use of force to solve foreign and domestic problems.

Explanation:

During the 1930s and 1940s more women than men wanted to ban the sale of liquor and keep the country out of war; this helped the Republicans, who then supported those policies. Since the 1970s, women have come to view Republicans as more likely to send U.S. troops into foreign combat and Republicans as more likely to remove the government "safety net" for those more vulnerable in society.

- E) None of the preceding four statements, A through D, is false.

Question 3) Which of the following statements, A through D, is false?

- A) Most American blue-collar workers think of themselves as "middle class," whereas most such workers in Britain or France describe themselves as "working class."

Explanation:

This difference in class identification helps to explain why British blue-collar workers are much more likely to support the Labour party than U.S. blue-collar workers are to vote Democratic. A related factor is that British blue-collar workers are much more likely than U.S. blue-collar workers to be union members.

- B) Occupation (and income) have become less important in explaining U.S. political attitudes and voting; race has become more important.

Explanation:

Part of the explanation for the decline of occupation and income as predictors of political attitudes

and behavior is due to the spread of college education to all classes in U.S. society. College graduates tend to be more liberal.

Race has become a more important predictor of party identification and voting as blacks nationwide have increased their loyalty to the Democratic party while Southern whites have shifted towards the Republican party. As a consequence, the Democratic and Republican parties have exchanged their regional bases – the Democratic party, once based in the South, is now based in the Northeast and Midwest; the Republican party, once based in the Northeast and Midwest, is now based in the South.

- C) It is among better-off blacks that one finds the greatest faith in progress toward equal opportunity in U.S. society.

No, this relationship is just the opposite. Blacks holding professional jobs are much MORE likely than black manual laborers to believe that whites get unfair advantages and to say that they have experienced discrimination.

Explanation: Wilson labels this finding "curious," as if no one had noticed it or no one had an explanation for it. Quite the contrary, political analysts have long been familiar with this and similar findings among many other groups besides blacks.

Several explanations have been advanced why better-off individuals are more likely to be conscious of and complain or take action against discrimination and exploitation. The better-educated have more hope and higher aspirations, while the less-educated are more likely to be fatalistic about their unhappy lot and more likely to use religion, alcohol, or drugs as forms of consolation or escapism. (This observation, of course, does not mean that only the poor use drugs or that the only value of religion is denial of injustice.)

- D) If you look only at white Protestants, you will find that those living in the South are similar to those living in the non-South on economic issues but a good deal more conservative on social issues (such as abortion or homosexuality).

Explanation: This white Southern social conservatism is largely explained by the preponderance of religious conservatives (evangelicals, fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and charismatics) among Southern white Protestants (mainly Baptists).

Among non-Southern white Protestants, religious moderates and liberals are much more prevalent in mainstream denominations such as Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational.

- E) None of the above statements, A through D, is false.

Question 4) Which of the following statements, A through D, is false?

- A) Political ideology is a coherent and consistent set of beliefs about what ends government should pursue, what problems government should use its powers to solve.

Explanation: As we will discuss in class, many ideological disagreements can be classified into two categories: 1) whether government should use its powers to guarantee social, political, and economic order – even at the expense of individual freedom, and 2) whether government should use its powers to guarantee social, political, and economic equality – even at the expense of individual freedom.

- B) Most studies of public opinion conclude that the great majority of citizens display relatively little political ideology in their thinking; however that term may be defined or measured.

Explanation: The great majority of U.S. voters do not think about politics in an ideological or even a very coherent manner and make little use of such concepts – so dear to political commentators and professors – as "liberal" or "conservative."

However, people can have general and strongly felt political preferences even though they are not

able to use ideological terms correctly. And, voters do think more ideologically when presidential candidates take sharply opposed ideological positions (as happened in 1964, 1972, 1980, 1984, 2000, & 2004) and most voters think less ideologically when both candidates are centrists (as in 1952, 1956, 1960, 1976, 1992, and 1996).

- C) One potentially confusing aspect about political ideology is that BOTH liberals and conservatives hold mixed views on "big" government.

Liberals favor using "big" or "strong" federal-government powers to guarantee equality (for example, with affirmative action programs) while conservatives oppose.

Explanation:

However, conservatives favor using "big" or "strong" federal-government powers to guarantee order (for example, outlawing pornography, flag burning, or abortions) while liberals oppose.

- D) It is only the libertarians and populists who are consistent in their (opposing) views about the proper size and use of government power.

Libertarians (but not conservatives) consistently oppose all "big" government, regardless of whether it is used to guarantee equality or order. Libertarians (but not conservatives) consistently favor only "small" government too weak to abridge or deny individual freedom – for whatever purpose.

Explanation:

Populists (but not liberals) are just the opposite of libertarians. Populists (but not liberals) consistently favor "big" government programs to guarantee both equality and order.

- E) None of the preceding four statements, A through D, is false.

Question 5) Which of the following statements, A through D, is false?

- A) During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the American electorate was sharply divided on class lines -- the 'haves' were largely Republican, the 'have-nots' were largely Democratic. However, during the second half of the 20th century, these class differences in partisanship and voting largely declined.

A major reason for this decline in class polarization in U.S. politics was the post-WWII movement of large numbers of the working class into the middle class.

Explanation:

Although class polarization has significantly declined in the electorate as a whole, there still remain some of the older class differences among selected economic subgroups. For example, college graduates with a business degree are much more likely to be conservatives and Republicans -- while college graduates with a social sciences, humanities, or fine arts degree are much more likely to be liberals and Democrats. These residual class differences are especially evident during economic recessions.

- B) Some analysts have identified a new class division within the growing middle class that pits the "traditional" middle class against a "new" middle class.


The member of the traditional middle class is more likely to be an older suburbanite, a conservative, Republican, employed in traditional business enterprise, and earned an undergraduate degree relevant to the old manufacturing-based economy.

Explanation:


In contrast, the member of the new middle class is more likely to be liberal, Democratic, a central-city resident, employed in the professions, and earned a post-graduate degree relevant to the new information-based economy.

As we will see in more detail in the chapter on parties and interest groups, this split in the American middle class has created great strains within BOTH political parties – primarily on social issues, much less so on economic questions.


In economically good times, social issues have dominated political campaigns (e.g., 1972, 1984, 1988, 1994, and 2000). In economically troubled times, pocket-book issues push the social issues into the background (as happened in 1980 and 1992).

-  C) Because the middle class is increasingly split between these two groups, the historical link between economic status and political attitudes has weakened.


Explanation: Both groups are affluent, but they disagree politically.

-  D) The key to the split between the traditional and new middle class groups is primarily education and, to a lesser extent, occupation.

Explanation: Members of the new middle class tend to have a greater command of the new technical skills of the information age and are therefore more likely to work in the newer information-based economy. Members of the traditional middle class tend to have fewer of the new technical skills and therefore still tend to work in older business and industry settings.

-  E) None of the preceding four statements, A through D, is false.


Question 6) Which of the following statements, A through D, is false?

-  A) In the middle 1960s, the relationship between the news media and politicians and government officials became much more mutually suspicious, cynical, and adversarial.


There are two basic explanations for this loss of mutual trust.

Explanation: First, the news media felt that too many politicians and government officials manipulated and lied to the media especially during the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. The increasing bitterness of partisanship and personal animosities within government induced many politicians and officeholders to violate traditional standards of bipartisanship and political ethics in their misuse of negative ads, leaks, and distortions.


Second, many politicians and government officials (of both political parties) felt betrayed and threatened by sensationalism, bias, and other media excesses. The pressures and rewards of greatly increasing competition within the news media itself caused many reporters, editors, producers, and publishers to violate traditional journalistic standards to gain readers or viewers.

-  B) In the early years of the Republic, most newspapers were controlled by various political factions and parties, published irregularly, and read primarily by a small audience; however, by the mid-19th century, most newspapers were independently-owned, published daily, and read by a mass audience.

Explanation: These changes were due to changes in both technology and society. The development of the high-speed rotary press dropped prices to a penny a paper, making daily readership affordable by the working class; while the spread of free public education at the elementary level – especially in the rapidly growing big cities – provided a mass readership.

-  C) During the Progressive era (1890s-1920s), a growing middle class was repelled by the sensationalism of the tabloid-style penny-papers and created a market for newspapers and magazines that focused more on objective news reporting.

Explanation: The "prestige" big-city newspapers of today rose to prominence during this period – the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Detroit Free Press, the Chicago Tribune, the St. Louis Post Dispatch, the Atlanta Constitution-Journal, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the Los Angeles Times.

-  D) Radio came on the political scene as a major factor in election politics in the 1920s, television in the 1960s.

Explanation: The first presidential election to be significantly influenced by television was the 1952 contest between Adlai Stevenson and Dwight Eisenhower (not the 1960 Kennedy/Nixon contest). Ike's

Republican campaign organization hired the best Madison-Avenue advertising-agency talent to craft a series of pioneer television political ads. All of the major types of TV political ads seen in today's election campaigns were invented by the Eisenhower staff, e.g., person-in-the-street endorsements and the "flip-flop" attack ad ("first my opponent says this, and then he says that").

The first presidential election to be significantly influenced by radio was the 1928 contest. Five states of the "solid" South bolted the Democratic party and voted for Hoover (VA, NC, TN, FL, and TX); the first time any Southern state voted Republican in a presidential contest. Besides Smith's Catholicism, Southerners (and many other Democratic voters in the Midwest and West) were alienated by Smith's pronounced New-York-City accent.

E) None of the above statements, A through D, is false.

Question 7) Which of the following statements, A through D, is false?

A) The local news media in the U.S. is now highly centralized in ownership and offers much more coverage of national rather than local news.

While this is an accurate description of the news media in most unitary-system democracies, this description is currently less accurate in the U.S. The local news media – radio, television, and newspapers – is still often locally owned and managed and is primarily oriented to a local market.

Explanation:

However, there is a growing level of concern about the increasing ownership of the local news media by large national and multinational corporations. More and more local radio, television, and newspaper outlets are being purchased by giant corporate enterprises leading to legitimate concerns about the concentration of media ownership placing too much power in too few hands.

B) There is a "national" press in the U.S. that acts as a gatekeeper, scorekeeper, and watchdog over the federal government.

The "national" press is composed of national-audience newspapers, news magazines, and television network news broadcasts. In addition, the news wire services supply most of the national news that local papers publish.

Explanation:

As gatekeeper, the national news media can influence what subjects become national political issues, and for how long. As scorekeeper, the national news media help make and break political reputations. As watchdog, the national news media investigate and exposes allegations of abuse of government power.

C) The national newspapers generally do a far better job of in-depth reporting than do the television network news broadcasts.

There are two explanations: 1) daily newspapers can devote far more column inches of writing to an important story than can be read during the nightly news broadcasts, and 2) newspaper reporters are usually hired and promoted solely on the basis of their investigative, analytical, and writing skills, while broadcast news anchors and reporters are hired and promoted to a great degree on the basis of their attractive personalities and photogenic qualities.

Explanation:

D) The print media – much more than the broadcast media – excel in performing the gatekeeper, scorekeeper, and watchdog functions.

Explanation: Because of the organizational differences discussed in the previous question and explanation.

E) None of the preceding four statements, A through D, is false.

Question 8) Which of the following statements, A though D, is false?

- A) Ironically, the most competitive part of the news media – radio and television broadcasting – must have a governmental license to operate and must conform to a variety of government regulations; whereas the least competitive part – the big-city newspapers – is almost entirely free from government regulation.

There are two explanations for this. First, the print media existed before the Framers wrote the Constitution and before the national government became strong enough to regulate any of the news media.

Explanation: Second, in the early days of the radio industry, competition was truly cut-throat. A common tactic of station owners with deeper pockets was to buy a more powerful transmitter than competing stations and to park that signal on each competing station's frequency to blast them off the dial and out of business. Soon the "little guys" in radio broadcasting got Congress to regulate their industry to outlaw such practices.

- B) In recent years, there has been a significant deregulation of the broadcast industry by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

Explanation: As a result, some of the old rules – for instance, that each hour on TV could contain only 16 minutes of commercials – are no longer enforced.

- C) The FCC's "fairness" doctrine currently requires broadcasters to present both sides of a controversial issue.

Explanation: The FCC abolished this rule in 1988 on the grounds that it violated the right of the broadcast organizations to free speech. Even so, many stations that broadcast editorials still voluntarily invite a responsible spokesperson to present an opposing point of view. This is a common practice of newspapers as well.

- D) The "personal-attack" rule and the "equal-time" rule are still enforced by the FCC.

The personal-attack rule requires that a person whose character is attacked on the air must be given a chance to respond at an equivalent time and for the same amount of air time.

Explanation: The equal-time rule requires broadcasters who give or sell advertising to one political candidate or party to make available equal (and equivalent) time to opposing candidates or parties. The latter rule has been modified to allow TV debates between major-party candidates that exclude minor-party candidates.

Neither rule applies – at all – to the print media. Newspapers and news magazines are free to write editorial endorsements and to offer free or paid advertising space to political candidates and parties without any further obligations.

- E) None of the above statements, A through D, is false.

Question 9) Which of the following statements, A though D, is false?

- A) "Routine" news stories cover public events that are relatively simple and therefore easily described.

Explanation: The political opinions of journalists have the least effect on these stories, especially if several competing journalists are covering the same story over a protracted period of time. That is why coverage of presidential campaigns tends to be generally even-handed – although the press tends to be harder on incumbents and frontrunners.

Wilson suggests that the 1968 Tet offensive during the Vietnam War was an example of such a routine story that was incorrectly reported partly because of the anti-war views of most reporters. What he ignores is that the 1968 Tet offensive was hardly a "routine" news story (i.e., relatively

simple and easily described).

Wilson also fails to point out that the reporters and news organizations that were NOT anti-war (e.g., the Wall Street Journal) were frequently misjudging the difficulties facing U.S. military forces in Vietnam before, during, and after the Tet offensive.

- B) "Feature" stories report on public events that are not regularly covered by competing journalists, but instead are chosen by reporters and editors (or TV producers) on grounds involving ideological beliefs about what ought to be reported.

Hence, a liberal editor or producer will choose to cover stories about white-collar crime, consumerism, the problems of minorities, and the costs of the arms race; while, a conservative editor or producer will instead select stories about street crime, the costs to business of consumer and environmental-protection regulations, and the need for a stronger national defense.

Explanation:

Such feature stories are a major portion of the typical nightly news broadcast and are becoming a larger part of newspaper content.

- C) "Insider" stories cover events that come to the public's attention through journalist's research or through informants within the government.

Explanation: The former stories are called "investigative reports," the latter are called "leaks."

- D) The reliance of the American news media upon "leaks" from within the government is a relatively new phenomenon.

Quite the opposite, leaks to the press are as old as the Republic. In fact, the U.S. government is and always has been one of the leakiest in the world. This is, of course, primarily because of the extreme dispersion of power and representation across branches and levels written into our Constitution. There are far fewer leaks in parliamentary and unitary representative democracies.

Explanation:

- E) None of the preceding four statements, A through D, is false.

Question 10) Which of the following statements, A though D, is false?

- A) Using the media to spread scurrilous attacks on political opponents is a relatively new phenomenon in U.S. politics.

Explanation: Such negative tactics are as old as the Republic. The newspapers of that era were full of coarse, crude, false, and derogatory attacks on political opponents. Each following era included many new examples of such negative politics.

- B) If the public has independent knowledge or strong beliefs about an issue, media coverage is less likely to influence opinions on that issue.

Many people tend to have personal knowledge and/or strong beliefs about street crime, interest rates, gasoline prices, the cost of health insurance, and the quality of local public schools. Media coverage is less likely to influence attitudes on these issues.

Explanation:

However, media coverage is more likely to influence public opinion on controversies that most people lack direct knowledge about – e.g., drug wars in South America, famine relief policies in sub-Saharan Africa, the ethics of gene research, or the cost-effectiveness of missile-defense technology.

- C) Even if the content of media coverage does not tell us what to think about problems, the amount of media coverage can influence public and government attitudes about what problems should be on the public's agenda.

Explanation: This is true, but such media influence is less likely among those in the public who have independent knowledge and/or strong beliefs about the issue being covered.

- D) This agenda-setting influence of the news media is not all pervasive. Given the tidal wave of

competing news information today, all of us read or view the news selectively – we filter attention to news stories and organizations through our own prior beliefs.

Explanation: The news media does have an important role in bringing crucial issues to the public's attention that relatively few people are aware or informed about. We will see in ch. 12, that media-savvy "policy entrepreneurs" with many different political agendas have often served this need.

E) None of the preceding four statements, A through D, is false.