MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

◼ TEXT SUMMARY

Government leaders make policy based on public opinion. Of the many ways to measure public opinion, some are more accurate than others.

A winning party and candidate often claim to have a **mandate,** or instructions from the constituency. Based on this they say that election results indicate public opinion, but few candidates receive true mandates. **Interest groups,** or private organizations that work to shape public policy, often present their views as public opinion, but how many people they represent is unknown. Public officials can use the media and public contacts to gain some sense of public opinion.
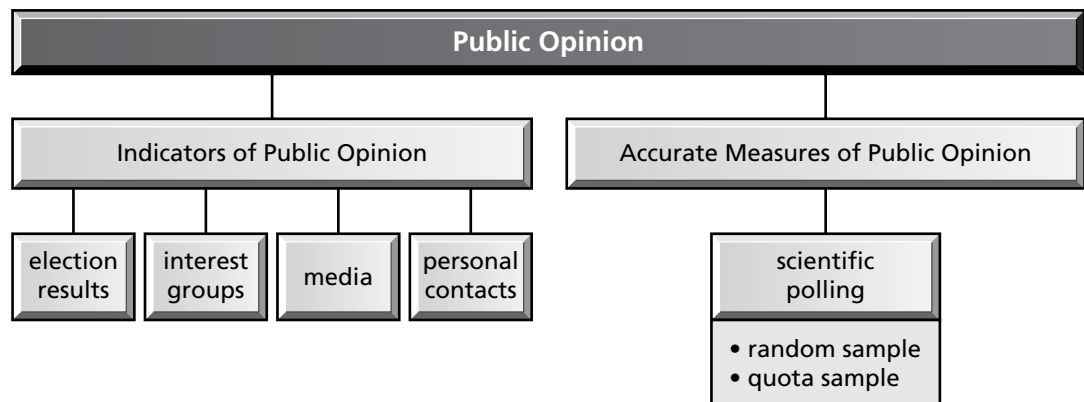
The best measures of public opinion are **public opinion polls,** or devices that collect information through questioning. **Straw votes,** which ask the same question to many people, are not reliable because those who respond may not represent the total population.

Scientific polling, which can be very accurate, breaks the polling process into steps. First, choose the "universe," that is, the population the poll aims to measure. Then get a **sample**—a representative slice of the universe. Most pollsters will draw a **random sample,** or one in which members of the chosen universe are equally likely to be picked. Some polls use the less reliable **quota sample,** one that deliberately reflects several of the major characteristics of a given universe. Next pollsters prepare valid questions, select and control the polling process, and report the results.

THE **BIG** IDEA

Of the methods for measuring public opinion, polls are the most effective.

◼ GRAPHIC SUMMARY: *Measuring Public Opinion*

Scientific polling is an accurate way of learning public opinion.

◼ REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. List the steps in scientific polling.

2. Diagram Skills What are the four indicators of public opinion?