

# Magruder's American Government

## CHAPTER 8

### *Mass Media and Public Opinion*

# Mass Media and Public Opinion

## SECTION 1 The Formation of Public Opinion

## SECTION 2 Measuring Public Opinion

## SECTION 3 The Mass Media

# The Formation of Public Opinion

- What is public opinion and why is it so difficult to define?
- How do family and education shape public opinion?
- What additional factors shape public opinion?



# What is Public Opinion?

**Public opinion** can be described as those attitudes held by a significant number of people on matters of government and politics.

## Different Publics

- The United States is made up of many groups, or publics, who share common news.

## Public Affairs

- **Public affairs** are those events and issues that concern the public at large. In its proper sense, public opinion includes only those views that relate to public affairs.

## Public Opinions

- More than one public opinion can exist at the same time, because there are many publics. A view or position must be expressed in the open in order to be a public opinion.



# The Political Spectrum

People who have similar opinions on political issues are generally grouped according to whether they are “left,” “right,” or “center” on the political spectrum.





# Family and Education

Many factors influence our political opinions and political socialization over the course of a lifetime.

## The Family

- Children first see the political world from within the family and through the family's eyes.
- The strong influence the family has on the development of political opinions is due to the large amount of time children spend with the family.

## The Schools

- Children acquire political knowledge throughout their time in the classroom.
- Students are taught about political systems, patriotism, and great Americans. Some are even required to take a course on government in high school.



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# Other Factors Influencing Public Opinion

## Mass Media

The **mass media** include those means of communication that reach large, widely dispersed audiences (masses of people) simultaneously. The mass media has a huge effect on the formation of public opinion.

## Peer Groups

**Peer groups** are made up of the people with whom one regularly associates, including friends, classmates, neighbors, and co-workers.

## Opinion Leaders

An **opinion leader** is any person who, for any reason, has an unusually strong influence on the views of others.

## Historic Events

Historic events can have a major impact on public opinion. The Great Depression is one event that shaped the political views and opinions of a generation.



# Section 1 Review

## 1. Public opinion is difficult to define because

- (a) everyone shares the same views.
- (b) there are many groups and issues to account for.
- (c) no one is allowed to have opinions.
- (d) none of the above.

## 2. The mass media consist of

- (a) friends and family.
- (b) neighbors.
- (c) newspapers, magazines, television, and the Internet.
- (d) peer groups.

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# Measuring Public Opinion

- What are the challenges involved in measuring public opinion?
- Why are opinion polls the best measure of public opinion?
- What are the five steps in the polling process?
- What are the challenges of evaluating polls?
- What are the limits on the impact of public opinion in a democracy?

# Measuring Public Opinion

## Elections

- Candidates who win an election are said to have a **mandate**, or a command from the electorate, to carry out campaign promises. In reality, however, election results are seldom an accurate measure of public opinion.

## Interest Groups

- **Interest groups** are private organizations whose members share certain views and work to shape public policy. Interest groups are a chief means by which public opinion is made known.

## The Media

- The media are frequently described as “mirrors” as well as “molders” of opinion.

## Personal Contacts

- Public officials rely on frequent and wide-ranging contacts with their constituents, such as reading their mail, answering calls, and meeting people in public.



# Polls—The Best Measure

Public opinion is best measured by **public opinion polls**, devices that attempt to collect information by asking people questions.

## Straw Votes

- A **straw vote** is a method of polling that seeks to read the public's mind simply by asking the same question of a large number of people.
- The straw-vote technique is highly unreliable, however.

## Scientific Polling

- Serious efforts to take the public's pulse on a scientific basis date from the 1930s.
- There are now more than 1,000 national and regional polling organizations in this country, with at least 200 of these polling political preferences.



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# The Polling Process

## Defining the Universe

- The *universe* is a term that means the whole population that the poll aims to measure.

## Constructing a Sample

- A **sample** is a representative slice of the total universe. Most professional pollsters draw a **random sample**, also called a probability sample. A **quota sample** is one that is deliberately constructed to reflect several of the major characteristics of a given universe.

## Preparing Valid Questions

- The way in which questions are worded is very important. Wording can affect the reliability of any poll.

## Interviewing

- Pollsters communicate with the sample respondents using various methods including person-to-person interviews, telephone calls, and mail surveys.

## Reporting

- Pollsters use computers to store and manipulate data, which helps them analyze and report the results of the poll.





# Evaluating Polls and Their Limit on Public Opinion

## Evaluating Polls

- On balance, most national and regional polls are fairly reliable. Still, they are far from perfect.
- Potential problems with polls include their inability to measure the intensity, stability, and relevance of the opinions they report.
- Another potential problem is that polls and pollsters are sometimes said to shape the opinions they are supposed to measure.

## Limits on the Impact of Public Opinion

- Public opinion is the major, but by no means the only, influence on public policy in this country.
- Much of the American political system is designed to protect minority interests against the excesses of majority views and actions.
- Finally, polls are not elections, nor are they substitutes for elections.



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# Section 2 Review

## 1. A straw vote

- (a) correctly predicted the outcome of the 1936 election.
- (b) is a method of polling that asks a large amount of people the same question.
- (c) is a very reliable type of polling.
- (d) measures the opinion of only the rural community.

## 2. To pollsters, the *universe* is

- (a) a private organization whose members share certain views and work to shape public policy.
- (b) all of outer space.
- (c) a probability sample.
- (d) the whole population that a poll aims to measure.

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# The Mass Media

- How does the mass media fulfill its role to provide the public with political information?
- How does the mass media influence politics?
- What are the factors that limit the influence of the media?

# The Role of Mass Media

A **medium** is a means of communication; it transmits some kind of information. Four major mass media are particularly important in American politics:

## *Television*

Politics and television have gone hand in hand since the technology first appeared. Today television is the principle source of political information for a majority of Americans.

## *Newspapers*

The first newspapers carried mostly political news. Even with the total number of newspapers declining, they are still the second leading source of political information for most Americans.

## *Radio*

On average, Americans hear 20 hours of radio each week. Radio has been a source of news and entertainment since 1920.

## *Magazines*

Some 12,000 magazines are published in the United States today. Several magazines are devoted to American news and politics.



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# Media Statistics

Access to media varies from country to country.

| Access to Media in Selected Countries   |                        |                                   |                          |   |
|---|------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Country   | Population in millions | Television sets per 1,000 persons | Radios per 1,000 persons | Daily newspaper circulation per 1,000 persons |
|  United States | 270.3                  | 776                               | 2,122                    | 238   |
|  Japan         | 125.9                  | 619                               | 799                      | 578   |
|  Bangladesh    | 127.6                  | 5                                 | 65                       | 0.4   |
|  Nigeria       | 110.5                  | 38                                | 170                      | 18  |
|  Mexico        | 98.5                   | 192                               | 227                      | 115   |
|  Italy         | 56.8                   | 436                               | 790                      | 126   |
|  India         | 984                    | 21                                | 117                      | 21  |
|  Chile       | 14.8                   | 280                               | 305                      | 101   |
|  Canada      | 30.7                   | 647                               | 919                      | 215   |
|  Nicaragua   | 4.6                    | 48                                | 206                      | 31  |

SOURCE: *The World Almanac*



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# The Media and Politics

## The Public Agenda

- The media play a very large role in shaping the **public agenda**, the societal problems that political leaders and citizens agree need government attention.
- It is not correct that the media tell the people *what* to think; but it is clear that they tell the people what to think *about*.

## Electoral Politics

- Today, television allows candidates to appeal directly to the people, without the help of a party organization.
- Candidates regularly try to use media coverage to their advantage.
- Newscasts featuring candidates are usually short, sharply focused **sound bites**—snappy reports that can be aired in 30 to 45 seconds.



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# Limits on Media Influence

- Only a small part of the public actually takes in and understands much of what the media have to say about public affairs.
- Many media sources mostly skim the news, reporting only what their news editors judge to be the most important and/or most interesting stories of the day.
- In-depth coverage of public affairs is available to those who want it and will seek it out.



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# Section 3 Review

1. Which of the following are major media?
  - (a) television
  - (b) newspapers
  - (c) magazines
  - (d) all of the above
  
2. According to the chart on international media usage found earlier in this section, which media source is accessible to the most Americans?
  - (a) newspapers
  - (b) radio
  - (c) television
  - (d) none of the above

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