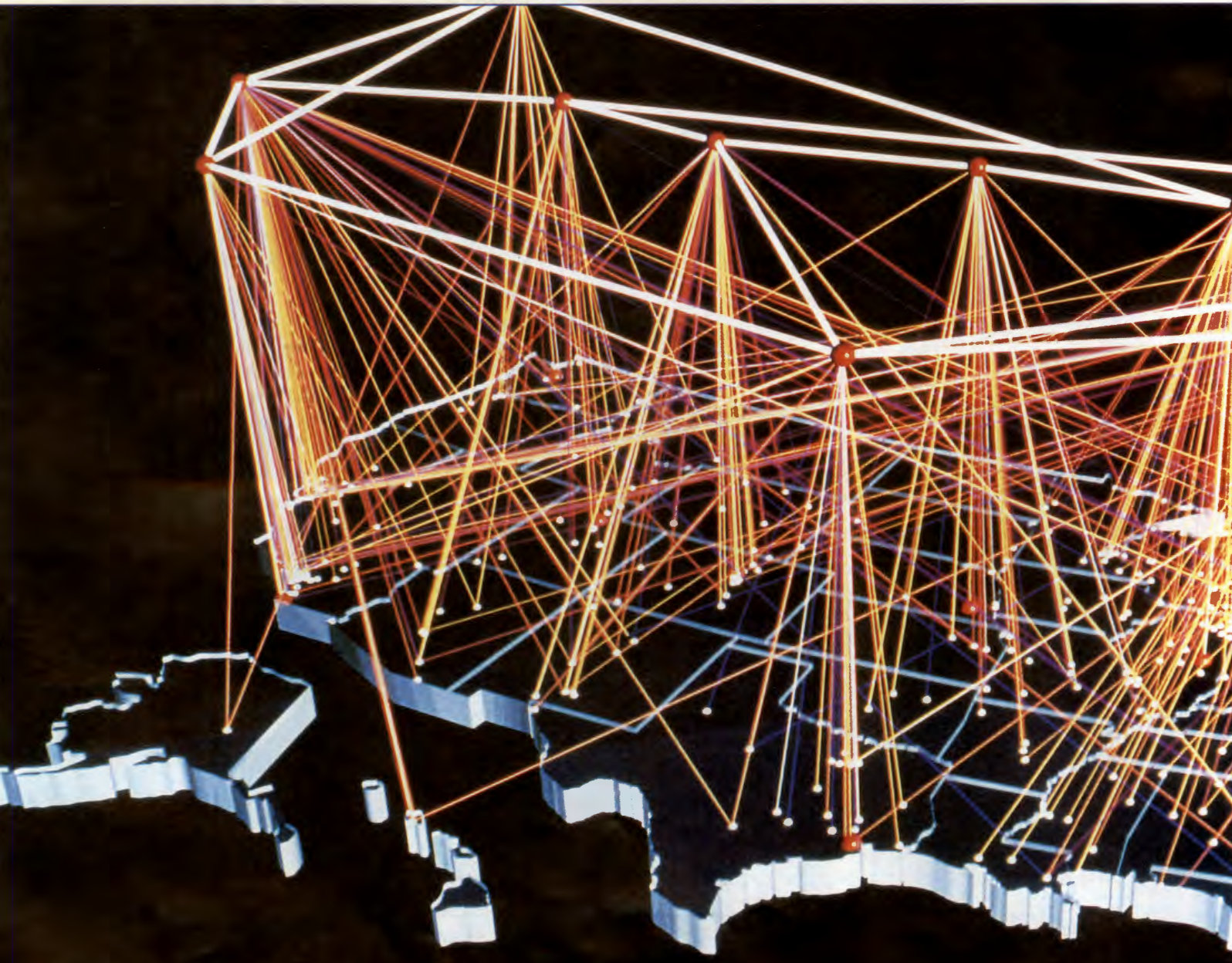


Mass Media and Public Opinion

“The hand that rules the press, the radio, the screen, and the far-spread magazine rules the country.”

—Judge Learned Hand (1942)

Since Judge Hand made this observation, new types of media have emerged, but the power of the media remains strong. The media, along with influences such as family and education, help shape our opinions about politics and many other aspects of our lives.



◆ Computer image of U.S. telecommunications network



Standards Preview

H-SS 12.3.1 Explain how civil society provides opportunities for individuals to associate for social, cultural, religious, economic, and political purposes.

H-SS 12.3.2 Explain how civil society makes it possible for people, individually or in association with others, to bring their influence to bear on government in ways other than voting and elections.

H-SS 12.6.3 Evaluate the roles of polls, campaign advertising, and the controversies over campaign funding.

H-SS 12.7.5 Explain how public policy is formed, including the setting of the public agenda and implementation of it through regulations and executive orders.

H-SS 12.7.6 Compare the processes of lawmaking at each of the three levels of government, including the role of lobbying and the media.

H-SS 12.8.1 Discuss the meaning and importance of a free and responsible press.

H-SS 12.8.2 Describe the roles of broadcast, print, and electronic media, including the Internet, as means of communication in American politics.

H-SS 12.8.3 Explain how public officials use the media to communicate with the citizenry and to shape public opinion.

Chapter 8 in Brief

SECTION 1

The Formation of Public Opinion (pp. 208–213)

- ★ Public opinion refers to the attitudes of a significant number of people on matters of government and politics.
- ★ Family and education are two of the most important factors in shaping public opinion.
- ★ Additional factors that shape public opinion include peer groups, opinion leaders, historic events, and mass media.

SECTION 2

Measuring Public Opinion

(pp. 215–221)

- ★ Public opinion can be determined to some extent through elections, interest groups, the media, and personal contacts.
- ★ The best way to measure public opinion is through opinion polls.
- ★ The complex process of scientific polling results in the most reliable poll data.
- ★ Although it is important to measure public opinion, public opinion is only one of many factors that shape public policy.

SECTION 3

The Mass Media (pp. 223–230)

- ★ The American public gets information on public issues through several forms of mass media, especially through television.
- ★ The media influence American politics by helping to set the public agenda and by playing a central role in electoral politics.
- ★ The influence of the media is limited, in part because many people use mass media as sources of entertainment rather than information.



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1

The Formation of Public Opinion

Section Preview

OBJECTIVES

1. **Examine** the term *public opinion* and understand why it is difficult to define.
2. **Analyze** how family and education shape public opinion.
3. **Describe** four additional factors that shape public opinion.

WHY IT MATTERS

You no doubt have opinions on a variety of issues, from school prayer to which political party should be in power. Several factors help shape your opinions. The two most important factors are family and education.

POLITICAL DICTIONARY

- ★ public affairs
- ★ public opinion
- ★ mass media
- ★ peer group
- ★ opinion leader

Do you like broccoli? Blue fingernail polish? Hard rock? What about sports? Old cars? Country music?

You almost certainly have an opinion on each of those things. On some of them, you may hold strong opinions, and those opinions may be very important to you. Still, each of those opinions is your own view, your *private* opinion. None of them qualifies as *public* opinion.

What Is Public Opinion?

Few terms in American politics are more widely used, and less well understood, than the term *public opinion*. It appears regularly in newspapers and magazines, and you hear it frequently on radio and television.

Quite often, the phrase is used to suggest that all or most of the American people hold the same view on some public issue, such as global warming or deficit spending. Thus, time and again, politicians say that “the people” want such and such, television commentators tell us that “the public” favors this or opposes that, and so on.

In fact, there are very few matters about which all or nearly all of “the people” think alike. “The public” holds many different and often conflicting views on nearly every public issue.

To understand what public opinion is, you must recognize this important point: Public opinion is a complex collection of the opinions of many different people. It is the sum of all of their views. It is *not* the single and undivided view of some mass mind.

Different Publics

Many publics exist in the United States—in fact, too many to be counted. Each public is made up of all those individuals who hold the same view on some particular public issue. Each group of people with a differing point of view is a separate public with regard to that issue.

For example, the people who think that Congress should establish a national health insurance program belong to the public that holds that view. People who believe that the President is doing an excellent job as chief executive, or that capital punishment should be abolished, or that prayers should be permitted in the public schools are members of separate publics with those particular opinions. Clearly, many people belong to more than one of those publics; but almost certainly only a very few belong to all four of them.

Notice this important point: Not many issues capture the attention of all—or even nearly all—Americans. In fact, those that do are few and far between. Instead, most public issues attract the interest of *some* people (and sometimes millions of them), but those same issues are of little or no interest to many (and sometimes millions of) other people.

This point is crucial, too: In its proper sense, public opinion includes only those views that relate to **public affairs**. Public affairs include politics, public issues, and the making of public policies—those events and issues that concern the people at large. To be a public opinion, a view must involve something of general concern

The Political Spectrum

LEFT

Radical

Favors extreme change to create an altered or entirely new social system.

Liberal

Believes that government must take action to change economic, political, and ideological policies thought to be unfair.

CENTER

Moderate

Holds beliefs that fall between liberal and conservative views, usually including some of both.

Conservative

Seeks to keep in place the economic, political, and social structures of society.

RIGHT

Reactionary

Favors extreme change to restore society to an earlier, more conservative state.

Interpreting Diagrams People who have similar opinions on political issues are generally grouped according to whether they are “left,” “right,” or “center” on the political spectrum. The general range, or spectrum, of political opinions is shown here. (a) *How might a liberal and a conservative differ on an issue such as expanding social welfare programs?* (b) *Where do your views fall on the political spectrum?*

and of interest to a significant portion of the people as a whole.

Of course, the American people as a whole are interested in many things—rock groups and symphony orchestras, the New York Yankees and the Dallas Cowboys, candy bars and green vegetables, and a great deal more. Many people have opinions on each of these things, views that are sometimes loosely called “public opinion.” But, again, in its proper sense, public opinion involves only those views that people hold on such things as parties and candidates, taxes, unemployment, welfare programs, national defense, foreign policy, and so on.

Definition

Clearly, public opinion is so complex that it cannot be readily defined. From what has been said about it to this point, however, **public opinion** can be described this way: those attitudes held by a significant number of people on matters of government and politics.

As we have suggested, you can better understand the term in the plural—that is, as public opinions, the opinions of different publics. Or, to put it another way, public opinion is made up of expressed group attitudes.

A view must be expressed in order to be an opinion in the public sense. Otherwise, it cannot be identified with any public. That expression need not be oral (spoken). It can take any number of other forms, as well: a protest demonstration, a film, a billboard, a vote for or against a candidate, and so on. The essential point is that a person’s private thoughts on an issue enter the stream of

public opinion only when those thoughts are expressed publicly.

Family and Education

No one is born with a set of attitudes about government and politics. Instead, each of us learns our political opinions, and we do so in a lifelong “classroom” and from many different “teachers.” In other words, public opinion is formed out of a very complex process. The factors involved in it are almost infinite.

You have already considered much of this in Chapter 6. In effect, that detailed look at why people vote as they do amounted to an extensive look at how public opinion is formed.



“Harold, would you say you are left of center, right of center, center, left of left, right of left, left of right, or right of right, or what?”

Interpreting Political Cartoons What does the cartoon suggest about the political spectrum?

In Chapter 6, remember, we described the process by which each person acquires political opinions—the process of political socialization. That complex process begins in early childhood and continues through a person’s lifetime. It involves all of the experiences and relationships that lead us to see the political world and to act in it as we do.¹

There are many different agents of political socialization at work in the opinion-shaping process. Again, you looked at these agents in Chapter 6: age, race, income, occupation, residence, group affiliations, and many others. Here, look again at two of them, the family and education. These have such a vital impact that they deserve another and slightly different discussion here.

The Family

Most parents do not think of themselves as agents of political socialization, nor do the other

¹The concept of socialization comes from the fields of sociology and psychology. There, it is used to describe all of the ways in which a society transforms individuals into members of that society. To put this another way: Socialization is the multi-sided, lifelong process in which people come to know, accept, and follow the beliefs and practices of their society. *Political socialization* is a part of that much broader process.

members of most families. Parents and other family members are, nonetheless, very important factors in this process.

Children first see the political world from within the family and through the family’s eyes. They begin to learn about politics much as they begin to learn about most other things. Children learn from what their parents have to say, from the stories that their older brothers and sisters bring home from school, from watching television with the family, and so on.

Most of what smaller children learn in the family setting are not really political opinions. Clearly, toddlers are not concerned with the wisdom of spending billions of dollars on an anti-missile defense system or the pros and cons of the monetary policies of the Federal Reserve Board.

Young children do pick up some fundamental attitudes, however. With those attitudes, they acquire a basic slant toward such things as authority and rules of behavior, property, neighbors, people of other racial or religious groups, and the like. In short, children lay some important foundations on which they will later build their political opinions.



▲ Family and education are the primary factors that shape one’s values and opinions. These photos show a preschooler, whose opinions are largely shaped by family (left); school-age children practicing American values by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance (center); and a young adult putting her values to work through community service (right). **Critical Thinking** How have your family and education shaped your own opinions and values? **H-SS 12.3.1**

A large number of scholarly studies report what common sense also suggests. The strong influence the family has on the development of political opinions is largely a result of the near monopoly the family has on the child in his or her earliest, most impressionable years. Those studies also show that

**PRIMARY
Sources**

“Children tend to absorb the political views of parents and other caregivers, perhaps without realizing it. . . . Children raised in households in which the primary caregivers are Democrats tend to become Democrats themselves, whereas children raised in homes where their caregivers are Republican tend to favor the GOP.”

—Benjamin Ginsberg, Theodore Lowi, and Margaret Weir, *We the People*

The Schools

The start of formal schooling marks the initial break in the influence of the family. For the first time, children become regularly involved in activities outside the home.

From the first day, schools teach children the values of the American political system. They work to indoctrinate the young, to instill in them loyalty to a particular cause or idea. In fact, training students to become good citizens is an important part of our educational system.

Schoolchildren salute the flag, recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and sing patriotic songs. They learn about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other great Americans. From the early grades on, they pick up growing amounts of specific political knowledge, and they begin to form political opinions. In high school, they are often required to take a course in American government and even to read books such as this one.

School involves much more than books and classes, of course. It is a complex bundle of experiences and a place where a good deal of informal learning occurs—about the similarities and differences among individuals and groups, about the various ways in which decisions can be made, and about the process of compromise that must often occur in order for ideas to move forward.

Once again, the family and education are *not* the only forces at work in the process by which opinions are formed. A number of other influences are part of the mix. These two factors are singled out here to underscore their leading roles in that process.

Other Factors

No factor, by itself, shapes a person's opinion on any single issue. Some factors do play a larger role than others, however. Thus, in addition to family and education, occupation and race are usually much more significant than, say, gender or place of residence.

For example, on the question of national health insurance, the particular job a person has—how well-paying it is, whether its benefits include coverage by a private health-insurance plan, and so on—will almost certainly have a greater impact on that person's views than his or her gender or place of residence. On the other hand, the relative weight of each factor that influences public opinion also depends on the issue in question. If the issue involves, say, equal pay for women or the restoration of Lake Michigan, then gender or where one lives will almost certainly loom larger in the opinion-making mix.

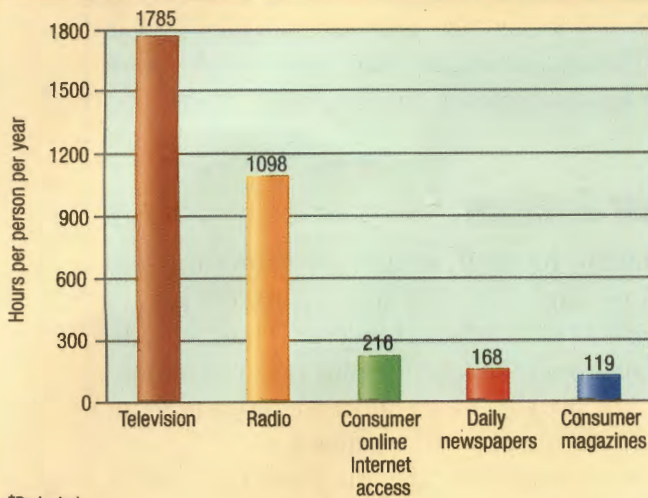
Besides family, education, and such factors as occupation and race, four other factors have a major place in the opinion-making process. They are the mass media, peer groups, opinion leaders, and historic events.

Mass Media

The **mass media** include those means of communication that reach large, widely dispersed audiences (masses of people) simultaneously. No one needs to be told that the mass media, including newspapers, magazines, radio, the Internet, and in particular television, have a huge effect on the formation of public opinion.

Take this as but one indication of that fact: The Census Bureau reports that there is at least one television set in 98 percent of the nation's 110 million households. There are two or more sets in more than 40 million homes and millions more in many other places. Most of those sets are turned on for at least seven hours a day, for a mind-boggling total of more than a billion hours a day.

Mass Media Use, 2007*



*Projected

SOURCE: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*



Interpreting Graphs This graph shows the hours that Americans spend each year on various forms of media. **Why do Americans spend more time watching television than on other forms of media? H-SS 12.8.2**

The chart above shows how much time Americans spend on various types of mass media. You will take a longer look at the influence of the mass media later in this chapter.

Peer Groups

Peer groups are made up of the people with whom one regularly associates, including friends, classmates, neighbors, and co-workers. When a child enters school, friends and classmates become an important factor in shaping his or her attitudes and behavior. The influence of peer groups continues on through adulthood.

Belonging to a peer group usually reinforces what a person has already come to believe. One obvious reason for this is that most people trust the views of their friends. Another is that the members of a peer group have shared many of the same socializing experiences, and so tend to think along the same lines.

To put this observation another way, contradictory or other unsettling opinions are not often heard within a peer group. Most people want to be liked by their friends and associates. As a result, they are usually reluctant to stray too far from what their peers think and how their peers behave.

Opinion Leaders

The views expressed by **opinion leaders** also bear heavily on public opinion. An opinion leader is any person who, for any reason, has an unusually strong influence on the views of others. These opinion shapers are a distinct minority in the total population, of course, but they are found everywhere.

Many opinion leaders hold public office. Some write for newspapers or magazines, or broadcast their opinions on radio or television. Others are prominent in business, labor, agriculture, and civic organizations. Many are professionals—doctors, lawyers, teachers, ministers, and rabbis—and have contact with large numbers of people on a regular basis. Many others are active members of their neighborhood or church, or have leadership roles in their local communities.

Whoever they may be—the President of the United States, a network television commentator, the governor, the head of a local citizens committee, or even a local talk-show host—these opinion leaders are people to whom others listen and from whom others draw ideas and convictions. Whatever their political, economic, or social standing or outlook may be, opinion leaders play a significant role in the formation of public opinion.

Historic Events

Historic events can have a major impact on the views of large numbers of people—and so have a major impact on the content and direction of public policy. Our history affords many examples of this point, not the least of them the Great Depression. This period began in 1929 and lasted for the better part of a decade.

The Depression was a shattering national experience. Almost overnight, need and poverty became massive national problems. Millions of Americans—one out of every four in the labor force—lost their jobs. Millions more were impoverished. Hunger and despair stalked the land. In 1929, some two million people were unemployed in the United States. By just four years later, that number had climbed to 13.5 million. In 1935, some 18 million men, women, and children were wholly dependent on public emergency relief programs. Some 10 million workers had no employment other than that provided by temporary public projects.

All of this changed the way millions of people viewed the proper place of government in the United States. The Depression persuaded a large majority of Americans to support a much larger role for government—and, in particular, for the National Government—in the nation's economic and social life.

The Great Depression also prompted a majority of Americans to shift their political loyalties from the Republican to the Democratic Party. As you know, the Republicans had dominated the national political scene from Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 to the onset of the Depression. That situation changed quite abruptly, however, when Franklin D. Roosevelt's landslide victory in 1932 began nearly 40 years of Democratic domination.

The turbulent politics of the 1960s and early 1970s furnish another example of the way in which significant occurrences can impact and shape opinions. The American people had emerged from World War II and the prosperity of the 1950s with a largely optimistic view of the future

WORK-IS-WHAT-I
WANT-AND-NOT-CHARITY
WHO-WILL-HELP-ME-
GET-A-JOB-7 YEARS-
IN-DETROIT. NO MONEY
SENT AWAY-FURNISH-
BEST-OF-REFERENCES
PHONE RAHWALPH 8331 ROOM
H.S.S.



▲ During the Great Depression, millions of Americans were out of work.

and of the United States' place in the world. That rose-colored outlook was reflected in a generally favorable, even respectful, attitude toward government in this country.

The 1960s and early 1970s changed all that. Those years were highlighted by a number of traumatic events. Of special note were the assassinations of President John Kennedy in 1963 and of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert Kennedy in 1968. This period also included the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, with all of the protests, violence, and strong emotions that accompanied both of those chapters in this nation's life. The era ended with the Watergate Scandal and the near-impeachment and subsequent resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1974.

Those years of turmoil and divisiveness produced a dramatic decline in the American people's estimate of their government—and most especially their evaluation of its trustworthiness. Evidences of that decline are still apparent in the United States of today.

Section 1 Assessment

Key Terms and Main Ideas

1. What is **public opinion**, and what factors shape it?
2. Give three examples of an **opinion leader**.
3. Describe the political socialization of a young child.
4. (a) What are the **mass media**? (b) What evidence can you give that the mass media influence public opinion?

Critical Thinking

5. **Drawing Conclusions** Is it likely that interaction with one's peer group would prompt one to switch his or her allegiance from one major party to the other? Why or why not?



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6. **Synthesizing Information** Why is it so difficult to define public opinion?

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For: An activity on forming public opinion
Web Code: mqd-2081

The Latino Media Story



Analysis Skills HR4, HI3

With the rise in the Latino population of the United States, the demand for Spanish-language newspapers, radio, and other media has grown. In this article from The Christian Science Monitor, staff writer Kim Campbell reports on how Latino media are scrambling to meet the new demand.

Rural Georgia is not the place you'd expect to find a boom in Spanish-language media. But Dalton, a small town in the north, is now home to three Spanish-language newspapers and a Spanish-language pop radio station.

Hispanic media have grown in the past decade—newspapers alone have increased 55 percent—and with the news . . . from the [2000] census that Hispanics are the largest U.S. minority, more attention is being paid to how to reach this group that has a purchasing power of more than \$490 billion a year. . . .

With the demand for more media has come a need for bilingual journalists. Some are being wooed away from mainstream media by Spanish-language publications and networks. Those who do the hiring say it can be tough to find staff who can speak and write well in both languages. Some Latinos, for example, don't speak Spanish; others have strong Spanish skills but can't do interviews in English or translate written reports.

Those who do cross over say there are advantages to working in Spanish-language media, including the opportunity to advance into management, to work with colleagues who understand the needs of the Hispanic community, and to practice advocacy-based journalism in which the target audience is clear. "There is this sense that you are really doing something to help the community," says Angelo Figueroa, editor of the monthly *People*



Martin Berlanga, of Spanish-language network Univisión, prepares for a live shot in Austin, Texas.

en Español. . . .

Spanish-language media often take a different approach from mainstream outlets—focusing, not surprisingly, on issues of importance to their audience. . . . In Miami, *The Miami Herald* and its Spanish-language sister paper, *El Nuevo Herald*, often take different approaches to the same issue. . . . "People pick up *El Nuevo Herald* not only because

it's in Spanish, but because it speaks to them," says Barbara Gutiérrez, a reader representative for both papers, who points out that *El Nuevo Herald* has shorter articles and is more opinionated. "It's just a different kind of style, and closer, I think, to what many Hispanics are used to."

The census took some people by surprise, but Ms. Gutiérrez says she and her colleagues could see what was coming. She looks forward to what happens next: "The next 10 years are going to be very exciting."

Analyzing Primary Sources

1. Why is the growth of the U.S. Latino population an important consideration to the media?
2. How might the rise in the Latino population affect the formation of public opinion?
3. If you were planning on a career in the media, how might the information in this article affect you?

2

Measuring Public Opinion

Section Preview

OBJECTIVES

1. **Describe** the challenges involved in measuring public opinion.
2. **Explain** why scientific opinion polls are the best measure of public opinion.
3. **Identify** five steps in the polling process.
4. **Understand** the challenges of evaluating polls.
5. **Recognize** the limits on the impact of public opinion in a democracy.

WHY IT MATTERS

Have you ever responded to a poll? Taken a poll yourself? Scientific polls are the most effective means for measuring public opinion. Other measures include election returns, the activities of interest groups, and direct personal contact.

POLITICAL DICTIONARY

- mandate
- interest group
- public opinion poll
- straw vote
- sample
- random sample
- quota sample

How many times have you heard this phrase: “According to a recent poll . . .”? Probably more than you can count, especially in the months leading up to an important election. Polls are one of the most common means of gauging public opinion.

If public policy is to reflect public opinion, one needs to be able to find the answers to these questions: What are people’s opinions on a particular issue? How many people share a given view on that issue? How firmly do they hold that view? In other words, there must be a way to “measure” public opinion.

Measuring Public Opinion

The general shape of public opinion on an issue can be found through a variety of means. These include voting; lobbying; books; pamphlets; magazine and newspaper articles; editorial comments in the press and on radio, television, and the Internet; paid advertising; letters to editors and public officials, and so on.

These and other means of expression are the devices through which the general direction of public opinion becomes known. Usually though, the means by which a view is expressed tells little—and often nothing reliable—about the size of the group that holds that opinion or how strongly it is held. In the American political system, this information is vital. To find it, some effort must be made to measure public

opinion. Elections, interest groups, the media, and personal contacts with the public all—at least to some degree—provide the means of measurement.

Elections

In a democracy, the voice of the people is supposed to express itself through the ballot box. Election results are thus very often said to be indicators of public opinion. The votes cast for the various candidates are regularly taken as evidence of the people’s approval or rejection of the stands taken by those candidates and their parties.



▲ The AIDS Memorial Quilt is a unique expression of public opinion. Here the quilt is laid out in front of the Washington Monument.



▲ Senator Barbara Boxer (D., California) discusses high gasoline prices in Los Angeles. **Critical Thinking** *What kinds of information can officials learn from meeting directly with the public?*

As a result, a party and its victorious candidates regularly claim to have received a **mandate** to carry out their campaign promises. In American politics a mandate refers to the instructions or commands a constituency gives to its elected officials.²

In reality, however, election results are seldom an accurate measure of public opinion. Voters make choices in elections for any of several reasons, as you have seen. Very often, those choices have little or nothing to do with the candidates' stands on public questions. And, as you know, candidates often disagree with some of the planks of their party's platform. In addition, candidates and parties often express their positions in broad, generalized terms.

In short, much of what you have read about voting behavior, and about the nature of parties, adds up to this: Elections are, at best, only useful indicators of public opinion. To call the typical election a mandate for much of anything other than a general direction in public policy is to be on very shaky ground.

Interest Groups

Interest groups are private organizations whose members share certain views and objectives and work to shape the making and the content of public policy. These organizations are also very aptly known as pressure groups and special-interest groups.

²The term *mandate* comes from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning a command.

Interest groups are a chief means by which public opinion is made known. They present their views (exert their pressures) through their lobbyists, by letters and telephone calls, in political campaigns, and by a number of other methods. In dealing with them, however, public officials often have difficulty determining two things: How many people does an interest group really represent? And just how strongly do those people hold the views that an organization says they hold?

The Media

Earlier you read some very impressive numbers about television. Those huge numbers help describe the place of the media in the opinion process; you will read more of those numbers later. Here, recognize this point: The media are also a gauge for assessing public opinion.

The media are frequently described as “mirrors” as well as “molders” of opinion. It is often said that the views expressed in newspaper editorials, syndicated columns, news magazines, television commentaries, and blogs are fairly good indicators of public opinion. In fact, however, the media are not very accurate mirrors of public opinion, often reflecting only the views of a vocal minority.

Personal Contacts

Most public officials have frequent and wide-ranging contacts in many different forms with large numbers of people. In each of these contacts, they try to read the public's mind. Indeed, their jobs demand that they do so.

Members of Congress receive bags of mail and hundreds of phone calls and e-mails everyday. Many of them make frequent trips “to keep in touch with the folks back home.” Top administration figures are often on the road, too, selling the President's programs and gauging the people's reactions. Even the President does some of this, with speaking trips to different parts of the country.

Governors, State legislators, mayors, and other officials also have any number of contacts with the public. These officials encounter the public in their offices, in public meetings, at social gatherings, and even at ball games.

Can public officials find “the voice of the people” in all of those contacts? Many can and

do, and often with surprising accuracy. But some public officials cannot. They fall into an ever-present trap: They find only what they want to find, only those views that support and agree with their own.

Polls—The Best Measure

Public opinion is best measured by **public opinion polls**, devices that attempt to collect information by asking people questions.³ The more accurate polls are based on scientific polling techniques.

Straw Votes

Public opinion polls have existed in this country for more than a century. Until the 1930s, however, they were far from scientific. Most earlier polling efforts were of the **straw vote** variety. That is, they were polls that sought to read the public's mind simply by asking the same question of a large number of people. Straw votes are still fairly common. Many radio talk show hosts pose questions that listeners can respond to by telephone, and television personalities regularly invite responses by e-mail.

The straw-vote technique is highly unreliable, however. It rests on the false assumption that a relatively large number of responses will provide a fairly accurate picture of the public's views on a given question. The problem is this: Nothing in the process ensures that those who respond will represent a reasonably accurate cross section of the total population. The straw vote emphasizes the quantity rather than the quality of the sample to which its question is posed.

The most famous of all straw-polling mishaps took place in 1936. A periodical called the *Literary Digest* mailed postcard ballots to more than 10 million people and received answers from more than 2,376,000 of them. Based on that huge return, the magazine confidently predicted the outcome of the presidential election that year. It said that Governor Alfred Landon, the Republican nominee, would easily defeat incumbent Franklin Roosevelt. Instead, Roosevelt won in a landslide. He captured more than 60 percent of the popular vote and carried every State but Maine and Vermont.

³Poll comes from the old Teutonic word *polle*, meaning the top or crown of the head, the part that shows when heads are counted.

The *Digest* had drawn its sample on an altogether faulty basis: from automobile registration lists and telephone directories. The *Digest* had failed to consider that in the mid-Depression year of 1936, millions of people could not afford to own cars or have private telephones.

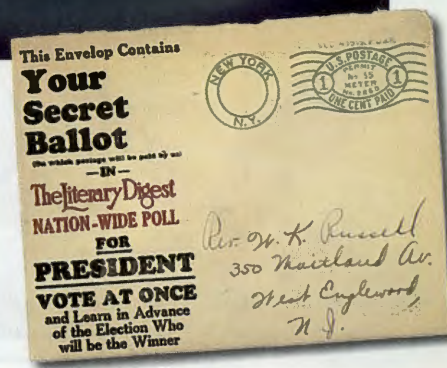
The *Digest* poll failed to reach most of the vast pool of the poor and unemployed, millions of blue-collar workers, and most of the ethnic minorities in the country. Those were the very segments of the population from which Roosevelt and the Democrats drew their greatest support. The magazine had predicted the winner of each of the three previous presidential elections, but its failure to do so in 1936 was so colossal that it ceased publication not long thereafter.

Scientific Polling

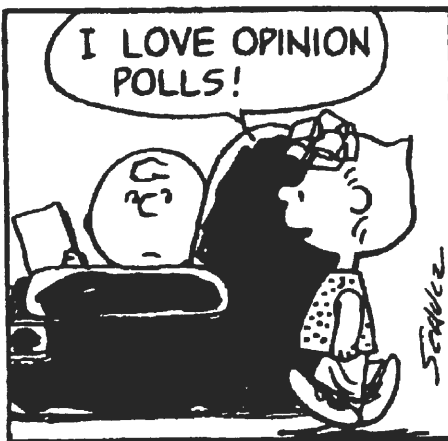
Serious efforts to take the public's pulse on a scientific basis date from the mid-1930s. Attempts began with the work of such early pollsters as George Gallup and Elmo Roper. The techniques that they and others have developed since then have reached a highly sophisticated level.



▲ **Polls Then and Now** The 1936 *Literary Digest* survey (right) drew a faulty conclusion about the winner of that year's presidential race because its sample was flawed. Today's scientific polls, such as the Harris Survey (above) are designed to avoid such errors.



Interpreting Political Cartoons (a) According to the cartoon, how seriously should we view the answers to opinion polls? (b) Does the text agree or disagree with this assessment? **H-SS 12.6.3**



There are now more than 1,000 national and regional polling organizations in this country. Many of them do mostly commercial work. That is, they tap the public's preferences on everything from toothpastes and headache remedies to television shows and thousands of other things. However, at least 200 of these polling organizations also poll the political preferences of the American people. Among the best known of the national pollsters today are the Gallup Organization (the Gallup Poll) and Louis Harris and Associates (the Harris Survey).

The Polling Process

Scientific poll-taking is an extremely complex process that can best be described in five basic steps. In their efforts to discover and report public opinion, pollsters must (1) define the universe to be surveyed; (2) construct a sample; (3) prepare valid questions; (4) select and control how the poll will be taken; and (5) analyze and report their findings to the public.

Defining the Universe

The *universe* is a term that means the whole population that the poll aims to measure. It is the group whose opinions the poll will seek to discover. That universe can be all voters in Chicago, or every high school student in Texas, or all Republicans in New England, or all Democrats in Georgia, or all Catholic women over age 35 in the United States, and so on.

Constructing a Sample

If a poll's universe is very small—say, the 25 members of a high school class—the best way to find out what that universe thinks about some issue would be to poll every one of them. In most cases, however, it is not possible to interview a complete universe. This is certainly true in matters of public policy that affect all the people in the nation. There are simply too many people in that universe to talk to. So the pollster must select a **sample**, a representative slice of the total universe.

Most professional pollsters draw a **random sample**, also called a probability sample. In a random sample, the pollster interviews a certain number of randomly selected people who live in a certain number of randomly selected places. A random sample is thus a sample in

Effect of Poll Wording on Reliability

1

The Federal Government should see to it that all people have adequate housing.

Agree
55.1%

Disagree
44.9%

2

Some people feel the Federal Government should see to it that all people have adequate housing, while others feel each person should provide his or her own housing. Which comes closest to how you feel about this?

Government
responsible
44.6%

Government
not responsible
55.4%

3

Some people feel each person should provide his or her own housing, while others feel the Federal Government should see to it that all people have adequate housing. Which comes closest to how you feel about this?

Government
responsible
29.5%

Government
not responsible
70.5%

SOURCE: *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys*, 1981

Interpreting Charts This chart demonstrates the importance of carefully wording each question in a poll. (a) Which question is worded in the least biased manner? (b) How do you know?

which each member of the universe and each geographic area within it have a mathematically equal chance of being included.

Each major national poll usually interviews just over 1,500 people to represent the universe of the nation's entire adult population (just over 200 million people today). How can the views of so few people represent the opinions of so many?

The answer to that question lies in the mathematical law of probability. Flip a coin 1,000 times. The law of probability says that, given an honest coin and an honest flip, heads will come up 500 times. Furthermore, the law states that the results of this test will be the same no matter how often you perform it, and no matter what kind of coin you use.

The law of probability is regularly applied in a great many situations. It is used by insurance companies to compute life expectancies, by food inspectors to check the quality of a farmer's truckload of beans, and by others who "play the odds," including pollsters who draw random samples.

In short, if the sample is of sufficient size and is properly selected at random from the entire universe, the law of probability says that the result will be accurate to within a small and predictable margin of error. Mathematicians tell us that a properly drawn random sample of some 1,500 people will reflect the opinions of the nation's entire adult population and will be accurate to within a margin of plus or minus (\pm) 3 percent.

Pollsters acknowledge that it is impossible to construct a sample that would be an absolutely accurate reflection of a large universe. Hence, the allowance for error. A margin of ± 3 percent means a spread of 6 percentage points, of course. To reduce the sampling error from ± 3 percent to ± 1 percent, the size of the sample would have to be 9,500 people. The time and money needed to interview so big a sample make that a practical impossibility.

Some pollsters use a less complicated, but less reliable, sampling method. They draw a **quota sample**, a sample deliberately constructed to reflect several of the major characteristics of a given universe.

For example, if 51.3 percent of a universe is female, 17.5 percent of it is African American, and so on, then the quota sample will be made up of 51.3 percent females, 17.5 percent African Americans, and so on. Of course, most of the people in the sample will belong to more than one category. This fact is a major reason why such a sample is less reliable than random samples.

Preparing Valid Questions

The way in which questions are worded is very important. Wording can affect the reliability of any poll. For example, most people will probably say "yes" to this question put this way: "Should local taxes be reduced?" Many of those same people will also answer "yes" to this question: "Should the city's police force be increased to



▲ **A Famous Polling Failure** An elated Harry S. Truman holds up a newspaper headline wrongly announcing his defeat in 1948. Pollsters and others had predicted an easy victory for Thomas E. Dewey in that election. **H-SS 12.6.3**

fight the rising tide of crime in our community?” Yet, expanding the police force almost certainly would require more local tax dollars.

Responsible pollsters acknowledge these issues and thus phrase their questions very carefully. They purposely try not to use “loaded,” emotionally charged words, or terms that are difficult to understand. They also try to avoid questions that are worded in a way that will tend to shape the answers that are given to them.

Interviewing

How pollsters communicate with respondents can also affect accuracy. For decades, most polls were conducted door-to-door, face-to-face. That is, the interviewer questioned the respondent in person. Today, however, most pollsters do their work by telephone, with a sample selected by *random digit dialing*. Calls are placed to randomly chosen numbers within randomly chosen area codes around the country.

Telephone surveys are less labor intensive and less expensive than door-to-door polling. Still, most professional pollsters see advantages and drawbacks to each approach. But they all agree that only one technique, not a combination of the two, should be used in any given poll.

The interview itself, whether by phone or in person, is a very sensitive point in the process. An interviewer’s tone of voice or the emphasis he or she gives to certain words can influence a respondent’s replies and so affect the validity of a poll.

If the questions are not carefully worded, some of the respondent’s replies may be snap judgments or emotional reactions. Others may be answers that the person being interviewed thinks “ought” to be given; or they may be replies that the respondent thinks will please—or offend—the interviewer. Thus, polling organizations try to hire and train their interviewing staffs very carefully.

Analyze and Report Findings

Polls, whether scientific or not, try to measure people’s attitudes. To be of any real value, however, someone must analyze and report the results. Scientific polling organizations today collect huge amounts of raw data. In order to handle these data, computers and other electronic hardware have become routine parts of the process. Pollsters use these technologies to tabulate and interpret their data, draw their conclusions, and then publish their findings.

Evaluating Polls

How good are polls? On balance, the major national polls are fairly reliable. So, too, are most of the regional surveys around the country. Still, they are far from perfect. Fortunately, most responsible pollsters themselves are quite aware of that fact and readily acknowledge the limits of their polls. Many of them are involved in continuing efforts to refine every aspect of the polling process.

Pollsters know that they have difficulty measuring the intensity, stability, and relevance of the opinions they report. *Intensity* is the strength of feeling with which an opinion is held. *Stability* (or fluidity) is the relative permanence or changeableness of an opinion. *Relevance* (or salience) is how important a particular opinion is to the person who holds it.

Polls and pollsters are sometimes said to shape the opinions they are supposed to measure. Some critics of polls say that in an election, for example, pollsters often create a “bandwagon effect.” That is, some voters, wanting to be with the winner, jump on the bandwagon of the candidate who is ahead in the polls.

In spite of these criticisms, it is clear that scientific polls are the most useful tools there are for the difficult task of measuring public opinion. Although they may not be always or precisely accurate, they do offer reasonably reliable guides to public thought. Moreover, they help to focus attention on public questions and to stimulate discussion of them.

Limits on the Impact of Public Opinion

More than a century ago, the Englishman Lord Bryce described government in the United States as “government by public opinion.” Clearly, the energy devoted to measuring public opinion in this country suggests something of its powerful role in American politics. However, Lord Bryce’s observation is true only if it is understood to mean that public opinion is the major, but by no means the only, influence on public policy in this country. Its force is tempered by a number of other factors—for example, by interest groups.

Most importantly, however, remember that our system of constitutional government is not designed to give free, unrestricted play to public opinion—and especially not to majority opinion. In particular, the doctrines of separation of powers and of checks and balances, and the constitutional guarantees of civil rights and liberties are intended to protect minority interests against the excesses of majority views and actions.



Interpreting Political Cartoons (a) What is the cartoon's message?(b) Does the text support this message?

Finally, polls are not elections, nor are they substitutes for elections. It is when faced with a ballot that voters must decide what is important and what is not. Voters must be able to tell the difference between opinions and concrete information, and should know the difference between personalities and platforms.

Democracy is more than a simple measurement of opinion. Democracy is about making careful choices among leaders and their positions on issues, and among the governmental actions that may follow. Ideally, democracy is the thoughtful participation of citizens in the political process.

Section 2 Assessment

Key Terms and Main Ideas

1. Why are **interest groups** uncertain gauges for measuring public opinion?
2. What is the major problem with the **straw vote** polling technique?
3. How is it that a **random sample** gives a fairly accurate representation of public opinion?
4. For what reasons is public opinion measured?

Critical Thinking

5. **Determining Relevance** List two good reasons for following polls during a presidential campaign.
6. **Understanding Point of View** How might the Framers of the Constitution have viewed public opinion polls?



Standards Monitoring Online

For: Self-quiz with vocabulary practice
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7. **Predicting Consequences** What positive and/or negative effects might there be if polls were taken among student voters before a student government election?

Go Online
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Skills for Life

Taking a Poll



Analysis Skill HR4

Politicians have a love/hate relationship with public opinion polls. When a poll shows them gaining public approval, they hail the results as an endorsement of their views. When it shows their popularity slipping, many claim that they never pay attention to polls!

Indeed, a poorly constructed survey can deliver invalid information that can mislead decision makers or can be used to make false claims. Whether a poll is nationwide or within your classroom, certain standards of poll-taking apply. For instance:

- 1. Define the population to be polled.** Decide what group you need to poll in order to find the answer to your question. For example, if you want to learn what percentage of registered voters in Fresno, California, voted in the last election, then it would not make sense to poll people who had not registered to vote.
- 2. Construct a sample.** Within the group that you're polling, you can take a random sample—people chosen purely by chance. Or you can take a quota sample—a representative number of people from each subgroup in your survey.

3. Prepare valid questions. Ask objective questions rather than ones that lead the subject toward a particular answer. Try to ask questions that can be answered in one word, so your results will be easy to tally. Avoid wording that is difficult to understand, especially if your subjects are young or not fluent in English.

4. Select and control the means by which the poll will be taken. Decide whether you will conduct an in-person interview, a telephone interview, a mail interview, or an online interview. Be sure to interview all members of a group in the same manner. Choose interviewers who are careful not to influence the responses by their dress, attitude, or tone of voice.

5. Report your findings. Make a table of the responses to your poll. Analyze the results and draw conclusions based on that information.

Test for Success

Work individually or in small groups to design, conduct, and present the findings from a poll of your class. Create a topic, or choose from one of the following: (a) television viewing habits; (b) career plans; (c) consumption of genetically engineered foods.



▲ Above, a student conducts a survey. At right is the Web site of a major national polling service, the Gallup Organization.

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GALLUP'S KEYS TO ELECTION '04

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ELECTION ANALYSES

- Terrorism, Economy Rank as Top Election Issues** (10/27/2004)
With the election less than a week away, terrorism and the economy loom as the two major issues in this year's presidential contest. The Iraq ...
- Bush Retains Lead Among Likely Voters. Now 51% to 46%** (10/26/2004)
According to the latest CNN/USA Today/Gallup survey, President George W. Bush holds a small, but statistically significant, five-point lead over Sen. John Kerry among likely ...
- How Many Are Planning to Vote for the First Time?** (10/25/2004)
A recent Gallup Poll finds that 12% of registered voters say this will be the first time they have voted in a presidential election. More ...

Now more than ever!

3

The Mass Media

Section Preview

OBJECTIVES

1. **Examine** the role of the mass media in providing the public with political information.
2. **Explain** how the mass media influence politics.
3. **Understand** the factors that limit the influence of the media.

WHY IT MATTERS

How often do you watch television, read a newspaper or magazine, listen to the radio? While these media provide entertainment, they are also our most important sources of political information.

POLITICAL DICTIONARY

- ★ **medium**
- ★ **public agenda**
- ★ **sound bite**

How much television do you watch each day? Little or none? Two hours a day? Three hours? More? However much you watch, you no doubt know that your peers spend a great deal of time in front of the TV. Studies show that by the time the average person graduates from high school today, he or she has spent nearly 11,000 hours in classrooms and nearly 14,000 hours watching television.

Television has an extraordinary impact on the lives of everyone in this country. As you will see in this section, so do the other elements of the mass media.

The Role of Mass Media

A **medium** is a means of communication; it transmits some kind of information. *Media* is the plural of medium. As you have read, the mass media include those means of communication that can reach large, widely dispersed audiences simultaneously.

Four major mass media are particularly important in American politics. Ranked in terms of impact, they are television, newspapers, radio, and magazines. Other media—books, films, and audio- and videocassettes, for example—play a lesser role. So, too, does the Internet, though its communicating capabilities are becoming increasingly important.

The mass media are not a part of government. Unlike political parties and interest groups, they do not exist primarily to influence government. They are, nonetheless, an important force in politics.

Besides providing entertainment, the media present people with political information. They do so directly when they report the news, in a newscast or in the news columns of a newspaper, for example. The media also provide a large amount of political information less directly—for example, in radio and television programs, newspaper stories, and magazine articles. These venues often deal with such public topics as crime, health care, or some aspect of American foreign policy. Either way, people acquire most of the information they know about government and politics from the various forms of media.

Television

Politics and television have gone hand in hand since the technology first appeared. The first public demonstration of television occurred at the New York World's Fair in 1939. President Franklin Roosevelt opened the fair on camera,



◀ **The “Wireless Web”**
Some mobile phones provide access to the Internet, an increasingly important form of mass media.

and local viewers watched him on tiny five- and seven-inch screens.

World War II interrupted the development of the new medium, but it began to become generally available in the late 1940s. Television boomed in the 1950s. The first transcontinental broadcast came in 1951, when President Harry Truman, speaking in Washington, addressed the delegates attending the Japanese Peace Treaty Conference in San Francisco.

Today, television is all-pervasive. As you read earlier, there is at least one television set in 98 percent of the nation's 110 million households. In fact, there are more homes in this country today with a television set than with indoor plumbing facilities!

Television replaced newspapers as the principal source of political information for a majority of Americans in the early 1960s. Today, television is the principal source of news for an estimated 80 percent of the population.

The more than 1,700 television stations in this country include more than 1,400 commercial outlets and over 300 public broadcasters. Three major national networks have dominated television from its infancy: the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). Those three

giants furnish about 90 percent of the programming for some 700 local stations. That programming accounts for about 45 percent of all television viewing time today.

The major networks' audience share has been declining in recent years, however. The main challenges to their domination have come from three sources: (1) several independent broadcasting groups—for example, the Fox Network; (2) cable broadcasters⁴—for example, Turner Broadcasting, and especially its Cable News Network (CNN); and (3) the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and its more than 350 local stations.

Some of the most highly touted presentations on television—a Super Bowl game, for example, or a debate between the major presidential candidates—are seen by as many as 100 million people. From 15 to 40 million watch the more popular sitcoms. Each of the three major network's nightly news programs draws 7 to 10 million viewers. In addition, more than 80 million places, including nearly three fourths of the nation's households, are now hooked up to cable systems.

⁴C-SPAN, the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, is sponsored by the cable industry. C-SPAN, C-SPAN2, and C-SPAN3 cover a broad range of public events—including major floor debates and committee hearings in Congress, presidential and other press conferences, and speeches by notable public figures.



▲ **Shaping Public Opinion** West Berlin mayor Willy Brandt is interviewed in 1961 on *Meet the Press*, television's first and longest running talk show (left). On *Larry King Live* Larry King speaks with Attorney General John Ashcroft about the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (right).

Newspapers

The first regularly published newspaper in America, the *Boston News-Letter*, appeared in 1704.⁵ Other papers soon followed, in Boston and then in Philadelphia, New York, Annapolis, and elsewhere. By 1775, 37 newspapers were being published in the colonies. All of them were weekly papers, and they were printed on one sheet that was usually folded to make four pages. The nation's first daily newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Evening Post and Daily Advertiser*, began publication in 1783.

Those first papers regularly carried political news. Several spurred the colonists to revolution, carrying the news of independence and the text of the Declaration to people throughout the colonies. Thomas Jefferson marked the vital role of the press in the earliest years of the nation when, in 1787, he wrote to a friend:

PRIMARY Sources

“... were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

—Letter to Colonel Edward Carrington,
January 16, 1787

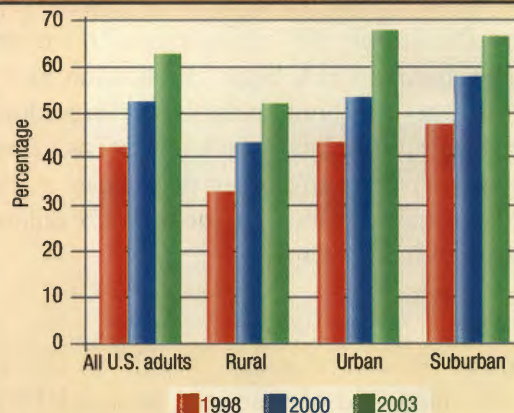
The 1st Amendment, added to the Constitution in 1791, made the same point regarding the importance of newspapers with its guarantee of the freedom of the press.

Today, more than 10,000 newspapers are published in the United States, including almost 1,450 dailies, more than 7,200 weeklies, some 550 semi-weeklies, and several hundred foreign-language papers. Those publications have a combined circulation of about 150 million copies per issue. About 45 percent of the nation's adult population read a newspaper every day, and they spend, on average, a half hour doing so.

The number of daily newspapers has been declining for decades, however, from more than 2,000 in 1920 to 1,745 in 1980 and to not quite 1,450 today. Radio and television, and more

⁵The world's first newspaper was almost certainly the *Acta Diurna*, a daily gazette in Rome dating from 59 B.C. Another very early forerunner of today's newspapers was *Tsing Pao*, a court journal in Beijing. Press historians believe that its first issues, printed from stone blocks, were published beginning in A.D. 618; its last issue appeared in 1911.

Americans with Internet Access*



* Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$.

SOURCES: (1998–1999 data) Pew Research Center; (2000–2003 data) Pew Internet Project



Interpreting Graphs Internet use has jumped dramatically, and with it the number of people who turn to the Internet for daily news. **Might the Internet eventually replace television and newspapers as a source of news? Why or why not? H-SS 12.8.2**

recently the Internet, have been major factors in that downward trend.

So, too, have been the battles over readers and advertisers that competing papers have fought in many places nationwide. Often, those struggles have left only one survivor. Competing daily papers exist in fewer than 50 cities today. This represents a major change from only a few decades ago, when at least two and sometimes three, four, or five newspapers existed in most major cities.

Nevertheless, newspapers rank second only to television as the public's primary source of information about government and politics. Most newspapers cover stories in greater depth than television does, and many try to present various points of view in their editorial sections. Those newspapers that have the most substantial reputations and national influence today include the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Most newspapers are local papers. That is, most of their readers live in or near the communities in which they are published. While local papers do carry some national and international news, most focus on their own locales.

Advances in telecommunications and computerized operations are changing that basic fact,

however. Now, each day's editions of *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Christian Science Monitor* are generally available on the day of publication around the country. *USA Today*, which began publication in the early 1980s, does not publish on Saturdays, Sundays, or most holidays. Still, it now has a larger circulation than any other newspaper in the United States; it distributes more than 2.1 million copies of each day's paper.

Radio

Radio as it exists today began in 1920. On November 2nd of that year, station KDKA in Pittsburgh went on the air with presidential election returns. Radio soon became immensely popular.

By 1927, 733 commercial stations were on the air, Americans owned more than seven million radio sets, and two national networks were in operation. NBC was established in 1926 and CBS in 1927. The Mutual Broadcasting System was formed in 1934, and ABC was formed in 1943. The advent of networks made it possible

for broadcasters to present their programs and advertising messages to millions of people all over the country.

By the 1930s, radio had assumed much of the role in American society that television has today. It was a major entertainment medium, and millions of people planned their daily schedules around their favorite programs. The networks also provided the nation with dramatic coverage of important events, and radio exposed the American people to national and international politics as never before.

President Franklin Roosevelt was the first major public figure to use radio effectively. Author David Halberstam has described the impact of FDR's famous fireside chats:

PRIMARY Sources

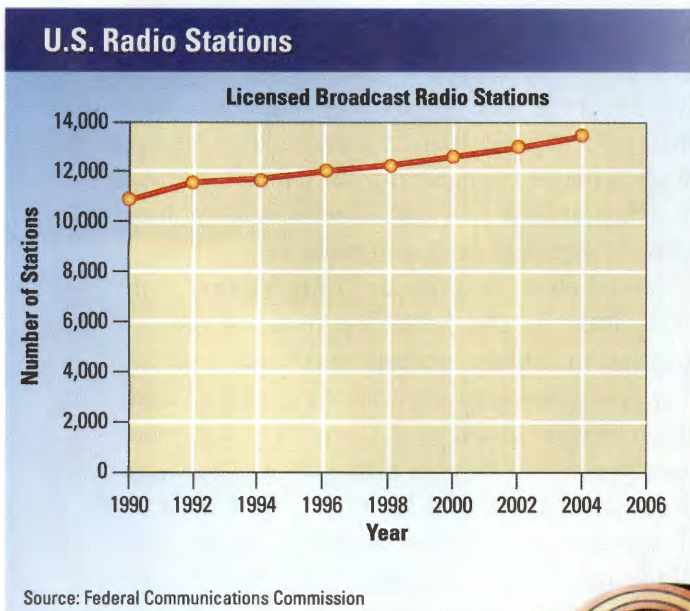
“He was the first great American radio voice. For most Americans of [that] generation, their first memory of politics would be of sitting by a radio and hearing that voice, strong, confident, totally at ease. . . . Most Americans in the previous 160 years had never even seen a President; now almost all of them were hearing him, in their own homes. It was literally and figuratively electrifying.”

—David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be*

Many people thought that the arrival of television would bring the end of radio as a major medium. Radio has survived, however, in large part because it is so conveniently available. People can hear music, news, sports, and other radio programs in many places where they cannot watch television—in their cars, at work, in the country, and in a number of other places and situations.

Radio remains a major source of news and other political information. The average person hears 20 hours of radio each week. No one knows how many radios there are in this country—in homes, offices, cars, backpacks, and a great many other places. Those radios can pick up some 10,000 stations on the AM and FM dials.

Many AM stations are affiliated with one or another of the national networks. Unlike television, however, most radio programming is local. There are also some 700 public radio stations, most of them on the FM dial. These noncommer-



Interpreting Graphs The number of radio stations increased fairly steadily in recent years. **How might this trend affect the quality and/or type of local radio programming?**



cial outlets are part of National Public Radio (NPR), which is radio's counterpart of television's PBS.

Most radio stations spend little time on public affairs today. Many of them do devote a few minutes every hour to "the news"—really, to a series of headlines. All-news stations are now found in most of the larger and many medium-sized communities. They are usually on the air 24 hours a day, and they do provide somewhat more extensive coverage of the day's events. A growing number of stations now serve the preferences of Latino Americans, African Americans, and other minority listeners.

Over recent years, talk radio has become an important source of political comment. The

opinions and analyses offered by a number of talk show hosts can be found on hundreds of stations across the country. Among the most prominent talk broadcasters today are conservatives Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Bill O'Reilly and liberal Al Franken. Their programs air nationally and attract millions of listeners every weekday.

Many local radio stations now feature their own talk shows. Most of them focus on matters of local interest and their hosts regularly invite listeners to chime in by telephone and e-mail.

Magazines

Several magazines were published in colonial America. Benjamin Franklin began one of the very first, his *General Magazine*, in Philadelphia in 1741. On into the early 1900s, most magazines published in the United States were generally devoted to literature and the social graces. The first political magazines—among them, *Harper's Weekly* and the *Atlantic Monthly*—appeared in the mid-1800s.

The progressive reform period in the early 1900s spawned several journals of opinion, including a number that featured articles by the day's leading muckrakers.⁶ For decades before radio and television, magazines constituted the only national medium.

Some 12,000 magazines are published in the United States today. Most are trade publications, such as *Veterinary Forum* and the *Automotive Executive*, or periodicals that target some special personal interest, such as *Golf Digest*, *Teen*, and *American Rifleman*. Among magazines with the highest circulation today: *AARP the Magazine*, *Reader's Digest*, and *National Geographic*. They each sell some 10 to 20 million or more copies per issue.

Three news magazines, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, rank in the top

⁶The muckrakers were journalists who exposed wrongdoing in politics, business, and industry. The term was coined by Theodore Roosevelt in 1906 and is derived from the raking of muck—that is, manure and other barnyard debris. The muckrakers set the pattern for what is now called investigative reporting.

Frequently Asked Questions

The Media

An uninformed public: the media's fault?

Any number of studies demonstrate this point: Overall, the American people are not very well informed about politics and public affairs. Some analysts claim that the media are largely responsible for this regrettable fact—because, they say, the media are much more interested in entertaining their audiences than they are in informing them. Most critics also note that "the news" tends to be negative in tone. That is, bad news regularly crowds out good news—and this, they say, leads many people to ignore, or at least fail to appreciate, the significance of news reports about public affairs.

. . . Or the public's fault?

Other observers argue that the public itself is to blame for its lack of knowledge and awareness. They say that virtually every aspect of public affairs is covered by the news media, on an ongoing basis. The problem here is that, by and large, most people don't play close attention to the news about public affairs—that is, don't bother to inform themselves.

Any Questions?

What would you like to know about the mass media? Brainstorm two new questions and exchange them with a classmate. What did you learn?



35 periodicals in terms of circulation. They have a combined circulation of nearly 10 million copies a week, and they are important sources of political news and comment. There are several other magazines devoted to public affairs, most of them vehicles of opinion, including the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, the *National Review*, and the *Weekly Standard*.

The Media and Politics

Clearly, the media play a significant role in American politics. Just how significant that role is, and just how much influence the media have, is the subject of a long, still unsettled debate.

Whatever its weight, the media's influence can be seen in any number of situations. It is most visible in two areas: (1) the public agenda and (2) electoral politics.

The Public Agenda

The media play a very large role in shaping the **public agenda**, the societal problems that the nation's political leaders and the general public agree need government attention. As they report and comment on events, issues, policies, and personalities, the media determine to a very large

extent what public matters the people will think and talk about—and, so, those matters that public-policy makers will be concerned about.

To put the point another way, the media have the power to focus the public's attention on a particular issue. They do so by emphasizing some things and ignoring or downplaying others. For example, they feature certain items on the front page or at the top of the newscast and bury others.

It is not correct to say that the media tell the people *what* to think; but it is clear that they tell the people what to think *about*. A look at any issue of a daily newspaper or a quick review of the content of any television news program will demonstrate that point. Remember, people rely on the media for most of the information they receive on public issues.

The mass media also has a direct impact on the nation's leaders. Some years ago, Stephen Hess, a widely respected authority on the media, identified several news organizations that form the “inner ring” of influence in Washington, D.C. He cited the three major television networks, CBS, ABC, and NBC; three newspapers, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*; the leading news wire service, the Associated Press (AP); and the three major news weeklies, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, Reuters and *USA Today* have since joined that select group.

Top political figures in and out of government pay close and continuing attention to these sources. In fact, the President receives a daily digest of the news reports, analyses, and editorial comments that these and other sources broadcast and publish.

Electoral Politics

You have seen several illustrations of the media's importance in electoral politics as you have read this book. Recall, for example, the fact that the media, and in particular television, have contributed to a decline in the place of parties in American politics.

Television has made candidates far less dependent on party organizations than they once were. Before television, the major parties generally dominated the election process. They recruited most candidates who ran for office, and they ran those



▲ **Power of the Press** The media transmit information across the country instantly. They thus help to shape the public agenda and affect the outcome of elections. Shown here is a CNN newsroom. **H-SS 12.8.1**

candidates' campaigns. The candidates depended on party organizations in order to reach the voters.

Now, television allows candidates to appeal directly to the people, without the help of a party organization. Candidates for major office need not be experienced politicians who have worked their way up a party's political ladder over the course of several elections. Today it is not at all unusual for candidates to assemble their own campaign organizations and operate with only loose connections to their political parties.

Remember, too, that how voters see a candidate—the impressions they have of that candidate's personality, character, abilities, and so on—is one of the major factors that influence voting behavior. Candidates and professional campaign managers are quite aware of this fact. They know that the kind of "image" a candidate projects in the media can have a telling effect on the outcome of an election.

Candidates regularly try to manipulate media coverage to their advantage. Campaign strategists understand that most people learn almost everything they know about a candidate from television. They therefore plan campaigns that emphasize television exposure. Such technical considerations as timing, location, lighting, and camera angles loom large, often at the expense of such substantive matters as the issues involved in an election or a candidate's qualifications for public office.

Good campaign managers also know that most television news programs are built out of stories that (1) take no more than a minute or two of air time, and (2) show people doing something interesting or exciting. Newscasts seldom feature "talking heads," speakers who drone on and on about some complex issue.

Instead, newscasts featuring candidates are usually short, sharply focused **sound bites**—snappy reports that can be aired in 30 or 45 seconds or so. Staged and carefully orchestrated visits to historic sites, factory gates, toxic-waste dumps, football games, and the like have become a standard part of the electoral scene.

Limits on Media Influence

Having said all this, it is all too easy to overstate the media's role in American politics. A number of built-in factors work to limit the media's impact on the behavior of the American voting public.

Voices on Government

Joseph Turow, a professor at the Annenberg School of Communications, studies the ways in which the media influence our political perspectives. Turow examines the mass media—from radio to the Internet—and their impact on people.



"We have to make people a little more sophisticated about video images. . . . News and entertainment are, essentially, a battle over the definition of the world. You've got various sources in public relations, and interest groups and political organizations are always maneuvering to have a reporter write this or that, and we don't know, for example, why this person is on this television show. One of the things I tell my students is to interrogate the newspaper, interrogate the television show."

Evaluating the Quotation

What do you think Turow means by "interrogating" a newspaper or a television news program? How would following his advice change you as a "consumer" of the news?

For one thing, few people follow international, national, or even local political events very closely. Many studies of voting behavior show that in the typical election, only about 10 percent of those who can vote and only about 15 percent of those who do vote are well informed on the many candidates and issues under consideration in that election. In short, only a small part of the public actually takes in and understands much of what the media have to say about public affairs.

Moreover, most people who do pay some attention to politics are likely to be selective about it. That is, they most often watch, listen to, and read those sources that generally agree with their own viewpoints. They regularly ignore those sources with which they disagree. Thus, for example, many Democrats do not watch the televised campaign appearances of Republican candidates. Nor do many Republicans read newspaper stories about the campaign efforts of Democratic candidates.

Another important limit on the media's impact is the content the media carries. This is especially true of radio and television. Most television programs, for example, have little or nothing to do with public affairs, at least not directly. (A number of popular programs do relate to public affairs in an indirect way, however. Thus, many are "crime shows," and crime is certainly a matter of public concern. Many also carry a political message—for example, that the police are hard-working public servants.)

Advertisers who pay the high costs of television air time want to reach the largest possible audiences. Because most people are more interested in being entertained than in being informed about public issues, few public-affairs programs air in prime time. There are exceptions, however, such as *60 Minutes*, *20/20*, *Dateline*, and *News Night*.

Radio and television mostly "skim" the news. They report only what their news editors judge to be the most important and/or the most interesting stories of the day. Even on widely watched evening news programs, most reports are presented in 60- to 90-second time



▲ **News or Entertainment?** Newspapers offer a variety of information, much of it not about politics, in order to appeal to the widest possible audience.

slots. In short, the broadcast media seldom give the kind of in-depth coverage that a good newspaper can supply.

Newspapers are not as hampered as many other media in their ability to cover public affairs. Still, much of the content of most newspapers is nonpolitical. Like nearly all of television and radio, newspapers depend on their advertising revenues, which in turn depend on producing a product with the widest possible appeal. Newspaper readers are often more interested in

the sports pages and the social, travel, advertising, and entertainment sections of a newspaper than they are in its news and editorial pages.

In-depth coverage of public affairs is available in the media to those who want it and will seek it out. There are a number of good newspapers around the country. In-depth coverage can also be found in several magazines and on a number of radio and television stations, including public broadcast outlets. Remember, however, that there is nothing about democracy that guarantees an alert and informed public. Like voting and other forms of political participation, being an informed citizen requires some effort.

Section 3 Assessment

Key Terms and Main Ideas

1. Why is the Internet considered a **medium**?
2. How do the media influence the **public agenda**?
3. What limits are there on media influence?
4. Why has radio survived despite television's enormous appeal?

Critical Thinking

5. **Making Comparisons** Through which medium—newspapers, television, or the Internet—can the American people become best informed about public affairs today? Why?



Standards Monitoring Online

For: Self-quiz with vocabulary practice
Web Code: mqa-2083

6. **Understanding Point of View** Nicholas Johnson, former chair of the Federal Communications Commission, said "All television is educational television. The only question is, what is it teaching." Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

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For: An activity on the media's role in public opinion
Web Code: mqd-2083

Can Religious Solicitation Be Regulated?

Jehovah's Witnesses follow the biblical command to "go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Their ability to fulfill this command has been thwarted by municipal regulations restricting or regulating door-to-door solicitation, however. As a result, the Supreme Court has periodically struggled with the balance between a municipality's right to limit solicitation and the Jehovah's Witnesses's religious requirement to advocate for their religion door-to-door.



Analysis Skills
HR4, HI3, HI4

Watchtower Bible & Tract Society of N.Y., Inc. v. Village of Stratton (2001)

The Village of Stratton, Ohio, passed an ordinance requiring all "canvassers" to get a Solicitation Permit from the mayor's office before going onto private residential property to promote any "cause." Applicants had to fill out a detailed Solicitor's Registration Form but did not have to pay any fee. The Solicitation Permit listed the name of the approved solicitor, who was required to show the permit whenever a police officer or homeowner requested. Violation of the ordinance was a misdemeanor.

A group of Jehovah's Witnesses that published and distributed religious materials sued the Village in Federal Court. They claimed that the ordinance violated their 1st Amendment rights of religion, free speech, and freedom of the press.

The District Court upheld the ordinance except in certain small respects. The Sixth Circuit affirmed, finding that the ordinance did not single out religious solicitation and was a legitimate attempt to protect Village residents from annoyance and to prevent criminals from posing as canvassers in order to defraud residents. The U.S. Supreme Court agreed to consider whether the permit requirement was constitutional, and whether religious or political solicitors have the right to advocate their beliefs without having to disclose their names.

Arguments for Watchtower Bible & Tract Society

1. The ordinance impermissibly restricts the right to distribute religious publications and discuss

- religious doctrine with residents of the Village.
2. Requiring solicitation permits does not realistically reduce the amount of crime in a municipality. Residents can post "no solicitation" signs if they do not wish to be disturbed.
3. Advocates for idealistic causes should not have to get advance permission or disclose their identities in order to present their views.

Arguments for Village of Stratton

1. The Village has a legitimate interest in preventing fraud and crime, and in protecting the privacy of its residents.
2. The ordinance is applied evenhandedly to all solicitors and does not unconstitutionally discriminate against religious advocates.
3. Requiring solicitors to disclose their names helps discourage solicitors from fraudulent or dishonest activities.

Decide for Yourself

1. Review the constitutional grounds upon which each side based its arguments and the specific arguments each side presented.
2. Debate the opposing viewpoints presented in this case. Which viewpoint did you favor?
3. Predict the impact of the Court's decision on other municipal efforts to regulate religious and commercial solicitations. (To read a summary of the Court's decision, turn to pages 799–806.)

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Use Web Code mqp-2086 to register your vote on this issue and to see how other students voted.

Political Dictionary

public affairs (p. 208), **public opinion** (p. 209), **mass media** (p. 211), **peer group** (p. 212), **opinion leader** (p. 212), **mandate** (p. 216), **interest group** (p. 216), **public opinion poll** (p. 217), **straw vote** (p. 217), **sample** (p. 218), **random sample** (p. 218), **quota sample** (p. 219), **medium** (p. 223), **public agenda** (p. 228), **sound bite** (p. 229)



Standards Review

- H-SS 12.3.1** Explain how civil society provides opportunities for individuals to associate for social, cultural, religious, economic, and political purposes.
- H-SS 12.3.2** Explain how civil society makes it possible for people, individually or in association with others, to bring their influence to bear on government in ways other than voting and elections.
- H-SS 12.6.3** Evaluate the roles of polls, campaign advertising, and the controversies over campaign funding.
- H-SS 12.7.5** Explain how public policy is formed, including the setting of the public agenda and implementation of it through regulations and executive orders.
- H-SS 12.7.6** Compare the processes of lawmaking at each of the three levels of government, including the role of lobbying and the media.
- H-SS 12.8.1** Discuss the meaning and importance of a free and responsible press.
- H-SS 12.8.2** Describe the roles of broadcast, print, and electronic media, including the Internet, as means of communication in American politics.
- H-SS 12.8.3** Explain how public officials use the media to communicate with the citizenry and to shape public opinion.

Practicing the Vocabulary

Matching Choose a term from the list above that best matches each description.

1. The people with whom one usually associates
2. A means of communication
3. The attitudes held by a significant number of people on matters of government and politics
4. A person who has an unusual amount of influence on the views held by other people
5. News reports that are brief and sharply focused
6. An organization that tries to influence public policy

Fill in the Blank Choose a term from the list above that best completes each sentence.

7. A type of sample that is carefully constructed to reflect the major characteristics of a particular universe is called a _____.
8. Winners of elections often claim that their victories at the polls represent a _____ to carry out their proposed programs.
9. A _____ is a type of sample in which each member of the sample universe has a mathematically equal chance of being included.
10. _____ are those means of communication that can reach large numbers of people.

Reviewing Main Ideas

Section 1.....

11. Why is it incorrect to say that public opinion represents the single, undivided view of the American people?
12. Why are the influences of education and family so powerful in the development of political attitudes?
13. Besides education and family, what forces help influence public opinion in American society?
14. Name at least three ways in which public opinion can be expressed.
15. (a) Why is your opinion about a rock group not a public opinion? (b) Give at least three examples of topics on which a group of people may have a public opinion.

Section 2.....

16. Elections, interest groups, the media, and personal contacts all are means of measuring public opinion. (a) Describe how each is used to measure public opinion. (b) What are the limitations of each?

17. What is the most reliable means of measuring public opinion? Explain your answer.
18. Why is it only partly correct to say that government in the United States is "government by public opinion"?
19. How does a straw vote differ from a scientific poll?
20. What factors can make a public opinion poll less than completely accurate?

Section 3.....

21. (a) What are the four major sources of political information in the United States? (b) List at least one advantage of each source.
22. Name two reasons for the decline in the number of daily newspapers in the United States.
23. Explain the impact of the mass media on the public agenda.
24. What is the impact of the mass media on electoral politics?
25. What factors limit the impact of the mass media on American politics?

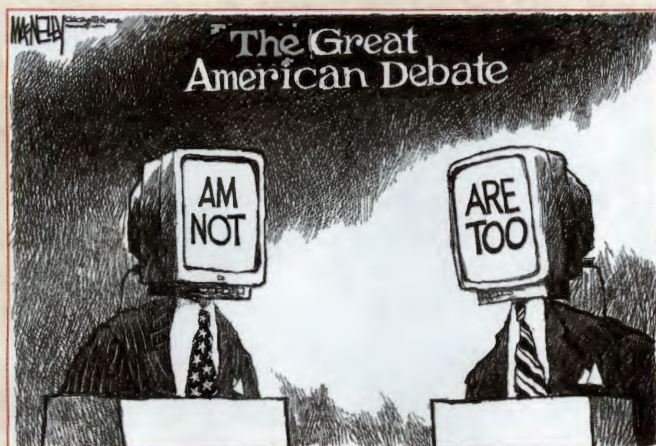
Critical Thinking Skills

Analysis Skills HR3, HR4

26. **Applying the Chapter Skill** Write five questions that you would ask if you were conducting a poll on the significance of mass media in the lives of American voters.
27. **Drawing Inferences** Political scientist V. O. Key, Jr., once described public opinion as those expressions that governments “find it prudent to heed.” Do you agree with Key’s definition? Explain your answer.
28. **Expressing Problems Clearly** You have read that schools are key agents of political socialization. What are the most important elements of citizenship in American society that you think students ought to learn in school?
29. **Distinguishing False From Accurate Images** In spite of its powerful and important role in American society, television is often criticized for its lack of content on important issues. **(a)** Considering what you have read in this chapter, do you feel that it is accurate to characterize television as lacking in real content? **(b)** If so, what do you think is to blame for the quality of television programming?

Analyzing Political Cartoons

Using your knowledge of American government and this cartoon, answer the questions below.



30. Who are the characters in the cartoon intended to represent?
31. What does the cartoon suggest about television coverage of candidate debates?



You Can Make a Difference

In what ways could your school be improved—increased recycling, a “say no to graffiti” campaign, more interest in student government? Choose an area that would benefit your school, and then decide on a medium—print, radio, or television—for getting your ideas across to the rest of the student body. Write a story or script for your chosen medium, including interviews if appropriate. If you have chosen radio or television, and equipment is available, record your piece for broadcast.

Participation Activities

Analysis Skills CS1, HR4, HI1

32. **Current Events Watch** Choose a current topic, such as the death penalty or prayer in public schools, and find two newspaper reports about it. One should be a factual report, and one should be an editorial. Summarize the main points of each report. Then contrast the language, selection of details, and point of view of the two reports to explain how an editorial differs from a news story.
33. **Time Line Activity** Create a time line showing events in the development of television, newspaper, radio, magazine, and Internet news and information reporting. Include a summary of the trends in the roles of the various media that your time line illustrates.
34. **It's Your Turn** Create a poster that urges students to spend more time educating themselves about public issues. As you plan your poster, remember that the purpose of your poster is to encourage good citizenship. Show reasons why you think students should become more involved and suggest ways in which they might do so. Display your class's posters throughout the school. **(Creating a Poster)**



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As a final review, take the Magruder's Chapter 8 Self-Test and receive immediate feedback on your answers. The test consists of 20 multiple-choice questions designed to test your understanding of the chapter content.