

PUBLIC OPINION

Section 1

WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION?

Public opinion is the group of views shared by a segment of society on issues of interest to people. Public opinion is often divided and can focus on a variety of issues, ranging from the government’s foreign policy to community problems.

Public policy, the choices the government makes and the actions it takes in response to an issue or problem, is related to public opinion. On the one hand, public policy can form public opinion, as Americans react to government actions. On the other hand, public opinion can form public policy. If enough Americans decide that a certain action needs to be taken, they can often convince government officials to make policy that addresses this need.

There are many ways Americans can express their individual and collective opinions. Voting is one example. People can also protest, write letters or blogs, or testify at public hearings. Additionally, people can join and support private organizations whose missions they respect and that work to influence policymakers.

1. Imagine that you just voted in an election for governor. How did you share your beliefs by voting?

FORMING PUBLIC OPINION

A number of factors can affect a person’s **political socialization**, or the way a person acquires political beliefs. Family is an important factor, since children grow up listening to family members’ beliefs on a range of political issues. School and work are two other factors that help shape the way a person feels about politics. Age, race, gender, and religion can further influence a person’s opinions.

2. Name three factors that shape a person’s political beliefs.

MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION

Mass media—any means of communication that provides information to a large audience—also influences public opinion. Newspapers, online news, and television news, all report on politics and issues that are important to both politicians and the public. Through coverage of an issue—or lack thereof—mass media can help shape the public agenda. However, as critics point out, mass media can sometimes be harmful, when there is bias in reporting or story selection, factual inaccuracy, or over consolidation of media outlets.

The earliest and longest-lasting form of mass media in the United States is print media, such as newspapers and magazines. Today, newspapers remain an important source of news and opinion, as do television, talk radio, and Internet news sites. It is now easier than ever to access news in very little time. Comparing information from multiple sources of news media helps people avoid **propaganda**, information purposely designed to shape public opinion.

3. Why is it important to receive news from more than one source?

Section 1 *continued*

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

A public opinion **poll** is a survey of people scientifically selected to provide opinions about something. When a poll is designed and conducted accurately, it can be an excellent gauge of public opinion.

The first step to ensuring accuracy in a poll is to pick an appropriate **sample**, or group of people who will take part in the poll. The size of the sample must be large enough to reflect the body of people the poll is supposed to represent, such as all registered voters. Additionally, the people who make up the sample must be chosen randomly. A well-designed scientific poll will also include questions that are worded in a way that does not unduly influence the respondent's answers. If a poll includes questions without **bias**, or polling method errors that lead to one outcome over others, it is more likely that the results of the poll will be **objective**—free from bias and other outside influences.

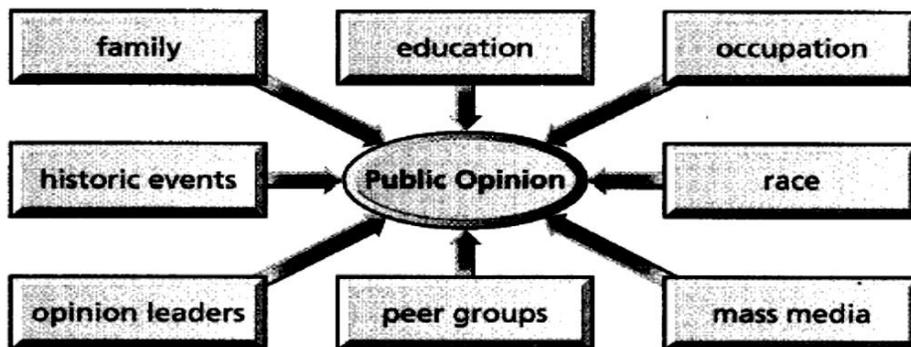
There is room for error in even the best designed poll. The **sampling error**, or margin of error in a poll, indicates a poll's accuracy and is given as a percent above and below the poll's results.

Exit polls are frequently used during elections. In these polls, voters are asked who they voted for, right after they vote. While these results can sometimes predict winners before elections are over, critics argue that they may discourage those who have not voted yet from voting and alter final results.

4. Explain the role of a sample in a poll.

5. Explain the positive and the negative of exit polls.

GRAPHIC SUMMARY: Factors That Shape Public Opinion



Directions: Using the Graph, Answer the question.

6) List at least four factors that influence public opinion.

The Formation of Public Opinion

Section Objective To understand public opinion and its role in American politics

A. What Is Public Opinion?

1. Public opinion is those attitudes held by a significant number of persons on matters of government and politics.
2. Public opinion is made up of a wide variety of expressed group attitudes.

B. Factors That Shape Public Opinion

1. The Family

- Political socialization begins within the family, where children learn basic attitudes toward authority, property, and rules of behavior.
- Adult political behavior is firmly based on attitudes and values formed in the home in early childhood.

2. The Schools

- Schools give children formal knowledge that they will need to be good citizens.
- Schools are also centers of informal learning about other groups in society.

3. Opinion Leaders

- Opinion leaders are people who have more than the usual amount of influence on the attitudes of others.
- They include politicians, members of the press, and professional people.

4. The Mass Media

- The mass media, including television, radio, film, books, magazines, and newspapers, have a large influence on public opinion.
- Television alone is a major influence on people's daily lives.

5. A Mix of Factors

- No one factor by itself shapes any person's political opinions.
- The factors that are most important vary with the issue being considered.

Directions answer the following question.

- 7) List the two types of information that is communicated by each of these sources:
a) Family b) School c) Mass Media
- 8) Which of the following choices s fits the definition of public opinion?
A) Those who favor raising the highway speed limit to 75 miles per hour.
B) Those who contribute money to public television.
C) Those who support a plan to build a new city airport.
D) Those who prefer New York Yankees to the Boston Red Sox.
E) Those in favor of America withdrawing from Afghanistan.
F) Those who own their own home