

## OVERVIEW

- What is public opinion?
- Where does it come from?
- How do we measure it?
- What is the role of public opinion in politics?

## WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION?

- V.O. Key defined public opinion as reflecting “those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed.”
- Another definition: the collective or aggregate opinions of the adult population.

## THE ORIGINS OF PUBLIC OPINION

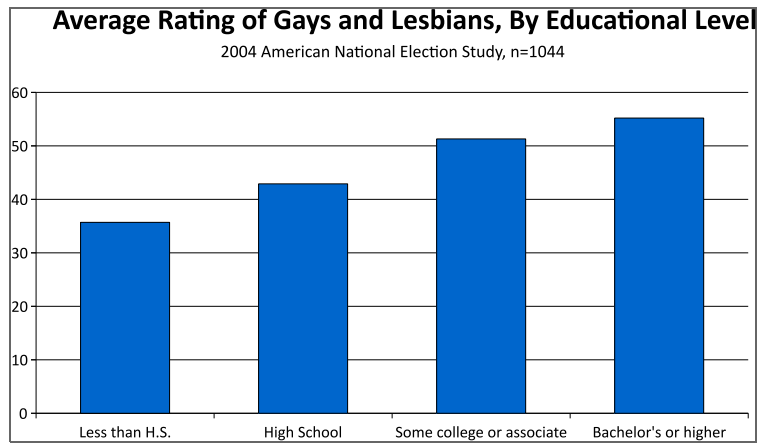
- Emerges in part from the *political socialization* process in childhood and early adolescence:
  - Family
  - School
  - Religion
  - Community
- Socialization helps form *beliefs* and *values* that shape our opinions later in life.



## INFLUENCES LATER IN LIFE

- Opinions are also influenced by adult experiences:
  - Self-interest
    - Employment
    - Property ownership (stakeholding)
    - Parenthood, marriage
  - Higher education
    - Instills *tolerance* and other political values.
    - Increases political *efficacy*: the belief that one's actions can affect government policies.
  - Mass media

## TOLERANCE EFFECTS OF EDUCATION



## MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

- Before the 1930s, studies of public opinion relied on convenience samples or *straw polls*.
- 1930s: George Gallup developed the scientific approach to survey research still used today:
  - Use of *random samples*.
  - Efforts to reduce *selection bias*.
- Other considerations:
  - *Measurement error*: expressed opinions may not reflect underlying attitudes.



## RANDOM SAMPLING AND SAMPLING ERROR

- In a random sample, each member of the population of interest has an equal chance of being surveyed.
- This rule guarantees that the *sampling error*—the error in polls due to using a sample rather than looking at the whole population—is as small as possible.
  - Bigger samples have less sampling error:
    - 500 respondents:  $\pm 4.4\%$
    - 1000 respondents:  $\pm 3.1\%$

## SELECTION BIAS

- If some members of the population are more likely to be surveyed than others, *selection bias* results.
- Sources of selection bias:
  - Sampling frame is not the population of interest.
    - Telephone polls omit people who don't have phones.
  - *Nonresponse bias*.
    - Some groups of people are less likely to respond to surveys than others.
  - Self-selection (opt-in), common in web polls

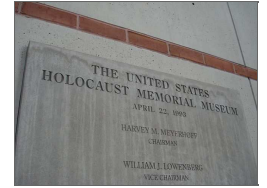
## MEASUREMENT ERROR

- Another common problem: survey questions may not accurately gauge interviewees' true attitudes:
  - Many opinions cannot be measured objectively and are hard to quantify.
  - Questions may lead to biased responses due to their wording.
  - Attitudes may be too complex for a single question.



## CONFUSING QUESTION WORDING

- In 1993 the American Jewish Committee commissioned a survey on public beliefs about the Holocaust when the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in Washington.
- 22% of Americans said it was “possible... the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened.”



## CONFUSING QUESTION WORDING

- Question asked:
  - “Does it seem possible or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews *never* happened?”
- Question was not clear or simple; it contains a double negative.

## CONFUSING QUESTION WORDING

- Alternative question used in a subsequent poll:
  - “Do you doubt that the Holocaust actually happened, or not?”
- In this formulation of the question, 87% of respondents were certain it happened and only 9% said it did not (4% were uncertain).
- The full report, by David W. Moore and Frank Newport, is available **in *The Public Perspective*** (March/April 1994).

## VALUE-LADEN WORDING

Sometimes these differences can emerge based solely on the terms used in the question:

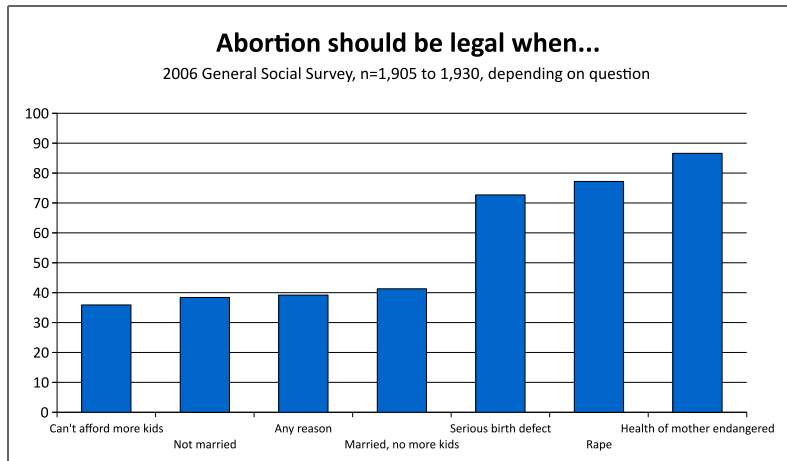
| Question                          | Too little | About right | Too much |
|-----------------------------------|------------|-------------|----------|
| Spending on "welfare"             | 25%        | 37%         | 38%      |
| Spending on "caring for the poor" | 70%        | 22%         | 8%       |

Source: 1984 General Social Survey.

## OVERSIMPLIFIED QUESTIONS

- Some issues are too complex to be captured by a single survey question.
- Attitudes towards abortion are a classic example:
  - Many Americans are not neatly "pro-choice" or "pro-life" in all circumstances; instead they tend to fall in the middle.
  - Questions about the extremes lead to biased responses that don't reflect issue's complexity.

## ABORTION: A COMPLEX ISSUE



## PUBLIC OPINION AND GOVERNMENT

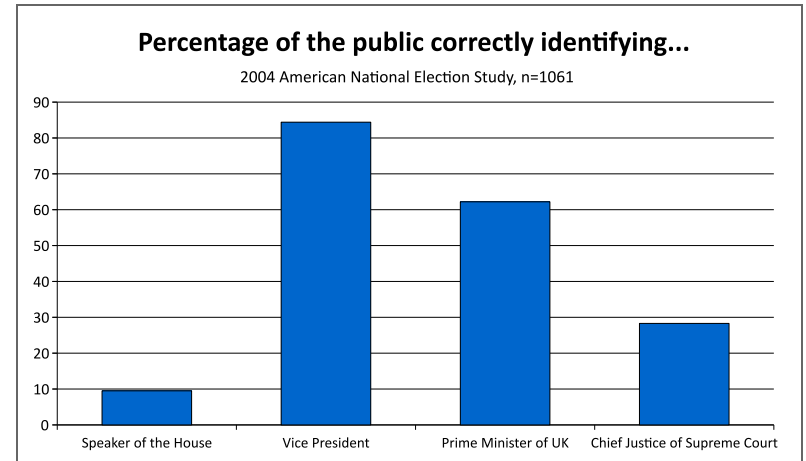
- While many of the sampling and measurement issues can be overcome, there are other obstacles to “governing by public opinion”:
  - Voters are *uninformed*.
  - Voters lack *ideological constraint*.
  - Voters' attitudes are *unpredictable*.



## POLITICAL INFORMATION AND RATIONAL IGNORANCE

- Voters will express opinions about things they know little about.
- A small fraction of the public knows “basic” information about politics like the identity of the Chief Justice of the United States or the Speaker of the House.
- Voters are **rationaly ignorant**: they know little about politics because the benefits do not exceed the costs.

## AMERICANS LACK POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE



## EXCEPTIONS TO RATIONAL IGNORANCE

- Higher education leads to more knowledge.
- Personal or group interest leads to acquiring knowledge about relevant topics: *issue publics*.
- Important events and media publicity may increase knowledge for a time.

## IDEOLOGY AND UNCONSTRAINED BELIEFS

- *Political elites* (people who are deeply interested and involved in politics) tend to conceptualize the world using *ideologies*:
  - Liberals
  - Conservatives
- Ideologies help people shape the political universe and connect related ideas together.
- Most people (the *mass public*) don't think about politics in these terms.

## ATTITUDE INCONSISTENCY

- Attitudes of the mass public often reflect logical contradictions:
  - Support for cutting government spending in the abstract, but opposition to cutting spending on specific programs.
  - Support for expanding government programs and cutting taxes at the same time.
  - Support for “free speech” but opposition to the exercise of free speech by unpopular groups.

## OPINIONS AND GOVERNING

- Even when the public cares deeply about an issue, government action may still be unlikely
  - Senators and representatives are responsible to their local constituents, whose opinions may differ from the public at large.
  - Elected officials may be more concerned about their supporters and single-issue voters than all of their constituents.
  - Elected officials may believe that voters have other, more important priorities.

## COLLECTIVE RATIONALITY?

- Despite the shortcomings of the public, government policy does seem to respond to aggregate trends in opinion.
- While individual opinion often appears irrational, *collective* opinion seems to cancel out much of the noise: the “rational public.”