

The American Citizen

Chapter 8: Public Opinion in American Democracy

Vocabulary and Definitions



Learning these terms and concepts is necessary to understand the basic principles of government. In this course, you must be able to recognize definitions of these terms for classroom lecture/discussions and (eventually) quizzes and tests.

conservative

A person in favor of the status quo, who is cautious about new policies, and who generally feels that the government should stay out of the affairs of private citizens and businesses

culture

A complex combination of traits (language, customs, traditions, etc.) that are unique to the population of a country

ideology

An organized pattern of looking at the political world; a systematic set of ideas that is used to justify a particular point of view

interest group

An organization of people with shared ideas and attitudes who attempt to influence public policy

"left"/"left-wing"

The term that is used to describe those people in society who generally favor change (and are against the status quo)

liberal

A person who believes that the government should actively and peacefully promote social reform within the existing social, economic, or political system

mandate

The wishes or support of the people in a democracy, as expressed by their votes

moderate

A person whose attitudes and opinions are somewhere between that of a liberal and conservative ("middle-of-the-road"), and tend to be tolerant of other people's views

peers

Those people around us who have similar backgrounds and beliefs and may be near us in age

political culture

Those elements of a nation's culture that are related to government and politics

political socialization

The process by which citizens acquire their sense of political identity

political symbol

An object or expression that is part of a nation's political culture and that represents an abstract idea such as "freedom," "democracy," or the country itself

probability (as a polling term)

The likelihood that something will happen (in this case, through scientific polling).

public opinion

The combination of many individuals' expressed feelings about government and political issues

radical

Someone who favors rapid, fundamental change in the existing social, economic, or political order (and often agrees with the use of violence or extreme methods to achieve those things)

random sample

A sample chosen in such a way that every member of a group being polled has an equal chance of being selected

reactionary

Someone who advocates a return to a previous government or state of affairs, and who may be willing to go to extremes (even violence) to attain this goal

"right"/"right-wing"

Generally refers to people who hold traditional views, and oppose changes in society and/or government.

sample

In polling terms, a small group of people who accurately represent a 'universe'

sampling error/margin of error

The range of accuracy of the results of a random sample poll

scientific polling

The determination of public opinion through precise sampling and statistical methods (rather than using older, less precise methods)

status quo

Conservatives favor this → keeping things the way they are at the present time.

straw poll

An informal survey of public opinion

universe (as a polling term)

This is the population that is to be studied in a poll.