

## Government in America

### CHAPTER 6 OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

#### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

##### INTRODUCTION

In a representative democracy, citizens' preferences are supposed to guide policymakers. Yet the American people are amazingly diverse, which means that there are many groups with many opinions rather than a single public opinion. And most citizens know very little about politics. This chapter focuses on the nature of these "public opinions," how citizens learn about politics, and the extent to which these opinions are conveyed to government officials through various types of political participation.

##### THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

One way of looking at the American public is through **demography**: the science of human populations. The most valuable tool for understanding demographic changes in America is the **census**.

With its long history of immigration, the United States has often been called a **melting pot**; but policymakers now speak of a new **minority majority** because it is estimated that all the minority groups combined should pass the 50 percent mark by the year 2060. The largest component of the minority majority currently is the *African-American population*. A legacy of racism and discrimination has left the African-American population economically and politically disadvantaged, but African-Americans have recently been exercising a good deal of political power. If current immigration and birth rates continue, the *Hispanic population* will outnumber the black population early in the twenty-first century. Hispanics are rapidly gaining power in the Southwest. The problem of what to do about *illegal immigration* is of particular concern to the Hispanic community. The recent influx of *Asians* has been headed by a new class of professional workers. Asian Americans are the most highly skilled immigrant group in American history, and they are the best off of America's minority groups. *Native Americans* are by far the worst off of America's minority groups. Statistics show that they are the least healthy, the poorest, and the least educated group. Most remain economically and politically disadvantaged.

Americans live in an increasingly multicultural and multilingual society. Yet, regardless of ethnic background most Americans share a common **political culture** – an overall set of values widely shared within a society. Over the last sixty years, much of America's population growth has been centered in the West and South, particularly with movement to the states of Florida, California, and Texas from states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan. This demographic change is associated with political change, as the process of **reapportionment** brings with it gains or losses of congressional representation as the states' population balance changes. The *fastest growing age group* in America is composed of citizens over age 65. The new political interests of the elderly have been mobilized under the umbrella of "**gray power**."

## HOW AMERICANS LEARN ABOUT POLITICS: POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

Richard Dawson notes that **political socialization** is "the process through which an individual acquires his or her own political orientations." **Agents of socialization** are numerous, including the family, the media, and schools. Only a small portion of Americans' political learning is formal; *informal learning* is much more important.

*Politics is a lifelong activity*, and political behavior is to some degree *learned behavior*. The family's role is central because of its monopoly on time and emotional commitment in the early years. Although most students like to think of themselves as independent thinkers, one can accurately predict how the majority of young people will vote simply by knowing the political leanings of their parents.

The mass media has been referred to as "the new parent." Television now displaces parents as the chief source of information as children get older. Governments throughout the world use the schools in their attempt to instill a commitment to the basic values of the system. Both democratic and authoritarian governments want students to learn positive features about their political system because it helps ensure that youth will grow up to be supportive citizens. Governments largely aim their socialization efforts at the young because one's *political orientations grow firmer* as one becomes more socialized with age.

## MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL INFORMATION

**Public opinion** is the distribution of people's beliefs about politics and policy issues. There is *rarely a single public opinion*: with so many people and such diversity of populations, there are also many opinions. Public opinion is one of the products of political learning.

Public opinion **polling** was first developed by George Gallup in 1932. Polls rely on a **sample** of the population (a relatively small proportion of people who are chosen as *representative* of the whole) to measure public opinion. The key to the accuracy of opinion polls is **random sampling**, which operates on the principle that everyone should have an equal probability of being selected. However, there is always a certain amount of risk of inaccuracy involved, known as the **sampling error**.

Sophisticated technology is now available for measuring public opinion. Most polling is now done on the telephone with samples selected through **random digit dialing**, in which calls are placed to telephone numbers within randomly chosen exchanges. Supporters of polling consider that it is a *tool for democracy* by which policymakers can keep in touch with changing opinions on issues. Critics of polling think polls can weaken democracy by *distorting the election process*. Polls are often accused of creating a "**bandwagon effect**," in which voters may support a candidate only because they see that others are doing so. Moreover, emphasis on poll results sometimes has drowned out the *issues* of recent presidential campaigns. The election day **exit poll** is probably the most

criticized type of poll. In the 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1996 presidential elections, the networks declared a winner while millions on the West Coast still had hours to vote (but analysis of survey data shows that few voters have actually been influenced by exit poll results). In 2000, the exit polls received much of the blame for the media's inaccurate calls of the Florida result on election night. Perhaps the most pervasive criticism of polling is that by altering the *wording* of questions, pollsters can get pretty much the results they want.

Polls have revealed again and again that the average American has a low level of political knowledge. Likewise, surveys show that citizens around the globe lack a basic awareness of the world around them. Increased levels of education over the last four decades have scarcely raised public knowledge about politics. Part of the reason the American political system works as well as it does is that people do know what *basic values* they want upheld, even when they do not have information on policy questions or decision makers. Sadly, the American public has become increasingly dissatisfied with government over the last three decades.

## **WHAT AMERICANS VALUE: POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES**

Generally, Americans tend to identify themselves as conservatives more than moderates or liberals—which helps to account for the relatively limited scope of government in the United States. But who identifies as a liberal or conservative often varies according to age, gender, race and socioeconomic status. Groups with political clout tend to be more conservative than groups whose members have often been shut out from the halls of political power.

Women are not a minority group, making up about 54 percent of the population, but they have nevertheless been politically and economically disadvantaged. Compared to men, women are more likely to support spending on social services and to oppose the higher levels of military spending, which conservatives typically advocate. This ideological difference between men and women has led to the gender gap, which refers to the regular pattern by which women are more likely to support Democratic candidates.

Ideological thinking is not widespread in the American public, nor are people necessarily consistent in their attitudes. For most people, the terms *liberal* and *conservative* are not as important as they are for political elites. Thus, the authors of the classic study *The American Voter* (Angus Campbell, et al.) concluded that to speak of election results as indicating a movement of the public to either the "left" or "right" is a misnomer because most voters do not think in such terms.

Furthermore, those who do are actually the least likely to shift from one election to the next. The relatively small percentage of voters who made up their minds in the last couple of days of the Bush-Gore campaign in 2000 were far more concerned with integrity and competence than ideology.

## **HOW AMERICANS PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS**

**Political participation** encompasses the many activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue. Paradoxically, the United States has a *participatory political culture*; but only 51 percent of Americans voted in the 2000 presidential election, and only 39 percent voted in the 2002 mid-term elections. Turnout in local elections is even lower.

Political scientists generally distinguish between two broad types of participation, conventional and unconventional. **Conventional participation** includes many widely accepted modes of influencing government, such as voting, trying to persuade others, ringing doorbells for a petition, and running for office. Although the decline of voter turnout is a development Americans should rightly be concerned about, a broader look at political participation reveals some positive developments for participatory democracy. **Unconventional participation** includes activities that are often dramatic, such as protesting, civil disobedience, and even violence.

**Protest** is a form of political participation designed to achieve policy change through dramatic and unconventional tactics, and protests today are often orchestrated to provide television cameras with vivid images. Throughout American history, individuals and groups have sometimes used **civil disobedience**, in which they consciously break laws that they think are unjust. Nonviolent civil disobedience was one of the most effective techniques of the civil rights movement in the American South. Although political participation can also be violent (as in some of the Vietnam War protests of the 1960s), perhaps the best indicator of *how well socialized Americans are to democracy* is that protest typically is aimed at *getting the attention of government* rather than at overthrowing it.

In the United States, participation is a *class-biased activity*, with citizens of higher socioeconomic status participating more than others. Minority groups like Hispanics and African-Americans are below average in terms of political participation. However, the participation differences between these groups and the national average have been declining. When blacks, Hispanics, and whites of *equal incomes and educations* are compared, it is the *minorities who participate more* in politics.

## **UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL ACTION**

While more people today think the government is too big rather than too small, a plurality has consistently called for spending on programs like education, healthcare, aid to big cities, protecting the environment, and fighting crime. Many political scientists have looked at these contradictory findings and concluded that Americans are *ideological conservatives* but *operational liberals*.

Americans often take for granted the opportunity to replace our leaders at the next election. Even if they are only voting according to the nature of the times, voters are being heard—which holds elected officials accountable for their actions.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### I. THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

#### A. Public opinion

1. The United States remains *one of the most diverse countries* in the world today.
2. The study of American **public opinion** aims to understand the distribution of the population's belief about politics and policy issues.
3. Such diversity *makes the study of American public opinion especially complex*, for there are many groups with a great variety of opinions.
4. The task is further complicated by the fact that people are often not well informed about the issues, and they may have contradictory attitudes.
5. There are also *consequences for democracy*: the least informed are also the least likely to participate in the political process, thereby leading to inequalities in who takes part in political action.

#### B. One way of looking at the American public is through **demography** (the science of population changes).

1. The most valuable tool for understanding demographic changes in America is the **census**, which was first conducted in 1790 to comply with the constitutional requirement that the government conduct an "actual enumeration" of the population every ten years.
2. Once a group can establish its numbers, it can then ask for federal aid in proportion to its size.

#### C. The United States has always been a nation of immigrants.

1. Americans live in a *multicultural and multilingual society* that is becoming more diverse all the time.
2. Despite this diversity, minority groups have *assimilated many basic American values*, such as the principle of equality.
3. Until recently, the largest minority group in the country has been the African-American population.
4. The 2000 Census reported that for the first time the Hispanic population outnumbered the African-American population.
5. Unlike Hispanics who have come to America to escape poverty, the recent influx of Asians has been driven by a new class of professional workers looking for greater opportunity.
6. By far the worst off minority group is the one indigenous minority, known today as Native Americans.
7. Regardless of ethnic background most Americans share a common political culture – an overall set of values widely shared within a society.

#### D. Over the last fifty years, much of America's population growth has been centered in the West and South, particularly with *movement to* the "sunbelt" states of Florida, California, and Texas *from* "rust belt" states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan.

1. The process of **reapportionment** occurs every ten years following the census, and brings with it gains or losses of congressional representation

as the states' population balance changes. (New York has lost about one-third of its delegation over the last fifty years.)

E. The *fastest growing age group* in America is composed of citizens *over age 65*: people are living longer as a result of medical advances, and the birth rate has dropped.

1. The *Social Security system* is second only to national defense as America's most costly public policy; the growing demands to care for the elderly will almost certainly become more acute in the decades ahead.

## II. HOW AMERICANS LEARN ABOUT POLITICS: POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

A. How Americans learn: the process of political socialization.

1. **Political socialization** is "the process through which an individual acquires his or her own political orientations."
2. Only a small portion of Americans' political learning is formal; *informal learning* is much more important.
3. **Agents of socialization** are numerous; they include family, the media, and schools.
  - a. *The family's* role is central because of its monopoly on two crucial resources in the early years—time and emotional commitment.
  - b. The *mass media* has been referred to as "the new parent."
  - c. Governments throughout the world use the *schools* in their attempt to instill a commitment to the basic values of the system.

B. Politics is a lifelong activity.

1. Aging increases one's *political participation* and the strength of one's *party attachment*.
2. Political behavior is to some degree *learned behavior*.
3. Governments largely aim their socialization efforts at the young (not the old) because one's *political orientations grow firmer* as one becomes more socialized with age.

## III. MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL INFORMATION

A. Public opinion.

1. What Americans believe (and believe they know) is **public opinion**—the distribution of people's beliefs about politics and policy issues.
2. There is *rarely a single public opinion*: with so many people and such diversity of populations, there are also many opinions.
3. Public opinion is one of the products of political learning.

B. Measuring public opinion.

1. Public opinion **polling** was first developed by George Gallup in 1932.
2. Polls rely on a **sample** of the population (a relatively small proportion of people who are chosen as *representative* of the whole) to measure public opinion.

- a. A sample of about 1,500 to 2,000 people can be representative of the "**universe**" (the larger group whose opinion is being measured) of potential voters.
  - b. The key to the accuracy of opinion polls is **random sampling**, which operates on the principle that everyone should have *an equal probability of being selected*.
  - c. There is always a certain amount of risk of inaccuracy involved, known as the **sampling error**.
- 3. Sophisticated technology is now available for measuring public opinion.
  - a. Computer and telephone technology have made surveying less expensive and more commonplace.
  - b. Most polling is now done on the telephone with samples selected through **random digit dialing**, in which calls are placed to telephone numbers within randomly chosen exchanges.
  - c. In this era of cell phones, many pollsters are starting to worry whether this methodology will continue to work much longer.
- C. The role of polls in American democracy.
  - 1. *Supporters* of polling believe it is a *tool for democracy* by which policymakers can keep in touch with changing opinions on issues.
  - 2. *Critics* of polling think it makes politicians *more concerned with following than leading* and may thus discourage bold leadership. Recent research by Jacobs and Shapiro argues that the common perception of politicians pandering to the results of public opinion polls may be mistaken. Rather than using polls to identify centrist approaches that will have the broadest appeal, Jacobs and Shapiro argue that elites use them to formulate strategies that enable them to avoid compromising on what they want to do.
  - 3. Polls can weaken democracy by *distorting the election process*; polls are often accused of creating a "**bandwagon effect**," in which voters may support a candidate only because they see that others are doing so.
  - 4. Emphasis on poll results sometimes has drowned out the *issues* of recent presidential campaigns.
  - 5. The election day **exit poll** is probably the most-criticized *type* of poll.
  - 6. Perhaps the most pervasive criticism of polling is that pollsters can get pretty much the results they want by altering the *wording* of questions. Although the *bias* in such questions may be easy to detect, the ethical problem is that *an organization may not report how the survey questions were worded*.
- D. What polls reveal about Americans' political information.
  - 1. Polls have revealed again and again that the average American has a low level of political knowledge.
    - a. In the 1996 National Election Study, only 88 percent knew that Al Gore was vice-president; 66 percent knew that Boris Yeltsin was president of Russia; 59 percent knew that Newt Gingrich was the speaker of the house; and 10 percent knew that William Rehnquist was chief justice of the Supreme Court.

- b. Surveys also show that citizens around the globe lack a basic awareness of the world around them.
- 2. Part of the reason the American political system works as well as it does is that people do know what *basic values* they want upheld, even when they do not have information on policy questions or decision makers.
- 3. Increased levels of education over the last four decades have scarcely raised public knowledge about politics.

#### IV. WHAT AMERICANS VALUE: POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

##### A. Who are the liberals and conservatives?

- 1. A **political ideology** is a *coherent set of values and beliefs about public policy*.
- 2. Overall, more Americans consistently choose the ideological label of conservative over liberal.
- 3. Some groups are more liberal than others, and want to see government do more; this includes people under the age of 30, minorities, and women.
- 4. Groups with political clout tend to be more conservative than groups whose members have often been shut out from the halls of political power.
- 5. Women are not a minority group, making up about 54 percent of the population, but they have nevertheless been politically and economically disadvantaged. Compared to men, women are more likely to support spending on social services and to oppose the higher levels of military spending, which conservatives typically advocate. This ideological difference between men and women has led to the gender gap, which refers to the regular pattern by which women are more likely to support Democratic candidates.

##### B. Do people think in ideological terms?

- 1. Ideological thinking is not widespread in the American public, nor are people necessarily consistent in their attitudes.
- 2. The authors of the classic study *The American Voter* (Angus Campbell, et al.) first looked carefully at the ideological sophistication of the American electorate in the 1950s. They divided the public into four groups, according to ideological sophistication.
  - a. **Ideologues** - Only 12 percent could connect their opinions and beliefs with broad policy positions taken by parties or candidates.
  - b. **Group benefits voters** - Forty-two percent of Americans thought of politics mainly by the groups they liked or disliked.
  - c. **Nature of the times voters** - The "handle on politics" of 24 percent of the population was limited to whether the times seemed good or bad to them.
  - d. **No issue content voters** - Twenty-two percent of the voters were devoid of any ideological or issue content in their political evaluations; most simply voted routinely for a party or judged the candidates by their personalities.

3. If the same methods are used to update the analysis of *The American Voter* through the 1980s, one finds some increase in the proportion of ideologues, but the overall picture looks much the same.

## V. HOW AMERICANS PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS

A. **Political participation** encompasses the many activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue.

1. Americans have many avenues of political participation open to them.
2. Paradoxically, the United State has a *participatory political culture*, but only 51 percent of Americans voted in the 2000 presidential election, 39 percent turned out for the 2002 mid-term elections, and the numbers get even smaller for state and local elections.

B. Political scientists generally distinguish between two broad types of participation: *conventional* and *unconventional*.

1. **Conventional participation** includes many widely accepted modes of influencing government, such as voting, trying to persuade others, ringing doorbells for a petition, and running for office.

2. **Unconventional participation** includes activities that are often dramatic, such as protesting, civil disobedience, and even violence.

a. **Protest** is a form of political participation designed to achieve policy change through dramatic and unconventional tactics, and protests today are often orchestrated to provide television cameras with vivid images.

b. Throughout American history, individuals and groups have sometimes used **civil disobedience** (consciously breaking a law that they think is unjust), illustrated in different eras by people like Henry David Thoreau in the 1840s and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1950s and 1960s.

c. Nonviolent civil disobedience was one of the most effective techniques of the civil rights movement in the American South. Rev. King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* is a classic defense of civil disobedience.

d. Political participation can also be violent (as in some of the Vietnam war protests of the 1960s).

C. Class, inequality, and participation.

1. In the United States, participation is a *class-biased activity*, with citizens of higher socioeconomic status participating more than others.

2. *Minority groups* like Hispanics and African-Americans are *below average* in terms of political participation.

a. The participation differences between these groups and the national average has been declining.

b. When blacks, Hispanics, and whites *of equal incomes and educations* are compared, it is *minorities who participate more* in politics.

## VI. UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL ACTION

- A. Public attitudes toward the scope of government.
  - 1. The question of government power is a complex one, but it is one of the key controversies in American politics today.
    - a. Public opinions on different aspects of the same issue do not always hold together well: while more people today think the government is too big rather than too small, a plurality has consistently called for spending on programs like education, healthcare, aid to big cities, protecting the environment, and fighting crime.
    - b. Many political scientists have looked at these contradictory findings and concluded that Americans are *ideological conservatives* but *operational liberals*.
- B. Democracy, public opinion, and political action.
  - 1. Americans often take for granted the opportunity to replace our leaders at the next election.
  - 2. Perhaps the best indicator of *how well socialized Americans are to democracy* is that protest typically is aimed at *getting the attention of government*, not at overthrowing it.
  - 3. Even if they are only voting according to the nature of the times, voters are clearly being heard, which holds elected officials accountable for their actions.