

PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL ACTION

CHAPTER OUTLINE AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

6.1 Identify demographic trends and their likely impact on American politics.

HOW AMERICANS LEARN ABOUT POLITICS: POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

6.2 Explain how the agents of socialization influence the development of political attitudes.

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL INFORMATION

6.3 Describe public opinion research and modern methods of polling.

WHAT AMERICANS VALUE: POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

6.4 Compare and contrast the principles of conservatism and liberalism.

THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY ON POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

6.5 Assess the influence of political ideology on political attitudes and behaviors.

HOW AMERICANS PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS

6.6 Identify the ways that people may participate in politics.

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL ACTION

6.7 Analyze how public opinion about the scope of government guides political behavior.

Politics in Action

THE LIMITS OF PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF HEALTH CARE REFORM

The Affordable Care Act (ACA), also known as “Obamacare,” stands out clearly as President Obama’s major legislative achievement. No other recent public policy issue has been debated so long, or in as much detail, as this historic change in America’s health care system. Yet a survey done in March 2014, months after Obamacare had gone into effect, revealed that the public’s knowledge about the law remained sketchy. The Kaiser Family Foundation’s tracking poll asked a nationally representative sample whether they thought a variety of provisions were included in the Affordable Care Act. Interestingly, their list comprised some of the key provisions of the legislation as well as some of the

most common misperceptions about it. They found that accurate perceptions of what Obamacare was designed to do were only slightly more common than misperceptions about the legislation.

On the positive side, the survey found that about 60 percent of the sample were correct that the Affordable Care Act (1) provides financial help to low and moderate income Americans who don't get insurance through their jobs to help them purchase coverage, (2) prohibits insurance companies from denying coverage because of a person's medical history, and (3) gives states the option of expanding their Medicaid program to cover more people with low incomes. On the negative side, though, the survey also found that slightly over 40 percent wrongly believed that Obamacare (1) establishes a government panel to make decisions about end-of-life care, and (2) allows undocumented immigrants to receive financial help from the government to buy health insurance. Another 20 percent said they were unsure whether Obamacare included provisions for end-of-life care and for insurance for undocumented immigrants.¹

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Public opinion polling has become a major growth industry in recent years. The media seem to love to report on the latest polls. If there is nothing new in their findings, journalists can always fall back on one sure pattern: the lack of public attention to matters of public policy. Whether it's health care reform, policies to address global warming, or the question of immigration reform, the safest prediction that a public opinion analyst can make is that many people will be unaware of the major elements of the legislative debate going on in Washington.

In a democracy, the people are expected to guide public policy. But do people pay enough attention to public affairs to fulfill their duty as citizens? As we shall see in this chapter, there is much reason to be concerned about how little the American public knows about policy issues; however, a case can also be made that most people know *enough* for democracy to work reasonably well. Like public opinion itself, evaluating the state of public knowledge of public policy is complex.

THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

6.1 Identify demographic trends and their likely impact on American politics.

Politicians and columnists commonly intone the words “the American people” and then claim their views as those of the citizenry. Yet it would be hard to find a statement about the American people—who they are and what they believe—that is either entirely right or entirely wrong. The American people are wondrously diverse. There are over 300 million Americans, forming a mosaic of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. America was founded on the principle of tolerating diversity and individualism, and it remains one of the most diverse countries in the world. Most Americans view this diversity as among the most appealing aspects of their society.

The study of American **public opinion** aims to understand the distribution of the population's beliefs about politics and policy issues. Because there are many groups and a great variety of opinions in the United States, this is an especially complex task. This is not to say that public opinion would be easy to study even if America were a more homogeneous society; as you will see, measuring public opinion involves painstaking interviewing procedures and careful wording of questions.

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**. The U.S. Constitution requires that the government conduct an “actual enumeration” of the population every 10 years. The first Census was conducted in 1790; the most recent Census was done in 2010.

The Census Bureau tries to conduct the most accurate count of the population possible. It isn't an easy job, even with the allocation of billions of federal dollars to

public opinion

The distribution of the population's beliefs about politics and policy issues.

demography

The science of population changes.

Census

An “actual enumeration” of the population, which the Constitution requires that the government conduct every 10 years. The Census is a valuable tool for understanding demographic changes.

In an attempt to get more people to fill out their Census form, the Census Bureau advertised heavily in 2010 to try to increase public awareness of the Census and its importance. One controversial allocation of money was \$1.2 million to sponsor NASCAR driver Greg Biffle during three auto races in March. Critics derided this as an absurd use of taxpayer money. In response, Census director Robert Groves argued that millions of Americans follow NASCAR races and that an increase in the initial response to the Census of just 0.1 percent could cut the cost of conducting the Census by \$8.5 million.



the task. In 2010, a Census form was mailed out to all 134 million residential addresses in the United States. Despite the fact that federal law requires a response from every household—a fact that is noted on the mailing envelope—only 72 percent of households responded. Thus, 800,000 people were hired to follow up with the remaining 28 percent through door-to-door canvassing. The information they gathered has since helped to determine how more than \$400 billion of federal funding is allocated every year for infrastructure and services such as hospitals, schools, job training centers, etc.

Changes in the U.S. population, which Census figures reflect, also impact our culture and political system in numerous ways, as will be examined in the next few sections.

The Immigrant Society

The United States has always been a nation of immigrants. As John F. Kennedy said, America is “not merely a nation but a nation of nations.”² All Americans except Native Americans are descended from immigrants or are immigrants themselves. Today, federal law allows for about 1 million new immigrants a year, and in recent years about 500,000 illegal immigrants a year have also entered the United States. Combined, this is equivalent to adding roughly the population of Phoenix every year. The Census Bureau reported in 2015 that 13 percent of the nation’s population were born outside the United States, and estimated that this percentage would rise to 18 percent by 2050 if the current rate of immigration continues.

There have been three great waves of immigration to the United States:

- In the first wave, in the early and mid-nineteenth century, immigrants were mainly northwestern Europeans (English, Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians).
- In the second wave, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many immigrants were southern and eastern Europeans (Italians, Jews, Poles, Russians, and others). Most came through Ellis Island in New York (now a popular museum).
- In the most recent wave, which began in the 1960s, immigrants have been dominated by Hispanics, particularly from Cuba, Central America, and Mexico, and Asians from Vietnam, Korea, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

For the first century of U.S. history, America had an open door policy for anyone who wanted to come to fill up its vast unexplored territory. The first restrictions that were imposed on immigration, in 1875, limited criminals and prostitutes from staying in the United States, and soon lunatics and people with serious diseases were banned also. The first geographically based restrictions were imposed in 1882 when the Chinese Exclusion

Act was passed. In 1924, as concern grew about the flood of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, establishing official quotas for immigrants based on national origins. These quotas were based on the number of people from each particular country living in the United States at the time of the 1890 Census. By tying the quotas to a time when most Americans were from northwestern Europe, this law greatly cut down on the flow of immigrants from elsewhere.

It wasn't until the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that these quotas were abolished. This 1965 law made family integration the prevailing goal for U.S. immigration policy. As historian Steven Gillon argues, this law produced an unanticipated chain of immigration under the auspices of family unification. For example, he writes,

An engineering student from India could come to the United States to study, find a job after graduating, get labor certification, and become a legal resident alien. His new status would then entitle him to bring over his wife, and six years later, after being naturalized, his brothers and sisters. They in turn could begin the process all over again by sponsoring their wives, husbands, children, and siblings.³

Today, some politicians believe that America's competitiveness in the globalized economy would be better served by reducing the emphasis on family unification in our immigration policy and reallocating a substantial percentage of immigrant visas to people with special talents. Should immigration be based more on skills than on blood ties? You can consider your position on this issue in the "You Are the Policymaker" sidebar, which follows next.

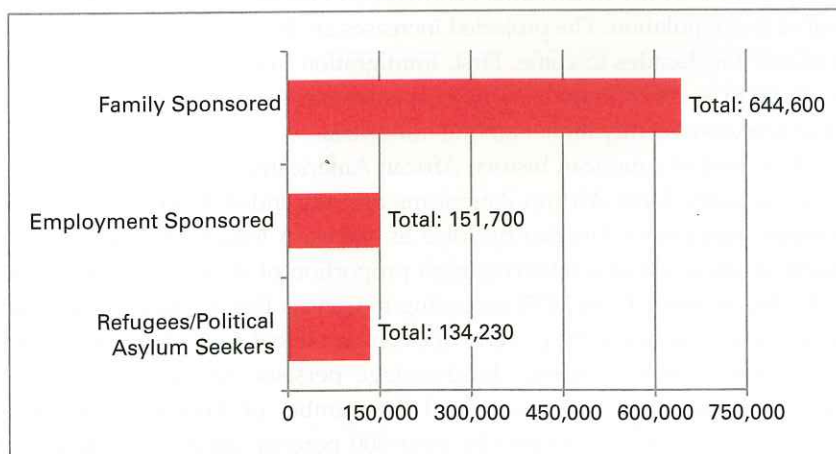
You Are the Policymaker

SHOULD IMMIGRATION BE BASED MORE ON SKILLS THAN BLOOD TIES?

In today's interconnected world, migration from one country to another is easier than ever before, and countries that attract immigrants with valuable skills can improve their economic status. Thus, a country's immigration policy, which sets criteria for admitting people from abroad for permanent residence, can be a valuable economic tool—if a country so chooses. Some people think the United States needs to put economic factors further up on its list of priorities for immigrants.

Immigrants to the United States can be roughly classified into three categories: (1) family sponsored, (2) employment sponsored, and (3) refugees and political asylum seekers. In the figure below you can see the distribution of American immigrants in a typical recent year—2014.

EXPLORE THE DATA SHOULD IMMIGRATION BE BASED MORE ON SKILLS THAN BLOOD?



SOURCE: "U.S. Legal Permanent Residents: 2014," Department of Homeland Security, April 2016.

In *Brain Gain: Rethinking U.S. Immigration Policy*, Darrell M. West argues that America needs to reorient its immigration policy toward enhancing economic development and attracting more of the world's best-educated people. He criticizes immigration policy in the United States as being based too much on *whom* one knows and not enough on *what* one knows.

West points out that other countries, such as Canada and Australia, allocate a much larger percentage of their entry visas to people with special skills who can make substantial contributions to their new country's economic development. He proposes changing U.S. policy to narrow the definition of which family members are eligible for immigration under the auspices of family reunification, eliminating aunts, uncles, cousins, and other distant relatives. This simple change would allow the number of visas granted for employment purposes to be doubled.

Of course, whenever there is a substantial change in policy, there are losers as well as winners. West's proposed change would certainly lead to a more educated crop of immigrants. But immigration rates from lands with relatively low rates of higher education would likely be cut. Hence, representatives in Congress who have many constituents who trace their roots to such countries would likely be opposed to such a change from the status quo.

In 2015, the Pew Research Center American Trends Panel survey asked a representative sample of Americans whether the government should give higher priority to those who are highly educated and skilled or those who have family in the United States. The results varied substantially according to party affiliation, with 65 percent of Republicans prioritizing the highly educated and skilled as compared to just 47 percent among Democrats, with Independents in-between at 59 percent.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Would you support the proposal to reallocate a substantial number of entry visas from those who have family ties in the United States to those who have special skills? Why or why not?

melting pot

A term often used to characterize the United States, with its history of immigration and mixing of cultures, ideas, and peoples.

minority majority

The situation, likely beginning in the mid-twenty-first century, in which the non-Hispanic whites will represent a minority of the U.S. population and minority groups together will represent a majority.

The American Melting Pot

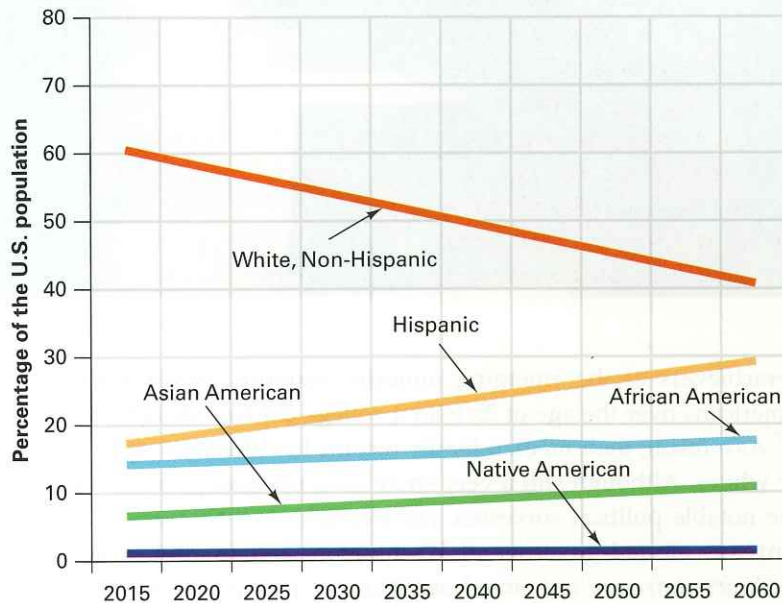
With its long history of immigration, the United States has often been called a **melting pot**, in which cultures, ideas, and peoples blend into one. As the third wave of immigration continues, policymakers have begun to speak of a new **minority majority**, meaning that America will eventually cease to have a non-Hispanic white majority. As of 2015, the Census Bureau reported an all-time low in the percentage of non-Hispanic white Americans—just 62 percent of the population. Hispanics made up the largest minority group, accounting for 18 percent of the U.S. population, with African Americans making up 12 percent, Asian Americans 6 percent, and Native Americans 1 percent. In recent years, minority populations have been growing at a much faster rate than the white non-Hispanic population. As you can see in Figure 6.1, the Census Bureau estimates that by the middle of the twenty-first century, non-Hispanic whites will represent less than half of the population. The projected increases are based on two trends that are likely to continue for decades to come. First, immigration into the United States will probably continue to be concentrated among Hispanics and Asian Americans. Second, birth rates have been consistently higher among minorities.

For most of American history, African Americans were the largest minority group in the country. Most African Americans are descended from reluctant immigrants—Africans brought to America by force as slaves. A legacy of centuries of racism and discrimination is that a relatively high proportion of African Americans are economically disadvantaged—in 2015, according to Census Bureau data, 24 percent of African Americans lived below the poverty line compared to 9 percent of non-Hispanic whites.

Although this economic disadvantage persists, African Americans have been exercising more political power, and the number of African Americans serving in an elected office has increased by over 600 percent since 1970.⁴ African Americans have been elected as mayors of many of the country's biggest cities, including Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. Under George W. Bush, two African Americans,

FIGURE 6.1 THE COMING MINORITY MAJORITY

Based on current birth and immigration rates, the Census Bureau estimates that the demographics of the United States should change as shown in the accompanying graph. As of 2015, the Census estimated that minority groups should be in the majority for the nation as a whole sometime between 2040 and 2045. Of course, should rates of birth and immigration change, so would these estimates.



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

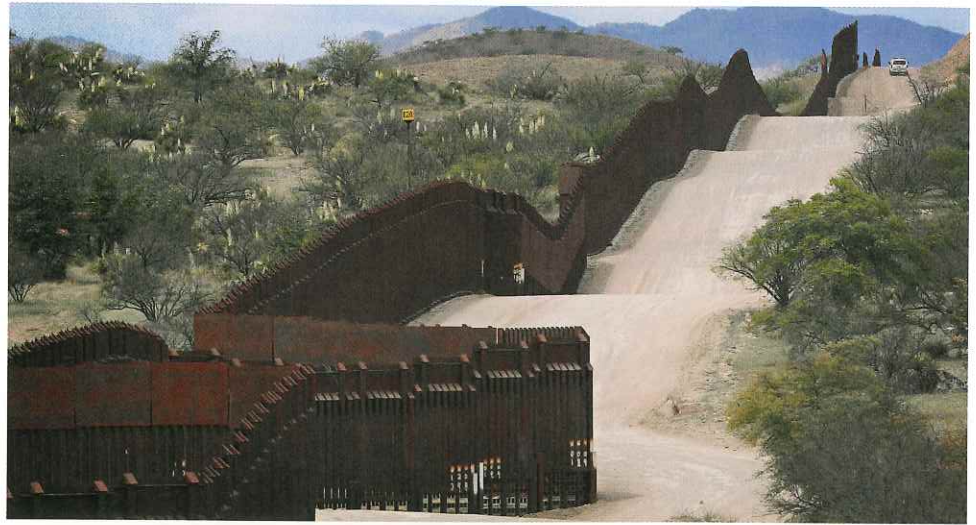
Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, served as secretary of state. And the biggest African American political breakthrough of all occurred when Barack Obama was elected president in 2008.

In the 2000 Census, the Hispanic population outnumbered the African American population for the first time. Like African Americans, Hispanics are concentrated in cities. Hispanics are rapidly gaining political power in the Southwest, and cities such as San Antonio and Los Angeles have elected mayors of Hispanic heritage. As of 2016, the state legislatures of Arizona, California, Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, and Texas had at least 10 percent Hispanic representation.

An issue of particular relevance to the Hispanic community is that of illegal immigration. According to the Department of Homeland Security, there were about 11.4 million unauthorized persons residing in the United States in 2012, 59 percent of whom were from Mexico.⁵ Although Presidents Bush and Obama both pledged to address the problems of illegal immigration, no significant reform has been enacted since the 1986 Simpson-Mazzoli Act. This law requires that employers document the citizenship of their employees. Whether people are born in Canton, Ohio, or Canton, China, they must prove that they are either U.S. citizens or legal immigrants in order to work. Civil and criminal penalties can be assessed against employers who knowingly employ undocumented immigrants. However, it has proved difficult for authorities to establish that employers have knowingly accepted false social security cards and other forged identity documents, and, as a result, the Simpson-Mazzoli Act has not significantly slowed illegal immigration.

Whereas many Hispanics have come to America to escape poverty, the recent influx of Asians has involved a substantial number of professional workers looking for greater opportunity. Indeed, the new Asian immigrants are the most highly skilled immigrant group in American history,⁶ and Asian Americans have often been called

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump promised to build a wall between the United States and Mexico, arguing that current immigration enforcement was inadequate. Here, a border patrol car (at the upper right) patrols along the fence between Nogales, Arizona, and Mexico.



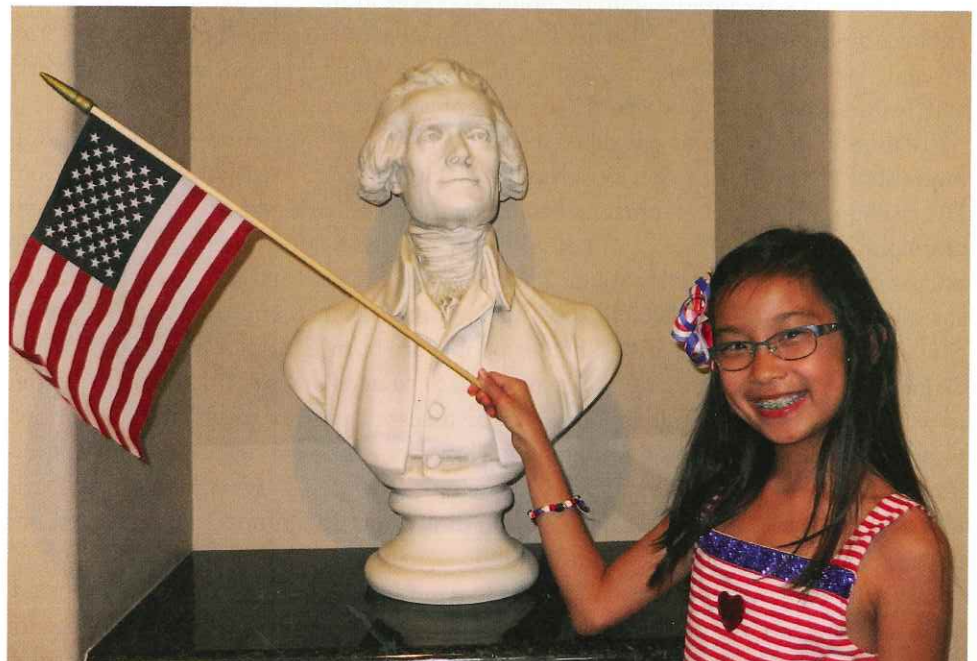
the superachievers of the emerging minority majority. Significantly, over half of Asian Americans over the age of 25 hold a college degree, almost twice the national average.⁷ As a result, their median family income has already surpassed that of non-Hispanic whites. Although still a very small minority group, Asian Americans have had some notable political successes. For example, in 1996 Gary Locke (a Chinese American) was elected governor of Washington, and in 2001 Norman Mineta (a Japanese American) was appointed secretary of transportation. Nikki Haley and Bobby Jindal, both of whom are the children of immigrants from India, have recently served as governors of South Carolina and Louisiana, respectively.

Americans live in an increasingly multicultural and multilingual society. Yet, regardless of ethnic background, Americans have a common **political culture**—an overall set of values widely shared within the society. For example, there is much agreement across ethnic groups about such basic American values as the principle of treating all equally. Debra Schildkraut's recent study of immigrants finds that the longer one's family has had to integrate into American society, the greater the likelihood

political culture

An overall set of values widely shared within a society.

By the time this little Chinese American girl (born in China but now an American citizen) graduates from college, Asian Americans will represent 8 percent of the U.S. population. As the most highly educated segment of the coming "minority majority," it is likely that they will be exercising a good deal of political power by then.



that one will identify oneself primarily as American. Integration is a simple matter of time for most immigrants. Schildkraut therefore concludes that “there is not much validity to concerns that American national identity is disintegrating or that the newest Americans are more likely than anyone else to reject their own American identity or American institutions.”⁸

However, not all observers view this most recent wave of immigration without concern. Ellis Cose, a prominent journalist, has written that “racial animosity has proven to be both an enduring American phenomenon and an invaluable political tool.” Because America has entered a period of rapid ethnic change, Cose predicts immigration “will be a magnet for conflict and hostility.”⁹ For Robert Putnam, the concern takes a different form, as he finds that “diversity does *not* produce ‘bad race relations’ or ethnically defined group hostility” but, rather, that “inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life” and to distrust their neighbors.¹⁰ Putnam thus recommends a renewed emphasis on the motto on our one dollar bill—*e pluribus unum* (out of many, one) to deal with the challenge created by the growing diversity within American communities.

The emergence of the minority majority is just one of several major demographic changes that are altering the face of American politics. In addition, the population has been moving and aging.

The Regional Shift

For most of American history, the most populous states were concentrated north of the Mason–Dixon Line and east of the Mississippi River. However, much of America’s population growth since World War II has been centered in the West and South.

Demographic changes are associated with political changes. States gain or lose congressional representation as their population changes, and thus power shifts as well. This **reapportionment** process occurs once a decade, after each Census, when the 435 seats in the House of Representatives are reallocated to reflect each state’s proportion of the population. If the Census finds that a state has 5 percent of the population, then it receives 5 percent of the seats in the House for the next 10 years. Thus, as the percentage of Americans residing in Texas grew with the movement to the Sun Belt, its representation in the House increased from 22 for the 1962–1972 elections to 35 for the 2012–2020 elections. During this same time period, in contrast, New York lost over one-third of its delegation.

reapportionment

The process of reallocating seats in the House of Representatives every 10 years on the basis of the results of the Census.

The Graying of America

Florida, currently the nation’s fourth most populous state, has grown in large part as a result of its attractiveness to senior citizens. Nationwide, citizens over 65 are the fastest-growing age group in America. Not only are people living longer as a result of medical advances, but in addition the fertility rate has dropped substantially—from 3.6 children per woman in 1960 to about 2.1 today.

The aging of the population has enormous implications for Social Security. Social Security is structured as a pay-as-you-go system, which means that today’s workers pay the benefits for today’s retirees. In 1960, there were 5.7 workers per retiree; today there are 3. By 2040, there will be only about 2 workers per retiree. This ratio will put tremendous pressure on the Social Security system. The current group of older Americans and those soon to follow can lay claim to trillions of dollars guaranteed by Social Security. People who have been promised benefits naturally expect to collect them, especially benefits for which they have made monthly contributions. Thus, both political parties have long treated Social Security benefits as sacrosanct. Major proposed changes to the Social Security system typically promise to leave the system unchanged for anyone at or near retirement age.

HOW AMERICANS LEARN ABOUT POLITICS: POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

6.2 Explain how the agents of socialization influence the development of political attitudes.

political socialization

The process through which individuals in a society acquire political attitudes, views, and knowledge, based on input from family, schools, the media, and others.

Central to the formation of public opinion is **political socialization**, or “the process through which an individual acquires his or her particular political orientations—his or her knowledge, feelings, and evaluations regarding his or her political world.”¹¹ As people become more socialized with age, their political orientations grow firmer. Thus, governments typically aim their socialization efforts largely at the young.

The Process of Political Socialization

Only a small portion of Americans’ political learning is formal. Civics or government classes in high school teach citizens some of the nuts and bolts of government—how many senators each state has, what presidents do, and so on. But such formal socialization is only the tip of the iceberg. Americans do most of their political learning without teachers or classes.

Informal learning is really much more important than formal, in-class learning about politics. Most of this informal socialization is almost accidental. Few parents sit down with their children and say, “Johnny, let us tell you why we’re Republicans.” Instead, the informal socialization process might be best described by words like *pick up* and *absorb*.

The family, the media, and the schools all serve as important agents of political socialization. We will look at each in turn.

THE FAMILY The family’s role in socialization is central because of its monopoly on two crucial resources in the early years: time and emotional commitment. If your parents are interested in politics, chances are you will be also, as your regular interactions with them will expose you to the world of politics as you are growing up. Furthermore, children often pick up their political leanings from the attitudes of their parents. Most students in an American government class like to think of themselves as independent thinkers, especially when it comes to politics. Yet one can predict how the majority of young people will vote simply by knowing the party identification of their parents.¹²

Recent research has demonstrated that one of the reasons for the long-lasting impact of parental influence on political attitudes is simply genetics. In one study, Alford, Funk, and Hibbing compared the political opinions of identical twins and nonidentical twins.¹³ If the political similarity between parents and children is due just to environmental factors, then the identical twins should agree on political issues to about the same extent the nonidentical twins do, as in both cases the twins are raised in the same environment. However, if genetics are an important factor, then identical twins, who are genetically the same, should agree with one another more often than nonidentical twins, who are not. On all the political questions they examined, there was substantially more agreement between the identical twins—clearly demonstrating that genetics play an important role in shaping political attitudes.

THE MASS MEDIA The mass media are the “new parent,” according to many observers. Average grade-school youngsters spend more time each week watching television than they spend at school. And television displaces parents as the chief source of information as children get older.

Unfortunately, today’s generation of young adults is significantly less likely to watch television news and read newspapers than their elders. Many studies have attributed the relative lack of political knowledge of today’s youth to their media

consumption or, more appropriately, to their lack of it.¹⁴ In 1965, Gallup found virtually no difference between age groups in frequency of following politics through the media. In recent years, however, a considerable age gap has opened up, with older people paying the most attention to the news and young adults the least. In 2014, CNN had the youngest audience in cable news, with a median age of 58, compared to 61 for MSNBC and 68 for Fox News.¹⁵ If you have ever turned on the TV news and wondered why so many of the commercials seem to be for various prescription drugs, now you know why.

SCHOOL Political socialization is as important to a government as it is to an individual. Governments, including our own, often use schools to promote national loyalty and support for their basic values. In most American schools, the day begins with the Pledge of Allegiance. As part of promoting support for the basic values of the system, American children have long been successfully educated about the virtues of free enterprise and democracy.

Most American schools are public schools, financed by the government. Their textbooks are often chosen by the local and state boards, and teachers are certified by the state government. Schooling is perhaps the most obvious intrusion of the government into Americans' socialization. And education does exert a profound influence on a variety of political attitudes and behavior. Better-educated citizens are more likely to vote in elections, they exhibit more knowledge about politics and public policy, and they are more tolerant of opposing (even radical) opinions.

The payoffs of schooling thus extend beyond better jobs and better pay. Educated citizens also more closely approximate the model of a democratic citizen. A formal civics course may not make much difference, but the whole context of education does. As Albert Einstein once said, "Schools need not preach political doctrine to defend democracy. If they shape men [and women] capable of critical thought and trained in social attitudes, that is all that is necessary."¹⁶

Political Learning over a Lifetime

Political learning does not, of course, end when one reaches 18 or even when one graduates from college. Politics is a lifelong activity. Because America is an aging society, it is important to consider the effects of growing older on political learning and behavior.

Aging increases political participation as well as strength of party attachment. Young adults lack experience with politics. Because political behavior is to some degree learned behavior, there is some learning yet to do. Political participation rises steadily with age until the infirmities of old age make it harder to participate, as can be seen in Figure 6.2. Similarly, strength of party identification increases as people often develop a pattern of usually voting for one party or the other.

Politics, like most other things, is thus a learned behavior. Americans learn to vote, to pick a political party, and to evaluate political events in the world around them. One of the products of all this learning is what is known as public opinion.

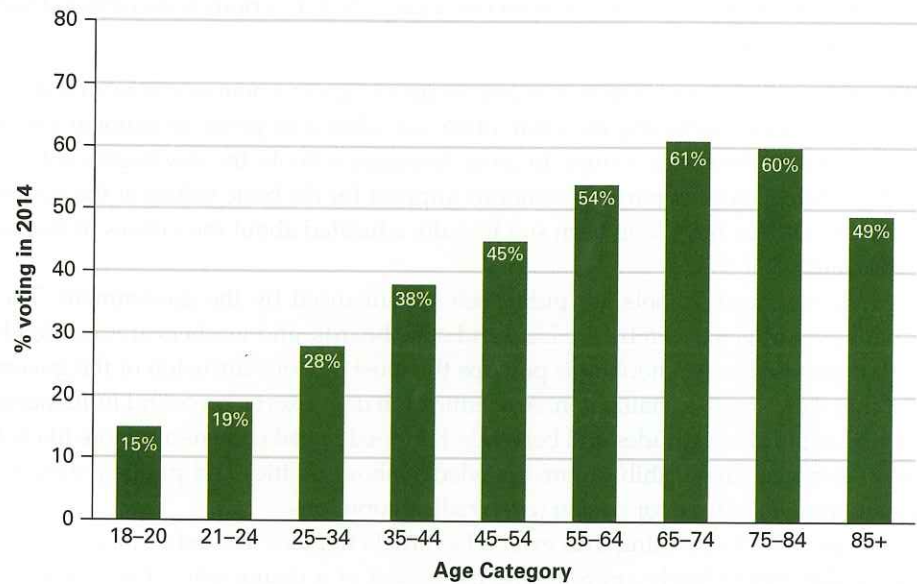
MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL INFORMATION

6.3 Describe public opinion research and modern methods of polling.

The study of American public opinion aims to understand the population's beliefs about politics and policy issues. Because there are many groups and a great variety of opinions in the United States, this is an especially complex task. This is not to say that public opinion would be easy to study even if America were a more homogeneous society; as you will see, measuring public opinion involves painstaking interviewing procedures and careful wording of questions.

FIGURE 6.2 TURNOUT INCREASES WITH AGE

In the 2014 congressional elections, as in most midterm elections, the relationship between age and turnout was particularly pronounced, as you can see in this figure. Because today's young adults lean in the liberal direction, political analysts concluded that the low turnout rate of young people cost the Democrats a substantial number of seats in the House and Senate in 2014.



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of 2014 Census Bureau data.

Before examining the role that public opinion plays in American politics, it is essential to learn about the science of public opinion measurement. How do we really know the approximate answers to questions such as “what percentage of young people favor abortion rights?,” “how many Hispanics supported Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign?,” or “what percentage of the public is looking for a job but cannot find one?” Carefully executed polls can provide these answers, yet there is much skepticism about polls. Many people wonder how accurately public opinion can be measured by interviewing only 1,000 or 1,500 people around the country.¹⁷ The next section provides an explanation of how polling works; we hope that it will enable you to become a well-informed consumer of polls.

How Polls Are Conducted

Public opinion polling is a relatively new science. It was first developed by a young man named George Gallup, who initially did some polling for his mother-in-law, a long-shot candidate for secretary of state in Iowa in 1932. With the Democratic landslide of that year, she won a stunning victory, thereby further stimulating Gallup’s interest in politics. From that little acorn the mighty oak of public opinion polling has grown. The firm that Gallup founded spread throughout the democratic world, and in some languages *Gallup* is actually the word used for an opinion poll.¹⁸

It would be prohibitively expensive and time-consuming to ask every citizen his or her opinion on a whole range of issues. Instead, polls rely on a **sample** of the population—a relatively small proportion of people who are chosen to represent the whole. Herbert Asher draws an analogy to a blood test to illustrate the principle of sampling.¹⁹ Your doctor does not need to drain a gallon of blood from you to determine whether you have mononucleosis, AIDS, or any other disease. Rather, a small sample of blood will reveal its properties.

sample

A relatively small proportion of people who are chosen in a survey so as to be representative of the whole.

In public opinion polling, a random sample of about 1,000 to 1,500 people can accurately represent the “universe” of potential voters. The key to the accuracy of opinion polls is the technique of **random sampling**, which operates on the principle that everyone should have an equal probability of being selected as part of the sample. Your chance of being asked to be in the poll should therefore be as good as that of anyone else—rich or poor, black or white, young or old, male or female. If the sample is randomly drawn, roughly one out of eight people interviewed will be African American, slightly over half will be women, and so forth, matching the population as a whole.

Remember that the science of polling involves estimation; a sample can represent the population with only a certain degree of confidence. The level of confidence is known as the **sampling error**, which depends on the size of the sample. The more people that are randomly interviewed for a poll, the more confident one can be of the results. A typical poll of about 1,500 to 2,000 respondents has a sampling error of ± 3 percent. What this means is that 95 percent of the time the poll results are within 3 percent of what the entire population thinks. If 40 percent of the sample say they approve of the job the president is doing, one can be pretty certain that the true figure is between 37 and 43 percent.

In order to obtain results that will usually be within sampling error, researchers must follow proper sampling techniques. In perhaps the most infamous survey ever, a 1936 *Literary Digest* poll underestimated the vote for President Franklin Roosevelt by 19 percent, erroneously predicting a big victory for Republican Alf Landon. The well-established magazine suddenly became a laughingstock and soon went out of business. Although the number of responses the magazine obtained for its poll was a staggering 2,376,000, its polling methods were badly flawed. Trying to reach as many people as possible, the magazine drew names from the biggest lists they could find: telephone books and motor vehicle records. In the midst of the Great Depression, the people on these lists were above the average income level (only 40 percent of the public had telephones then; fewer still owned cars) and were more likely to vote Republican. The moral of the story is this: accurate representation, not the number of responses, is the most important feature of a public opinion survey. Indeed, as polling techniques have advanced, typical sample sizes have been getting smaller, not larger.

Computer and telephone technology has made surveying less expensive and more commonplace. In the early days of polling, pollsters needed a national network of interviewers to traipse door-to-door in their localities with a clipboard of questions. Now most polling is done on the telephone with samples selected through **random-digit dialing**. Calls are placed to phone numbers within randomly chosen exchanges (for example, 512-471-XXXX) around the country. In this manner, both listed and unlisted numbers are reached at a cost of about one-fifth that of person-to-person interviewing. There are a couple of disadvantages, however. A small percentage of the population does not have a phone, and people are substantially less willing to participate over the telephone than in person—it is easier to hang up than to slam the door in someone’s face. These are small trade-offs for political candidates running for minor offices, for whom telephone polls are an affordable method of gauging public opinion.

However, in this era of cell phones, many pollsters are starting to worry whether this methodology will continue to be affordable. As of 2016, government studies showed that about 48 percent of the adult population had cell phone service only. [This percentage is significantly higher among young adults, minorities, and people who are transient.] Because federal law prohibits use of automated dialing programs to cell phone, pollsters have to use the far more expensive procedure of dialing cell phone numbers manually. In addition, studies have shown that people are much less likely to agree to be interviewed when they are reached on a cell phone as compared to

random sampling

The key technique employed by survey researchers, which operates on the principle that everyone should have an equal probability of being selected for the sample.

sampling error

The level of confidence in the findings of a public opinion poll. The more people interviewed, the more confident one can be of the results.

random-digit dialing

A technique used by pollsters to place telephone calls randomly to both listed and unlisted numbers when conducting a survey.

a landline. All told, Mark Mellman, one of America's top political pollsters, estimates that it is 5 to 15 times as expensive to gather interviews from the cell-phone-only segment of the population as from landline users.²⁰ Although big firms like Gallup have successfully made the adjustment so far, the costs of conducting phone polls are likely to further escalate as more people give up their landlines.

As with many other aspects of commerce in America, the future of polling may lie with the Internet. Internet pollsters, such as Knowledge Networks, assemble representative panels of the population by first contacting people on the phone and asking them whether they are willing to participate in Web-based surveys on a variety of topics. If they agree, they are paid a small sum every time they participate. And if they don't have Internet access, they are provided with it as part of their compensation. Once someone agrees to participate, he or she is then contacted exclusively by e-mail. As Knowledge Networks proclaims, "This permits surveys to be fielded very quickly and economically. In addition, this approach reduces the burden placed on respondents, since e-mail notification is less obtrusive than telephone calls, and most respondents find answering Web questionnaires to be more interesting and engaging than being questioned by a telephone interviewer."²¹

From its modest beginning with George Gallup's 1932 polls for his mother-in-law in Iowa, polling has become a big business. That it has grown so much and spread throughout the world is no surprise: from Manhattan to Moscow, from Tulsa to Tokyo, people want to know what other people think.

The Role of Polls in American Democracy

Polls help political candidates detect public preferences. Supporters of polling insist that it is a tool for democracy. With it, they say, policymakers can keep in touch with changing opinions on the issues. No longer do politicians have to wait until the next election to see whether the public approves or disapproves of the government's course. If the poll results shift, then government officials can make corresponding midcourse corrections. Indeed, it was George Gallup's fondest hope that polling could contribute to the democratic process by providing a way for public desires to be heard at times other than elections. His son, George Gallup, Jr., argued that this hope had been realized in practice, that polling had "removed power out of the hands of special interest groups," and "given people who wouldn't normally have a voice a voice."²²

Critics of polling, by contrast, say it makes politicians more concerned with following than leading. Polls might have told the Constitutional Convention delegates that the Constitution was unpopular or might have told President Thomas Jefferson that people did not want the Louisiana Purchase. Certainly they would have told William Seward not to buy Alaska, a transaction known widely at the time as "Seward's Folly." Polls may thus discourage bold leadership, like that of Winston Churchill, who once said,

Nothing is more dangerous than to live in the temperamental atmosphere of a Gallup poll, always taking one's pulse and taking one's temperature . . . There is only one duty, only one safe course, and that is to try to be right and not to fear to do or say what you believe.²³

Based on their research, Jacobs and Shapiro argue that the common perception of politicians pandering to the results of public opinion polls may be mistaken. Their examination of major recent debates finds that political leaders "track public opinion not to make policy but rather to determine how to craft their public presentations and win public support for the policies they and their supporters favor."²⁴ Staff members in both the White House and Congress repeatedly remarked that their purpose in conducting polls was not to set policies but rather to find the key words and phrases with which to promote policies already in place. Thus, rather than using polls to identify

centrist approaches that will have the broadest popular appeal, Jacobs and Shapiro argue, elites use them to formulate strategies that enable them to avoid compromising on what they want to do. As President Obama's chief pollster, Joel Benenson, said about his work for Obama: "Our job isn't to tell him what to do. Our job is to help him figure out if he can strengthen his message and persuade more people to his side. The starting point is where he is and then you try to help strengthen the message and his reasons for doing something."²⁵

Yet polls might weaken democracy in another way—they may distort the electoral process by focusing on who is ahead more than on what people think about public policy questions. The policy issues of recent presidential campaigns have sometimes been drowned out by a steady flood of polls concerned with which candidate is currently ahead.

Probably the most widely criticized type of poll is the Election Day **exit poll**. For this type of poll, voting places are randomly selected around the country. Workers are then sent to these places and told to ask every tenth person how he or she voted. The results are accumulated toward the end of the day, enabling the television networks to project the outcomes of all but very close races before hardly any votes are actually counted. In some presidential elections, the networks have declared a national winner while millions on the West Coast still had hours to vote. Critics have charged that this practice discourages many people from voting and thereby affects the outcome of some state and local races.

Perhaps the most pervasive criticism of polling is that by altering the wording of a question, pollsters can manipulate the results. Small changes in question wording can sometimes produce significantly different results. For example, numerous surveys have found that people respond to questions about health reform quite differently depending on whether they are asked about "Obamacare" or "the Affordable Health Care Act" despite the fact that they are just different names for the same piece of legislation.²⁶ In evaluating public opinion data, it is crucial to carefully evaluate how questions are posed. Fortunately, most major polling organizations now post their questionnaires online, thereby making it much easier than ever before for everyone to scrutinize their work.

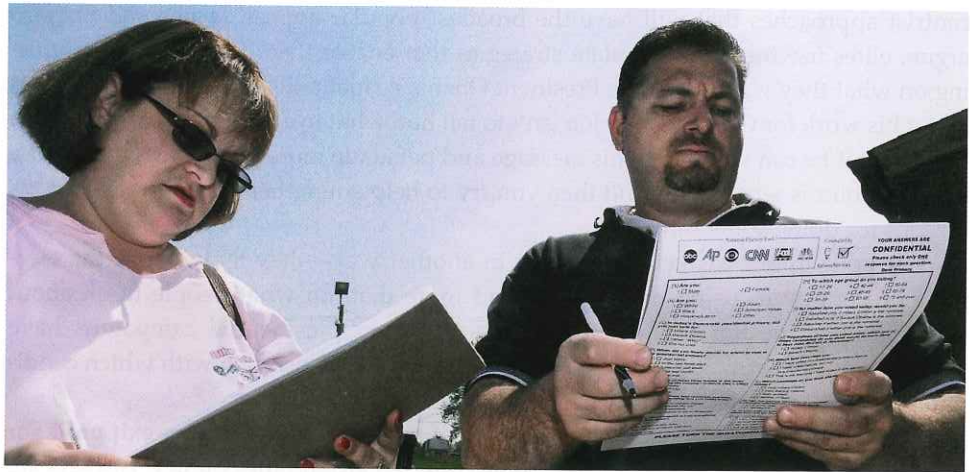
exit poll

Public opinion surveys used by major media pollsters to predict electoral winners with speed and precision.



The wording of a question can bias the answers in surveys, just as is often the case in everyday conversations.

In exit polls, voters are interviewed just after they have voted. These polls are used by the media to project election results as soon as the polls are closed, as well as to help the media understand what sorts of people have supported particular candidates.



A nuts-and-bolts knowledge of how polls are conducted will help you avoid the common mistake of taking poll results for solid fact. But being an informed consumer of polls also requires that you think about whether the questions are fair and unbiased. The good—or the harm—that polls do depends on how well the data are collected and how thoughtfully the data are interpreted.

What Polls Reveal About Americans' Political Information

Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton had very different views about the wisdom of common people. Jefferson trusted people's good sense and believed that education would enable them to take the tasks of citizenship ever more seriously. In contrast, Hamilton lacked confidence in people's capacity for self-government. His response to Jefferson was the infamous phrase, "Your people, sir, is a great beast."²⁷

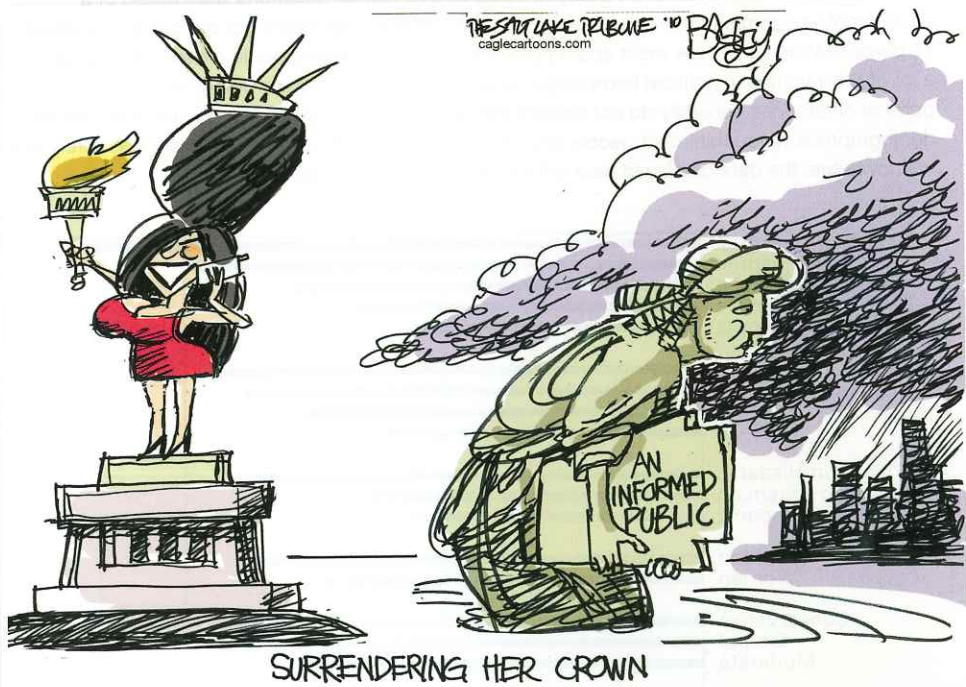
If there had been polling data in the early days of the American republic, Hamilton would probably have delighted in throwing some of the results in Jefferson's face. If public opinion analysts agree about anything, it is that the level of public knowledge about politics is dismally low. For example, in October 2008, the National Annenberg Election Survey asked a set of factual questions about some prominent policy stands taken by Obama and McCain during the campaign. The results were as follows:

- 63 percent knew that Obama supported more middle-class tax cuts.
- 47 percent knew McCain favored overturning *Roe v. Wade*.
- 30 percent knew McCain was more likely to support free trade agreements.
- 8 percent knew that both candidates supported stem cell research funding.

If so many voters did not know about the candidates' stands on these hotly debated issues, then there is little doubt that most were also unaware of the detailed policy platforms the candidates were running on.

No amount of Jeffersonian faith in the wisdom of the common people can erase the fact that Americans are not well informed about politics. Polls have regularly found that less than half the public can name their representative in the House. Asking people to explain their opinion on whether the Trans-Pacific Partnership Free Trade Agreement is a good deal for the United States, or whether the Keystone Pipeline should have been approved, or whether they would like to see a constitutional amendment to overturn the Supreme Court's ruling in the *Citizens United* case often elicits blank looks. When trouble flares in a far-off country, polls regularly find that people have no idea where that country is.

Point to Ponder



Ever since the beginning of survey research in the 1930s pollsters have regularly found that the level of public information about political issues is often quite low.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

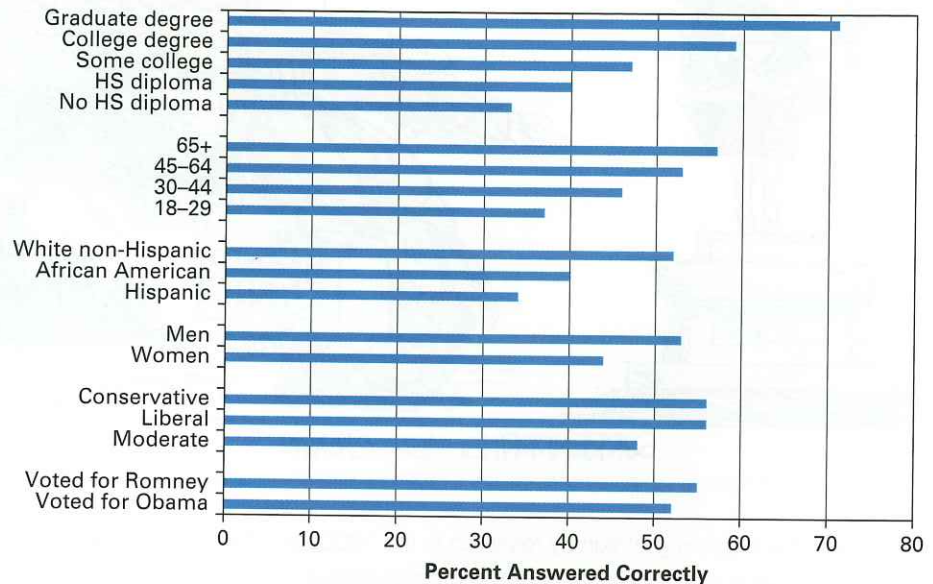
Do you think the level of public information is so low that it poses a threat to democracy, or do you think the cartoonist is exaggerating the problem?

Figure 6.3 shows how political knowledge varies according to various demographic and political factors. As Lance Bennett points out, these findings provide “a source of almost bitter humor in light of what the polls tell us about public information on other subjects.”²⁸ For example, slogans from TV commercials are better recognized than famous political figures. And in a Zogby national poll in 2006, 74 percent of respondents were able to name each of the “Three Stooges”—Larry, Curly, and Moe—whereas just 42 percent could name each of the three branches of the U.S. government—judicial, executive, and legislative.

How can Americans, who live in the most information-rich society in the world, be so ill informed about politics? Some blame the schools. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., criticizes schools for a failure to teach “cultural literacy.”²⁹ People, he says, often lack the basic contextual knowledge—for example, where Afghanistan is, or what the provisions of the Affordable Care Act are—necessary to understand and use the information they receive from the news media or from listening to political candidates. Those who blame the schools for Americans’ ignorance about politics may have a point. Nevertheless, it has been found that increased levels of education over the past half century have scarcely raised public knowledge about politics.³⁰ Despite the apparent glut of information provided by the media, Americans do not remember much about what they are exposed to through the media. (Of course, there are many critics who say that the media fail to provide much meaningful information.)

FIGURE 6.3 HOW POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE VARIES ACCORDING TO DEMOGRAPHIC AND POLITICAL FACTORS

In the American National Election Study of 2012, twelve factual questions were asked of a representative sample of the American public. The average respondent got 5.8 correct, or about 48 percent. Who knows the most about politics in America? Demographic differences explain a lot of the variation in political knowledge, as you can see in the figure below. In contrast, political differences generally do not predict differences in political knowledge nearly as well as demographics. If you think that people who don't agree with you about politics are just sorely lacking in knowledge, the data displayed here will probably come as a surprise to you.



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the 2012 American National Election Study.

The "paradox of mass politics," says Russell Neuman, is that the American political system works as well as it does given the discomfiting lack of public knowledge about politics.³¹ Scholars have suggested numerous ways that this paradox can be resolved. Although many people may not know the ins and outs of most policy questions, some will base their political behavior on knowledge of just one issue that they really care about, such as abortion or environmental protection. Others will rely on simple information regarding which groups (Democrats, big business, environmentalists, Christian fundamentalists, etc.) are for and against a proposal, siding with the group or groups they trust the most.³² Finally, some people will simply vote for or against incumbent officeholders based on how satisfied they are with the job the government is doing generally.

WHY IT MATTERS TODAY

Political Knowledge of the Electorate

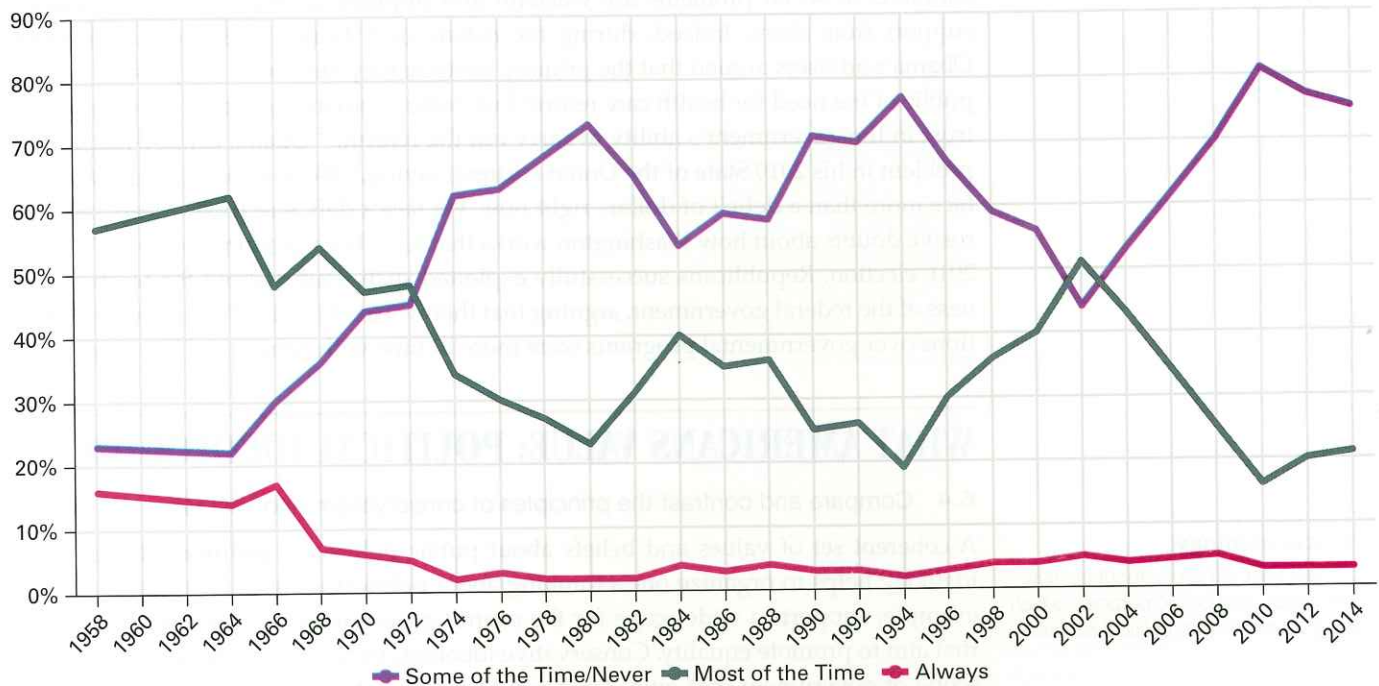
The average American clearly has less political information than most analysts consider to be desirable. While this level of information is surely adequate to maintain our democracy, survey data plainly show that citizens with above-average levels of political knowledge are more likely to vote and to have stable and consistent opinions on policy issues. If political knowledge were to increase overall, it would in all likelihood be good for American democracy.

The Decline of Trust in Government

Sadly, the American public has become increasingly dissatisfied with government in recent decades, as shown in Figure 6.4. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, nearly

FIGURE 6.4 THE DECLINE OF TRUST IN GOVERNMENT, 1958–2014

This graph shows how people have responded over time to the following question: how much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time? When this question was written in 1958, survey researchers could not imagine that anyone would respond “never,” so the traditional wording of the trust in government question omits this option. In 2014, about 7 percent of respondents volunteered that they never trusted the government.



SOURCES: Authors' analysis of 1958–2012 American National Election Study data. As there were no election studies for 2006, 2010, and 2014, we have used the following sources for those years: December 2006 Pew Research Center poll; February 5–10, 2010 *New York Times*/CBS News Poll; February 2014 Pew Research Center poll.

three-quarters of Americans said that they trusted the government in Washington to do the right thing always or mostly. By the late 1960s, however, researchers started to see a precipitous drop in public trust in government. First Vietnam and then Watergate shook people's confidence in the federal government. The economic troubles of the Carter years and the Iran hostage crisis helped continue the slide; by 1980, only one-quarter of the public thought the government could be trusted most of the time or always. Since then, trust in government has occasionally risen for a while, but the only time a majority said they could trust the government most of the time was in 2002, after the events of September 11.

Some analysts have noted that a healthy dose of public cynicism helps to keep politicians on their toes. Others, however, note that a democracy is based on the consent of the governed and that a lack of public trust in the government is a reflection of their belief that the system is not serving the public well. These more pessimistic analysts have frequently wondered whether such a cynical population would unite behind their government in a national emergency. Although the drop in political cynicism after September 11 was not too great, the fact that it occurred at all indicates that cynicism will not stop Americans from rallying behind their government in times of national crisis. Widespread political cynicism about government apparently applies only to “normal” times; it has not eroded Americans' fundamental faith in our democracy. Even though trust in government was very low in 2014, 81 percent of respondents in the General Social Survey said they were proud of how democracy in the USA works.

Perhaps the greatest impact of declining trust in government since the 1960s has been to drain public support for policies that address the problems of poverty and

racial inequality. Mark Hetherington argues, “People need to trust the government when they pay the costs but do not receive the benefits, which is exactly what anti-poverty and race-targeted programs require of most Americans. When government programs require people to make sacrifices, they need to trust that the result will be a better future for everyone.”³³ Hetherington’s careful data analysis shows that declining trust in government has caused many Americans to believe that “big government” solutions to social problems are wasteful and impractical, thereby draining public support from them. Indeed, during the debate over health care reform, President Obama’s advisers argued that the primary obstacle they faced was not persuading the public of the need for health care reform but, rather, convincing them to put sufficient trust in the government’s ability to carry out the reform.³⁴ Obama acknowledged the problem in his 2010 State of the Union address, saying, “We have to recognize that we face more than a deficit of dollars right now. We face a deficit of trust—deep and corrosive doubts about how Washington works that have been growing for years.” In the 2016 election, Republicans successfully exploited such doubts about the trustworthiness of the federal government, arguing that their values favoring free enterprise solutions over governmental programs were more in tune with Americans’ basic values.

WHAT AMERICANS VALUE: POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

6.4 Compare and contrast the principles of conservatism and liberalism.

A coherent set of values and beliefs about public policy is a **political ideology**; an ideology helps to organize one’s thinking about political issues. Liberal ideology, for example, supports a wide scope for the central government, often involving policies that aim to promote equality. Conservative ideology, in contrast, supports a less active scope of government that gives freer rein to the private sector. Table 6.1 attempts to summarize some of the key differences between liberals and conservatives.

TABLE 6.1 HOW TO TELL A LIBERAL FROM A CONSERVATIVE

Liberal and *conservative*—these labels are thrown around in American politics as though everyone knows what they mean. Here are some of the political beliefs likely to be preferred by liberals and conservatives. This table, to be sure, is oversimplified.

	Liberals	Conservatives
Foreign Policy		
Military spending	Believe we should spend less	Believe we should maintain peace through strength
Use of force	Less willing to commit American troops to action overseas	More likely to support American military intervention around the world
Social Policy		
Abortion	Support “freedom of choice”	Support “right to life”
Prayer in schools	Are opposed	Are supportive
Affirmative action	Favor	Oppose
Economic Policy		
Scope of government	Support regulation of the market, on the grounds that it is in the public interest	Favor free-market solutions, on the grounds that regulation is not in the public interest
Taxes	Want to tax the rich more in order to make taxation more progressive	Want to cut taxes for everyone in order to stimulate economic growth
Spending	Want to spend more on benefits for the needy	Want to limit spending on the poor to no more than absolutely necessary
Crime		
How to cut crime	Believe government should address the problems that cause crime	Believe that government needs to get tougher with criminals
Defendants’ rights	Believe we should guard those rights carefully	Believe that guarding those rights all too often means letting criminals off the hook

political ideology

A coherent set of beliefs about politics, public policy, and public purpose, which helps give meaning to political events.

Decades of survey data have consistently shown that more Americans choose the ideological label of *conservative* over *liberal*. In 2016, the Gallup poll reported that of those who labeled themselves, 37 percent were conservatives, 35 percent were moderates, and just 24 percent were liberals. The predominance of conservative thinking in America is one of the most important reasons for the relatively restrained scope of government activities compared to most European nations.

Yet there are some groups that are more liberal than others and thus would generally like to see the government do more. Among people under the age of 30, there are slightly more liberals than conservatives. The younger an individual, the less likely that person is to be a conservative. As befits their greater liberalism, they are more supportive of government spending on health care and environmental protection, and they are less inclined than seniors to spend more on the military. Younger voters are also more supportive of abortion rights and gay rights. The fact that younger people are also less likely to vote means that conservatives are overrepresented at the polls.

In general, groups with political clout tend to be more conservative than groups whose members have often been shut out from the halls of political power. This is in large part because excluded groups have often looked to the government to rectify the inequalities they have faced. For example, government activism in the form of the major civil rights bills of the 1960s was crucial in bringing African Americans into the mainstream of American life. It should come as little surprise, then, that African Americans are more liberal than the national average or that many African American leaders currently place a high priority on retaining social welfare and affirmative action programs in order to assist African Americans' progress. Similarly, Hispanics also are less conservative than non-Hispanic whites, and the influx of more Hispanics into the electorate may well move the country in a more liberal direction.

Women are not a minority group—making up, as they do, about 54 percent of the population—but they have 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. These issues concerning the priorities of government lead women to be significantly less conservative than men. This ideological difference between men and women has resulted in the **gender gap**, a regular pattern in which women are more likely to support Democratic candidates. In his 1996 reelection, for example, Bill Clinton carried the women's vote, whereas Bob Dole won more support from men. In 2016, surveys showed that women were about 11 percent less likely to support Donald Trump than men.

Another source of division between liberals and conservatives is financial status, or what is often known as social class. But in actuality, the relationship between family income and ideology is now relatively weak; social class has become much less predictive of political behavior than it used to be.³⁵ Even among the much-talked-about wealthiest 1 percent of Americans, Gallup has found that conservatism is not much more prevalent than in the population as a whole.³⁶

The role of religion in influencing political ideology has also changed greatly in recent years. Catholics and Jews, as minority groups who struggled for equality, have long been more liberal than Protestants. Today, Jews remain by far the most liberal demographic group in the country.³⁷ However, the ideological gap between Catholics and Protestants is now smaller than the gender gap. Ideology is now determined more by religiosity—that is, the degree to which religion is important in one's life—than by religious denomination. What is known as the new Christian Right consists of Catholics and Protestants who consider themselves fundamentalists or "born again." The influx of new policy issues dealing with matters of morality and traditional family values has recently tied this aspect of religious beliefs to political ideology. Those who identify themselves as born-again Christians are currently the most conservative demographic group. On the other hand, people who say they have no religious affiliation (roughly 20 percent of the population) are more liberal than conservative.

gender gap

The regular pattern in which women are more likely to support Democratic candidates, in part because they tend to be less conservative than men and more likely to support spending on social services and to oppose higher levels of military spending.

THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY ON POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

6.5 Assess the influence of political ideology on political attitudes and behaviors.

Political ideology doesn't necessarily guide political behavior. It would probably be a mistake to assume that when conservative candidates do better than they have in the past, this necessarily means people want more conservative policies, for not everyone thinks in ideological terms.

The authors of the classic study *The American Voter* first examined how much people rely on ideology to guide their political thinking.³⁸ They divided the public into four groups, according to ideological sophistication. Their portrait of the American electorate was not flattering. Only 12 percent of people showed evidence of thinking in ideological terms. These people, classified as *ideologues*, could connect their opinions and beliefs with broad policy positions taken by parties or candidates. They might say, for example, that they liked the Democrats because they were more liberal or the Republicans because they favored a smaller government. Forty-two percent of Americans were classified as *group benefits* voters. These people thought of politics mainly in terms of the groups they liked or disliked; for example, "Republicans support small business owners like me" or "Democrats are the party of the working person." Twenty-four percent of the population were *nature of the times* voters. Their handle on politics was limited to whether the times seemed good or bad to them; they might vaguely link the party in power with the country's fortune or misfortune. Finally, 22 percent of the voters expressed no ideological or issue content in making their political evaluations. They were called the *no issue content* group. Most of them simply voted routinely for a party or judged the candidates solely by their personalities. Overall, at least during the 1950s, Americans seemed to care little about the differences between liberal and conservative politics.

There has been much debate about whether this portrayal has been and continues to be an accurate characterization of the public. In the 1970s, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik argued that voters were more sophisticated than they had been in the 1950s.³⁹ Others, though, have concluded that people have seemed more informed and ideological only because the wording of the questions changed.⁴⁰ Recently, the authors of *The American Voter Revisited* updated the analysis of *The American Voter* using survey data from the 2000 election. They found that just 20 percent of the population met the criteria for being classified as an ideologue in 2000—not that much more than the 12 percent in 1956. Echoing the analysts of the 1950s, they conclude that "it is problematic to attribute ideological meaning to aggregate voting patterns when most of the individuals making their decisions about the candidates are not motivated by ideological concepts."⁴¹

These findings do not mean that the vast majority of the population does not have a political ideology. Rather, for most people the terms *liberal* and *conservative* are just not as important as they are for members of the political elite, such as politicians, activists, and journalists. Relatively few people have ideologies that organize their political beliefs as clearly as in the columns of Table 6.1. Back in 1960, the authors of *The American Voter* reached a conclusion that still stands: to speak of election results as indicating a movement of the public either left (to more liberal policies) or right (to more conservative policies) is not justified 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.

Morris Fiorina makes a similar argument with regard to the question of whether America is in the midst of a political culture war. In the media these days, one frequently hears claims that Americans are deeply divided on fundamental political issues, making it seem like there are two different nations—the liberal blue states versus the conservative red states. After a thorough examination of public opinion data, Fiorina concludes that "the views of the American citizenry look moderate, centrist, nuanced,



"I concede that my opponent has run an intelligent campaign... which is precisely why I expect to win by a landslide."

ambivalent—choose your term—rather than extreme, polarized, unconditional, dogmatic.⁴² He argues that the small groups of liberal and conservative activists who act as if they are at war with one another have left most Americans in a position analogous to "unfortunate citizens of some third-world countries who try to stay out of the crossfire while Maoist guerrillas and right-wing death squads shoot at each other."⁴³

In 2016, as in most years, the relationship between ideology and the vote was far from perfect. According to the national exit poll, liberals made up 26 percent of voters and cast 84 percent of their ballots for Clinton. Conservatives made up 35 percent of voters and cast nearly as high a percentage for Trump, at 81 percent. And moderates, who numbered 39 percent of voters, gave Clinton a narrow victory in the popular vote, by supporting her at a rate of 52 percent.

HOW AMERICANS PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS

6.6 Identify the ways that people may participate in politics.

In politics, as in many other aspects of life, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. The way citizens "squeak" in politics is to participate. Americans have many avenues of political participation open to them:

- Mrs. Jones of Iowa City goes to a neighbor's living room to attend her local precinct's presidential caucus.
- Demonstrators against abortion protest at the Supreme Court on the anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision.
- Parents in Alabama file a lawsuit to oppose textbooks that, in their opinion, promote "secular humanism."
- Mr. Smith, a Social Security recipient, writes to his senator to express his concern about a possible cut in his cost-of-living benefits.
- Over 125 million people vote in a presidential election.

All these activities are types of **political participation**, which encompasses the many activities in which citizens engage to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue.⁴⁴ Participation can be overt or subtle. The mass protests

Cartoonists often make fun of how successful candidates appeal to the lowest common denominator in the American electorate. In 2016, Hillary Clinton's speeches were pitched at an eighth-grade reading level whereas Donald Trump's were pitched at a fourth-grade level.

political participation

All the activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue. The most common means of political participation in a democracy is voting; other means include protest and civil disobedience.

against communist rule throughout Eastern Europe in the fall of 1989 represented an avalanche of political participation, yet quietly writing a letter to your congressperson also represents political participation. Political participation can be violent or peaceful, organized or individual, casual or consuming.

Generally, the United States has a culture that values political participation. Americans express very high levels of pride in their democracy: the General Social Survey has consistently found that over 80 percent of Americans say they are proud of how democracy works in the United States. Nevertheless, just 58 percent of adult American citizens voted in the presidential election of 2016, and only about 36 percent turned out for the 2014 mid-term elections. At the local level, the situation is even worse, with elections for city council and school board often drawing less than 10 percent of the eligible voters.

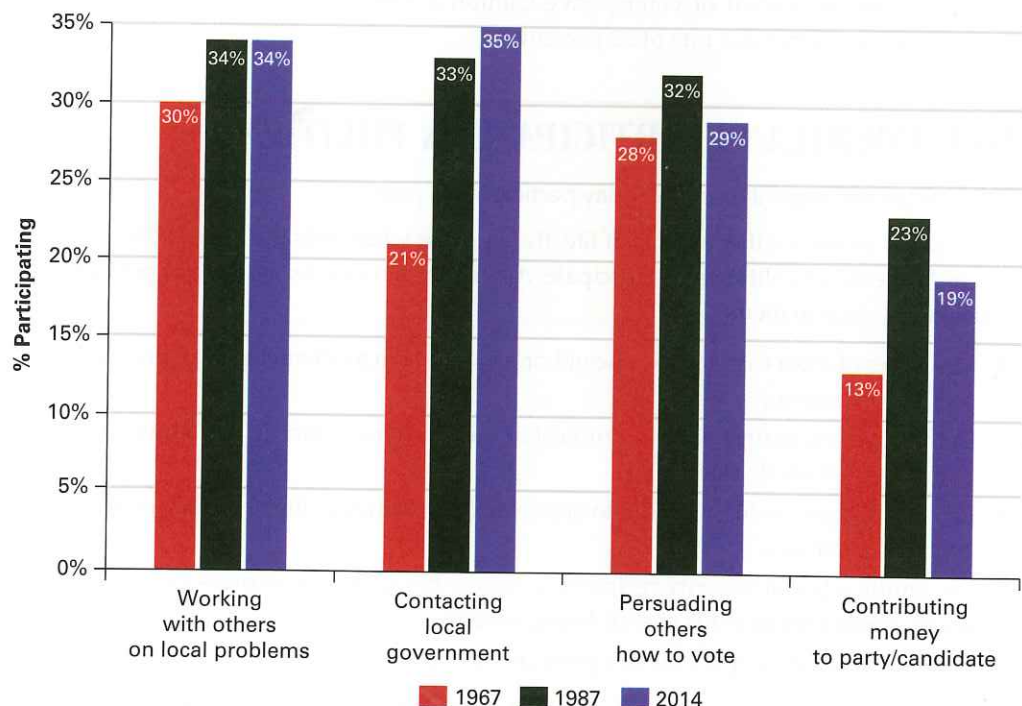
Conventional Participation

Although the line is hard to draw, political scientists generally distinguish between two broad types of participation: conventional and unconventional. *Conventional participation* includes many widely accepted modes of influencing government—voting, trying to persuade others, ringing doorbells for a petition, running for office, and so on. In contrast, *unconventional participation* includes activities that are often dramatic, such as protesting, civil disobedience, and even violence.

Millions take part in political activities beyond simply voting. Tocqueville noted long ago that America has a rich participatory culture and this remains true today. Figure 6.5 presents four measures of political participation that have been studied

FIGURE 6.5 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OTHER THAN VOTING, 1967–2014

In the classic work titled *Political Participation in America*, Nie and Verba analyzed a number of measures of political participation other than voting. Four of these measures have subsequently been asked about in the 1987 and 2014 General Social Surveys using the exact same question wording. The graph below shows the results from these three surveys over a 47-year period, demonstrating that political participation in America has generally increased over time.



SOURCES: Authors' analysis of the 2014 and 1987 General Social Surveys and the 1967 Political Participation in America Study.

over the last half century. Substantial increases in participation are evident in contacting public officials and giving money for political campaigns, and small increases are evident on persuading others how to vote and working with others on local problems. Thus, although the disappointing election turnout rates in the United States are something Americans should rightly be concerned about, a broader look at political participation reveals some positive developments for participatory democracy.

Protest as Participation

Americans have engaged in countless political protests ranging from the Boston Tea Party to burning draft cards to demonstrating against abortion. **Protest** is a form of political participation designed to achieve policy change through dramatic and unconventional tactics. The media's willingness to cover the unusual can make protests worthwhile, drawing attention to a point of view that many Americans might otherwise never encounter. For example, when an 89-year-old woman walked across the country to draw attention to the need for campaign finance reform, she put this issue onto the front page of newspapers most everywhere she traveled. Using more flamboyant means, the Occupy Wall Street activists attracted a good deal of attention to the issue of economic inequality by camping out in prominent public places. The liberal Occupy movement and the conservative Tea Party movement may not share many political values, but they have both followed the now-standard playbook for demonstrations, orchestrating their activities so as to provide television cameras with vivid images. Demonstration coordinators steer participants to prearranged staging areas and provide facilities for press coverage.

Throughout American history, individuals and groups have sometimes used **civil disobedience** as a form of protest; that is, they have consciously broken a law that they thought was unjust. In the 1840s, Henry David Thoreau refused to pay his taxes, as a protest against slavery and the Mexican War, and went to jail. (He stayed only overnight because someone, likely his aunt, paid the taxes.) Influenced by India's Mahatma Gandhi, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and others in the civil rights movement, engaged in civil disobedience in the 1950s and 1960s to bring an end to segregationist laws. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is a classic defense of civil disobedience.⁴⁵ In 1964, King was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 35—the youngest person ever to receive this honor. The Nobel committee honored the ways that King used civil disobedience to protest social and political injustices without engaging in violence.

Sometimes political participation can be violent. The history of violence in American politics is a long one—not surprising, perhaps, for a nation born in rebellion. The turbulent 1960s included many outbreaks of violence. African American neighborhoods in American cities were torn by riots. College campuses sometimes

protest

A form of political participation designed to achieve policy change through dramatic and unconventional tactics.

civil disobedience

A form of political participation based on a conscious decision to break a law believed to be unjust and to suffer the consequences.

Nonviolent civil disobedience was one of the most effective techniques of the civil rights movement in the American South during the early 1960s. Young African Americans sat at "whites only" lunch counters to protest segregation. Following in their footsteps, BlackLivesMatter activists have also practiced civil disobedience to draw attention to questions of racial justice in the 21st century.



Perhaps the best-known image of American political violence from the Vietnam War era: A student lies dead on the Kent State campus, one of four killed when members of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on anti-Vietnam War demonstrators.



turned into battle zones as protestors against the Vietnam War fought police and National Guard units; students were killed at Kent State and Jackson State in 1970. At various points throughout American history, violence has been resorted to as a means of pressuring the government to change its policies.

Although the history of American political protest includes many well-known incidents, Americans today are less likely to report that they have participated in protests than citizens of most other established democracies around the world. As you can see in Figure 6.6 the relative lack of protest activity in the United States is not because Americans are “couch potatoes” when it comes to political participation. Rather, Americans are just more likely to employ conventional political participation—contacting politicians and/or governmental officials—than they are to engage in protests.

Class, Inequality, and Participation

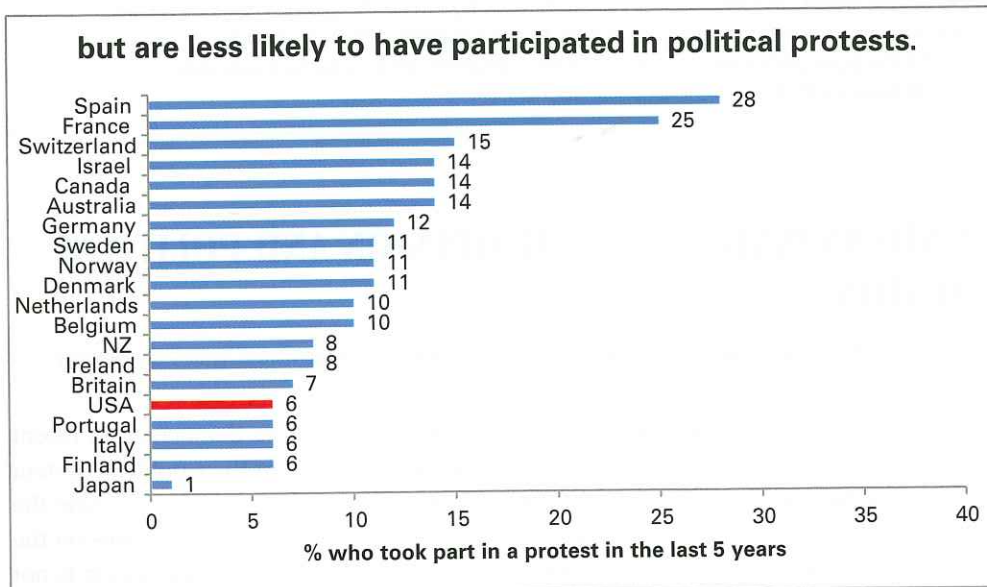
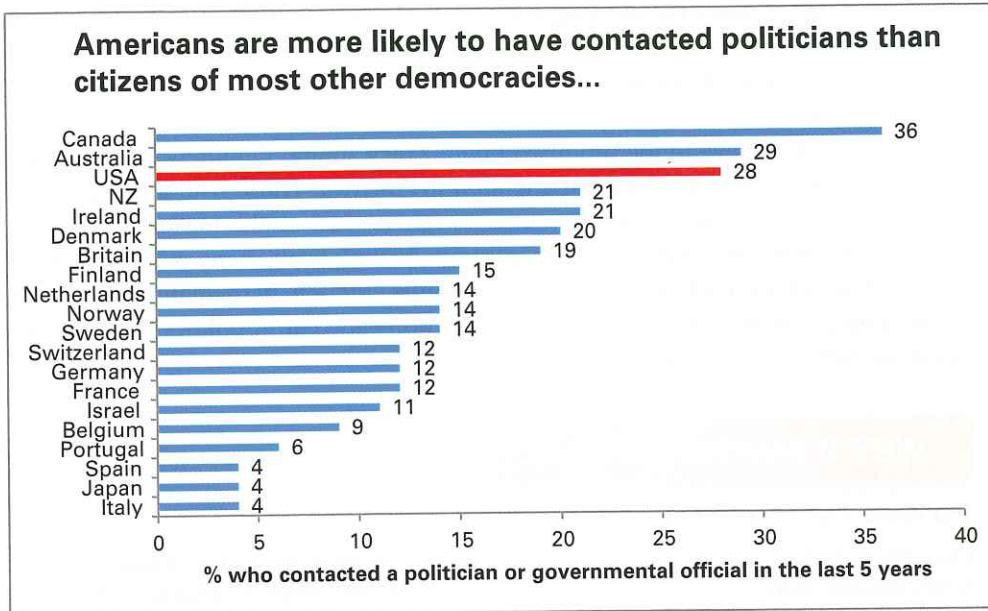
Rates of political participation are unequal among Americans. Virtually every study of political participation has come to the conclusion that Verba and Nie did back in 1972: “[C]itizens of higher social economic status participate more in politics. This generalization ... holds true whether one uses level of education, income, or occupation as the measure of social status.”⁴⁶ People with higher incomes and levels of education are not only more likely to donate money to campaigns but also to participate in other ways that do not require financial resources, such as contacting governmental officials and signing petitions. Theorists who believe that America is ruled by a small, wealthy elite make much of this fact to support their view.

To what extent does race affect participation? When the scenes of despair among poor African Americans in New Orleans during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina refocused attention on racial inequalities, some commentators speculated that one reason that the federal government was so slow in coming to the aid of African Americans is that they are less likely to vote because of their relatively poor socioeconomic status. But in actuality, the difference in turnout rates between whites and

FIGURE 6.6 CONVENTIONAL AND UNCONVENTIONAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In a cross-national survey of political behavior in 20 established democracies, citizens were asked whether they had engaged in a variety of forms of political participation over the past five years. Whereas Americans were among the most likely to engage in the conventional mode of contacting politicians, they were among the least likely to engage in protest demonstrations.

- Do you think the fact that Americans are more likely to contact politicians than protest is a good sign for American democracy, showing that people are largely content with conventional channels of transmitting public opinion to policymakers?
- Do you think that when many people engage in political protest, this indicates that citizens are frustrated and discontented with their government, or is it likely just a reflection of political passion and involvement?



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 2 (2001–2006).

blacks in Louisiana has been minimal to nonexistent in recent years; in 2012, for example, 57.6 percent of whites voted compared to 57.8 percent of blacks.⁴⁷ Nationwide, the Census Bureau reported that in 2012 blacks actually had a turnout rate of 2 percent above that of non-Hispanic whites. One reason for the fact that African-Americans vote at higher rates than we would expect given their socio-economic status is that they often possess a group consciousness that gives them an extra incentive to vote. Political scientists have long recognized that when blacks and whites with equal levels of education are compared, the former actually participate more in politics.⁴⁸

The picture for Hispanic and Asian political participation is not so positive, though, at the present time. In recent years, their voting turnout rates have trailed that of non-Hispanic whites and blacks by roughly twenty percent. Scholars have found that Hispanics and Asians who have difficulty with English and/or those who have not been in the country for too long have particularly low turnout rates. With both Hispanics and Asians voting nearly 75 percent Democratic in recent years, one should expect the Democrats to focus much of their mobilization efforts on these groups in the near future.

People who believe in the promise of democracy should definitely be concerned with the inequalities of political participation in America. Those who participate are easy to listen to; nonparticipants are easy to ignore. Just as the makers of denture cream do not worry too much about people with healthy teeth, many politicians don't concern themselves much with the views of groups with low participation rates, such as the young and people with low incomes. Who gets what in politics therefore depends in part on who participates.

WHY IT MATTERS TODAY

Political Participation

Inequality in political participation is a problem in a representative democracy. Public policy debates and outcomes would probably be substantially different if people of all age groups and income groups participated equally. If young adults participated more, politicians might be more inclined to seek ways by which the government could help young people get the training necessary to obtain good jobs in a changing economy. And if the poor participated at higher levels, government programs to alleviate poverty would likely be higher on the political agenda.

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL ACTION

6.7 Analyze how public opinion about the scope of government guides political behavior.

In many third world countries, there have been calls for more democracy in recent years. One often hears that citizens of developing nations want their political system to be like America's in the sense that ordinary people's opinions determine how the government is run. However, as this chapter has shown, there are many limits on the role public opinion plays in the American political system. The average person is not very well informed about political issues, including the crucial issue of the scope of government.

Public Attitudes Toward the Scope of Government

Central to the ideology of the Republican Party is the belief that the scope of American government has become too wide. According to Ronald Reagan, probably the most

admired Republican in recent history, government was not the solution to society's problems—it was the problem. He called for the government to “get off the backs of the American people.”

Because of Americans' long history of favoring limited government, taking a general stand about the need to streamline the federal establishment is appealing to the majority of the public more often than not. Since 1992, the Gallup Poll has regularly asked samples the following question: “Some people think the government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses. Others think that government should do more to solve our country's problems. Which comes closer to your own view?” On average, 52 percent have said the government is doing too much, whereas just 40 percent have said the government should do more, with the rest saying it depends or they don't know. The only time Gallup found that at least 50 percent said that the government should do more was in the month after the terrorist attacks of September 11.⁴⁹

However, public opinion on the scope of government, as with most issues, is often complex and inconsistent. Although more people today think that overall the government is too big, a plurality has consistently called for more spending on such programs as education, health care, aid to cities, protecting the environment, and fighting crime.⁵⁰ Many political scientists have looked at these contradictory findings and concluded that many Americans are symbolic conservatives but operational liberals—meaning that they oppose the idea of big government in principle but favor it in practice. As Christopher Ellis and James Stimson write, “We are one and the same, a symbolically conservative nation that honors tradition, distrusts novelty, and embraces the conservative label—and an operationally liberal nation that has made Social Security one of the most popular government programs ever enacted.”⁵¹ The fact that public opinion is contradictory on these important aspects of the scope of the government contributes to policy gridlock, as both liberal and conservative politicians can make a plausible case that the public is on their side.

Democracy, Public Opinion, and Political Action

Remember, though, that American democracy is representative rather than direct. As *The American Voter* stated many years ago, “The public's explicit task is to decide not what government shall do but rather who shall decide what government shall do.”⁵² When individuals under communist rule protested for democracy, what they wanted most was the right to have a say in choosing their leaders. Americans can—and often do—take for granted the opportunity to replace their leaders at the next election. Protest is thus directed at making the government listen to specific demands, not overthrowing it. In this sense, it can be said that American citizens have become well socialized to democracy.

If the public's task in democracy is to choose who is to lead, we must still ask whether it can do so wisely. If people know little about where candidates stand on issues, how can they make rational choices? Most choose performance criteria over policy criteria. As Morris Fiorina has written, citizens typically have one hard bit of data to go on: “They know what life has been like during the incumbent's administration. They need not know the precise economic or foreign policies of the incumbent administration in order to see or feel the results of those policies.”⁵³ Even if they are voting only based on a general sense of whether the country is moving in the right or wrong direction, their voices are clearly being heard; they hold public officials accountable for their actions.

REVIEW THE CHAPTER

THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

- 6.1** Identify demographic trends and their likely impact on American politics.

Immigration—both legal and illegal—has accelerated in America in recent decades. As a consequence, the size of the minority population has increased greatly. If current trends continue, by the middle of the twenty-first century non-Hispanic whites will represent less than half of the population. The American population has also been aging and moving to Sunbelt states such as California, Texas, and Florida.

HOW AMERICANS LEARN ABOUT POLITICS: POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

- 6.2** Explain how the agents of socialization influence the development of political attitudes.

Much of the process of political socialization is informal. People pick up and absorb political orientations from their everyday environment. The principal agents of socialization are the family, the media, and schools. As people age, the firmness with which they hold political attitudes, such as party identification, tends to increase.

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL INFORMATION

- 6.3** Describe public opinion research and modern methods of polling.

Polls are conducted through the technique of random sampling, in which every member of the population has an equal probability of being selected for an interview. A random sample of between 1,000 and 1,500 Americans will yield results that are normally within plus or minus three percentage points of what would be found if all Americans were interviewed. The responses from such samples can be important tools for democracy, measuring what the public thinks about political matters between elections. Polls also help analysts assess the age-old question of how well informed people are about political issues.

WHAT AMERICANS VALUE: POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

- 6.4** Compare and contrast the principles of conservatism and liberalism.

A political ideology is a coherent set of values and beliefs about politics and public policy. An ideology helps

guide people's thinking on policy issues and gives meaning to political events. The two most prominent ideologies in American politics are conservatism and liberalism.

THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY ON POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

- 6.5** Assess the influence of political ideology on political attitudes and behaviors.

Although roughly 65 percent of the American public call themselves either conservatives or liberals, even many of these individuals are not necessarily ideologically consistent in their political attitudes. Often they are conservative in principle but liberal in practice; that is, in theory they are against big government, but they actually favor more spending on a wide variety of specific programs.

HOW AMERICANS PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS

- 6.6** Identify the ways that people may participate in politics.

Conventional forms of political participation include voting, writing letters or e-mails to public officials, attending political meetings, signing petitions, and donating money to campaigns and political groups. Unconventional participation involves activities such as attending protest demonstrations and engaging in acts of civil disobedience. Many studies have found that citizens of higher social economic status participate more in American politics than do citizens of lower social economic status.

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL ACTION

- 6.7** Analyze how public opinion about the scope of government guides political behavior.

Conservatives typically believe that, in recent decades, the scope of American government has become too wide. They look to Ronald Reagan's pledge to get government "off the backs of the American people" as an inspiration. In contrast, liberals believe the scope of government should be further increased, and they support policies like the Obama administration's health care reform law.