


Public Opinion and Voting

1. What is public opinion
2. How do people form political opinions
3. Measuring political opinions
4. Voting and voter turnout
5. Why people vote as they do

2



1. What is Public Opinion

- President Franklin Roosevelt, "A government can be no better than the public opinion that sustains it."
- Only when the opinions of Americans are communicated effectively to elected representatives can those opinions form the basis of government action.

3



What is public opinion (cont)

- Questions to ponder:
 - What is public opinion?
 - How do we form our opinions on political issues?
 - How can public opinion be measured accurately?
 - What factors affect voter participation?
- Most important way we participate in government is through voting

4



What is public opinion (cont)

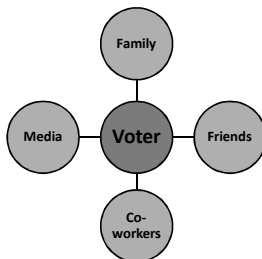
- Public opinion: the views of the citizenry about politics, public issues and public policies
- If an article states that “a significant number of Americans” feel a certain way about an issue, that means that a particular opinion is held by enough people to get the attention of government officials.

5



2. How do People Form Political Opinions

• Most people acquire their political attitudes, opinion, beliefs, and knowledge through a complex learning process called “political socialization.”



• This process begins in childhood and continues throughout the person’s life

6



How do people form political opinions (cont)

- Family: influence is strongest when children clearly perceive their parents' attitudes
 - The political party of the parents usually becomes the party of the child

7



How do people form political opinions (cont)

- Education: generally, those with more education have more knowledge about politics and policy than those with less education
 - Too many students graduate with too little knowledge of American government
 - If people know little or nothing about our nation's history and institutions, they will be unable to fulfill their obligations and duties as citizens in our democracy
 - Most everyone has an opinion
 - However, it is important to base that opinion on knowledge and understanding of the facts

8



How do people form political opinions (cont)

- The media, especially TV & increasingly the Internet, is the leading source of political and public affairs information for most people
- The media is now as influential as the family, particularly among high school students.
- The media has the most influence over persons who have not yet formed opinions on certain issues or candidates

9



How do people form political opinions (cont)

- Opinion leaders: public officials, religious leaders, celebrities, etc. play a significant role in the formation of public opinion
 - Vice-president Al Gore has been an influential advocate for the environment
- Major life events: The Great Depression, war can influence the attitudes of an entire generation

10



How do people form political opinions (cont)

- Peer groups: views of friends begin to influence attitudes and beliefs usually beginning in middle school
- Economic status and occupation: can affect political views

11



3. Measuring Political Opinions

- For public opinion to affect public policy, public officials must be aware of that opinion
 - Must know which issues are of current concern
 - How strongly people feel about those issues
 - Must know when public opinion changes
- Officials learn of public opinion through:
 - Election results, personal contacts, interest groups, media reports, opinion polls

12



Measuring political opinions (cont)

- Public opinion poll: a numerical survey of the public's opinion on a particular topic at a particular moment
- Polling is used extensively by political candidates and policymakers
- Polls can be remarkably accurate when they are conducted properly

13



Measuring political opinions (cont)

- Gallup polls sample between 1500 and 2000 people
 - The group must consist of a group of people who are typical of the general population
 - The sampling must be random: means that each person within the entire population being polled has an equal chance of being chosen

14



Measuring political opinions (cont)

- Poll takers want to ensure that there is no bias in their polling questions
 - How a question is phrased can significantly affect how people answer it
 - "Do you believe that the school district should provide high-speed connections to the Internet?"
 - "Are you willing to pay higher property taxes so that the school district can have high-speed connections to the Internet?"

15



Measuring political opinions (cont)

- Sampling error: the difference between what the sample results show and what the true results would have been had everybody in the relevant population been interviewed
- Misuse of polls: frequent complaint is that instead of measuring opinion, polls can end up creating it
 - Many people want to support the winning candidate
 - A candidate can lose support if he/she is behind in the polls

16



Measuring political opinions (cont)

Checklist for Evaluating Public Opinion Polls

- Who conducted the poll/paid for it
- How many people were interviewed
- How were the people chosen
- How were respondents interviewed
- Who was not interviewed (refused to participate, did not have phone, etc)
- What is the margin of error
- What questions did the poll ask
- In what order were the questions asked
- When was the poll taken
- What do similar polls report

17



4. Voting and voter turnout

Voter turnout since 1960

1960—63.1—Kennedy/Nixon---highest turnout

1964—61.9—Johnson/Goldwater

1968—60.8—Nixon/Humphrey

1972—55.2—Nixon/McGovern

1976—53.6—Carter/Ford

1980—52.6—Reagan/Carter

1984—53.1—Reagan/Mondale

1988—50.1—Bush/Dukakis

1992—55.1—Clinton/Bush

1996—49.1—Clinton/Dole---lowest turnout

2000—51.3—GW Bush/Gore

2004—55.3—GW Bush/Kerry

2008—56.8—Obama/McCain

18



Voting and voter turnout (cont)

- Voting is the most important way citizens participate in the political process
- Voters help keep elected officials accountable to campaign promises at the time or reelection

19



Voting and voter turnout (cont)

Why is voter turnout relatively low?

– Voter turnout: percentage of the voting-age population that votes

1. Close to 40% of non-voters do not feel that they have a duty to vote
2. 70% of non-voters said they lacked information about the candidates
3. Many cite increasing public cynicism
4. Some believe their vote will not make a difference

From the Pew Research Center

20



Voting and voter turnout (cont)

Historic restrictions on voting

- 1810- religious restrictions abolished
- 1810- property ownership and tax-payment requirements began to disappear
- 1850-all white males were allowed to vote
- 1870- African-American males allowed to vote
- 1920-women given the right to vote
- 1924-Native Americans given the right to vote

21



Voting and voter turnout (cont)

Attempts to improve voting procedures

1. 1993-National Voter Registration Act
 - Requires states to provide all eligible citizens with the opportunity to register to vote when they apply for or renew a driver's license
 - Requires states to allow mail-in registrations
 - Forms given out at public assistance agencies
 - 1998-Oregon allowed voting by mail
 - Dramatically increased voter turnout
 - 2004- 84% voted

22



Voting and voter turnout (cont)

Attempts to improve voting procedures

2. Electronic v. paper ballots
3. 2002-Help America Vote Act
 - Provided funds to the states to help purchase new electronic voting equipment
 - 2006 elections-problems with electronic voting machines
 - Crashed or refused to start
 - "flipped" votes from one candidate to the other
 - Estimated 18,000 votes not counted in one county

23



Voting and voter turnout (cont)

Voter Profile/how actually votes

- Education: The higher the education level the more likely it is that a person will be a regular voter
- Income: wealthy are more likely to be regular voters
- Age: seniors are more likely to be regular voters
- Race/ethnicity: minorities generally vote less, but numbers have increased in recent elections

24



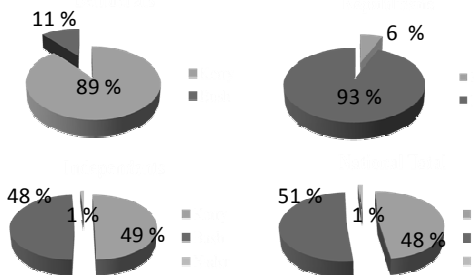
5. Why People Vote As They Do

- Party identification
- Perception of the candidates
- Policy choices
- Socioeconomic factors

25



Party Identification & Voting 2004



26



Why people vote as they do (cont)

- Perception of the candidates
 - Voters often base their decisions more on their impressions of the candidates than on the candidates' actual qualifications
 - To some extent, voter attitudes toward candidates are based on emotions rather than on any judgment about experience or policy

27



Why people vote as they do (cont)

- Policy choices
 - Voters choose a candidate who share their positions on particular issues
 - Historically, economic issues have had the strongest influence on voters' choices
 - War usually takes priority over economic issues
 - Candidates (presidential) generally avoid taking a stand on social issues to avoid offending large groups of voters

28
