

Chapter 7

Public Opinion

REVIEWING THE CHAPTER

CHAPTER FOCUS

The purpose of this chapter is to explore what we mean by *public opinion* and to ask what sorts of effects public opinion has on our supposedly democratic form of government. After reading and reviewing the material in this chapter, you should be able to do each of the following:

1. List the sources of our political attitudes, and indicate which are the most important ones. Assess the influence of various religious traditions on political attitudes.
2. Explain why there is no single cleavage between liberals and conservatives in this country and why there are crosscutting cleavages. Explain the significance of these facts. Assess the significance of race in explaining political attitudes.
3. Define *political ideology* and state why most Americans do not think ideologically. Summarize the liberal positions on the economy, civil rights, and political conduct. Describe the major policy packages in the Democratic Party, and indicate which groups in the Democratic coalition can be identified with each package.
4. Identify which elite groups have become liberal, and compare their current attitudes with the past political preferences of these groups. Discuss the “new class” theory as an explanation for changes in attitudes. Analyze why these changes are causing strain in the political party system.

STUDY OUTLINE

I. Introduction

A. Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address ... “of the people, by the people, for the people”

1. Yet the federal government’s budget is not balanced
2. Yet the people have opposed busing
3. Yet the ERA was not ratified
4. Yet most Americans favor term limits for Congress

B. Why government policy and public opinion may appear to be at odds

1. Government not intended to do “what the people want”
 - a) Framers of Constitution aimed for substantive goals
 - b) Popular rule was only one of several means toward these goals
 - c) Large nations feature many “publics” with many “opinions”
 - (1) Framers hoped no single opinion would dominate
 - (2) Reasonable policies can command support of many factions
2. Limits on effectiveness of opinion polling; difficult to know public opinion

II. What is public opinion?

A. Influences and limitations

1. Position taking on nonexistent legislation, contradictory opinions and inexplicable shifts

2. Political scientists and polling
 - a) 1940s: only a small group of citizens appeared to be informed
 - b) Later studies: many use limited information (cues) to support candidates, parties and policies that reflect their own personal values
- B. How polling works
 1. Sampling techniques
 2. Sampling error
 3. High accuracy rates—in presidential elections
- C. How opinions differ
 1. Saliency: some opinions matter more than others
 2. Stability: some opinions are more volatile than others
 3. Policy congruence: some opinions are reflected in government policy more closely than others
 4. Additional observations
 - a) Political socialization matters
 - b) Elite and mass opinion differ
- III. Political socialization
 - A. The family
 1. Child absorbs party identification of family but becomes more independent with age
 2. Much continuity between generations
 3. Declining ability to pass on identification
 - a) Younger voters exhibit less partisanship; more likely to be independent
 - b) Meaning of partisanship unclear in most families; less influence on policy preferences
 - c) Age related differences in opinions on issues (gay marriage, women's rights, vouchers, etc.)
 - d) Few families pass on clear ideologies
 - B. Religion
 1. Religious traditions affect families
 - a) Catholic families somewhat more liberal
 - b) Protestant families more conservative
 - c) Jewish families decidedly more liberal
 2. Two theories on differences
 - a) Social status of religious group
 - b) Content of religion's tradition
 - C. The gender gap
 1. Journalists note women have “deserted” Republican candidates
 - a) It would be more correct to say men have “deserted” Democratic candidates
 - b) Difference (“gap”) in the political views of men and women has existed for a long time
 - c) Presents problems for both parties
 2. Females and voting
 - a) Turnout
 - (1) Right to vote obtained in 1920, Nineteenth Amendment
 - (2) Low turnout rate until 1980
 - b) Vote choice
 - (1) More likely to favor Democratic candidates
 - (2) Leaning also evident in mid-term congressional elections
 - (3) Reflection of differences in stances on issues
 - (a) Banning handguns
 - (b) Increased spending on anti-poverty programs

- (c) Limiting defense spending
- (d) "Issue importance" rankings

D. Schooling and information

1. Much research links college education to liberal attitudes
2. Relationship was especially strong for students at high prestige institutions
3. Increased schooling also correlated with higher levels of voting and political participation
4. Generalizations less applicable today
 - a) Some evidence to suggest college students are more conservative than they used to be
 - (1) Concerns about "political correctness"
 - (2) Conservative students more vocal on campus
 - (3) Increase in enrollment of religious colleges and universities
 - b) Political participation among young people is down
 - c) Decline in reading of newspapers and newsmagazines

IV. Cleavages in public opinion

A. Social class: less important in United States than in Europe

1. More important in 1950s on unemployment, education, housing programs
2. Less important in 1960s on poverty, health insurance, Vietnam, jobs
3. Why the change?
 - a) Education: occupation depends more on schooling
 - b) Noneconomic issues now define liberal and conservative

B. Race and ethnicity

1. African Americans: voting patterns and positions on issues
 - a) African Americans are overwhelmingly Democratic
 - (1) Younger African Americans are more likely than older ones to identify with the Republican Party
 - (2) Younger African Americans more likely than older ones to support school vouchers
 - b) Sharp differences between attitudes of whites and African Americans on public policies
 - (1) Blacks more likely to support affirmative action
 - (2) Blacks more likely to think the criminal justice system is biased against them
 - (3) Blacks more likely to oppose use of military force and less likely to think we should all be willing to fight for our country
 - (4) Blacks less likely to think believing in God is essential for a person to be moral
 - c) Areas of agreement
 - (1) Getting tough on crime
 - (2) Abortion
 - (3) Dependency on governmental aid
 - (4) The power to succeed
2. Latinos and Asians
 - a) Latinos are the largest minority in America, but there are few studies of their opinions
 - (1) More likely to be Democrat, although not as much as African Americans
 - (2) Somewhat more liberal than whites or Asian Americans, although not as liberal as African Americans
 - (a) Favor big government
 - (b) Think the Democratic Party cares more about them

- (3) Those from Mexico are more Democrat, those from Cuba are more Republican, those from Puerto Rico somewhere in between
- (4) Hispanics in Texas are more conservative than Hispanics in California
- (5) Differences between native-born and foreign born ones

b) Asians

- (1) Asian Americans identify more strongly with the Republican Party than whites
- (2) Views on military and welfare programs, prayer in schools, and the death penalty are more similar to those of whites than those of blacks or Hispanics
- (3) Japanese Americans are more conservative whereas Korean Americans are more liberal

C. Region

- 1. Southerners are more conservative than northerners on military and civil rights issues but differences are fading overall
- 2. Southern lifestyle different
- 3. Lessening attachment to Democratic Party

V. Political ideology

A. Consistent attitudes

- 1. Ideology: patterned set of political beliefs about who ought to rule, their principles and policies
- 2. Measuring ideology
 - a) Self-identification
 - b) Searching for “constraint”
- 3. Recent surveys
 - a) Moderates are the largest group among Americans
 - b) Conservatives are second, liberals are the smallest group

B. Concerns about self-identification in surveys

- 1. Most Americans do not use the words liberal and conservative on their own and many do not have a clear idea of what they mean
- 2. Inconsistency can be caused by a variety of factors
 - a) Nature of a problem may have changed
 - b) Wording of questions may have changed
 - c) People may have contradictory preferences
- 3. Some respondents will hide their ideology

C. Mass ideologies: a typology

- 1. Increasingly, searching for “constraint” is preferred
- 2. Nine different groups identified by certain key values in one popular survey
 - a) Liberals and “disadvantaged Democrats” constitute one in three voters and over one quarter of the general public
 - b) Conservatives and Republican “enterprisers” comprise nearly one in two registered voters and over 40 percent of the general population
 - c) One in five Americans are “disaffected” or “bystanders”

D. Political elites

- 1. Definition: those who have a disproportionate amount of some valued resource
- 2. Elites, or activists, display greater ideological consistency
 - a) More information than most people
 - b) Peers reinforce consistency and greater differences of opinion than one finds among average voters
- 3. Greater ideological consistency of elites can be seen in Congress
 - a) Democratic members tend to be consistently liberal

b) Republican members tend to be consistently conservative

VI. Political elites, public opinion, and public policy

A. Elites influence public opinion in three ways

1. Raise and form political issues
2. State norms by which to settle issues, defining policy options
3. Elite views shape mass views

B. Limits to elite influence on the public

1. Elites do not define problems
2. Many elites exist; hence many elite opinions