Public Opinion and Political Action
Introduction

• Public Opinion
  – The distribution of the population’s beliefs about politics and policy issues.

• Demography
  – The science of population changes.

• Census
  – A valuable tool for understanding population changes - required every 10 years.
The American People

• The Immigrant Society
  – African Americans face a legacy of racism. Hispanics are the largest minority group, faced with the problem of illegal immigration (Simpson-Mazzoli Act).
  – Asian immigration has been driven by a new class of professional workers.
  – Political culture is an overall set of values widely shared within a society.
The American People
The American People

• The Regional Shift
  – Reapportionment: The process of reallocating seats in the House of Representatives every 10 years on the basis of the results of the census.

Figure 6.2
The American People

• The Graying of America
  – Fastest growing age group is over 65
  – Potential drain on Social Security
  – “Gray Power”
How Americans Learn About Politics: Political Socialization

• Political Socialization:
  – “…the process through which and individual acquires [their] particular political orientation”

• The Process of Political Socialization
  – The Family
    • Time & emotional commitment
    • Political leanings of children often mirror their parent’s leanings
How Americans Learn About Politics: Political Socialization

• The Process of Political Socialization
  – The Mass Media
    • Generation gap in TV news viewing
  – School / Education
    • Used by government to socialize the young into the political culture
    • Education produces better jobs and a more positive view of government

• Political Learning Over a Lifetime
How American Learn About Politics: Political Socialization

• Turnout by Age, 2000 (Figure 6.3)
Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information

• How Polls Are Conducted
  – Random Sampling: The key technique employed by sophisticated 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.
Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information

• The Role of Polls in American Democracy
  – Polls help politicians figure out public preferences.
  – Does it make politicians think more about following the polls?
  – Exit Polls - used by the media to predict election day winners.
  – The wording of questions makes a difference.
Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information

• What Polls Reveal About Americans’ Political Information
  – Americans don’t know much about politics.
  – Americans may know their basic beliefs, but not how that affects policies of the government.

• The Decline of Trust in Government
  – Since 1964, trust in government has declined.
  – Trust in government has gone up somewhat since September 11.
Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information

- The Decline of Trust in Government, 1958-2004 (Figure 6.4)
What Americans Value: Political Ideologies

• Political Ideology:
  – A coherent set of beliefs about politics, public policy, and public purpose.

• Who Are the Liberals and Conservatives?
  – Views change over time
  – Currently about 37% conservative, 23% liberal, 40% moderate
What Americans Value: Political Ideologies

• Do People Think in Ideological Terms?
  – Ideologues: think in ideological terms - 12% of the population
  – Group Benefits: rely on party labels - 42% of the population
  – Nature of the Times: current times are good or bad - 24% of the population
  – No issue content: based on personalities - 22% of the population
How Americans Participate in Politics

• Political Participation:
  – All the activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue.

• Conventional Participation
  – Voting in elections
  – Working in campaigns / running for office
  – Contacting elected officials
How Americans Participate in Politics

• Protest as Participation
  – Protest: A form of political participation designed to achieve policy changes through dramatic and unconventional tactics.
  – Civil disobedience: A form of political participation that reflects a conscious decision to break a law believed to be immoral and to suffer the consequences.
How Americans Participate in Politics

- Class, Inequality, and Participation
Understanding Public Opinion and Political Action

• Public Attitudes Toward the Scope of Government
  – Many people have no opinion.

• Democracy, Public Opinion, and Political Action
  – We select our leaders, not policies.
  – We protest for specific policies, not against the government.