

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

Figure 6.1

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.

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.