

## **PUBLIC OPINION, PARTICIPATION AND VOTING**

### **I. INTRO**

- a. The 2000 election and subsequent problems in Florida demonstrated the acute need to modernize the way we vote in the U.S.
- b. There were issues of partisan people (Katherine Harris) being in charge of ensuring accuracy in the voting
- c. 2002 Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) providing \$3.9BB in federal funds to modernize elections
- d. U.S. has more to accomplish to make voting fair and transparent.

### **II. PUBLIC OPINION**

- a. All governments must be concerned with public opinion
- b. WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION?
  - i. PUBLIC OPINION- distribution of individual preferences for or evaluations of a given issue, candidate, or institution with a specific population
  - ii. Most accurate way is by polls and surveys
- c. TAKING THE PULSE OF THE PEOPLE
  - i. In a public opinion poll, relatively small number of people can accurately represent the opinions of a larger population based on a RANDOM SAMPLING – every individual has an equal chance of being selected
    1. Most reliable way to take out bias is a RANDOM-DIGIT DIALING
    2. EXIT POLLS are also strong indicators
    3. Even with proper sampling there is a MARGIN OF ERROR based on the sampling size

- ii. The art of asking questions and how questions are posed can influence answers. Questions need to be phrased to eliminate bias.
- iii. OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS allow respondents to answer in their own words
- iv. Also need thorough analysis and reporting of the results
  - v. One way to track opinion change is to re-interview the same sample more than once-  
PANEL SURVEYS
- vi. Defining public opinion as the distribution of INDIVIDUAL PREFERENCE emphasizes that the unit of measurement is the individual- not groups
- vii. When a significant percentage of the respondents agree with an issue or candidate, there is a CONSENSUS
- viii. But on most issues there is a disagreement which can be POLARIZING
- ix. INTENSITY- the degree to which people feel STRONGLY about their opinions is a very important aspect of public opinion
  - 1. Measured by how intensely we feel about it on a SCALE
- x. LATENCY- Political opinions people may hold but have not been fully expressed
  - 1. Important for leaders since actions will end latency either positive or negative
  - 2. MANIFEST OPINION- prior to 9/11 not really concerned but now homeland security is a shared and consciously held viewpoint
- xi. SALIENCY- how important an issue is to them; relevancy

1. Saliency and intensity are strongly related;  
energy issues versus economic issues- jobs  
versus deficit
- d. HOW DO WE GET OUR POLITICAL OPINIONS  
AND VALUES?
  - i. We get it through POLITICAL  
SOCIALIZATION – most notably by family and  
school
  - ii. A common element in the socialization process is  
NATIONALISM- a consciousness of the nation-  
state and belonging to it
  - iii. Pluralistic political culture makes sources of our  
views varied
    1. We form our attitudes through participation  
in groups
    2. We identify with specific attitudes of these  
groups
  - iv. FAMILY- most powerful socializing agent;  
create basic attitudes
    1. Children generally show political interest  
around the age of 10; LBJ
    2. Early teens interest fairly high
  - v. SCHOOLS- also key in developing civic  
understanding and opinion
    1. Student government and debate
    2. Daily Pledge of Allegiance and recognizing  
American flag
    3. College students are more likely to be  
knowledgeable than non-college students
  - vi. MASS MEDIA-
    1. SELECTIVE EXPOSURE- choose which  
media outlet with which they agree; NPR,  
FOX

2. Media influence is greater on issues and individual politicians than underlying values
- vii. OTHER INFLUENCES
    1. Religion, ethnicity, race, workplace
- e. STABILITY AND CHANGE IN PUBLIC OPINION
    - i. Adults' opinions tend to remain stable
    - ii. A harsh experience (war, economic depression, loss of a job) might be a catalyst that changes attitudes and opinions
    - iii. Core values (abortion, same-sex marriage, death penalty) tend to remain stable over time; how a president is doing can change quickly
- f. PUBLIC OPINION AND PUBLIC POLICY
    - i. Public opinion hard to measure historically but much easier now due to polls, surveys, etc.
    - ii. Public officials tend to focus on issues of importance to the public
      1. Decisions are made on what states to campaign in based on polls
      2. Polls provide valuable data on public opinion and voting behavior
      3. Polls are no substitute for elections
- g. AWARENESS AND INTEREST
    - i. With all the governmental structures and policies, politics is complicated and difficult to understand for the normal person.
    - ii. The public knows little about public policy issues
    - iii. The ATTENTIVE PUBLIC knows politics and how government works; about 25% of the people
    - iv. Opposite end of the spectrum are the political know-nothings; about 1/3 of public
    - v. In between are part time citizens; about 40%

- vi. Democracy can flourish even if all persons aren't engaged in the process; makes activists that much more important

### III. PARTICIPATION: TRANSLATING OPINIONS INTO ACTION

- a. Citizen to Citizen participation- voting in elections, Internet political blogs, interest groups, political party meetings, sign petitions
- b. PROTESTS- political system is very tolerant of protests; MLK
- c. Even in a democracy, people would fight rather than accept the verdict; Lincoln elected in 1860; anti-abortion
- d. For most people, politics is a private activity; avoid discussing because it is divisive or upsetting
- e. Small numbers of people can make a significant difference in political opinion and activity
- f. Political participation increased in 2008 due to increased activity on the Internet; candidates also used the Internet to raise campaign funds.
- g. VOTING- our most typical political activity
  - i. Originally it was a state issue
  - ii. Civil Rights movement of the '60s made voting a central issue
  - iii. One legal requirement- VOTER REGISTRATION- arose in response to voting abuses; but it also discouraged voting
  - iv. Every state but North Dakota requires voter registration in advance
  - v. Motor voter- 1993 National Voter Registration Act allowed people to register to vote while applying for a driver's license or renewing it. More new voters have registered to vote

- vi. ABSENTEE AND EARLY VOTING- absentee has been used since the Civil War; very popular today; 20%; by 2008, 31 states had early voting available
- h. TURNOUT
  - i. The U.S. holds more elections than any other democracy in the world
  - ii. Elect officeholders in GENERAL ELECTIONS, elect nominees in PRIMARY ELECTIONS and replace House of Representatives who have died in office in SPECIAL ELECTIONS
  - iii. PRESIDENTIAL – every 4 years AND MIDTERM ELECTIONS- in between presidential elections; odd numbered years are OFF-YEAR ELECTIONS (primarily local and city elections)
  - iv. TURNOUT- the percentage of eligible voters that actually votes, is higher in presidential than mid-term; higher in mid-term than odd-year; federal elections have higher turnout than state or local
  - v. Turnout highest in 1960, 65% but just over 60% in 2004 and a little higher in 2008
- i. WHO VOTES?
  - i. Varies greatly
  - ii. Higher educated will vote more often
  - iii. Race and ethnicity are linked due to link to education
  - iv. Women have voted in greater numbers than men since 1984
  - v. As age increases so does proportionality of voting; in 2004 there was a concerted party effort to get young people to vote- “Rock the Vote”
- j. MOBILIZATION

- i. Candidates must mobilize their “base”; reaffirm support for basic political issues that party affirms
  - ii. Recognize and attack “battleground states.”
  - iii. CANVASSING the people by conducting interviews
  - iv. Undecided or “swing” voters are a strong focus of mobilization
- k. HOW SERIOUS IS NONVOTING?
  - i. 40% of eligible citizens do not vote in major elections
  - ii. In the U.S., voting can be more difficult and take more time than other countries
  - iii. Hold elections on weekdays; 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment brought age down to 18 where there is apathy
  - iv. Those who argue that nonvoting is a problem point to “class bias” as a major issue; people who need the most help from government do not vote
  - v. People don’t vote because no one asks them to
  - vi. Overall, differing opinions as to importance of nonvoting

#### IV. VOTING CHOICES- three main elements

- a. PARTY IDENTIFICATION- sense of affiliation with party and issues
  - i. Independents have been more important and larger group recently; however, they are actually “leaners”
  - ii. It remains more stable than attitudes about issues or political ideology
- b. VOTING ON THE BASIS OF CANDIDATES
  - i. CANDIDATE APPEAL – or Democrats would have won every election since last realignment in 1932!

1. Candidates make their case directly to the voters
2. Look for candidate-specific information
3. Candidate's character is very important
4. Candidate appeal is many times more important than party or issues; Eisenhower; Dean and "the scream"
5. Increasingly, campaigns focus on the negative of the candidate's character or history

c. VOTING ON THE BASIS OF ISSUES

- i. Less appeal than candidate appeal or party identification
- ii. Candidates tend to be less specific on issues; obscure their positions to not offend any group
- iii. Candidates look for WEDGE ISSUES- issues that will motivate and mobilize large segments of voters
- iv. RETROSPECTIVE ISSUE VOTING – what an incumbent did or didn't do, tends to be more substantive than PROSPECTIVE ISSUE VOTING- what a candidate will do if elected.
- v. The state of the economy is often the central issue in the midterm and presidential elections; many times it doesn't help the incumbent
- vi. Economy was the most important issue in 2008
  1. Lessened the issue of McCain's age or Obama's race

v. THE IMPACT OF CAMPAIGNS -

- a. Effective campaigns give voters reason to vote for their party
- b. Campaigns are a team sport; groups and parties are heavily engaged in all aspects of the campaign
- c. Spending money does not guarantee victory

d. Not for the faint of heart; intense and personal in many cases

V. COUNTING VOTES

- a. Votes are counted in the U.S. in accordance with state laws administered by local officials
- b. Recent changes reflect an effort to modernize the democracy
  - i. Internet voting or e-voting
- c. Voting is imperfect
- d. The process of voting is very local and administered in local neighborhoods
- e. In the wake of the 2000 and 2004 elections, states have invested billions to modernize equipment and technology
- f. Government by the people is most frequently exercised by voting