

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

In a representative democracy, citizens' preferences are supposed to guide policymakers. Yet the American people are amazingly diverse, which means that there are many groups with many different opinions rather than a single public opinion. And most citizens know very little about politics. This chapter focuses on the nature of **public opinion**, how citizens learn about politics, and the extent to which these opinions are conveyed to government officials through various types of political participation.

THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

One way of looking at the American public is through **demography**: the science of human populations. The most valuable tool for understanding demographic changes in America is the **census**.

With its long history of immigration, the United States has often been called a **melting pot**, but policymakers now speak of a new **minority majority** because it is estimated that all the minority groups combined should pass the 50 percent mark by the middle of the twenty-first century. The largest component of the minority used to be the *African-American population*. A legacy of racism and discrimination has left the African-American population economically and politically disadvantaged, but African Americans have recently been exercising a good deal of political power. The *Hispanic population* now outnumbers the Black population. Hispanics are rapidly gaining power in the Southwest. The problem of what to do about *illegal immigration* is of particular concern to the Hispanic community. The recent influx of *Asians* has been headed by a new class of professional workers. Asian Americans are the most highly skilled immigrant group in American history, and they are the best off of America's minority groups. *Native Americans* are by far the worst off of America's minority groups. Statistics show that they are the least healthy, the poorest, and the least educated group. Most remain economically and politically disadvantaged.

Americans live in an increasingly multicultural and multilingual society. Yet, regardless of ethnic background most Americans share a common **political culture**—an overall set of values widely shared within a society. Over the last 60 years, much of America's population growth has been centered in the West and South, particularly with movement to the states of Florida, California, and Texas from states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan. This demographic change is associated with political change, as the process of **reapportionment** brings with it gains or losses of congressional representation as the states' population balance changes. The *fastest growing age group* in America is composed of citizens over age 65. The survival of Social Security is one of the most important issues affecting the elderly.

HOW AMERICANS LEARN ABOUT POLITICS: POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

Richard Dawson notes that **political socialization** is “the process through which an individual acquires his or her own political orientations.” **Agents of socialization** are

numerous, including the family, the media, and schools. Only a small portion of Americans' political learning is formal; *informal learning* is much more important.

Politics is a lifelong activity, and political behavior is to some degree *learned behavior*. The family's role is central because of its monopoly on time and emotional commitment in the early years. Although most students like to think of themselves as independent thinkers, one can accurately predict how the majority of young people will vote simply by knowing the political leanings of their parents. In fact, research with identical twins indicates that genetics plays a substantial part in the political attitudes people possess.

The mass media has been referred to as "the new parent." Television now displaces parents as the chief source of information as children get older. Governments throughout the world use the schools in their attempt to instill a commitment to the basic values of the system. Both democratic and authoritarian governments want students to learn positive features about their political system because it helps ensure that youth will grow up to be supportive citizens. Governments largely aim their socialization efforts at the young because one's *political orientations grow firmer* as one becomes more socialized with age.

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL INFORMATION

Public opinion is the distribution of people's beliefs about politics and policy issues. There is *rarely a single public opinion*: with so many people and such diversity of populations, there are also many opinions. Public opinion is one of the products of political learning.

Public opinion **polling** was first developed by George Gallup in 1932. Polls rely on a **sample** of the population (a relatively small proportion of people who are chosen as *representative* of the whole) to measure public opinion. The key to the accuracy of opinion polls is **random sampling**, which operates on the principle that everyone should have an equal probability of being selected. However, there is always a certain amount of risk of inaccuracy involved, known as the **sampling error**.

Sophisticated technology is now available for measuring public opinion. Most polling is now done on the telephone with samples selected through **random digit dialing**, in which calls are placed to telephone numbers within randomly chosen exchanges. Supporters of polling consider that it is a *tool for democracy* by which policymakers can keep in touch with changing opinions on issues. Critics of polling think polls can weaken democracy by *distorting the election process*. Polls are often accused of creating a "**bandwagon effect**," in which voters may support a candidate only because they see that others are doing so. Moreover, emphasis on poll results sometimes has drowned out the *issues* of recent presidential campaigns. The election day **exit poll** is probably the most criticized type of poll. In the 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1996 presidential elections, the networks declared a winner while millions on the west coast still had hours to vote (but analysis of survey data shows that few voters have actually been influenced by exit poll results). In 2000, the exit polls received much of the blame for the media's inaccurate calls of the Florida result on election night. Perhaps the most pervasive criticism of polling is that by altering the *wording* of questions, pollsters can get pretty much the results they want.

Polls have revealed again and again that the average American has a low level of political knowledge. While people around the globe are less informed than they should be, Americans know even less. Increased levels of education over the last four decades and our information-rich modern society have scarcely raised public knowledge about politics. Part of the reason the American political system works as well as it does is that people do know what *basic values* they want upheld, even when they do not have information on policy questions or decision makers. Sadly, the American public has become increasingly dissatisfied with government over the last three decades. This in turn has undermined the ability of government to address pressing social problems.

WHAT AMERICANS VALUE: POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

Generally, Americans tend to identify themselves as conservatives more than moderates or liberals—which help to account for the relatively limited scope of government in the United States. But who identifies as a liberal or conservative often varies according to age, gender, race and socioeconomic status. Groups with political clout tend to be more conservative than groups whose members have often been shut out from the halls of political power.

Women are not a minority group, making up about 54 percent of the population, but they have nevertheless been politically and economically disadvantaged. Compared to men, women are more likely to support spending on social services and to oppose the higher levels of military spending, which conservatives typically advocate. This ideological difference between men and women has led to the **gender gap**, which refers to the regular pattern by which women are more likely to support Democratic candidates.

Ideological thinking is not widespread in the American public, nor are people necessarily consistent in their attitudes. For most people, the terms *liberal* and *conservative* are not as important as they are for political elites. Thus, the authors of the classic study *The American Voter* (Angus Campbell, et al.) concluded that to speak of election results as indicating a movement of the public to either the “left” or “right” is a misnomer because most voters do not think in such terms. Some polling data disputes media claims of a polarizing “culture war.” For example, long-term tracking polls indicate a gradually increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians among liberals, moderates, and conservatives alike.

Furthermore, those who do think in ideological terms are actually the least likely to shift from one election to the next. The relatively small percentage of voters who made up their minds in the last couple of days of the Bush-Gore campaign in 2000 were far more concerned with integrity and competence than ideology.

HOW AMERICANS PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS

Political participation encompasses the many activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue. Paradoxically, the United States has a *participatory political culture*, but only 60 percent of Americans voted in the 2004 presidential election, and only 40 percent voted in the 2006 mid-term elections. Turnout in local elections is even lower.

Political scientists generally distinguish between two broad types of participation: conventional and unconventional. **Conventional participation** includes many widely accepted modes of influencing government, such as voting, trying to persuade others, ringing doorbells for a petition, and running for office. Although the decline of voter turnout is a development Americans should rightly be concerned about, a broader look at political participation reveals some positive developments for participatory democracy. **Unconventional participation** includes activities that are often dramatic, such as protesting, civil disobedience, and even violence.

Protest is a form of political participation designed to achieve policy change through dramatic and unconventional tactics, and protests today are often orchestrated to provide television cameras with vivid images. Throughout American history, individuals and groups have sometimes used **civil disobedience**, in which they consciously break laws that they think are unjust. Nonviolent civil disobedience was one of the most effective techniques of the civil rights movement in the American South. Although political participation can also be violent (as in some of the Vietnam War protests of the 1960s), perhaps the best indicator of *how well socialized Americans are to democracy* is that protest typically is aimed at *getting the attention of government* rather than at overthrowing it.

In the United States, participation is a *class-biased activity*, with citizens of higher socioeconomic status participating more than others. Minority groups like Hispanics and African Americans are below average in terms of political participation. However, the participation differences between these groups and the national average have been declining. When Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites *of equal incomes and educations* are compared, it is the *minorities who participate more* in politics.

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL ACTION

While more people today think the government is too big rather than too small, a plurality has consistently called for spending on programs like education, healthcare, aid to big cities, protecting the environment, and fighting crime. Many political scientists have looked at these contradictory findings and concluded that Americans are *ideological conservatives* but *operational liberals*.

Americans often take for granted the opportunity to replace our leaders at the next election. Even if they are only voting according to the nature of the times, voters are being heard—which holds elected officials accountable for their actions.