

## 4.1 Public Opinion & Political Socialization



Image 4.1 Civic Participation Photos of Opposing Protesting Groups

On April 15 (or “tax day”), 2010, members of the Tea Party movement rallied at the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul in favor of smaller government and against the Affordable Care Act (left). Two years later, supporters of the law (right) demonstrated in front of the U.S. Supreme Court during oral arguments in *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*.

(Credit: OpenStax; credit left--modification of work by “Fibonacci Blue”/Flickr; credit right--modification of work by LaDawna Howard)

### Learning Objectives

- Define public opinion and political socialization.
- Explain the process and role of political socialization in the U.S. political system.
- Compare the ways in which citizens learn political information.
- Understand the role of social groups in the political socialization process and public opinion formation.

Chart 4.1 Learning Objectives on Public Opinion and Political Socialization

### What Is Public Opinion?

**Public opinion** is a collection of attitudes and beliefs of an individual or a group of individuals about political issues and topics. For example, each day, a number of polling organizations call Americans at random to ask whether they approve or disapprove of the way the president is guiding the country.<sup>[1]</sup> These individual opinions are collected for analysis and interpretation by public policy makers. The collection of public opinion through polling and interviews is a part of the American political system. Politicians want to know what the public thinks. Campaign managers want to know how citizens will vote. Media members seek to write stories about what Americans want and about critical issues facing the nation. Every day, polls take the pulse of the people and report the results. Why do we care what people think?

Public opinion analysis examines how the public feels or thinks, so policy makers can use the information to make decisions that are responsive to public concerns.

With a system of elected representation, the connection between majority public opinion and governmental action by those elected is a guiding assumption of democratic theory. While many will dispute how exact the linkage is or should be, few will deny that “**consent** of the governed” implies a responsive relationship to public opinion.<sup>[4]</sup> But where do people’s opinions come from?

Most citizens base their political opinions on their beliefs<sup>[3]</sup> and their attitudes, both of which begin to form in childhood. Beliefs are closely held ideas that support our values and expectations about life and politics. For example, the idea that we are all entitled to equality, liberty, freedom, and privacy is a belief most people in the United States agree upon; and, it can be said to be part of the shared political culture of the United States. We may acquire this belief by growing up in the United States or by having come from a country that did not afford these valued principles to its citizens. Our attitudes are also affected by our personal beliefs and represent the preferences we form based on our life experiences and values. A person who has suffered racism or bigotry may have a skeptical attitude toward the actions of authority figures. Over time, our beliefs and our attitudes about people, events, and ideas will become a set of norms, or accepted ideas, about what we may feel should happen in our society or what is right for the government to do in a situation. In this way, attitudes and beliefs form the foundation for opinions.

## Political Socialization

While our political beliefs and attitudes are forming during childhood, we are also being socialized; that is, we are learning from many information sources about the society and community in which we live and about its political system. **Political socialization** is the entire complex process by which we are trained to understand our country’s political system and form our political views about how it should operate; and, like most forms of socialization, it starts when we are very young. We may first become aware of politics by watching a parent or guardian vote, for instance, or by hearing presidents and candidates speak on television or the Internet, or seeing adults honor the American flag at an event. As socialization continues, we are introduced to basic political information in school. We recite the Pledge of Allegiance and learn about the Founding Fathers, the *Constitution*, the two major political parties, the three branches of government, and the economic system. In the United States, one benefit of socialization is that our political system enjoys diffuse support, which is support characterized by a high level of stability in politics, acceptance of the government as legitimate, and a common goal of preserving the system.<sup>[4]</sup>

### Consider the Original: Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance...

**“I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”**

(Credit: USCode.House.gov)

Chart 4.2 The Pledge of Allegiance

By the time we complete formal schooling, we have usually acquired the political knowledge necessary to form political views and be contributing members of the political system.<sup>[5]</sup> However, political socialization does not end with formal schooling and is really a life-long process. Our own personal political ideology, made up of the attitudes and beliefs that help shape our opinions on political theory and policy, is rooted in who we are as individuals. Our political beliefs may change as we grow older and are introduced to new circumstances or new information. While some changes in political beliefs may be subtle and gradual, sometimes we experience events that profoundly affect us and our political beliefs.<sup>[6]</sup> For example, family members of 9/11 victims became more Republican and more political following the terrorist attacks.<sup>[7]</sup>

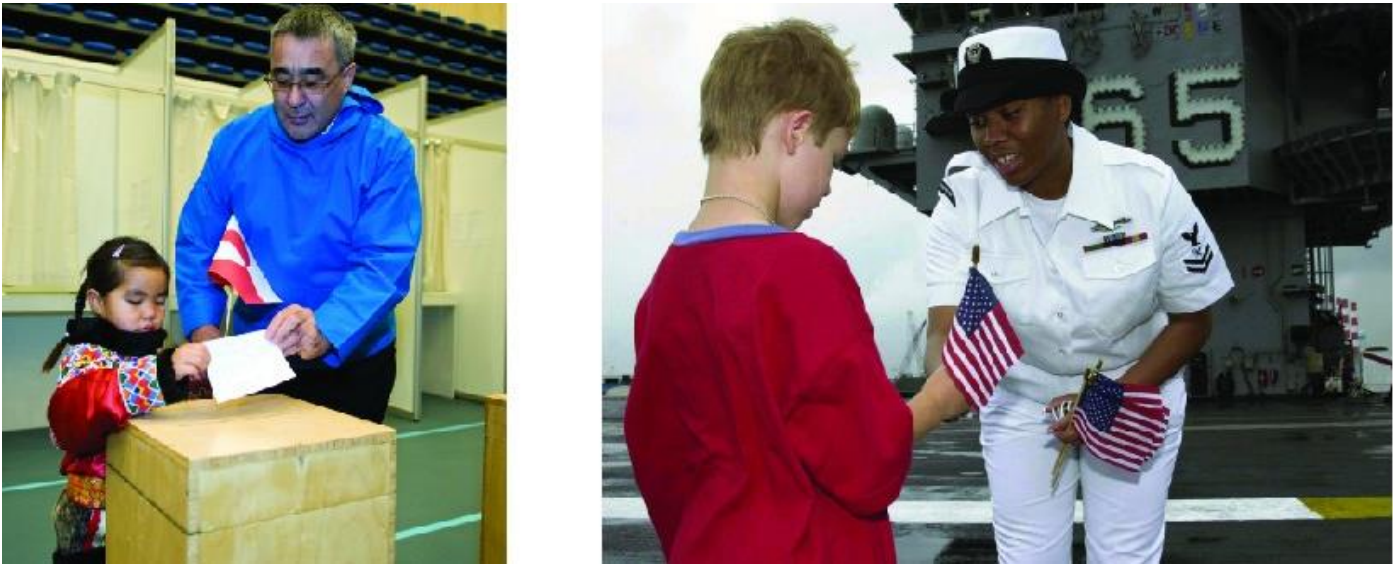


Image 4.2 Photos of Children Involved in Civic Participation

Political socialization begins early. (a) Hans Enoksen, former prime minister of Greenland, receives a helping hand at the polls from five-year-old Pipaluk Petersen. (b) Intelligence Specialist Second Class Tashawbaba McHerrin hands a U.S. flag to a child visiting the USS *Enterprise* during Fleet Week in Port Everglades, Florida. (OpenStax; Credit a: modification of work by Leiff Josefsen; Credit b: modification of work by Matthew Keane, U.S. Navy)

## Socialization Agents

An **agent of political socialization** is a source of political information which influences citizen understanding of how to act in their political system or make decisions on political matters. These agents’ information may influence their political actions. For example, the information may help a citizen decide how to vote, where to donate money, or how to protest decisions made by the government. The most prominent early agents of socialization are family, friends, and formal schooling.

Other life-long influential agents of socialization include social groups, such as religious institutions, interest groups of which

| Agents of Socialization    |
|----------------------------|
| parents, family            |
| friends, peers             |
| Interest groups            |
| education, teachers        |
| books, movies, media       |
| experiences                |
| circumstances              |
| religious practice/leaders |
| social group membership    |

Chart 4.3 Agents of Socialization

individuals are members, unions, popular culture such as movies and television along with the news mass media. Both interest groups and the mass media, major agents of political socialization for adults, will be covered in a separate chapters.<sup>[8]</sup> We are also socialized outside our homes and schools. When citizens attend religious services or ceremonies, as 70 percent of Americans in a recent survey claimed, they are socialized to adopt beliefs that affect their politics.<sup>[9]</sup> Religious leaders often teach on matters of life, death, punishment, and obligation, which translate into views on political issues such as abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty, and peace and military involvement. Political socialization is not a new concept. It was acknowledged even in the days of ancient Greece that democracy could not flourish without capable people acting and the cultivation and spread of knowledge.

## Consider the Original

Excerpt from BOOK II CHAPTER VI *Beginning of the Peloponnesian War—First Invasion of Attica—Funeral Oration of Pericles* from THE HISTORY OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR by Thucydides 431 BC as translated by Richard Crawley for Project Gutenberg...

**“Our public men have, besides politics, their private affairs to attend to, and our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters; for, unlike any other nation, regarding him who takes no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless, we Athenians are able to judge at all events if we cannot originate, and instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all [...]” –Pericles**

(Credit: [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7142/7142-h/7142-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0007](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7142/7142-h/7142-h.htm#link2H_4_0007))

Chart 4.4 Excerpt from Pericles

Friends and peers too have a socializing effect on citizens. Communication networks are based on trust and common interests, so when we receive information from friends and neighbors, we often readily accept it because we trust them.<sup>[10]</sup> Information transmitted through social media is also likely to have a socializing effect. Friends “like” articles and information, sharing their political beliefs and information with one another. Media—newspapers, television, radio, and the Internet—also socialize citizens through the information they provide. For a long time, the media served as gatekeepers of our information, creating reality by choosing what to present. If the media did not cover an issue or event, it was as if it did not exist. With the rise of the Internet and social media, however, traditional media have become less powerful agents of this kind of socialization.

## Social Groups and Public Opinion

Race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, and socio-economic status also shape opinion. They are part of the everyday reality of personal experiences and circumstances, and they become part of how we evaluate leadership and governing processes. Opinions of various demographic groups varied widely during the 2016 presidential election season.<sup>[11]</sup> Public opinion analysts frequently find differences on issues divided by demographic groups. These differences occur because of the shared experiences of those in the social

group. That is, individuals in these social groups are comfortable with one another and will talk more and share opinions, leading to more opportunities to influence or reinforce one another's opinions.

Social groups may be viewed as both voluntary and involuntary. Some examples of social groups include age cohort, gender, race, social economic class, ethnicity, education level, geographic region, etc. It is possible for a social group to be both voluntary and involuntary. For example, someone might be born within a particular social class; but, through their own actions, they may move up or down the socio-economic ladder. Research shows opinions often develop through the filter of group affiliation. For example, issues surrounding social security elicit different responses from senior citizens versus younger adults. Race and ethnicity are often factors in facilitating the development of distinctive political viewpoints.

## Race and Ethnicity

About three-quarters of blacks and Asians and about half of Hispanics say they experience discrimination or unfair treatment because of race or ethnicity.<sup>[12]</sup> In the same survey, about two-thirds whites claimed to have never experienced unfair treatment; however, this may be changing among some whites. For example, an increasing percentage of young white males in the science and technology fields now claim they are being discriminated against based on both race and gender in the workplace—with “diversity” in the workforce being the chief reason for discrimination in hiring and career advancement.<sup>[12]</sup> These white male workers consider themselves victims of “reverse discrimination.”<sup>[13]</sup> Blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to say they have been unfairly stopped by law enforcement. Blacks, far more than Whites (79% to 44%), suggest that government should increase help for the needy “even if it means” increased government debt.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Gender

Pew Research Center surveys acknowledge approximately four in ten women claim discrimination based upon gender, and about half say the government has not done enough to provide equal rights to women.<sup>[16]</sup> More women (58%) appear to prefer bigger government providing more services rather than smaller government with fewer services (36%)—with men the statistics are reversed.<sup>[17]</sup> Significant gender gaps also exist on several political and social issues, including party identification and views of the death penalty. However, while abortion is favored by women with less men identifying as pro-choice, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, these differences are quite small and generally such results have been the case for decades.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Geography

Daniel Elazar's 1966 book, *Federalism: A View from the States*, discussed three distinct geographic regions and political cultures in the US attributed to immigrant migratory patterns, with distinct political and religious values influencing beliefs about the proper role of government. Advances in technology and transportation make it easier to travel and relocate; however, analysts still acknowledge political opinion

differences among regions and states. Gallup polling found a concentration of conservative voters in the South and Mountain states, while the Northeast and West Coast areas promote liberal perspectives on the role of government.<sup>[19]</sup> Pew Research Center found significant differences in public opinion between rural, suburban and urban areas.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Religious Affiliation

Religious affiliation or lack of any affiliation impacts individual opinion. On the issue of abortion over sixty percent of evangelical protestants oppose abortion, while over eighty percent of American Jews support legal abortion as did those with no religious affiliation.<sup>[21]</sup> More than seventy percent of individuals who say religion is “very important and an integral part of a person’s life,” oppose abortion.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Political Assumptions and Social Group Membership

Political parties and candidates consider social group affiliation when designing campaigns, with campaign strategies considering the generally perceived opinions of groups on sets of issues. While social group loyalties impact public opinion formation, group influence is reduced when affiliation with a group is offset by simultaneous linkage with another group—**cross-cutting cleavages** limit the degree to which political alignments intensify and establish a singular political orientation.<sup>[23]</sup>

A person identifying as “working class” does not necessarily define their entire political perspective exclusively by this characteristic. They may also focus on race, ethnicity, gender, or even the industry in which they work. Some or all these social groups may determine their total political orientation or perspective on issues. Seymour Martin Lipset’s *Social Requisites of Democracy* notes “the available evidence suggests that the chances for stable democracy are enhanced to the extent that groups and individuals have a number of cross-cutting, politically relevant affiliations.”<sup>[24]</sup> Recent trends show a growth of **reinforcing** rather than **cross-cutting cleavages** has led to polarization and conflict within the U.S. political system. In *Uncivil Agreement*, Lilliana Mason analyses a decades-long process of “social sorting” among social groups and found that cross-cutting differences “are increasingly disappearing from the American electorate,” noting Republican and Democratic parties attract supporters with different racial, religious, ideological and regional differences; but, gradually Republicans and Democrats are more internally homogeneous with greater overlap and reinforcing consistency among respective social groups—increasing alignment between partisan, ideological and social identities.<sup>[25]</sup> The term, **identity politics**, denotes when people’s political beliefs and interests are assumed to be determined by group membership—particularly gender, race, sexual orientation or religion.<sup>[26]</sup> In this era of increasing social group reinforcement in the two major political parties, each party accuses the other of paying inappropriate attention to identity politics. Republicans criticize Democrats for “playing identity politics” with a focus on racial, ethnic or gender-related social identities. Democrats charge Republicans are controlled by one social group—Christian evangelicals playing “identity politics” among working class whites.<sup>[27]</sup>

## Public Opinion: Questions to Consider

1. Where do your beliefs originate?
  2. What do we mean by political socialization and what two things do we learn through this process of socialization?
  3. What is an agent of political socialization?
  4. Which early agents of socialization will have the strongest impact on an individual?
- 
1. *beliefs originate from our life experiences which begin to form in childhood with family or early childhood experiences including formal schooling but continue throughout our lives and include the influence of others and of groups formal and informal of which we are a party*
  2. *political socialization is the way we acquire political values and opinions; through this continuous process we learn about the political system and form political opinion*
  3. *it is a source of political information which influences citizen understanding and opinion of how to act in their political system or make decisions on political matters*
  4. *family is typically the strongest influence because it is the first*

## Terms to Remember

**agent of political socialization**—a person or entity that teaches and influences others about politics through use of information

**cross-cutting cleavages**—social group divisions within society that cut across demographic categories to produce groups that are more heterogeneous or different; concept recognizes most people have multiple interests and identities affecting political views

**identity politics**—term used when people's political beliefs and interests are assumed to be determined by their membership in groups, particularly their gender, race, sexual orientation or religion

**political socialization**—the process of learning the norms and practices of a political system through others and societal institutions

**public opinion**—collection of attitudes and beliefs of an individual or group of individuals on a topic, person, or event

**reinforcing cleavages**—social group divisions within society that reinforce one another, making groups more homogeneous or similar in their political beliefs

**socio-economic status**—position in society based upon social class, education, and income

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## 4.2 Political Culture and Political Ideology

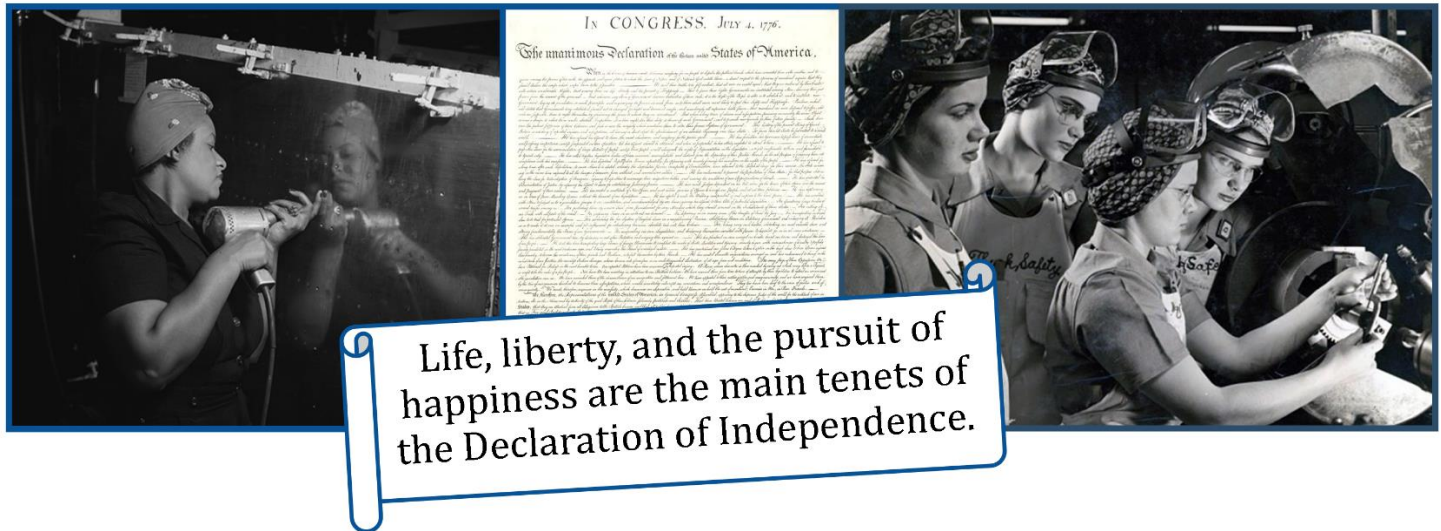


Image 4.3 Photos of Women Factory Workers During WWII

Our shared values in the US was first expressed in the Declaration of Independence, including a person's inherent right to "life liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This American political creed involves a belief in hard work and personal achievement, with the expectation of equal treatment by employers.

(Credit: "Operating a hand drill at Vultee-Nashville, a woman is shown working on a 'Vengeance' dive bomber, Tennessee," Library of Congress, Alfred T. Palmer, photographer, 1943; [www.loc.gov/resource/fasc.1a35371](https://www.loc.gov/resource/fasc.1a35371) and National Archives at <https://www.archives.gov/founding-doc/declaration>; a group of women are shown working on machinery, Department of the Interior photo)

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss shared beliefs, values, and political culture.
- Explain how beliefs and ideology affect the formation of public opinion about governmental actions.
- Explain the standard interpretation of political ideology in the United States and its limitations.
- Explain an alternative interpretation of U.S. political ideology.
- Understand political ideology in a worldwide context.

Chart 4.5 Learning Objectives on Shared Political Culture and Ideology

### SHARED POLITICAL CULTURE: VALUES AND BELIEFS

The first, and perhaps most crucial, elements of a **shared political culture** are values and beliefs. **Values** are a culture's standard for discerning what is good and just in society. Values are deeply embedded and critical for transmitting and teaching a culture's beliefs. **Beliefs** are the tenets or convictions that people hold to be true. Individuals in a society have specific beliefs, but they also share collective values. Collective values are not static. They vary across time and between groups as people evaluate, debate, and change societal beliefs. Values also vary from political culture to political culture, that is, nation to nation.

To illustrate the difference, Americans commonly believe in and value the “American Dream”—that everyone should have an opportunity to seek a happy, successful life with material comfort and prosperity. Underlying this belief are the American values of egalitarianism, individualism, populism, freedom, and confidence in a private-sector free-market capitalist economic system.

Collective values help shape a **shared political culture** by suggesting what is good and bad and what is to be sought or avoided in public policy and governmental actions. Consider the value that the United States places upon **egalitarianism** or the belief that everyone should be treated equally by the government regardless of other factors such as age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, etc. The United States also has an individualistic culture, meaning people place a high value on **individualism** and independence. In contrast, many other cultures are collectivist, meaning the welfare of the group and group relationships are a primary value. Americans tend to value **democratic principles** or the belief that the people, themselves, through their civic participation ought to be in control of the government and the government should protect our **liberty/freedoms** whether political, social or economic. Additionally, most Americans think **capitalism**, or a private sector dominate market-based economy, is the best economic system.

| Element                      | Description of Element of Shared Political Culture               |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>liberty/freedom</b>       | political, social and economic liberty of each individual        |
| <b>democratic principles</b> | belief that the people should be in control of the government    |
| <b>egalitarianism</b>        | belief that everyone should be treated equally by the government |
| <b>individualism</b>         | independence; self-determination                                 |
| <b>capitalism</b>            | market-based economy with minimal controls to protect the people |

Chart 4.6 Elements of Shared Political Culture

Living up to a political culture’s values can be difficult. On a personal level, it is easy to value good health, but it is hard to quit smoking. Equal opportunities for all people are valued in the United States, yet the country’s highest political offices have been dominated by white men and not all have been able to achieve the “American Dream.”

Societies strive to put values into action through rewards, sanctions, and punishments. Rewards may involve informal social interaction while sanctions and punishments require governmental action. For example, when people observe the norms of society and uphold its values, they are often rewarded. A boy who helps an elderly woman board a bus may receive a smile and a “thank you.”

People sanction certain behaviors by giving their support, approval, or permission informally, or by enacting formal governmental sanctions of disapproval and nonsupport.

Sanctions are a form of social control, a way to encourage conformity to cultural norms. Sometimes people conform to norms in anticipation or expectation of positive sanctions: good grades, for instance, may mean praise from parents and teachers.

From a criminal justice perspective, properly used social control is also inexpensive crime control. Utilizing social control pushes most people to conform to societal rules, regardless of whether authority figures (such as law enforcement) are present. When people go against a society's values, they are punished either informally or through formal governmental enforced action. A boy who shoves an elderly woman aside to board the bus first may receive frowns or even a scolding from other passengers. Breaking norms and rejecting values can lead to cultural sanctions such as earning a negative label—lazy, no-good bum—or to legal sanctions, such as traffic tickets, fines, or imprisonment.<sup>11</sup>

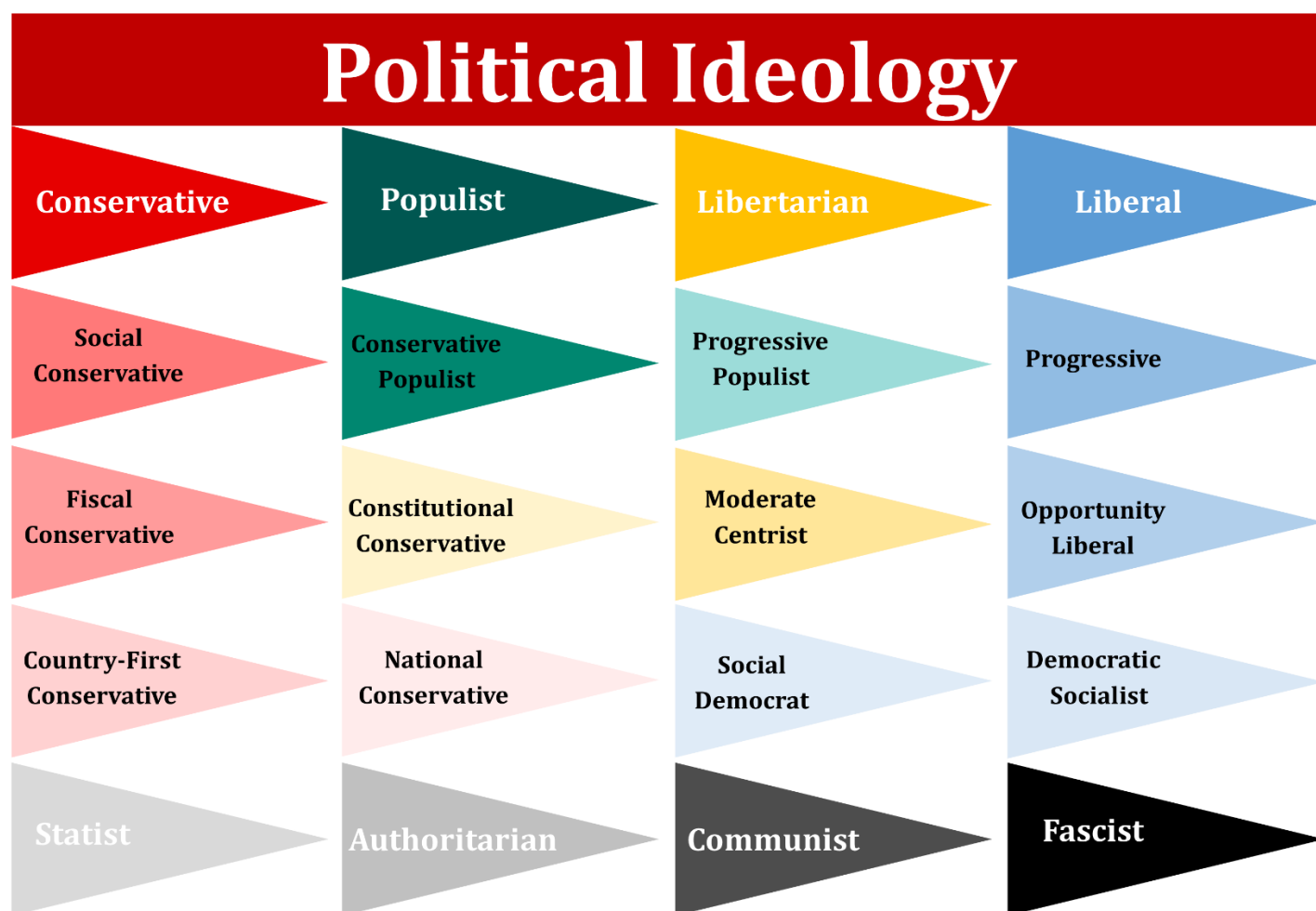


Chart 4.7 Illustration of Various Degrees of Political Ideology

Original Chart by Richard Fonte and Deborah Hoag of Austin Community College, 18 July 2019.

Political ideologies can come in many varieties and combinations beyond the simple division between conservative and liberal. The chart reflects the complex division of ideologies within the United States. The bottom four ideologies are not significant within the U.S. but reflect ideological thought among some individuals and in other countries.

## Socialization and Political Ideology

A **political ideology** is a consistent set of political beliefs, values, and attitudes shared by a group about what government should do: its purposes and scope. The individual political socialization process leaves citizens with attitudes and beliefs that create a personal **political ideology**. In the United States, both the predominate political ideologies and a personal political ideology are shaped within a shared political culture. Political ideologies depend on attitudes and beliefs and on how we prioritize each belief or attitude.

Even in the context of a shared political culture, however, there can be significant differences over the prioritization and interpretation of the shared values. For example, egalitarianism can be interpreted solely as a commitment to the **equality of opportunity** or fair competition based upon legal and social equality; or, it can be broadened to suggest that government should take action to provide for a specific equalized result—**equality of outcome**.<sup>[2]</sup>

Citizens hold a great number of beliefs and attitudes about government action. Most think government should provide for the common defense, in the form of a national military. They also argue that government should provide social programs and services to citizens in the form of public education, temporary income payments for the unemployed and assistance for the poor and senior citizens. When asked how to divide the national budget, Americans reveal priorities that divide public opinion. Should we have smaller military and larger social welfare programs or a larger military budget for national defense and limited social benefits?

This is the *guns versus butter* debate, which assumes that governments have a finite amount of money

and must choose whether to spend a larger part on the national defense or on social programs. The choice forces citizens into opposing ideological groups regarding government priorities.

### Ideologies and the Ideological Spectrum

An extremely common way to look at political ideologies is to place them on a left to right spectrum or axis that visually compares them based on what they prioritize. This left to right placement dates from the time of the French Revolution, where those seeking the most change in the nation's political and societal arrangements sat on the left side of the



Image 4.4 Photo of Important Women Social Reformers

Suffrage and labor activist Flora Dodge “Fola” La Follette (1882-1970) and social reformer and missionary Rose Livingston with a young stiker during a garment strike in New York City in 1913 illustrate how personal beliefs and values can lead to civic engagement based upon ideological preferences. (Credit: Library of Congress, Bain Collection, Bain News Service, 12397)

legislative assembly. Those seeking to preserve or conserve the existing political and social system sat on the right side.

Today, many political analysts and the popular mass media frequently characterize the two most predominant U.S. political ideological groups, liberal and conservative, using this left to right continuum. This left to right spectrum does have some limitations in differentiating between governmental roles in regulating social behavior and economic intervention, but it can be generally useful in dividing those who both seek change in the existing economic and social systems and those who both seek to preserve and maintain the existing economic and social systems.

It is important to recognize the two political ideologies of liberalism and conservatism do not represent the entire spectrum of U.S. political ideologies. They are, however, predominant enough that conservatives find their major home in the Republican Party while liberals primarily associate with the Democrat Party.

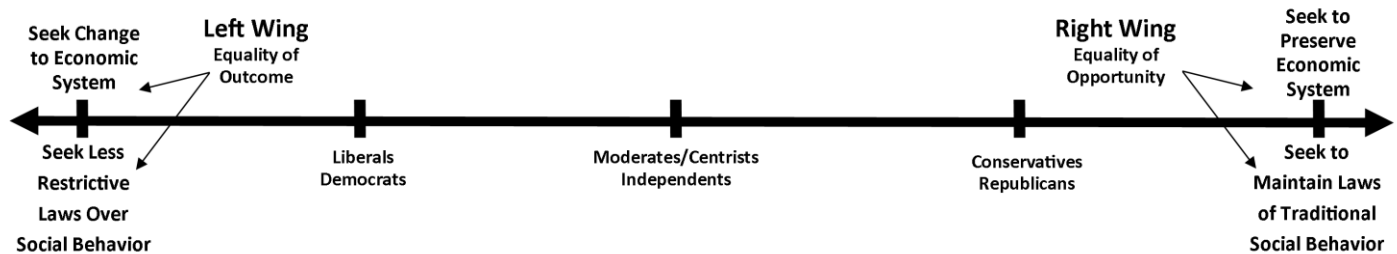


Chart 4.8 Illustration of Political Leanings Left to Right

## Predominant U.S. Ideologies: Liberal and Conservative

### Liberalism

Modern **Liberals** generally support a more interventionist and active role for the federal/national government in regulating and stimulating the nation's economy. They support government spending on social welfare programs aimed at providing a strong social safety net for the economically disadvantaged with the goal of achieving the outcome of greater income and economic equality. That is, they see a significant role for the national government in providing public goods and services. Liberals often express concerns over fairness of the criminal justice and law enforcement systems and the potential adverse impact on some ethnic and racial groups.

Liberalism supports an individual's right to make decisions without what are traditional constraints on social behavior, including constraints on marriage (same-sex marriage) and abortion. To Liberals, these are personal liberty choices or lifestyle freedoms with which government should not interfere.

The research of the moral psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, found Liberals committed to the value of caring/compassion leading to concern over rights of "vulnerable groups" and to social welfare programs to help these groups as a matter of "social justice."<sup>[3]</sup>

Frequently, the media uses the term **Progressives** to describe Liberals, and the two terms are often considered interchangeable.<sup>[4]</sup> However, the progressive term is differentiated from liberal in that progressives favor higher levels of national government intervention on economic matters and to remove traditional constraints on social behavior. Some Progressives seek to go even further than other Liberals on the role of government, preferring to be called **Social Democrats** or **Democratic Socialists**. The candidate debates for the 2020 Democratic Party nomination during 2019 debate season demonstrated that many of the candidates preferred to classify themselves as Progressives rather than Liberals. Bernie Sanders, running for the 2020 nomination, calls himself a Democratic Socialist.

The 2017 Pew Research Center survey on ideology found differences among liberal oriented groups, reflecting the interpretation of a split between a progressive wing and a more moderate “opportunity” liberalism, which had greater confidence in the current U.S. economic system to provide for economic advancement without government intervention. The research found two groups differing on government’s role on health care with the more moderate “opportunity” oriented liberals in favor of some form of private-public mix for health insurance rather than a fully public sector insurance plan. <sup>[5]</sup>

## Conservatism

Modern **Conservatives** support a more limited role for the national government supporting less government spending and more fiscal restraint. Conservatives advocate a smaller commitment to social welfare programs by the national government or for what are known as public sector goods and services. Conservatives perceive the role of government is to facilitate individualized equality of opportunity with minimal responsibility of guaranteeing equality of outcome. Thus, they support only a basic social safety net for truly needy individuals.

Jonathan Haidt, the moral psychologist found Conservatives viewing equality as a matter of fair treatment for individuals in achieving what they deserve based on their abilities with “liberty” from government interference. Conservatives view “justice as fairness” and use the term “justice” with no modifier, where Liberals often seek “social justice,” which is seeking to equalize someone’s or some social group’s social or economic standing in society through governmental programs and policies—implying the need to seek a high social safety net.<sup>[6]</sup>

For Conservatives, a critical idea is that individuals are to be judged on their individual actions and needs rather than a judgment of need for government assistance based on social group identifiers—that is, regardless of individual action or effort. Conservatives support a government of equal rules for all individuals rather than favoritism for certain groups—opposing what might be considered group-oriented equality of outcome programs.

In addition, Conservatives have a strong commitment and loyalty to maintaining order through a safe and organized society based upon the rule of law and the established practices and national traditions of society.<sup>[7]</sup> Conservative governmental policy generally supports upholding traditional moral or social constraints (the social order) on individual behavior including marriage and abortion.<sup>[8][9]</sup> Conservatives,

especially **Social Conservatives**, see abortion as disrespecting the unalienable right to life regardless of age, the human fetus is acknowledged as a separate individual with separate liberties and rights.

There are significant differences in emphasis among those who consider themselves Conservatives. **Fiscal Conservatives** emphasize policies focused on economic issues, while **Social Conservatives** focus on upholding traditional social behavior.

**Fiscal Conservatives** prefer limited government intervention in the economy, allowing the free market to determine prices, wages, and supply of goods. They are also very concerned about the overall level of government spending and an increasingly large national debt.

**Constitutional Conservatives** or Limited Government Conservatives believe the *U.S. Constitution* carefully delineates and restricts the powers of the national government. As a matter of constitutional principle, they favor state government flexibility in determining the scope of the safety net. They believe in monitoring government overreach into individual lives along with maintaining the rule of law and support of constitutional structures of government meant to balance power and limit the possibility of tyrannical government. Even the courts should be bound by the *Constitution*, and no branch of government should exceed the enumerated authority granted in the *U.S. Constitution*.

The 2017 Pew Research Center survey on Ideology found differences among Conservatives between those they labeled as “**country-first**” conservatives, favoring restrictions on legal and illegal immigration and international trade with less optimism of the U.S. military role abroad, in contrast with other conservatives favoring more legal immigration and a greater international economic role and more optimism over the ability of the U.S to effectively use military power.<sup>[10]</sup> Recently, these more nationalistic, country-first conservatives have self-described as **National Conservatives**.<sup>[11]</sup>

### Moderates, Centrists or Ambivalent?

Many political analysts recognize that these two political ideologies do not fully represent the range of political beliefs of the American public. Frequently, an in-between category known as **Moderates**, has been used to describe those who do not fall into the major categories. Moderates are assumed to share some beliefs from Liberalism and Conservatism. Sometimes they are called **Centrists**. Many people, in response to political polling, describe themselves as moderates, but the category lacks a consistency of content.<sup>[12]</sup> Sometimes, the polling would seem to place such people in an “ambivalent” category toward ideology.<sup>[13]</sup>

### Libertarianism and Populism: Other U.S. Ideologies (Social Issue Variation)

There is a growing recognition that many American differentiate between social and economic based issues when evolving a personal political ideology.<sup>[14]</sup>

While some seek change on both economic and social behavior issues, some may seek change only on economic issues.<sup>[15]</sup> Thus, a simple left to right focus on change as indicated by the chart above, may fail to capture the range of current U.S. political ideologies.<sup>[16]</sup>

Therefore, a fuller understanding of the U.S. ideological spectrum is helped by two additional ideologies, Libertarianism and Populism. The diagram below adds these two additional ideologies recognizing that individuals can have views on the desirability of governmental laws in either or both arenas—social and economic.<sup>[17]</sup>

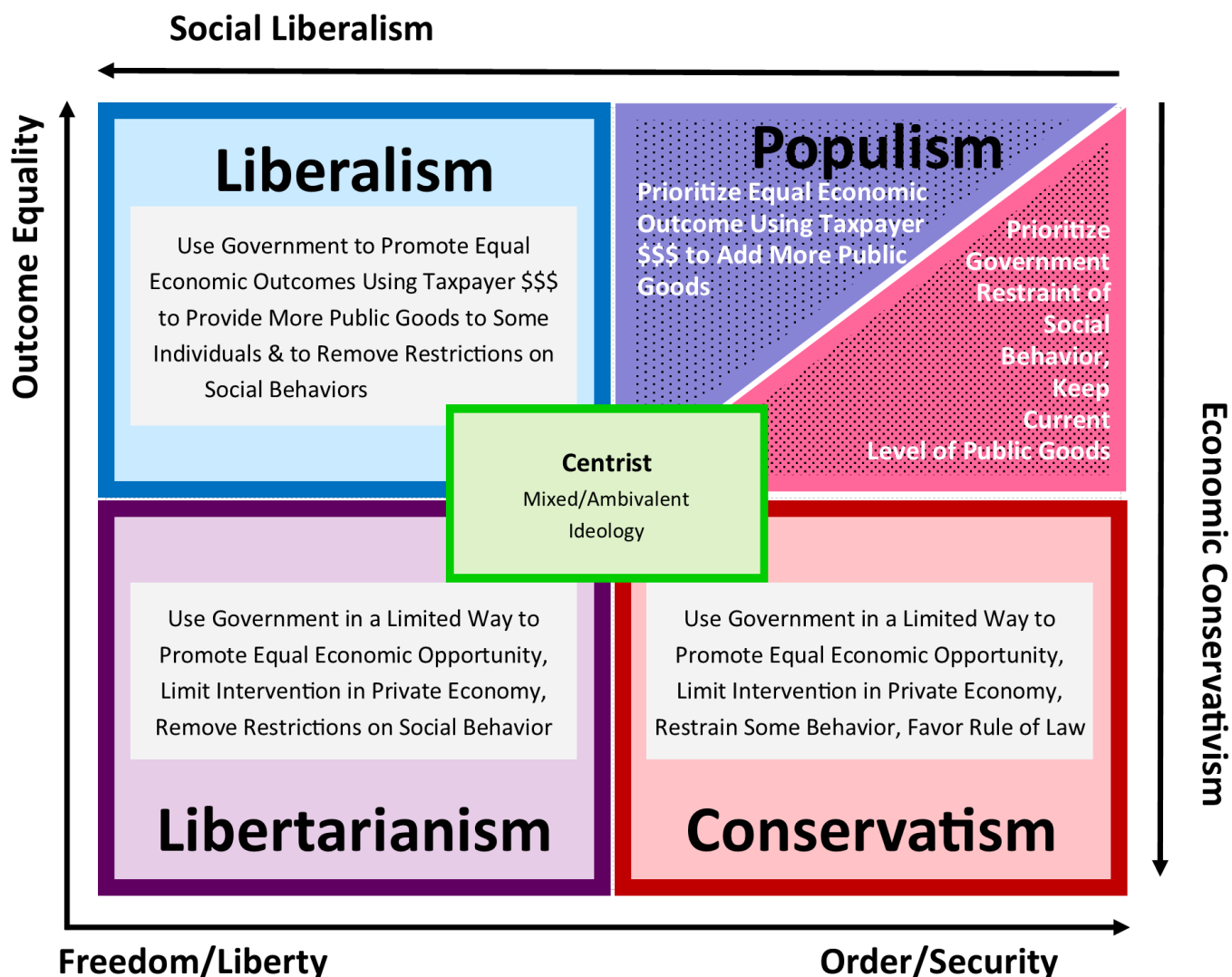


Chart 4.9 Illustration of Various Ideologies

## Libertarianism

**Libertarians** support limited government intervention in private life and the economy. Government exists to maintain and maximize individual freedom for both personal life behavior choices and individual economic decision-making. For Libertarians, government's main functions are very limited with an emphasis on ensuring domestic peace and national defense with few public goods. For

Libertarians, government should not engage in major social welfare programs or programs aimed at promoting economic equality. Their view of the social safety net may be stricter than Conservatives in terms of government responsibility.

Libertarians may have considerable compatibility with Conservatives on fiscal issues and frequently find themselves at home in the Republican Party. They may be constitutional conservatives or limited government conservatives, generally believing the U.S. *Constitution* significantly restricts the powers of the national government.

Libertarians are frequently less inclined to favor an interventionist foreign policy than many conservatives; and, they often share similar views with Liberals opposing governmental restraint on social behavior, including marriage, abortion, or marijuana use.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Populism

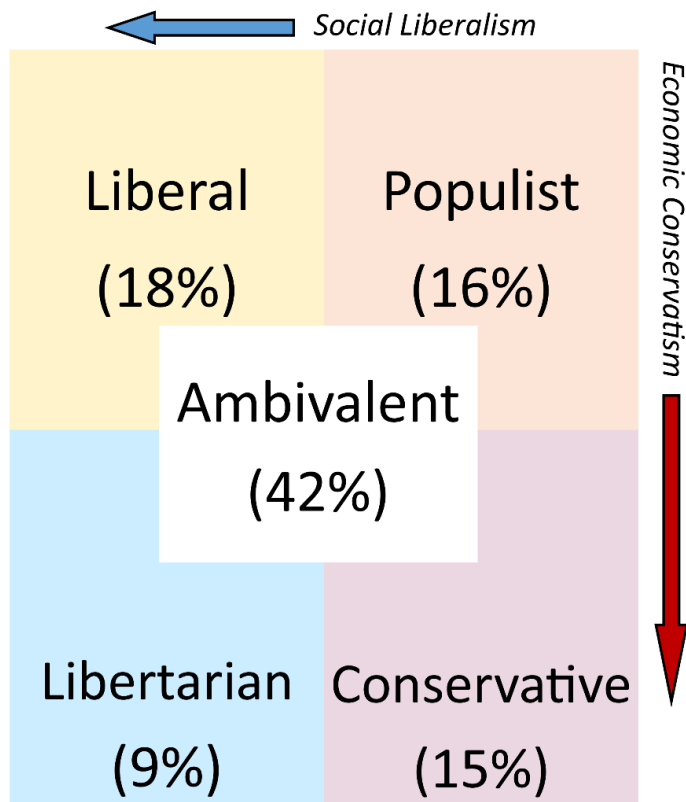
**Populism** has both an attitudinal and ideological aspect to its perspective on the role and scope of government. Populism places emphasis on control of government by the people, meaning ordinary people rather than a powerful elite.

In fact, a distrust of elites is usually an essential part of a populist viewpoint, especially business or economic elites as well as political, cultural, or establishment elites. The ideological definition of Populism varies widely with analysts seeing both the existence of left-wing or **progressive populism** and right-wing or **conservative-leaning populism**.<sup>[19]</sup>

One view of a **Populist** typically aligns them ideologically with Liberals on economic equality issues such as the value of the social safety net and with Conservatives on social issues.<sup>[20]</sup> This explanation may be too simple since it fails to differentiate among Populists of the priority or emphasis they may place on economic versus social issues. Populists generally support a significant governmental role in providing greater economic equality through social welfare programs, often favoring economic regulation of business.

Some Populists are sometimes called social conservatives or conservative populists because they have similar views with Conservatives by also placing a priority on issues such as abortion, marriage, law-enforcement, and immigration policy.

The Pew Research Center found that a group labeled the “devout and diverse” approached such views.<sup>[21]</sup> Other Populists, known as Progressive Populists, emphasize economic issues almost exclusively and have views similar to Liberals or self-styled Progressives.<sup>[22][23]</sup>



Based on responses to 6 questions: 3 dealing with role of government in the economy and social welfare issues, and 3 dealing with social issues. (Credit: Pew Research Center, "In Search of Ideologies in America," 10 April, 2006)

**Chart 4.10 Ideologies by Percent of Population**

## The U.S. Profile of Ideology

The Pew Research study of ideologies found that the majority of Americans could be classified into one of four basic ideological categories—liberal, conservative, libertarian or populist. However, a significant portion of the American public (42%) defied easy classification into these groups. This large non-ideological group was labeled as “ambivalent” about ideology. The largest ideological group were classified as liberals (18%), followed by populist (16%), conservatives (15%) and libertarians (9%).<sup>[24]</sup>

The survey of 2000 people classified ideology on the basis of responses to six questions covering economic and social issues. While liberals and conservatives gave consistently contrasting responses on both economic and social issues, populists were similar to conservatives on social questions and more

similar to liberals on economic issues. Libertarians were liberal-like on social questions and similar to conservatives on economic issues.<sup>[25]</sup>

The ideological groups also differed from each other on certain demographic characteristics.

Libertarians were more likely to be under 30 and contain more males. Males and females were evenly divided as conservatives, with females more likely to be populist and liberal than males. Those with only a high school degree were more likely in the populist or ambivalent category, with only 16% of populists having a college degree. Populists also were less well-off financially than other groups. Liberals were more likely to have a college degree.<sup>[26]</sup>

The populist ideological category also had some other significant differences from other ideological groups. Unlike liberals, populists are far more likely to be evangelical protestants and attend church weekly than are liberals. In addition, they are far more likely to reside in the South, with liberals far more likely to li the Northeast.<sup>[27]</sup>

## World-Wide Ideologies (Economic Issue Variation): Socialism and Communism

### Socialism

**Socialism** (Democratic) supports strong governmental policy to promote both social and economic equality within a country. Socialists believe government should provide public goods and publicly financed services, often to the exclusion of private goods and services. Socialist countries frequently have basic industries run directly by the government, but they differ on the degree of reliance on the public sector and public goods—seeing governmental programs as a way to ensure all citizens obtain equal economic outcomes. Compared to the American version of Liberalism, the level of governmental intervention in society and the economy is a higher priority for modern Socialists. At least one recent U.S. politician, Senator Bernie Sanders, is a self-proclaimed Democratic Socialist. European social Democracies like Sweden or Denmark are characterized by significant adoption of socialist political ideology, while preserving most civil liberties and civil rights.<sup>[28]</sup>

### Communism

**Communism** promotes common ownership of all property, means of production, and materials. This means that the government, or states, should own the property, farms, manufacturing, and businesses. Essentially, there would be no private goods—only public goods. Communism presents a problem, however, because the practice differs from the theory. The presumption of communist theory, as espoused by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, includes advocacy for common ownership of property, society based solely on public goods, and government supported and led by workers of the country.<sup>[29]</sup> Human rights violations by actual communist countries, such as Cuba and the former Soviet Union, demonstrate that such governments are not formed with the consent of the people but are imposed upon the citizens of the country. That is, communist governments are generally totalitarian and non-democratic with limited civil liberties and civil rights. They differ, therefore, very little from other authoritarian regimes with governmental control over virtually all aspects of society.

## World-Wide Ideologies (Authoritarian Based): Fascism and Statism

### Fascism

**Fascism** promotes total control of the country by the ruling party or political leader. This form of government will run the economy, the military, society, and culture, and often tries to control the private lives of its citizens. Authoritarian leaders control the politics, military, and government of a country, and often the economy as well, either through direct ownership or state planning and regulation. Such governments are non-democratic and citizens have neither rights nor civil liberties.<sup>[30]</sup>

### Statism

**Statism** promotes extensive intervention by the government in both economic and social spheres. Individuals supporting the state as the ultimate arbiter of what is correct, what (or who) is valuable, and what level of government control is acceptable are Statists. For Statists, nothing exists outside the state.

## Political Ideologies: United States and World-Wide

The U.S. versions of Liberalism and Conservatism, even with the addition of Libertarianism and Populism, do not represent the totality of worldwide political ideologies commonly adopted or represent how such ideological terms are used in other countries. In fact, people may sometimes be a mix of ideological positions depending on the exact issues under discussion. The chart below provides a short summary of some of the major ideologies operating both in the United States and in other countries.

| Ideological Label                                  | Generalized Description of Ideological Viewpoint                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Major U.S. Political Ideologies</b>             |                                                                                              |
| <b>Liberalism</b>                                  | remove constraints on social behavior; increase govt. role in \$\$ issues                    |
| <b>Conservatism</b>                                | traditions of social behavior; limited government control of \$\$ issues; rule of law        |
| <b>Other Ideologies (Social Issue Variation)</b>   |                                                                                              |
| <b>Populism</b>                                    | traditional on social behavior; expanded public services and govt. \$\$ spending             |
| <b>Libertarianism</b>                              | very little constraint on social behavior; limited govt. intervention; limited \$\$ spending |
| <b>Other Ideologies (Economic Issue Variation)</b> |                                                                                              |
| <b>Socialism</b>                                   | govt. enforces social and economic equality; govt. provides goods and services               |
| <b>Communism</b>                                   | common ownership/full government ownership of all property, production, etc.                 |
| <b>Other Ideologies (Authoritarian Variation)</b>  |                                                                                              |
| <b>Fascism</b>                                     | total control by ruling elite or dictator of both private and public lives of citizens       |
| <b>Statism</b>                                     | individuals support extensive intervention by the state; economic and social control         |

Chart 4.11 Descriptions of Ideological Labels

Chart created by Deborah Hoag and Richard Fonte, Austin Community College.



Where do your beliefs come from?

The Pew Research Center offers a [typology quiz](#) to help you find out.

- Ask a friend or family member to answer a few questions with you and compare the results of your quiz answers.
- What do you think about government regulation?
- What are your opinions on the military?
- What do you think about the economy?
- Are you both liberal, conservative, or moderate?

## Public Opinion: Questions to Consider

1. What would be the difference between Liberals and Conservatives on the issue of the appropriate level of public goods and services?
2. On what category of issues would Conservatives and Libertarians find frequent agreement and on what category of issues would they disagree?
3. How do ideological differences develop in the U.S. with its system of shared political culture?

1. *Liberals favor a higher level of public goods and services than Conservatives who are typically more reluctant to put the burden of paying for all these services upon the taxpayers*
2. *They would agree on fiscal or economic issues and likely disagree on personal lifestyle or traditional social behavior issues?*
3. *There can be significant difference over the prioritization and interpretation of the shared values.*

## Terms to Remember

**beliefs**—the tenets or convictions that people hold to be true

**capitalism**—an economic system, characterized by a predominate, private sector providing goods and services through a private market based economy and free markets based upon private ownership of means of production and services

**communism/communist**—a political and economic system ideology where government promotes common or government ownership of all property and the means of production, a removal of private property protections; placing the economic system in the hands of a limited number of governmental elites; in practice, most communist governments use force to maintain political, social, and economic control, essentially statist or authoritarian

**conservatism/conservative**—a political ideology that prioritizes individual liberties, preferring a smaller government that stays out of the economy

**democratic principles**—belief that people should be in control of government with political equality, the right to political participation and consent of the governed” in determining public policy

**democratic socialism**—belief in predominately socialist economic system, frequently used term connected to social democracy in Denmark and Sweden

**egalitarianism**— the belief that everyone should be treated equally by the government

**equality of opportunity**—egalitarianism with an emphasis on equality before the law, non-discrimination based on individual action

**equality of outcome**—broaden view of egalitarianism beyond social and legal equality suggesting government should take action to guarantee some level of economic equality as the result of policy; equality of outcome policies may be focused upon individuals or groups; group equality of outcome favors some groups based on group identity rather than individual situation and action

**fascism/fascist**—a political system of total control by the ruling party or political leader over the economy, the military, society, and culture and often the private lives of citizens

**ideology**—beliefs and values shared by members of a group

**individualism**—independence of the individual, everyone has value regardless of any factor of birth or circumstance

**liberalism/liberal**—a political ideology based on belief in government intervention to support increased economic equality and less control of personal social behavior or personal lifestyle

**libertarianism/libertarian**—a political ideology which supports individual rights and limited government intervention in private life and personal economic decisions

**liberties**—freedoms possessed because an individual is a human being with reasoning capabilities; life, liberty and property; basic freedoms

**moderate/centrist**—assumed to share some beliefs from Liberalism and Conservatism

**political ideology**—a consistent set of political beliefs, values, and attitudes shared by a group about what government should do: its purposes and scope

**political socialization**—the process of learning the norms and practices of a political system and of forming our political views about how it should operate

**populism/populist**—a political ideology which places an emphasis on control of government by the common people rather than a powerful elite; generally supports a significant program of public goods and services by government, divided among themselves on the degree that government should or should not intervene in traditional social behavior issues

**progressive**—term sometimes used interchangeably with liberal; but is sometimes differentiated from liberal with progressives said to favor higher levels of national government intervention on economic matters and higher levels of action to remove traditional constraints on social behavior

**public opinion**—a collection of attitudes and beliefs of an individual or a group of individuals on a topic, person, or event

**shared political culture**—collectively held and deeply embedded values and beliefs which shape a particular society's perspectives on what is good and bad and what is to be sought or avoided in public policy or governmental actions; this shared political culture may vary from nation to nation

**socialism/socialist**—a political and economic system in which government uses its authority to promote social and economic equality

**statism/statist**–the state is the highest arbiter of the scope of government intervention and law

**values**–a culture’s standard for discerning or determining what is good and just in society

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#### PUBLIC DOMAIN CONTENT

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## 4.3 Public Opinion: How is it measured?



Image 4.5 Photo of Child Waiting to Watch Voting

Photo of child at the polling place.  
(Credit: Catherine Donaldson-Evans, November 5, 2012, 7:23 pm,  
"Voting with Kids: The 411 on Taking Your Children to the Polls" from CafeMom.com)

### Learning Objectives

- Explain how information about public opinion is gathered.
- Identify common ways to measure and quantify public opinion.
- Analyze polls to determine whether they accurately measure a population's opinions.

Chart 4.12 Learning Objectives on Public Opinion

Polling has changed over the years. The first opinion poll was taken in 1824; it asked voters how they voted as they left their polling places. Informal polls are called **straw polls**, and they informally collect opinions of a non-random population or group. Newspapers and social media continue the tradition of unofficial polls, mainly because interested readers want to know how elections will end.

Facebook and online newspapers often offer informal, pop-up quizzes that ask a single question about politics or an event. The poll is not meant to be formal, but it provides a general idea of what the readership thinks.

**Tracking polls** are typically conducted repeatedly over a period and by going back to the same group of respondents. These polls often follow an incumbent office holder (like the president) or a policy issue, making trends observable

Modern public opinion polling is relatively new, only eighty years old. These polls are far more sophisticated than straw polls and are carefully designed to probe what we think, want, and value. The information they gather may be relayed to politicians or newspapers and is analyzed by statisticians and social scientists. As the media and politicians pay more attention to the polls, an increasing number are put in the field every week.

## Taking a Poll

Most public opinion polls aim to be accurate, but this is not an easy task. From design to implementation, polls are complex and require careful planning and care. Our history is littered with examples of polling companies producing results that incorrectly predicted public opinion due to poor survey design or bad polling methods.

In 1936, *Literary Digest* continued its tradition of polling citizens to determine who would win the presidential election. The magazine sent opinion cards to people who had a subscription, a phone, or a car registration. Only some of the recipients sent back their cards. As a result, Alf Landon was predicted to win 55.4 percent of the popular vote; in the end, he received only 38 percent.<sup>14</sup>

A few years later, Thomas Dewey lost the 1948 presidential election to Harry Truman, despite polls showing Dewey far ahead and Truman destined to lose. In 1948, pollsters did not poll up to the day of the election, relying on old numbers that did not include a late shift in voter opinion. Zogby's polls did not represent likely voters and incorrectly predicted who would vote and for whom. These examples reinforce the need to use scientific methods when conducting polls, and to be cautious when reporting the results.

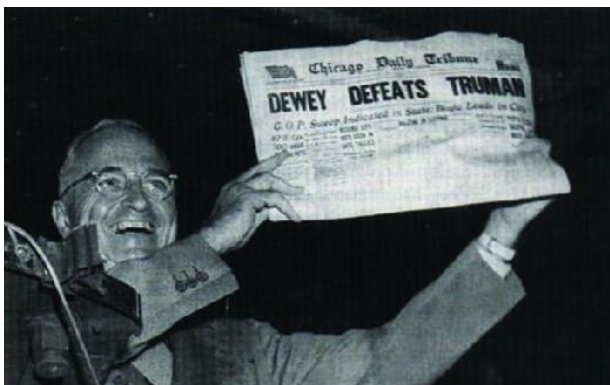


Image 4.6 President Truman Wins Election

Polling process errors can lead to incorrect predictions. On November 3, the day after the 1948 presidential election, a jubilant Harry S. Truman triumphantly displays the inaccurate headline of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* announcing Thomas Dewey's supposed victory (Credit: OpenStax; David Erickson/Flickr).

Most polling companies employ statisticians and methodologists trained in conducting polls and analyzing data. Several criteria must be met if a poll is to be completed scientifically.

First, the methodologists identify the desired population, or group, of respondents they want to interview. For example, if the goal is to project who will win the presidency, citizens from across the United States should be interviewed. If we wish to understand how voters in Colorado will vote on a proposition, the population of respondents should only be Colorado residents. When surveying on elections or policy matters, many polling houses will interview only respondents who have a history of voting in previous elections, because these voters are more likely to go to the polls on Election Day.

Politicians are more likely to be influenced by the opinions of proven voters than of everyday citizens. Once the desired population has been identified, the researchers will begin to build a sample that is both random and representative.

| Type of Poll   | Description of Poll                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| straw          | informal collection of opinion; non-random; not representative; pop-up question                                                                                   |
| tracking       | repeated over time with same group of respondents; following policy or person                                                                                     |
| exit           | taken as voters leave/exit the polling locations after an election                                                                                                |
| push           | poll uses leading questions in an attempt to get a predetermined answer; may be used to influence a targeted audience with the skewed polling data                |
| Type of Sample | Description of Sample                                                                                                                                             |
| random         | limited number of people from overall population selected; each person in overall population examined has equal chance of being chosen to participate in the poll |
| representative | group whose demographic distribution is similar to the overall population sought for the poll                                                                     |

Chart 4.13 Types of Polls, Descriptions and Samples

A **random sample** consists of a limited number of people from the overall population, selected in such a way that each has an equal chance of being chosen. In the early years of polling, telephone numbers of potential respondents were arbitrarily selected from various areas to avoid regional bias. While landline phones allow polls to try to ensure randomness, the increasing use of cell phones makes this process difficult. Cell phones, and their numbers, are portable and move with the owner. To prevent errors, polls that include known cellular numbers may screen for zip codes and other geographic indicators to prevent regional bias. A **representative sample** consists of a group whose demographic distribution is similar to that of the overall population. For example, nearly 51 percent of the U.S. population is female.<sup>[2]</sup> To match this demographic distribution of women, any poll intended to measure what most Americans think about an issue should survey a sample containing slightly more women than men.

Pollsters try to interview a set number of citizens to create a reasonable sample of the population. This sample size will vary based on the size of the population being interviewed and the level of accuracy the pollster wishes to reach. If the poll is trying to reveal the opinion of a state or group, such as the opinion

of Wisconsin voters about changes to the education system, the sample size may vary from five hundred to one thousand respondents and produce results with relatively low error. For a poll to predict what Americans think nationally, such as about the White House's policy on greenhouse gases, the sample size should be larger.

A larger sample makes a poll more accurate, because it will have relatively fewer unusual responses and be more representative of the actual population. Pollsters do not interview more respondents than necessary, however. Increasing the number of respondents will increase the accuracy of the poll, but once the poll has enough respondents to be representative, increases in accuracy become minor and are not cost-effective.<sup>[3]</sup>

When the sample represents the actual population, the poll's accuracy will be reflected in a lower margin of error. The **margin of error** is a number that states how far the poll results may be from the actual opinion of the total population of citizens. The lower the margin of error, the more predictive the poll is likely to be. Large margins of error are problematic. For example, if a poll that claims Hillary Clinton is likely to win 30 percent of the vote in the 2016 New York Democratic primary has a margin of error of  $\pm 6$ , it tells us that Clinton may receive as little as 24 percent of the vote ( $30 - 6$ ) or as much as 36 percent ( $30 + 6$ ). A lower margin of error is clearly desirable because it gives us the most precise picture of what people think or will do.

With many polls out there, how do you know whether a poll is a good poll and accurately predicts what a group believes? First, look for the numbers. Polling companies include the margin of error, polling dates, number of respondents, and population sampled to show their scientific reliability. Was the poll recently taken? Is the question clear and unbiased?

Was the number of respondents high enough to predict the population? Is the margin of error small? It is worth looking for this valuable information when you interpret poll results.

While most polling agencies strive to create quality polls, other organizations want fast results and may prioritize immediate numbers over random and representative samples. For example, instant polling is often used by news networks to quickly assess how well candidates are performing in a debate.

## Technology and Polling

The days of randomly walking neighborhoods and phone book cold-calling to interview random citizens are gone. Scientific polling has made interviewing more deliberate. Historically, many polls were conducted in person, yet this was expensive and yielded problematic results.

In some situations, face-to-face interviewing still exists. Exit polls, focus groups, and some public opinion polls occur in which the interviewer and respondents communicate in person.

Exit polls are conducted in person, with an interviewer standing near a polling location and requesting information as voters leave the polls. Focus groups often select random respondents from local shopping

places or pre-select respondents from Internet or phone surveys. The respondents show up to observe or discuss topics and are then surveyed.

On November 6, 2012, the Connect2Mason.com team conducts exit surveys at the polls on the George Mason University campus. (Credit: OpenStax; Mason Votes/Flickr).



Image 4.7 Young People Conducting Exit Polling

When organizations like Gallup or Roper decide to conduct face-to-face public opinion polls, however, it is a time-consuming and expensive process. The organization must randomly select households or polling locations within neighborhoods, making sure there is a representative household or location in each neighborhood.<sup>[4]</sup>

Then it must survey a representative number of neighborhoods from within a city. At a polling location, interviewers may have directions on

how to randomly select voters of varied demographics. If the interviewer is looking to interview a person in a home, multiple attempts are made to reach a respondent if he or she does not answer.

Gallup conducts face-to-face interviews in areas where less than 80 percent of the households in an area have phones, because it gives a more representative sample.<sup>[5]</sup>

News networks use face-to-face techniques to conduct exit polls on Election Day.

Most polling now occurs over the phone or through the Internet. Some companies, like Harris Interactive, maintain directories that include registered voters, consumers, or previously interviewed respondents. If pollsters need to interview a population, such as political party members or retirees of a specific pension fund, the company may purchase or access a list of phone numbers for that group. Other organizations, like Gallup, use random-digit-dialing (RDD), in which a computer randomly generates phone numbers with desired area codes. Using RDD allows the pollsters to include respondents who may have unlisted and cellular numbers.<sup>[6]</sup>

Questions about ZIP code or demographics may be asked early in the poll to allow the pollsters to determine which interviews to continue and which to end early.

The interviewing process is also partly computerized. Many polls are now administered through computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) or through robo-polls. A CATI system calls random telephone numbers until it reaches a live person and then connects the potential respondent with a trained interviewer. As the respondent provides answers, the interviewer enters them directly into the computer program. These polls may have some errors if the interviewer enters an incorrect answer. The

polls may also have reliability issues if the interviewer goes off the script or answers respondents' questions.

Robo-polls are entirely computerized. A computer dials random or pre-programmed numbers and a prerecorded electronic voice administers the survey. The respondent listens to the question and possible answers and then presses numbers on the phone to enter responses. Proponents argue that respondents are more honest without an interviewer. However, these polls can suffer from error if the respondent does not use the correct keypad number to answer a question or misunderstands the question. Robo-polls may also have lower response rates, because there is no live person to persuade the respondent to answer. There is also no way to prevent children from answering the survey. Lastly, the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (1991) made automated calls to cell phones illegal, which leaves a large population of potential respondents inaccessible to robo-polls.<sup>[7]</sup>

The latest challenges in telephone polling come from the shift in phone usage. A growing number of citizens, especially younger citizens, use only cell phones, and their phone numbers are no longer based on geographic areas. The millennial generation (currently aged 18–33) is also more likely to text than to answer an unknown call, so it is harder to interview this demographic group. Polling companies now must reach out to potential respondents using email and social media to ensure they have a representative group of respondents.

Yet, the technology required to move to the Internet and handheld devices presents further problems. Web surveys must be designed to run on a varied number of browsers and handheld devices. Online polls cannot detect whether a person with multiple email accounts or social media profiles answers the same poll multiple times, nor can they tell when a respondent misrepresents demographics in the poll or on a social media profile used in a poll.

These factors also make it more difficult to calculate response rates or achieve a representative sample. Yet, many companies are working with these difficulties, because it is necessary to reach younger demographics in order to provide accurate data.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Problems in Polling

For several reasons, polls may not produce accurate results. Two important factors a polling company faces are timing and human nature. Unless you conduct an **exit poll** during an election and interviewers stand at the polling places on Election Day to ask voters how they voted, there is always the possibility the poll results will be wrong. The simplest reason is that if there is time between the poll and Election Day, a citizen might change his or her mind, lie, or choose not to vote at all. Timing is very important during elections, because surprise events can shift enough opinions to change an election result. Of course, there are many other reasons why polls, even those not time-bound by elections or events, may be inaccurate.



Created in 2003 to survey the American public on all topics, Rasmussen Reports is a [new entry](#) in the polling business. Rasmussen also conducts exit polls for each national election.

Polls begin with a list of carefully written questions. The questions need to be free of framing, meaning they should not be worded to lead respondents to an answer. For example, take two questions about presidential approval. Question 1 might ask, “Given the high unemployment rate, do you approve of the job President Obama is doing?” Question 2 might ask, “Do you approve of the job President Obama is doing?” Both questions want to know how respondents perceive the president’s success, but the first question sets up a frame for the respondent to believe the economy is doing poorly before answering. This is likely to make the respondent’s answer more negative. Similarly, the way we refer to an issue or concept can affect the way listeners perceive it. The phrase “estate tax” did not rally voters to protest the inheritance tax, but the phrase “death tax” sparked debate about whether taxing estates imposed a double tax on income.<sup>[9]</sup>

Many polling companies try to avoid leading questions, which lead respondents to select a predetermined answer, because they want to know what people really think. Some polls, however, have a different goal. Their questions are written to guarantee a specific outcome, perhaps to help a candidate get press coverage or gain momentum. These are called **push polls**. In the 2016 presidential primary race, MoveOn tried to encourage Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) to enter the race for the Democratic nomination. Its poll used leading questions for what it termed an “informed ballot,” and, to show that Warren would do better than Hillary Clinton, it included ten positive statements about Warren before asking whether the respondent would vote for Clinton or Warren.<sup>[10]</sup>

The poll results were blasted by some in the media for being fake. Sometimes lack of knowledge affects the results of a poll. Respondents may not know that much about the polling topic but are unwilling to say, “I don’t know.” For this reason, surveys may contain a quiz with questions that determine whether the respondent knows enough about the situation to answer survey questions accurately.

A poll to discover whether citizens support changes to the Affordable Care Act or Medicaid might first ask who these programs serve and how they are funded. Polls about territory seizure by the Islamic State (or ISIS) or Russia’s aid to rebels in Ukraine may include a set of questions to determine whether the respondent reads or hears any international news. Respondents who cannot answer correctly may be excluded from the poll, or their answers may be separated from the others. People may also feel social pressure to answer questions in accordance with the norms of their area or peers.<sup>[11]</sup> If they are embarrassed to admit how they would vote, they may lie to the interviewer.

In the 1982 governor’s race in California, Tom Bradley was far ahead in the polls, yet on Election Day he lost. This result was nicknamed the **Bradley effect**, on the theory that voters who answered the poll were afraid to admit they would not vote for a black man because it would appear politically incorrect and racist. In the 2016 presidential election, the level of support for Republican nominee Donald Trump may

have been artificially low in the polls due to the fact that some respondents did not want to admit they were voting for Trump.

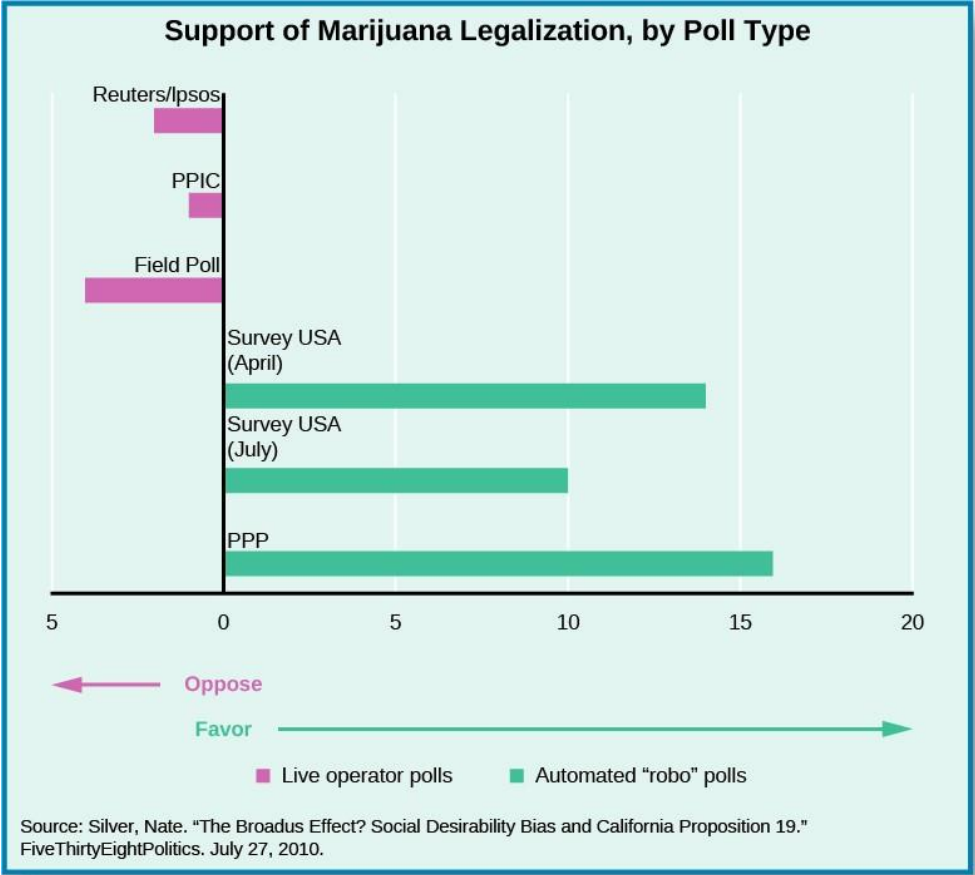


Chart 4.15 Bar Graph on Polling on Issue of Marijuana Legalization

In 2010, polls about California’s Proposition 19 were inconsistent, depending on how they were administered, with voters who spoke with a live interviewer declaring they would vote against Proposition 19 and voters who were interviewed via a computer declaring support for the legislation. The measure was defeated on Election Day.

In 2010, Proposition 19, which would have legalized and taxed marijuana in California, met with a new version of the Bradley effect. Nate Silver, a political blogger, noticed that polls on the marijuana proposition were inconsistent, sometimes showing the proposition would pass and other times showing it would fail. Silver compared the polls and the way they were administered, because some polling companies used an interviewer and some used robo-calling. He then proposed that voters speaking with a live interviewer gave the socially acceptable answer that they would vote against Proposition 19, while voters interviewed by a computer felt free to be honest.<sup>[12]</sup> While this theory has not been proven, it is consistent with other findings that interviewer demographics can

affect respondents’ answers. African Americans, for example, may give different responses to interviewers who are white than to interviewers who are black.<sup>[13]</sup>

### Public Opinion: Questions to Consider

1. Why do pollsters interview random people throughout the country when trying to project which candidate will win a presidential election?

2. How have changes in technology made polling more difficult?

1. because if they were to confine their sample to one area of the country, it would not be representative of the total population and would have a significant margin of error

2. many citizens use only cell phones, whose area codes do not indicate their actual geographic location since cell phones are their numbers are portable and move with the owner; random and representative samples are also impacted by Caller ID on phones allows individuals to avoid calls they do not recognize; new technology requires companies to make online polls accessible on different platforms; the millennial generation (currently aged 18–33) is also more likely to text than to answer an unknown call, so it is harder to interview this demographic group

## Terms to Remember

**exit poll**—an election poll taken by interviewing voters as they leave a polling place

**leading question**—a question worded to lead a respondent to give a desired answer

**margin of error**—a number that states how far the poll results may be from the actual preferences of the total population of citizens

**push poll**—politically biased campaign information presented as a poll in order to change minds

**random sample**—a limited number of people from the overall population selected in such a way that each has an equal chance of being chosen

**representative sample**—a group of respondents demographically like the population of interest

**straw poll**—an informal and unofficial election poll conducted with a non-random population

**tracking poll**—poll conducted repeatedly over a period of time; usually following an incumbent office holder (like the president) or a policy issue; making trends observable

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## 4.4 Public Opinion:

### What is the connection to political institutions?

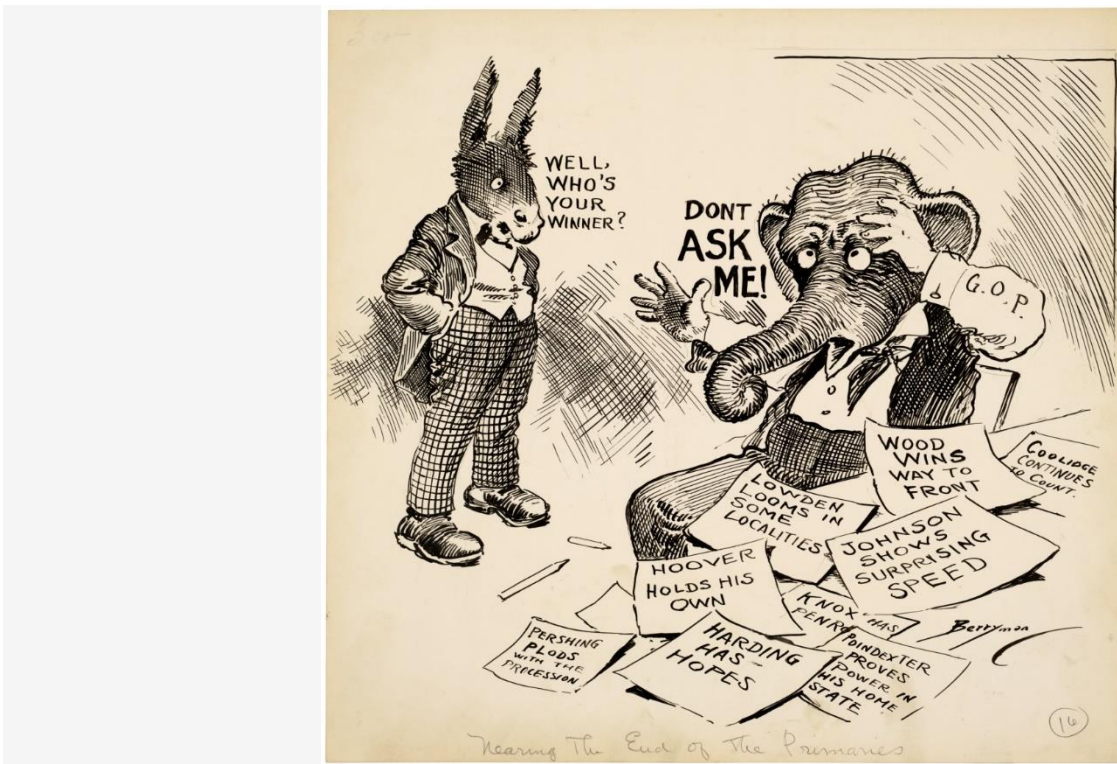


Image 4.8 Political Cartoon from 1920

May 3, 1920 This cartoon illustrates the effect of the primary process and the uncertainty of public opinion on choosing nominees for political office. This cartoon shows the frazzled Republican elephant surrounded by conflicting newspaper headlines while the Democratic donkey makes pressing inquiries "Who's your winner?" (Credit: U.S. Senate Collection Center for Legislative Archives at <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/running-for-office/>)

### Learning Objectives

- Explain why Americans hold a variety of views about politics, policy issues, and political institutions.
- Identify factors that change public opinion.
- Compare levels of public support for the branches of government.

Chart 4.16 Learning Objectives on Opinion of Government

## Public Opinion and Political Institutions

Public opinion about American institutions is measured in public approval ratings rather than in questions of choice between positions or candidates. The congressional and executive branches of government are the subject of much scrutiny and discussed daily in the media. Polling companies take daily approval polls of these two branches.

The Supreme Court makes the news less frequently, and approval polls are more likely after the court has released major opinions. All three branches, however, are susceptible to swings in public approval in response to their actions and to national events. Approval ratings are generally not stable for any of the three. We next look at each in turn.



Chart 4.17 Line Graph on Joe Biden Tracking Poll

Presidential approval ratings illustrated by a **tracking poll** on President Joe Biden by Gallup, Inc. (Credit: Gallup at [new.gallup.com/poll/509186/biden-averages-job-approval-tenth-quarter.aspx](https://new.gallup.com/poll/509186/biden-averages-job-approval-tenth-quarter.aspx))

The president is the most visible member of the U.S. government and a lightning rod for disagreement. Presidents are often blamed for the decisions of their administrations and political parties and are held accountable for economic and foreign policy downturns. For these reasons, they can expect their approval ratings to slowly decline over time, increasing or decreasing slightly with specific events. On average, presidents enjoy a 66 percent approval rating when starting office, but it drops to 53 percent by the end of the first term. Presidents serving a second term average a beginning approval rating of 55.5 percent, which falls to 47 percent by the end of office. President Obama's presidency followed the same trend closely. He entered office with a public approval rating of 67 percent, which fell to 53 percent by the end of the first term; and, it then dropped to 52 percent after his reelection. In November 2016, his rating was 46 percent. The Trump presidency, however, did not follow the normal trend. President Trump received a 45 percent approval rating when he began his term; and, the rating remained in the 40 percent range. President Biden's approval rating dropped from 57% in January 2021 to 43% by September according to Gallup polling.<sup>[1]</sup> Events during a president's term may spike his or her public approval ratings. George W. Bush's public approval rating jumped from 51 percent on September 10, 2001, to 86 percent by September 15 following the 9/11 attacks. His father, George H. W. Bush, had received a similar spike in approval ratings (from 58 to 89 percent) following the end of the first Persian Gulf War in 1991.<sup>[2]</sup>

These spikes rarely last more than a few weeks, so presidents try to quickly use the political capital they bring. For example, the 9/11 rally effect helped speed a congressional joint resolution authorizing the president to use troops, and the “global war on terror” became a reality.<sup>[3]</sup>

### Consider the Original: Federalist 71

|| Excerpts from *Federalist No. 71* ||

**The Duration in Office of the Executive**  
From the New York Packet; Tuesday, March 18, 1788; Author: **Alexander Hamilton**

To the People of the State of New York:

...There are some who would be inclined to regard the servile pliancy of the Executive to a prevailing current, either in the community or in the legislature, as its best recommendation. But such men entertain very crude notions, as well of the purposes for which government was instituted, as of the true means by which the public happiness may be promoted. **The republican principle demands that the deliberate sense of the community should govern the conduct of those to whom they intrust the management of their affairs; but it does not require an unqualified complaisance to every sudden breeze of passion, or to every transient impulse which the people may receive from the arts of men, who flatter their prejudices to betray their interests.**<sup>[3]</sup> It is a just observation, that the people commonly INTEND the PUBLIC GOOD. This often applies to their very errors. But their good sense would despise the adulator who should pretend that they always REASON RIGHT about the MEANS of promoting it. They know from experience that they sometimes err; and the wonder is that they so seldom err as they do, beset, as they continually are, by the wiles of parasites and sycophants, by the snares of the ambitious, the avaricious, the desperate, by the artifices of men who possess their confidence more than they deserve it, and of those who seek to possess rather than to deserve it. When occasions present themselves, in which the interests of the people are at variance with their inclinations, it is the duty of the persons whom they have appointed to be the guardians of those interests, to withstand the temporary delusion, in order to give them time and opportunity for more cool and sedate reflection. Instances might be cited in which a conduct of this kind has saved the people from very fatal consequences of their own mistakes, and has procured lasting monuments of their gratitude to the men who had courage and magnanimity enough to serve them at the peril of their displeasure [...].<sup>[4]</sup>

*PUBLIUS.*

Chart 4.18 Excerpt from Federalist Paper No. 71

President Kennedy’s approval average was unusually high because his time in office was short; he was assassinated before he could run for reelection, leaving less time for his ratings to decline. Nixon’s unusually low approval ratings reflect several months of media and congressional investigations into his involvement in the Watergate affair, as well as his resignation in the face of likely impeachment.



Gallup polling has tracked approval ratings for all presidents since Harry Truman. The [Presidential Job Approval Center](#) allows you to compare weekly approval ratings for all tracked presidents, as well as their average approval ratings.

Congress as an institution has historically received lower approval ratings than presidents, a striking result because individual senators and representatives are generally viewed favorably by their constituents. While congressional representatives almost always win reelection and are liked by their constituents back home, the institution itself is often vilified as representing everything that is wrong with politics and partisanship. As of March 2021, public approval of Congress sat at around 34 percent higher than most recent ratings as can be seen on the chart below.<sup>[5]</sup>

For most of the last forty years, congressional approval levels have bounced between 20 percent and 60 percent, but in the last fifteen years they have regularly fallen below 40 percent. Like President George W. Bush, Congress experienced a short-term jump in approval ratings immediately following 9/11, likely because of the rallying effect of the terrorist attacks. Congressional approval had dropped back below 50 percent by early 2003.

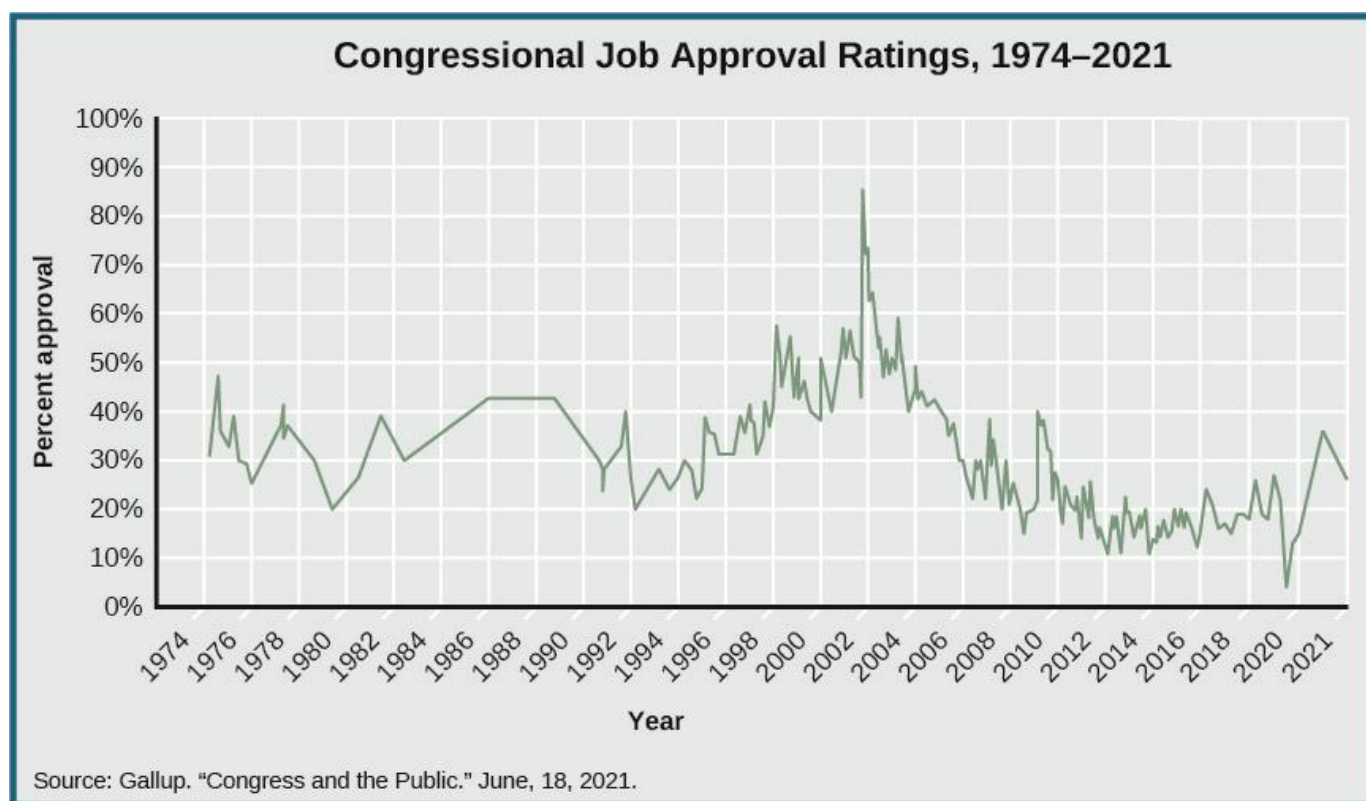


Chart 4.19 Line Chart on Congressional Approval Ratings Via Tracking Poll

Congressional approval ratings over the past forty-four years have generally fallen between 20 and 50 percent; however, these ratings spiked to over 80 percent in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

(Credit: Gallup, "Congress and the Public," at [news.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx), 2019)

While presidents are affected by foreign and domestic events, congressional approval is mainly affected by domestic events. When the economy rebounds or gas prices drop, public approval of Congress tends to go up. But when party politics within Congress becomes a domestic event, public approval falls. The passage of revenue bills has become an example of such an event, because deficits require Congress to make policy decisions before changing the budget. Deficit and debt are not new to the United States.

Congress and presidents have attempted various methods of controlling debt, sometimes successfully and sometimes not.

In the past three decades alone, however, several prominent examples have shown how party politics make it difficult for Congress to agree on a budget without a fight, and how these fights affect public approval.

Most of the time, the people believe political parties need to work together to solve problems rather than play political games. During the 2011 ceiling debate, congressional approval fell from 18 to 13 percent, while in 2013; congressional approval fell to a new low of 9 percent in November.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Supreme Court generally enjoys less visibility than the other two branches of government, which leads to more stable but also less frequent polling results. Indeed, 22 percent of citizens surveyed in 2014 had never heard of Chief Justice John Roberts, the head of the Supreme Court.<sup>[7]</sup> The court is protected by the justices' non-elected, non-political positions, which gives them the appearance of integrity and helps the Supreme Court earn higher public approval ratings than presidents and Congress. To compare, between 2000 and 2010, the court's approval rating bounced between 50 and 60 percent. During this same period, Congress had a 20 to 40 percent approval rating. The Supreme Court's approval rating is also less susceptible to the influence of events. Support of and opinions about the court are affected when the justices rule on highly visible cases that are of public interest or other events occur that cause citizens to become aware of the court.<sup>[8]</sup>

## PUBLIC OPINION AND GOVERNMENT

The relationship between public opinion polls and government action is murkier than that between polls and elections. Like the news media and campaign staffers, members of the three branches of government are aware of public opinion. But do politicians use public opinion polls to guide their decisions and actions?

The short answer is "sometimes." The public is not perfectly informed about politics, so politicians realize public opinion may not always be the correct guide in making decisions. Yet many political studies, from the *American Voter* in the 1920s to the *American Voter Revisited* in the 2000s, have found that voters behave rationally despite having limited information. They appear to be informed just enough, using preferences like their political ideology and party membership, to make decisions and hold politicians accountable during an election year for the positions they have taken on the issues.

Overall, the collective public opinion of a country changes over time, even if party membership or ideology does not change dramatically. As James Stimson's prominent study found, the public's mood, or collective opinion, can become more or less liberal from decade to decade. Studies have gone beyond to determine collective public opinion, and its relative liberalness, and how they in turn affect politicians and institutions and the politician's decisions on policy.<sup>[9]</sup>

## PUBLIC OPINION AND THE PRESIDENT

Public opinion of the president is different from public opinion of Congress. Congress is an institution of 535 members, and opinion polls look at both the institution and its individual members. The president is both a person and the head of an institution. The media pays close attention to any president's actions, and the public is generally well informed and aware of the office and its current occupant. Perhaps this is why public opinion has an inconsistent effect on presidents' decisions.

Overall, it appears that presidents try to move public opinion towards personal positions rather than moving themselves towards the public's opinion.<sup>[10]</sup>

If presidents have enough public support, they use their level of public approval indirectly to get their agenda passed. Immediately following Inauguration Day, for example, the president enjoys the highest level of public support for implementing campaign promises.

When presidents have high levels of public approval, they are likely to act quickly and try to accomplish personal policy goals. They can use their position and power to focus media attention on an issue. This is sometimes referred to as the bully pulpit approach. The term "bully pulpit" was coined by President Theodore Roosevelt, who believed the presidency commanded the attention of the media and could be used to appeal directly to the people. Roosevelt used his position to convince voters to pressure Congress to pass laws.

Increasing partisanship has made it more difficult for presidents to use their "power to persuade" to get their own preferred issues through Congress, however, especially when the president's party is in the minority in Congress.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, modern presidents may find more success in using their popularity to increase media and social media attention on an issue. Even if the president is not the reason for congressional action, he or she can cause the attention that leads to change.<sup>[12]</sup>

## CONGRESSIONAL POLICY-MAKING AND PUBLIC OPINION

While presidents have at most only two terms to serve and work, members of Congress can serve if the public returns them to office. We might think that for this reason public opinion is important to representatives and senators, and that their behavior, such as their votes on domestic programs or funding, will change to match the expectation of the public. In a more liberal time, the public may expect to see more social programs. In a non-liberal time, the public mood may favor austerity, or decreased government spending on programs. Failure to recognize shifts in public opinion may lead to a politician's losing the next election.<sup>[13]</sup>

The savvy politicians look carefully to recognize when shifts occur. When the public is more or less liberal, the politicians may make slight adjustments to their behavior to match. Politicians who frequently seek to win office, like House members, will pay attention to the long- and short-term changes in opinion. By doing this, they will be less likely to lose on Election Day.<sup>[14]</sup> Thus, failure to recognize shifts in public opinion may lead to a politician's losing the next election.

House of Representatives members, with a two-year term, have a more difficult time recovering from decisions that anger local voters. And because most representatives continually fundraise, unpopular decisions can hurt their campaign donations. For these reasons, it seems representatives should be susceptible to polling pressure. Yet one study, by James Stimson, found that the public mood does not directly affect elections, and shifts in public opinion do not predict whether a House member will win or lose. Despite this, we still see policy shifts in Congress, often matching the policy preferences of the

public. When the shifts happen within the House, they are measured by the way members vote. The study's authors hypothesize that House members alter their votes to match the public mood, perhaps to strengthen their electoral chances.<sup>[15]</sup> The Senate is quite different from the House. Senators do not enjoy the same benefits of incumbency, and they win reelection at lower rates than House members. Yet, they do have one advantage over their colleagues in the House: Senators hold a six-year term, which gives them time to engage in fence-mending to repair the damage from unpopular decisions. In the Senate, Stimson's study confirmed that opinion affects a senator's chances at reelection, even though it did not affect House members. Specifically, the study shows that when public opinion shifts, fewer senators win reelection.

Thus, when the public becomes more or less liberal, new senators are elected. Rather than the senators shifting their policy preferences and voting differently, it is the new senators who change the policy direction of the Senate.<sup>[16]</sup>

Another major study by Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro *found change in public policy more likely to occur in Congress when there is a significant change in public opinion from past opinion*. They found that when opinion moved up or down at least 6 percentage points between two surveys of public opinion, government policy changed in keeping with the changed opinion direction. Of the over 300 instances of opinion change they studied; policy changes were consistent with opinion changes in 66% of the cases. Moreover, Page and Shapiro found that very large change in public opinion (20 points or more) produced consistent policy changes more than 90% of the time. The evidence suggests that the government does responds to major shifts of public opinion.<sup>[17]</sup>

## THE SUPREME COURT AND PUBLIC OPINION

There is some disagreement about whether the Supreme Court follows public opinion or shapes it. The lifetime tenure the justices enjoy was designed to remove everyday politics from their decisions, protect them from swings in political partisanship, and allow them to choose whether and when to listen to public opinion. Often, the public is unaware of the Supreme Court's decisions and opinions. When the justices accept controversial cases, the media tune in and ask questions, raising public awareness and affecting opinion. But do the justices pay attention to the polls when they make decisions? Studies that look at the connection between the Supreme Court and public opinion are contradictory. Early on, it was believed that justices were like other citizens: individuals with attitudes and beliefs who would be affected by political shifts.<sup>[18]</sup> Later studies argued that Supreme Court justices rule in ways that maintain support for the institution. Instead of looking at the short term and making decisions day to day, justices are strategic in their planning and make decisions for the long term.<sup>[19]</sup>

Overall, however, it is clear that public opinion has a less powerful effect on the courts than on the other branches and on politicians.<sup>[20]</sup> Perhaps this is due to the lack of elections or justices' lifetime tenure, or perhaps we have not determined the best way to measure the effects of public opinion on the Court.

# Public Opinion: Questions to Consider

1. Why might one branch's approval ratings be higher than another's?
  2. When are social and economic issues more likely to cause polarization in public opinion?
- 
1. *opinion question; based upon whether individuals perceive one branch has been an advocate for their position or ideological beliefs*
  2. *open for debate; consider the level of divisiveness between economic or social issues*

## Term to Remember

**tracking poll**—conducting a public opinion poll that is repetitious; example—following the approval ratings of an office holder like the president over an extended period of time

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