CHAPTER 6

Public Opinion and Political Action

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Politics in Action: A Rare Moment of Consensus in Public Opinion (pp.183-184)
   A. September 11 revealed a rare example of consensus in public opinion.
   B. The study of American public opinion aims to understand the distribution of the population’s belief about politics and policy issues.

IV. The American People (pp. 184–191)
   A. Demography is the science of human populations. The Constitution requires a census, "an actual enumeration" of the population, every ten years.
   B. The Immigrant Society: There have been three great waves of immigration.
   C. The American Melting Pot
      1. A melting pot refers to a mixture of cultures, ideas, and peoples.
      2. The United States will soon experience a minority majority, where white Anglo-Saxons will no longer be a majority.
      3. The Simpson-Mazzoli Act required employers to document the citizenship of their employees.
      4. Americans share a common political culture—an overall set of values widely shared within a society.
   D. The Regional Shift
      1. Over the last 60 years, the Sunbelt has had the greatest population growth.
      2. Reapportionment occurs after every census. House seats are reallocated to the states based on population changes.
   E. The Graying of America
      1. Citizens over 65 compose the fastest growing age group.

V. How Americans Learn About Politics: Political Socialization (pp. 191–195)
   A. Political socialization is the process through which an individual acquires his or her particular political orientations.
   B. The Process of Political Socialization
      1. The Family
      2. The Mass Media
      3. School
   C. Political Learning over a Lifetime

IV. Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information (pp. 195–201)
   A. How Polls are Conducted
      1. A sample of the population is a relatively small proportion of people who are chosen as representative of the whole.
      2. Random sampling operates on the principle that everyone should have an equal probability of being selected.

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3. **Sampling error** depends on the size of the sample.
4. Most polling is done on the telephone with samples selected through **random-digit dialing**.

**B. The Role of Polls in American Democracy**
1. Polls help political candidates detect public preferences.
2. Polls may make politicians followers rather than leaders.
3. Polls can distort the election process.
4. **Exit polls** may discourage people from voting.
5. Polls can be manipulated by altering the wording of questions.

**C. What Polls Reveal about Americans' Political Information**
1. Americans are not well informed about politics.

**D. The Decline of Trust in Government**

**V. What Americans Value: Political Ideologies (pp. 201–206)**

**A. A political ideology** is a coherent set of values and beliefs about public policy.

**B. Who are the Liberals and Conservatives?**
1. More Americans consistently choose the ideological label of conservative over liberal.
2. Liberals generally like to see the government do more.
3. Groups with political clout tend to be more conservative than groups whose members have often been shut out from political power.
4. Ideological differences between men and women have led to the **gender gap**, where women are more likely to support Democratic candidates.
5. The role of religion in influencing political ideology has changed greatly in recent years.

**C. Do People Think in Ideological Terms?**
1. For most people, the terms liberal and conservative are not as important as they are for the political elite.

**VI. How Americans Participate in Politics (pp. 206–210)**

**A. Political participation** encompasses the many activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue.

**B. Conventional Participation:** The majority of Americans participate only by voting in presidential elections.

**C. Protest as Participation**
1. **Protest** is designed to achieve policy change through dramatic and unconventional tactics.
2. **Civil disobedience** is consciously breaking a law thought to be unjust.

**D. Class, Inequality, and Participation:** Lower rates of political participation among minority groups are linked with lower socioeconomic status.

**VII. Understanding Public Opinion and Political Action (pp. 210–211)**

**A. Public Attitudes toward the Scope of Government**

**B. Democracy, Public Opinion, and Political Action**

**VI. Summary (p. 211)**
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying Chapter 6, you should be able to:

1. Describe how demographic factors shape who we are politically.
2. Identify the processes through which people learn about politics.
3. Define public opinion, identify how it is measured, explain its role in shaping public policy, and discuss the nature of political information in America.
4. Understand the concept of political ideology in American politics and government.
5. Explain the ways in which people participate in politics and in the policymaking process, and discuss the implications of unequal political participation.
6. Understand the relationship between the scope of government, democracy, public opinion, and political action.

The following exercises will help you meet these objectives:

Objective 1: Describe how demographic factors shape who we are politically.

1. What were the three great waves of immigration to the United States?

   1.

   2.

   3.

2. What is meant by the term "minority majority"?

3. What was the goal of the Simpson-Mazzoli Act?
4. How have the following demographic changes affected political changes?
   1. Immigration
   2. Regional Shifts
   3. Aging Population

Objective 2: Identify the processes through which people learn about politics.

1. Explain the significance of each of the following as sources for political learning:
   1. Family
   2. Mass media
   3. Schools

2. Name two ways in which aging affects political behavior.
   1.
   2.

Objective 3: Define public opinion, identify how it is measured, explain its role in shaping public policy, and discuss the nature of political information in America.

1. What is the key to the accuracy of opinion polls?

2. Explain the technique of random-digit dialing.
3. List three criticisms of public opinion polling.
   1.
   2.
   3.

4. What is the "paradox of mass politics," according to Russell Neuman?

5. What is the largest impact of declining trust in government since the 1960s?

Objective 4: Understand the concept of political ideology in the context of American politics and government.

1. Fill in the following table concerning political ideology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>General Beliefs</th>
<th>Typical Demographic Characteristics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Explain how the role of religion influences political ideology in the United States.

3. Fill in the following table on the classification of the ideological sophistication of American voters according to the study *The American Voter*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideological Classification</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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Objective 5: Explain the ways in which people participate in politics and in the policymaking process, and discuss the implications of unequal political participation.

1. List five activities of conventional political participation, placing a star next to the most common activity.

   1.
   
   2.
   
   3.
   
   4.
   
   5.
2. Define civil disobedience and give an example.

3. How does minority group status affect political participation?

Objective 6: Understand the relationship between the scope of government, democracy, public opinion, and political action.

1. What is the public's general attitude about the scope of government?

2. Comment on how Americans' lack of political knowledge and low participation rate affects democracy.

**KEY TERMS**

*Identify and describe:*

public opinion

demography

census

melting pot

minority majority
political culture

reapportionment

political socialization

sample

random sampling

sampling error

random-digit dialing

exit poll

political ideology

gender gap

political participation

protest
civil disobedience

*Compare and contrast:*

demography and census

melting pot and minority majority

public opinion and political ideology

sample, random sampling, and sampling error

random-digit dialing and exit poll

protest and civil disobedience

*Name that term:*

1. This is the mixing of cultures, ideas, and peoples.

_________________________

2. This is an overall set of values widely shared within a society.

_________________________

3. This occurs when the 435 seats in the House of Representatives are reallocated to the states based on population changes.

_________________________

4. The process through which an individual acquires his or her particular political orientations.

_________________________
5. The distribution of the population's beliefs about politics and policy issues.

6. This technique is the key to the accuracy of public opinion polls.

7. This is the most criticized type of poll.

8. In American politics, this is usually characterized by the liberal-conservative dimension.

9. Ideological differences between men and women have led to this.

10. Voting, running for office, and even violent protest are examples of this.

USING YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Locate the published results of an opinion poll by Gallup, Harris, or one of the news organizations on a topic that is of interest to you. You may want to use polls that focused on the 2008 presidential election, social or economic issues, the war on terrorism, or the war in Iraq. Assess the results in terms of the demographic distributions, if any, that are reflected in the results. See if males differed from females, whites from non-whites, and so on. If the results are compared with the findings of an earlier poll, see if public opinion on the topic is changing. Briefly describe what you found and what its implications are for policymaking. Alternatively, design a small questionnaire for your class dealing with questions of information, ideology, and political participation. Have the respondents to your survey provide demographic information. Summarize your findings in a table or two presenting the overall responses and those for particular demographic groups. Keep in mind that you will probably face the problems of a limited sample size and a lack of representativeness for the general population.
2. Conduct a study on the role of unconventional political participation in the United States. Compare and contrast the different types of unconventional political participation. Identify examples of historical events in the United States that exemplify unconventional political participation. Present an analysis of these events in terms of the number of people involved, the type of activity, the target of the activity, and the short-term and long-term results of the activity. In particular, you might want to analyze the protest movements against the war on Iraq. Critically evaluate the effectiveness of unconventional political participation as compared to conventional political participation.

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

Circle the correct answer:

1. Which of the following statements is TRUE?
   a. Normally, American public opinion reveals conflicting attitudes and ambivalence.
   b. Immediately after 9/11, American public opinion was nearly unanimous on responding immediately and by force to the terrorist attacks.
   c. More than 80 percent of Americans viewed 9/11 as an act of war.
   d. Both a and b
   e. All of the above

2. The distribution of the population’s beliefs about politics and policy issues is called
   a. demography.
   b. ideology.
   c. public opinion.
   d. the public agenda.
   e. the U.S. census.

3. By constitutional requirement, the government conducts the United States Census every
   a. two years.
   b. year.
   c. five years.
   d. presidential election year.
   e. ten years.

4. The 2000 census indicated that the largest minority population is comprised of
   a. illegals.
   b. African Americans.
   c. Asian Americans.
   d. Hispanics.
e. Native Americans.

5. Approximately what percent of African Americans live below the poverty line?
   a. 28
   b. 42
   c. 24
   d. 6
   e. 17

6. The Simpson-Mazzoli Act
   a. represented a crackdown on illegal aliens by requiring that employers document
      the citizenship or legitimate immigrant status of workers or pay stiff fines.
   b. requires that states keep their polls open for at least ten hours on election day in
      order to facilitate participation.
   c. established federal guidelines and regulations for taking public opinion polls.
   d. reformed the jury procedures in felony cases, particularly the unanimous verdict
      requirement.
   e. required that the homeless be counted in the 1990 census.

7. ________ occurs after every census to reallocate the 435 seats in the United States House
   of Representatives, reflecting shifts in the population of the states and, thus, how many
   seats each state is allotted.
   a. Equalization
   b. Restructuring
   c. Political socialization
   d. Reapportionment
   e. Demography

8. Political socialization is defined as
   a. the distribution of the population’s beliefs about politics and policy issues.
   b. the various political roles that individuals play in society.
   c. a coherent set of values and beliefs about public policy.
   d. the process through which an individual acquires his or her particular political
      orientations.
   e. the activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the
      policies they pursue.

9. The most obvious intrusion of the government into America’s socialization is through
   a. political parties.
   b. the family.
   c. schooling.
   d. the mass media.
   e. criminal laws.
10. The level of confidence about a public opinion poll is referred to as
   a. the confidence index.
   b. sampling error.
   c. the sample.
   d. random sampling.
   e. demographic certainty.

11. Which of the following is NOT a criticism of modern polling?
   a. Careful attention to polls is unwise, as polls only reflect the passive attitudes of voters.
   b. Politicians use polls to follow the crowd rather than to assert bold leadership.
   c. Polls can distort the election process by creating a bandwagon effect, where people want to follow the crowd.
   d. Polls are subject to very wide margins of error, yet are treated as accurate measurements of public opinion.
   e. All of the above

12. A ________ is a coherent set of values and beliefs about public policy.
   a. policy agenda
   b. political ideology
   c. demography
   d. public opinion
   e. political socialization

13. In general, liberal ideology supports
   a. a strong central government that sets policies to promote equality.
   b. individuals responding generously to each other to solve society’s problems without looking to government to do so.
   c. a small, less active government that gives freer reign to the private sector.
   d. public and government ownership of the means of production.
   e. strong local and state governments that are closer to the people.

14. Which of the following statements is TRUE?
   a. Americans consistently choose the ideological label of liberal over conservative.
   b. Americans consistently choose the ideological label of conservative over liberal.
   c. Young people are more likely than older people to be conservative.
   d. Both a and c
   e. Both b and c

15. One of the effects of growing older on political learning and political behavior is that
   a. political participation increases with age.
   b. the strength of one's party attachment declines with age.
   c. people become more liberal with age.
   d. interest in politics decreases with age.
e. single-issue voting increases with age.

16. The *American Voter* study on ideological sophistication among voters in the 1950s showed that only a small percentage of Americans
   a. had no coherent political ideology.
   b. identified with groups reflecting their own interests.
   c. had a coherent political ideology.
   d. had ever taken a government or civics course.
   e. linked their own economic well-being with the party in power.

17. Recent presidential elections have shown
   a. a sharp turn in public thinking to more conservative positions on issues.
   b. that voters are less interested in ideology or issue positions than in candidate traits such as competence and integrity.
   c. a sharp turn in public thinking to more liberal positions on issues.
   d. a dramatic growth of ideological voters.
   e. that voters are more interested in issue positions than in candidate ideology.

18. Sidney Verba and his colleagues found that while voter turnout declined between 1967 and 1987,
   a. writing letters to the editor and contacting government officials increased.
   b. participating in nonpolitical activities increased.
   c. protesting and giving money to candidates increased.
   d. contacting government officials and giving money to candidates increased.
   e. none of the above

19. There is evidence that when incomes and educational levels are equal
   a. members of the majority tend to be more politically active than minorities.
   b. members of minority groups tend to participate more than members of the majority.
   c. Hispanics participate more than whites and African Americans participate less than whites.
   d. Hispanics, African Americans, and women tend to be less politically active than white males.
   e. the political participation of members of minority groups and the majority are also equal.

20. To say that Americans are ideological conservatives, but operational liberals is to say that Americans
   a. oppose big government in principle, but want it to do more in practice.
   b. favor big government in principle, but want it to do less in practice.
   c. favor divided government.
   d. oppose divided government.
   e. believe, following Reagan, that government is the source of their problems.
TRUE/FALSE QUESTIONS

Circle the correct answer:

1. Americans hold a diversity of views and conflicting attitudes. T / F
2. The census is mandated by the U.S. Constitution. T / F
3. Over the second part of the twentieth century, the greatest population growth occurred east of the Mississippi. T / F
4. The family plays little significant role in an individual’s political socialization. T / F
5. Voter turnout is related to age. T / F
6. The level of confidence in the findings of a public opinion poll is called sampling error. T / F
7. Americans’ trust in government has increased in recent decades. T / F
8. More Americans call themselves liberals than moderates. T / F
9. The gender gap refers to the regular pattern by which women are more likely than men to support Democratic candidates. T / F
10. Public opinion surveys show that acceptance of gays and lesbians is increasing among liberals but decreasing among moderates and conservatives. T / F

SHORT ANSWER/SHORT ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. What is the census and why is it so politically important?
2. Explain the process of reapportionment. Why is it important in American politics?
3. What factors influence an individual’s political socialization?
4. What is the gender gap? Where does it come from? What are its consequences?
5. Define protest and why it is employed in the political process. What is civil disobedience? Should it be tolerated in American politics or strictly curtailed? How can civil disobedience be defended? Explain.