CHAPTER FOUR
PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion is the distribution of individual attitudes about a particular issue, candidate, or political institution. Although the definition is simple enough, public opinion encompasses the attitudes of millions of diverse people from many racial, ethnic, age, and regional groups. As a result, the study of American public opinion is especially complex, but also very important. For American government to operate democratically, the opinions of the American public must reach and become an integral part of the political process.

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

The measurement of public opinion is a complex process that involves careful interviewing procedures and question wording. To complicate the task further, people are often not well informed about the issues, and may comment on topics they know little about. Public opinion polls must be constructed and executed carefully in order to accurately reflect the attitudes of the American public.

Public opinion polling is a relatively new science, first developed by George Gallup, who did some polling for his mother-in-law, a candidate for secretary of state in Iowa in 1932. Gallup founded a firm that spread from its headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey, throughout the democratic world. Today, other well-known private firms conduct polls, and big television networks, magazines and newspapers, such as CNN, Time, and The New York Times, conduct their own polls. Pollsters are also hired by political candidates to determine their popularity, and the results of these polls often shape the direction of political campaigns. The national government even sponsors opinion polls of its own.

Polls generally start when someone wants a political question answered. For example, a candidate running for the House of Representatives may wonder, “What do people in the district need?” or “How strong a candidate do they think I am?” Or a newspaper may want to know, “How do people in this country feel about the threats of bioterrorism?” The candidate or publisher may commission a poll, and a reporter may base a story on the research findings. The pollsters then follow several important principles in gathering accurate statistics:

- Representative sample – The sample of those interviewed must be representative of the entire population. Every citizen cannot be polled regarding his or her opinion on a whole range of issues, but those selected must allow the pollster to make accurate assessments of public opinion. The most common technique employed is random sampling, which gives everyone in the population an equal probability of being selected. Most national surveys sample between one thousand and fifteen hundred persons. The pollster most commonly makes a list of groups, using criteria such as region, age, ethnic and racial groups, gender, and religion. From these groups, people are selected randomly for interviews. The disastrous Literary Digest Poll of 1936
provides a famous example of what can happen if the random sampling principle is ignored. That poll predicted that Alf Landon would beat Franklin Roosevelt by a landslide, but the opposite were the result. The Digest sample was biased because it was based on telephone books and club membership lists at a time when only well-to-do people had phones.

- **Respondent’s knowledge** – People must have some knowledge of the issues they are asked about. If the issue is complex (such as American policy toward Afghanistan), people should be allowed to say, “I don’t know”, or “I haven’t thought about it much.” Still, people are often reluctant to admit a lack of knowledge about political issues, so pollsters always must allow for the fact that people often pretend to know things that they don’t.

- **Careful and objective wording** – The structure and wording of the question is very important in obtaining an accurate response. “Loaded” or emotional words should not be used, and the pollster must not indicate what the “right” answer is. For example, consider a question like, “How much do you dislike leaders of Middle Eastern countries?” You could hardly expect an accurate answer. The categories of answers also determine the results of the poll. A yes or no question, such as, “Do you think the president is doing a good job?” will give very different results than a question that gives the interviewee a chance to rank the president’s performance (excellent, very good, good, average, poor, very poor).

- **Cost efficiency v. accuracy** – Almost all polls have a budget, but accuracy should not suffer as a result. For example, a straw poll that asks television viewers to call in their opinions is not very expensive, but it generally is not very accurate either. The people that call in usually feel very strong about the issue. And some of them call in more than once.

- **Variances between samples** – The same poll conducted with a different random sample almost certainly will produce slightly different results. These slight variations are known as sampling errors. A typical poll of about fifteen hundred usually has a sampling error of plus (+) or minus (-) 3 percent. This means that 95% of the time the poll results are within 3 percentage points of what the entire population thinks. If 60% of the population supports a candidate for office, in actuality, 57-63% of the population supports him or her. Usually, the larger the sample in proportion to the population, the smaller the sampling error.

**FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE POLITICAL ATTITUDES**

When pollsters divide people into groups before they conduct random samples, they are acknowledging a well-proven fact: group identifications often influence political attitudes. Political attitudes are shaped by political socialization, a lifelong process through which an individual acquires opinions through contact with family, friends, coworkers, and other group associations. Today the media also plays a major role in political socialization, with political news and opinions widely available on TV, radio, and the internet. Political attitudes in turn determine how individuals participate, who they vote for, and what political parties they support. Many factors – including family, gender, religion, education, social class, race and ethnicity, and region – all contribute to American political attitudes and behavior.