CHAPTER 5

Public Opinion and Political Participation

Chapter Objectives

This chapter examines what the American people actually think about politics, how they come to think what they do, and how they translate their thoughts into politically relevant actions. Chapter 4 described the major patterns of American political beliefs in philosophical and historical terms. In this chapter we concern ourselves with the extent to which the general public actually subscribes to those beliefs, which leads into an examination of how people learn to think about politics. What are the influences that encourage people to become Democrats, Independents, or Republicans, as well as determine their opinions on political issues? These topics are discussed in the sections on political socialization. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how political beliefs are translated into political actions, ranging from voting to protest demonstrations and civil disobedience.

Public Opinion: What Americans Think About Politics

What Americans *think* about politics is important because it determines, in part, how they act politically. The diverse but predominantly moderate character of Americans' political views and the relatively modest intensity with which most people advance their views set the tone for the whole political process. To understand how people think about politics is to understand an essential element of the environment within which the political process functions.

The Character of Public Opinion

public opinion
The array of beliefs and attitudes that people hold about political and related affairs

Public opinion may sound like a simple and stable concept, but it is actually complex and ever changing. **Public opinion** is a combination of the views, attitudes, and ideas held by individuals in a community. There is no single public opinion; there is, rather, a wide variety of viewpoints. Different publics or groups of people think differently about political questions. Some people hold very sophisticated views about politics; others do not. Some people devote their entire lives to politics; others hardly ever think about politics.

Certain facets of public opinion are remarkably constant. Love of country and pride in the nation's accomplishments, for instance, are attitudes that are almost always present and widely shared. Other facets of public opinion are *dynamic,* fluctuating considerably in response to social, political, and economic events. Some opinions are held *intensely;* others seem to be little more than *casual preferences.* An opinion that is intensely held is more likely

President Barack Obama discusses with CNN's Wolf Blitzer *Time Magazine*'s cover story about himself during the presidential campaign in May 2008. (*AP/Wide World Photos*)

to influence what a person thinks about political candidates and how that person might get involved politically.

The politically sophisticated and the general public observe the same political world. However, much of the public sees it, to borrow an expression from the Bible, "through a glass darkly." Politicians and political commentators can argue at length about what they see as the major political issues of the time, but much of this seems to pass by most of the public. As explained in the following sections, a substantial share of the American public does not care much about politics, knows relatively little about it, and does not think about it in very sophisticated terms. Still, few would admit that public opinion is unimportant. Indeed, political analysts and politicians are very concerned about what the public thinks.

How Much Americans Care and Know About Politics

The first public opinion pollsters assumed that the public cared and was reasonably well-informed about politics; however, they were startled to find that many Americans cared little and knew less about what went on in the political arena. More recent surveys have done little to contradict these early findings or show any recent increase in public interest and information—a surprising finding given the rising level of education and the proliferation of the media, particularly television news, over the last few decades.

This is not to say that the public as a whole is essentially uninterested in politics; indeed, a substantial number of people indicate a considerable degree of interest. For example, a recent survey found that 26 percent of the public said that they followed government and public affairs "most of the time," 41 percent only "some of the time," 23 percent "only now and then," and 10 percent "hardly at all."[1] These results fall short of the democratic ideal of a keenly interested electorate, but are reasonably reassuring in that most people do seem to be at least somewhat interested in politics.

The meaningfulness of such expressions of interest is called into question by the public's level of information about politics. A survey indicated that 46 percent of Americans did not know which party had a majority of seats in Congress prior to the election, and in a 2007 survey, 19 percent of Americans had never heard of Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House of Representatives. A 1999 study found that 24 percent of Americans could not name the country from which the United States gained its independence from following the Revolutionary War.[2]

What Americans Hold in Common

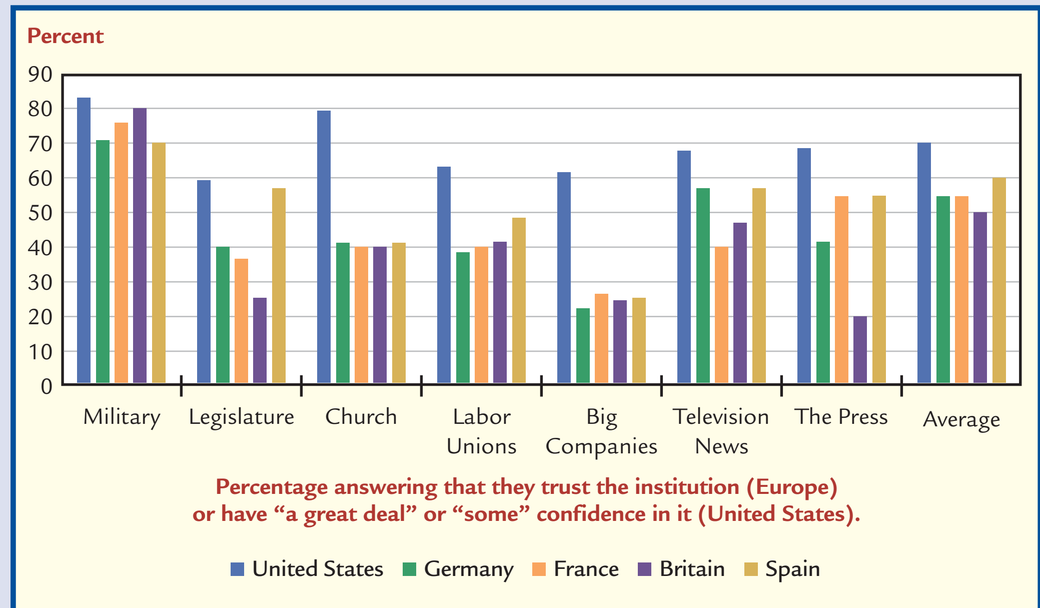
On many fundamental political matters, the vast majority of Americans are in substantial agreement. First of all, Americans are proud of their country and emotionally attached to it and its symbols. In a 2008 poll, 89 percent of Americans said they were either "extremely proud" or "very proud" to be an American.[3] Studies consistently show that the percentages of people expressing enthusiasm and pride for their country are, in fact, higher in the United States than in almost any other country.

FIGURE 5.1

Confidence in Public Institutions: A Comparative Perspective

Americans consistently express greater confidence in their country's political, social, and economic institutions than do citizens of other democratic countries.

SOURCE: The Gallup Organization, "Confidence in Congress: Lowest Ever for Any U.S. Institution," June 2008, http://www.gallup.com/poll/27946/Americans-Confidence-Congress-AllTime-Low.aspx (14 July 2008) and European Commission, "Eurobarometer Report Numbers 64, 68, 69, June 2006–June 2008, http://ec.europa.eu./public_opinion/archives/eb/ (14 July 2008).



Americans are also positive about their country's political, social, and economic institutions. When asked how much confidence they had in their country's public and private institutions, Americans consistently responded more favorably than citizens from four other European democracies (Figure 5.1). Although some Americans are critical of their nation's institutions, what is most striking is that Americans are clearly less critical than people in other countries. Even for institutions that are sometimes singled out as objects of public disdain in the United States, such as the media, labor unions, and Congress, Americans consistently have more confidence in them than do their European counterparts.

Why are Americans generally so proud of their country and positive about its institutions? One reason is that they have been taught all their lives to think of America as the best (see the section on political socialization later in this chapter). But the roots of American pride run deeper than that. Americans also take pride in their country because they are generally raised to hold certain basic values, and to believe that the United States, among all nations, is particularly dedicated to the fulfillment of those values. The Declaration of Independence exemplifies these values.

POLITICS AND IDEAS

Textbooks and Children's Ideas About American Politics

American students typically spend a dozen or more years of their lives poring over textbooks of various sorts. Some of these books have little to do with politics: math books, chemistry books, foreign language books. Many of them, however, do deal directly or indirectly with topics related to politics: social studies books, history books, American government books, economics books, and sociology books.

Because students spend so much time reading them, textbooks seem likely to significantly affect how students think about politics. Further, the books may be particularly influential because of the way students are likely to approach them. Students treat the material in textbooks as information they need to know, rather than as information to be read critically or thought about afterward in depth. Almost as soon as the material is known, it starts to be forgotten. As the specific facts fade, what tends to be remembered is a general impression a color and tone and feeling that can persist for years.

The influence of textbooks brings up some of the most important and difficult issues of political socialization.[1] Much of political socialization occurs not in sudden and dramatic jumps from ignorance to knowledge or from ambivalence to passion, but through a slow, steady gain and loss of political information and impressions. The content of school textbooks is determined by a combination of scholarly, economic, and political factors. The scholars who write the book, the editors and publishers who mold the book to help it sell, and the more or less politically accountable officials who pick the books to be used shape the final product. But who should decide which textbooks American children should read? Are not school boards democratic institutions? More generally, who should decide what children will be taught? How democratic do we want the education process to be?

Earlier textbooks often presented children with an idealized picture of American history, society, and politics ("sugarcoating," some scholars have called it), but recently there has been more sentiment toward giving students the "unvarnished truth." For example, over the past generation textbooks have become more multicultural—featuring more stories and descriptions of ethnic and racial minorities and women.[2] Is there such a thing as "unvarnished truth," or are there just different perspectives? Is there a "best" way to present America's diverse cultural history? And, again, who should decide?

Teaching children to think critically about their country, as newer texts tend to do, is certainly an admirable goal, but it can run counter to the goal of political socialization necessary to promote good citizenship. How does a society create in its children the appropriate balance of respect and skepticism for its basic values? To put it differently, every society wants to instill in its youth favorable feelings toward its values and institutions, but where is the line between socialization and brainwashing?

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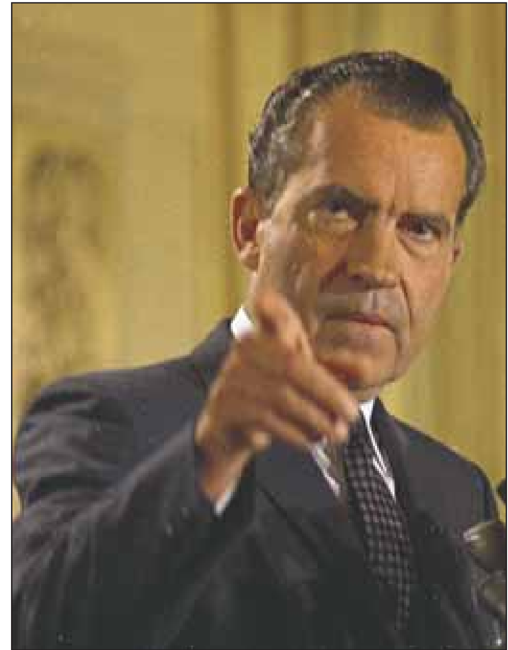
[1] Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).
[2] Jesus Garcia, "The Changing Image of Ethnic Groups in Textbooks," *Phi Delta Kappa* 75 (1993): 29–35.

WE hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.* That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the *Consent of the Governed.* [italics added]

To these three basic values of democracy—equality, freedom, and consent of the governed—can be added most Americans' commitment to capitalism and the free enterprise system.

- ***Equality*** Surveys suggest that roughly 80 percent of Americans genuinely believe in equality and that, whether or not they really think people are equal, more than 90 percent believe that the government should treat everyone as if they were equal.[4] That being said, Americans tend to disagree on the best way for the government to treat citizens equally. For example, only about one-third of Americans believe it's the government's responsibility to see that racial minorities are treated fairly in jobs or that the federal government should ensure school integration.[5]
- ***Freedom*** Americans believe in their capacity to do what is best for themselves. Hence, they think that individuals should be free to act as they please, with minimal government interference, as long as they do not interfere with other people's freedom. Surveys have long shown a strong commitment to freedom of speech, press, religion, and association.[6] For example, 92 percent of Americans responding to a 2003 poll indicated that the First Amendment protection for freedom of speech is either crucial or very important to their own sense of freedom.[7] On the other hand, when rights come into conflict, Americans are faced with tough choices regarding which freedoms to support. The issue of school prayer often pits those who favor free exercise of religion against those who oppose the establishment of religion. In a recent poll, 76 percent of Americans said they would favor a constitutional amendment to allow prayer in public schools, even though the Supreme Court has consistently found such prayer in violation of the First Amendment.[8]
- ***Consent of the governed*** Americans see their acceptance of government as voluntary. About 93 percent of Americans believe that periodic elections make the government "pay attention to what the people think" at least some of the time. While only 47 percent responded that they trust the government most or all of the time, just 1 percent of Americans said they never trust the government.[9] Americans also believe firmly in the idea that the majority (more than half) of the people should rule in political affairs. At the same time, however, they believe that majorities should not possess unlimited power and that the rights of a minority (less than half) of the people should be protected against the whims of the majority.
- ***Capitalism and the free enterprise system*** Americans believe in the value of hard work, in private property, in economic competition, and in profit. In contrast to some other societies, most Americans tend to view hard work as a virtue and laziness as a vice—tenets of the so-called Protestant ethic. They see private property as an essential element of economic progress. They believe that competition brings out the best in people and that the most successful competitors deserve the greatest rewards.

Americans' preference for freedom over equality manifests itself in the economic as well as the political sphere. This particular combination of values fits well with a free-market, entrepreneurial economy. Americans like the idea of a fair competition in which everybody starts out equally, but in which they all have the freedom to pursue their self-interest and thus end up unequally well off according to how well they have pursued their self-interest. A series of Gallup polls taken between 1994 and 2007 indicates that a consistent, although shrinking, plurality of Americans believes the government "is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses."[10] Regarding taxation, 51 percent of Americans polled in 2008 believed the government should tax the rich more heavily in order to redistribute wealth while a larger majority (55 percent) indicated that they would like to have their own taxes decreased.[11] Polling also found over 74 percent of respondents saying that there is either too much or just the right amount of government regulation of business and industry.[12] Thus, it seems clear that Americans have little interest in moving toward a communist or socialist system.



Richard M. Nixon, who appeared on nationwide television to resign his position following the Watergate scandal. (*AP/Wide World Photos*)

Although Americans are proud of their country and its system of government, and although they believe in the fundamental values on which it rests, they are not beyond finding fault with it. In fact, since the 1960s the American political system has struggled with a widespread undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the way in which the system is working, fired by the urban disorders of the 1960s, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the nation's ongoing economic problems. Between 1964 and 1994 the percentage of Americans who said they trusted the government to do what was right all or most of the time fell from 76 percent to 21 percent, and the percentage who said that public officials care what "people like me" think declined from 62 percent to 22 percent. This sense of alienation started to turn around somewhat by the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, as the trust in government number rose to 47 percent and the percent who believed government cared about what they think rose to 34 percent by 2004.[13] By late 2007, however, the trust in government index had fallen again; this time to 32 percent. Such mood changes may not be

entirely unrelated to Americans' pocketbooks. In 1993, 68 percent of Americans were at least moderately worried about their personal economic situation. By January of 2000, however, a majority of Americans were only a little worried or not at all worried.[14] By mid-2008, due to the economic downturn of the early 2000s, only 8 percent of Americans believed the economy was getting better; and 87 percent believed it was getting worse. These figures coincided with the public's low job approval ratings for both Congress (18 percent) and the president (28 percent).[15] This connection between trust in the government and the success of the economy is an enduring feature of American public opinion.[16]

Where Americans Differ

Citizens of the United States manifest considerable agreement on the general principles of democracy just described, but consensus is far from complete. The American people differ on the implications of these general principles when applied to particular cases. They also differ in their political ideologies.

The Meaning of Equality Although Americans profess a belief in equality in the abstract, just what this means and to whom it applies are matters for disagreement. First, as we discussed in Chapter 3, does equality mean equality of opportunity or equality of result? That is, should everybody have an equal chance to pursue an education and earn a high income, or should everybody get the same education and earn the same income? Americans seem to lean away from equality of result. Only 21 percent believe the government should see to it that every person has a job and good standard of living.[17]

Second, just which "men" are equal? Some Americans do not believe that men and women are equal. According to a 2004 survey, 8 percent think, "Women's place is in the home rather than business, industry, or government."[18] A substantial percentage of Americans do not regard African Americans and whites as equals. In a 1990 survey, 78 percent of whites thought that African Americans were more likely to prefer living on welfare than whites; 62 percent thought African Americans less likely to be hardworking; 56 percent thought African Americans more prone to violence; and 53 percent thought African Americans less intelligent. African Americans see this sense of racial inequality from a different perspective. In a 2007 poll, 76 percent of whites thought an African American had as good of a chance as a white American to get job for which they were qualified, but 61 percent of African Americans felt this was not the case. Additionally, 80 percent of whites believed that African American children have the same chance as white children to get a good education, whereas only 49 percent of African Americans share this view.[19]

Limits of Freedom Although Americans believe in freedom as a general principle, they do see it as having definite limits. More than 95 percent endorse the principle of freedom of expression in the abstract, but percentages drop sharply with the possibility that "bad" or "dan-

gerous" ideas will be expressed.[20] For many Americans, freedom of expression does not extend to speaking, writing, or teaching when the ideas are unpopular ones—antireligious or racist.[21] Further, some Americans do not agree that people should be able to express their views any way they want. The Supreme Court's decisions in 1989 and 1990 upholding the rights of protesters to burn the American flag set off a bitter national debate. A constitutional amendment to criminalize the act has been introduced in Congress every session since. In the wake of the war on terrorism, Americans have expanded their view on what expressions are potentially dangerous and how restrictive the government should be in response. Some have argued that the 2001 Patriot Act went too far in restricting civil liberties, but by 2006, only 30 percent of Americans thought the Act needed major changes or should be eliminated entirely.[22] That being said, 64 percent of Americans opposed the government taking actions to prevent terrorism that would violate Americans basic civil liberties.[23]

Majority Rule Versus Minority Rights The American people's adherence to the ideals of majority rule and minority rights sometimes loses something in the translation to everyday political questions. Slightly more than half of the respondents in one survey held that only people who were well informed about issues should be allowed to vote in elections in which questions relating to "tax-supported undertakings" are at issue, and four out of five held that only taxpayers should be allowed to do so.[24] The idea that any citizen should be able to grow up to be president is endorsed in the abstract but rejected by some in practice. In April 2008, 35 percent of Americans did not think the country was ready for a woman president and 22 percent did not think the country was ready for a black president.[25] Of course, the Democratic Party put those attitudes to the test when Senators Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Barack Obama (D-IL) campaigned throughout the entire presidential primary season. By June of that year Obama had secured enough delegates to become his party's nominee and the first black presidential candidate to represent one of the two main political parties.

Free Enterprise in Practice As enamored of the free enterprise system as Americans are, their affection for it still has some limits. About 75 percent of Americans believe most small business owners can be trusted.[26] On the other hand, although Americans are against government regulation of business in the abstract, a majority actually supports the current level of regulation or favors increasing it. A majority of Americans believe the government should do more to prevent big business mergers.[27] Americans are particularly wary of influences on the economy, with 68 percent of respondents in a 2008 poll saying they would like to see big business have less influence than it does now.[28]

Political Ideology Perhaps the most important matter on which Americans differ is political ideology. American politics is often portrayed as a controversy between liberals and conservatives. As discussed in Chapter 4, with the rise of neoconservatism, neoliberalism, and the return to classical liberal principles in libertarianism, particularly in recent years, the

reality has become much more complicated. Commentators have also distinguished among the different dimensions of liberalism and conservatism: economic, social, and cultural. Such debates have certainly occupied the attention of the intellectual elites, but what is striking is how far removed they are from the concerns of most Americans. Even the most basic notions of liberalism and conservatism meet with limited recognition. Only about half of U.S. citizens recognize the terms liberalism and conservatism and have some general sense of what they mean.[29] In a 2004 national survey, 20 percent of the respondents declined to place themselves on a liberal-conservative scale when asked to do so because they said they did not know or had not thought that much about it.[30]Studies of people's answers to questions raising liberal-conservative issues have long shown little consistency between answers, suggesting that many people do not think about politics in ideologically coherent terms.[31] Such findings are important because, first of all, they suggest that a good share of the population does not really have a grasp on the debate between liberals and conservatives. Second, the findings raise questions about the meaningfulness of the American public's responses to questions about their political ideology. When people are unsure what they are being asked, a safe response is often in the middle.

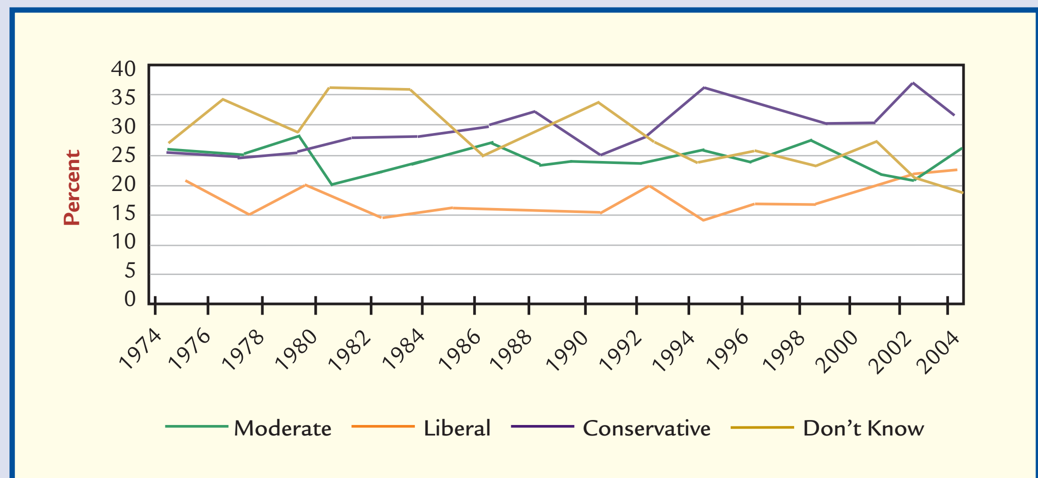
Figure 5.2 shows how over the last two decades more Americans have characterized themselves as conservatives than as moderates or liberals. This trend peaked in 1994, when

FIGURE 5.2

Americans Rate Themselves on the Liberal–Conservative Scale, 1974–2004

While the number of Americans identifying themselves as conservatives has remained higher than the number identifying themselves as liberals over the last 30 years, only a slim majority of Americans identify with either label.

SOURCE: American National Election Studies, 2004.



36 percent of Americans identified themselves as conservative and only 14 percent as liberal. The years since then have shown a small reversal, yet still 9 percent more Americans said they were conservative than liberal in 2004. When given the opportunity to clarify the degree of their ideology, however, Americans reveal that their ideological beliefs are, for the most part, mild. Both liberals and conservatives were more likely to indicate that they were slightly ideological than extremely so. In fact, no more than 4 percent of respondents in any of the survey years indicated that they were "extremely liberal" or "extremely conservative."

What these findings really mean is difficult to interpret without some sense of what the American public means when it uses the words liberal and conservative. Different people appear to mean different things by them. When a national election survey asked people what they had in mind when they said that someone's political views were liberal or conservative, the most common responses described liberals as people who are open to change and new ideas, for government action to help solve social problems, allied with working people, inclined to spend government money, and somewhat rash. In contrast, conservatives were viewed as resistant to change, for free enterprise solutions, allied with big business and the rich, against government spending, and cautious.[32]

What about the people who don't think in terms of, or even recognize, liberal and conservative labels? Political scientists have tried to plumb political thinking to get at the mental images of these people. What they have found does not paint an encouraging portrait. Many Americans seem to respond to political issues on an essentially individual basis, without any broad or overarching political philosophy to guide them. Instead, their responses are shaped by their sense of identification with one or another political party or group, by their feelings about whether "it's good times" or "it's hard times," or by their feelings about a particular candidate or public figure.[33]

However, there may be an important qualification: The level of coherence in public thinking may be at least partially dependent on how politicians handle issues in campaign and policy-making discussions. When candidates and public figures address the public on issues, the public does seem to respond by becoming more conscious of and concerned about those issues. For example, in the relatively placid 1950s, candidates and parties did little to bring issue differences to the attention of the public, and the public showed little awareness of issues or coherence in its thinking about them. From the mid-1960s into the 1970s, however, candidates began to discuss compelling issues such as the Vietnam War and urban disorder; and the public seemed to respond with increased awareness and coherence.[34]

More recent research has called into question the degree and meaningfulness of the changes observed in the 1960s and 1970s, suggesting that they may result from changes in the way questions were asked and that much of the research into this area may be fatally flawed. It may be that the public's level of sophistication about politics has always been low and that it has changed little over the last 40 years. Whatever apparent increases in liberal-conservative

POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

Economic Status and Ideology

Conventional wisdom has it that political ideology is closely tied to economic status, with the less well-off holding liberal beliefs and the better-off aligning themselves with a conservative viewpoint. How well does this relationship hold up in America? Figure 5A shows the relationship between the respondent's professed political ideology and the income of the respondent's family. The poorest Americans are the most likely group to identify themselves as liberal. These citizens are less moderate and conservative than they are liberal. In the second and third groups the number of liberals is the least populous group. In the other two categories, liberals come in second to conservatives. Conservative views outnumber the others in the three highest income categories, and there does seem to be some support for the claim that wealthier individuals are more likely to be conservative. Additionally, the higher income groups are more likely to express an ideological identity: 96 percent of the wealthiest group identified with one of the three categories, but only 59 percent of the poorest group did. One striking feature of these data is the relative weakness of the ideological differences between the income groups. More than 18 percent of the poorest Americans describe themselves as conservative. In the wealthiest group, 29 percent describe themselves as liberal. Surprisingly, then, not everybody who pays through taxes for liberal government programs opposes them, and not everybody who might benefit from them supports them. Clearly, economic standing alone does not determine the ideological views of the American public.

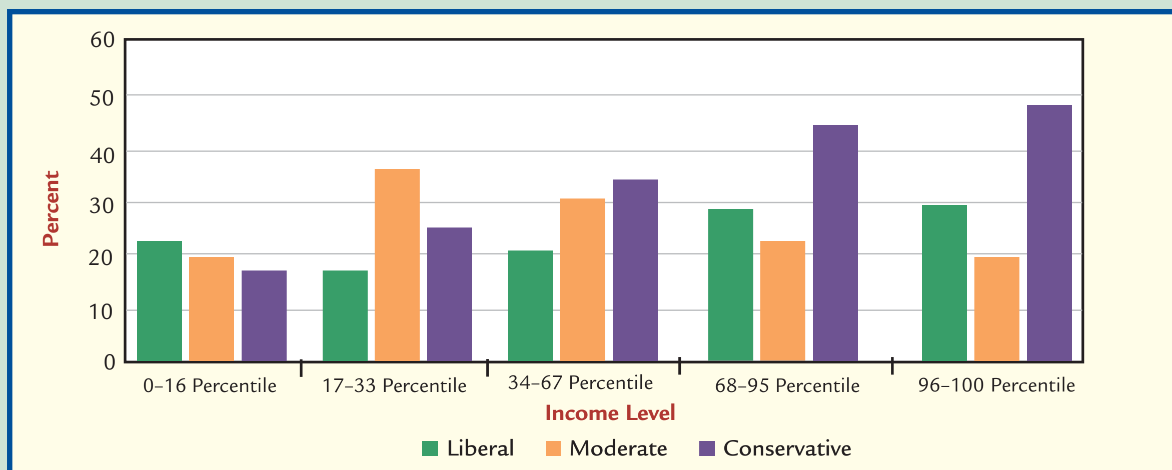
What other factors might determine how liberal or conservative a person is? How do you think the neoliberal and neoconservative viewpoints discussed in Chapter 4 might relate to economic status?

FIGURE 5A

Political Ideology and Income

Poor people tend to be less conservative and rich people tend to be more conservative, but all income levels have substantial numbers of conservatives, and some rich people are liberal.

SOURCE: American National Election Study, 2004.



thinking there have been may result from the public merely parroting the heightened liberal-conservative rhetoric of candidates without really understanding it.[35]

The political beliefs of the American public establish patterns that help to shape politics. The general agreement on principles such as freedom and majority rule defines the boundaries within which the game of American politics is played. These limits help to blunt any potential for political instability or violence. Commitments to ideas such as equal opportunity tend to define the basic objectives of the political system. The relatively low level of ideological thinking provides political leaders with room to maneuver, and, thereby fosters political stability.

Nevertheless, differences in ideological perspective result in fundamental conflicts that the political process must resolve. For instance, how actively should the government promote the interests of disadvantaged or oppressed groups? Where should the government strike the balance between promoting social change and maintaining social stability? How the public thinks about politics defines, in part, some of the most fundamental principles and problems of American democracy.

The Sources of Public Opinion: Political Socialization

Given the importance of public opinion, it is useful to comprehend why the public thinks as it does about politics. The origins of public opinion lie in history and philosophy, as discussed in Chapter 4. But knowing where ideas come from does not explain how people come to hold certain beliefs; understanding that phenomenon requires a discussion of political socialization.

political socialization

The process by which citizens acquire politically relevant knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of behavior

Political socialization is the process by which citizens come to think what they do about politics. Through political socialization, citizens internalize, or incorporate into their own thinking, beliefs, feelings, and evaluations (judgments on whether something is good or bad) about the political world in which they live. Think of the tremendous range of knowledge, feelings, and evaluations that people have about politics, and think of the many sources from which they all come; political socialization is obviously a long and complicated process.

Most of what people think and feel about politics has been learned from somebody else, but to leave it at that would deny the dynamic nature of the process and ultimately the possibility of any political change. That is, if all people simply stuck with what they have been taught about politics, nobody would ever think of anything new; and nothing would ever change. Clearly, then, some people break away from rigid adherence to old ideas and put thoughts together in new ways, but even those people start somewhere, building upon what already exists. Thus, political socialization is important to both stability and change in American politics.

The Processes of Political Socialization

How do people learn about politics? Psychologists say that people tend to repeat behavior patterns that are rewarded and not to repeat patterns that are not rewarded or that are

punished. Much of what people know about politics they learn through explicit teaching. Information is presented to them, and they are either rewarded for learning it (by a higher grade or the praise of teachers or parents, for example) or punished for not learning it (by a lower grade or the criticism of teachers or parents). The mechanisms of learning are really the domain of psychology. Listed below are some of the basic processes that political scientists have identified as important in political socialization.

- ***Social learning theory*** People experience subtle rewards and punishments from the psychological attachments they form to particular people around them, some of whom they admire, others of whom they dislike. Because people like to have favorable images of themselves, they may attempt to boost their self-images by acting like people they admire or by avoiding the behavior of those they do not like. Thus, a little boy may parrot his mother's views about the president, or a rebellious teenager may criticize a candidate that her disliked father holds dear.
- ***Transfer theory*** People may carry over attitudes developed in a narrower setting, such as the family or school, to the broader political setting. A boy who dislikes his father may rebel against political authority more generally.
- ***Cognitive development theory*** What people can learn about politics depends on the stage of their mental development. Some things can be learned only early in life, while others can be learned only later on. An adult immigrant newly arrived in America may never develop the deep emotional attachment to the nation felt by a person who has grown up in this country from birth. By contrast, a first grader lacks the intellectual capacity to master the intricacies of federalism.[36]

These different theories of how people learn about politics are not competing but, rather, complementary. Social learning sometimes occurs through explicit teaching. The possibilities of transference, social learning, and explicit teaching probably all vary, depending on the intellectual development of the learner. Political socialization is too complex to be accounted for by any one theory or explanation.

The Agents of Political Socialization

agents of socialization

A "teacher" in the process of political socialization, for example, the family, the school, a peer group, or the mass media

Agents of socialization are the people and institutions from which we learn. A person growing up in the United States learns about politics from many teachers. A comprehensive list would be too long to include here, but it is possible to identify a few of the most important agents. (Another important agent, the mass media, is discussed in the next chapter.)

- ***The Family*** Under almost any realistic theory of political socialization, the family is uniquely situated to be a potent agent. The young individual who according to developmental theory is most vulnerable to socialization, spends much time with the family. Thus, the family has the first chance at influencing political develop-

ment. Psychological attachments are often strong and, therefore, conducive to the transference of attitudes toward authority, which influences attitudes and behavior relating to participation and partisanship. Although much learning takes place in the family, how much of that learning is political is difficult to pinpoint and varies from family to family. Politics is not of paramount interest to most Americans and, thus, is not usually at the top of the typical family's agenda for discussion. As such, it is not surprising that children sometimes grow up to be politically different from their parents. Research indicates that the transmission of political attitudes from parents to their children is substantial only when the attitudes relate to topics that regularly come up for discussion in the family.[37]

- ***The School*** The school is also a prime agent of political socialization. Education can be related to many political orientations—political participation, political knowledgeability, and political tolerance, among others. Certainly the school is the primary explicit teacher of information about politics and government. A good share of the learning fades away, as every student well knows, unless it is periodically reinforced by additional education, exposure to the media, political discussion, or repeated use.

  However, schools involve more than just the presentation of facts; they are complex and diverse bundles of experiences and impressions. Students encounter teachers, books, authority figures and role models (such as principals and coaches), and their fellow students or peers. Some of the people students encounter may be very much like themselves, and some may be different. Meeting students of different races or

The school is a prime agent of political socialization. *(iStock)*

religions in the school setting often provides children with their first real encounter with social diversity. Students may involve themselves in low-level political activities: class and club elections, student government, protests against school policies, and so on. They acquire not just facts but subtle impressions about the way things are and the way things ought to be. They develop feelings about social and political involvement and what they can hope to accomplish through the political process.[38]

- ***Peer Groups*** Peer groups are groups of people, roughly equal in social position, who interact with one another. Students who go to school together, people who work together in an office or factory or bowl on the same team, the neighbors on the block—all are peer groups. Social pressures on group members to conform can be quite powerful. Group members adopt "proper" attitudes and behavior because they seek the boost to their self-image that comes with the approval of others or because they fear that nonconformity will lead to ostracism. Because other things are usually more important, peer groups do not always set norms relating to politics. However, when they do, the political consequences can be significant.[39]

The Development of Political Self

How does political learning actually take place? How do politically blank infants develop into full-blown political beings? Probably the first political thought to blossom in the mind of a small child in the United States is a psychological attachment to America. This is by no means a sense of what America is, just a feeling of belonging to it. In families where partisanship is important, a primitive sense of "I'm a Republican" or "I'm a Democrat" may appear. A sense of external authority above the authority of the parents that must be obeyed also emerges. This is most often attached to two specific figures: the president and the police officer. The president is the focal point of the American political system; thus, it is not surprising that this focused attention influences even very small children. The police officer gains attention as a less remote figure of considerable authority who moves about in a child's world. Perhaps the most striking feature of these early images is their positive character. Small children tend to idealize political authorities, attributing to them all possible virtues.[40]

As children grow, their political orientations evolve. In school they begin to acquire substantial new knowledge pertinent to politics. Much of this they soon forget, but some of it becomes part of their lasting store of information. Their conceptions of politics become less personal and more institutional. For example, the president is important not so much as a person but as a position. Idealization of political authority fades to realism: Public figures have flaws, they make mistakes, and people criticize them. Once in school, where teachers may try to minimize classroom conflict by downplaying partisan differences, children tend to become less partisan.

As partisanship declines, the ability to deal with the political world on a more abstract level increases. Children develop intellectually and morally to the extent that they can begin

to look at politics in a more sophisticated and structured way. The critical age at which political thinking really starts to blossom seems to be about 12. Within a couple more years, children's thinking becomes nearly as abstract and sophisticated as that of adults. Also, with increasing exposure to the sometimes unattractive facets of political life, realism often fades into cynicism. By the late teens, most individuals have established a political identity.

Political socialization does not end at the age of 21, however; learning about politics continues through adulthood. As people age, their needs and concerns evolve from, for example, their own education to their children's education to, in later life, their own health care. People's social environment changes; their family role shifts from child to parent to grandparent, the school years recede into the past, and peer groups switch from fellow students to fellow workers to fellow retirees. Broader social change affects political learning, too, as large-scale social transformations such as the civil rights movement and the women's movement alter the expectations that people have of themselves and of society. Major unresolved issues revolve around how much childhood socialization persists into adulthood, and how much adult political learning is constrained by what has been learned as a child.[41]

Diversity in Socialization

Socialization is not an identical process for all Americans. American society includes many subsocieties with their own distinctive political subcultures or shared patterns of political attitudes and behavior—many of which are racially and ethnically based. African Americans constitute one of the largest distinctive subcultures. Although African Americans and white Americans view many issues similarly, significant divisions exist, particularly with regard to equality and the government. For example, 84 percent of whites believe that equal housing opportunities exist for African Americans, but only 44 percent of African Americans hold this view. While 73 percent of African Americans believe they are treated less fairly by the police, only 31 percent of whites believe this is true.[42] The Latino and Asian subcultures are harder to characterize, partly because neither is a single subculture, but rather a collection of them. The rapidly growing Latino subculture encompasses the Mexican-oriented culture of the Southwest, as well as the Cuban-oriented culture of south Florida and the Puerto Rican culture of New York City and other large cities. Similarly, the Asian subculture includes the long-established Chinese communities of San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City and the more recently established communities of immigrants from Vietnam, Laos, and other Southeast Asian countries.

The different regions of the United States, to some degree, also constitute distinctive subcultures with unique patterns of political thought and behavior. The South is perhaps the most distinct from the others, owing to the continuing legacy of slavery and subsequent racial strife, as well as its more rural, agricultural subculture. Earlier studies of socialization found children in the South to differ from those in the North, but these differences seem to be fading.

CONTEMPORARY CONTROVERSIES

Public Opinion and Terrorism: American Government in the Eyes of the World

Reaction to the American government's initial response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks varied around the world. (*iStock*)

As soon as the terrorist attacks hit the United States on September 11, 2001, Americans and governments and citizens throughout the world began to react to the unfolding events. Many of these reactions were captured in opinion polls conducted by the news media and by independent polling agencies. Although reactions were initially quite uniform, cleavages soon began to emerge around the world.

A vast majority of Americans supported the government's initial responses. The president's approval ratings (in response to the question "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president?") initially jumped from 51 percent just prior to September 11 to 86 percent a few days later. This figure rose to 90 percent in the following weeks and remained there for longer than any previous president since The Gallup Organization started measuring approval ratings in the 1940s. Throughout the weeks that followed, Americans also indicated strong support for Congress (84 percent), military action in Afghanistan (88 percent), and the use of ground troops (80 percent). When it came to the next steps, however, diversity of opinion—a hallmark of democracy—began to return to American politics. Although support for the government's overall actions was high, about half of the nation (49 percent) believed that the government's repeated warnings about the possibility of further terrorist attacks didn't help but "just scared people." When political leaders began to speculate about the need to restrict personal freedoms, such as personal privacy, in order to prevent future acts of terror, 60 percent of Americans opposed making it easier for legal authorities to read mail and e-mail or tap phones without a person's knowledge.

Around the world reactions have been even more varied. Although countries almost universally condemned the terrorist attacks against the United States, opinions were wide ranging regarding America's military response. In the weeks following the attacks of September 11th and the October 7th launch of a military response, America's closest traditional allies tended to be the most supportive. British Prime Minister Tony Blair made his nation's support evident, and the British people followed suit. Ninety-three percent favored arresting anyone found to be aiding terrorists, and 70 percent be-

lieved the United States and its allies should "be prepared to take military action" against nations harboring the terrorists responsible for the attacks. Britons were wary, however, of the consequences of such actions—78 percent believed any military response would create a wider conflict between "the Western world and the Islamic world."

The people of many other nations were deeply split over support for the military response. The Russians, a newly acquired and still cautious ally, expressed confidence in the Bush administration's ability to "handle the situation," but only 42 percent approved of the military strikes against Afghanistan. The Russian people themselves had experienced first-hand the misery of a protracted Afghan war in the 1980s, and many (60 percent) believed the actions of the United States would threaten Russian security. Some (54 percent) blamed terrorism and the Taliban regime for the military conflict, but others (30 percent) held American leadership and American society responsible. One of the main concerns expressed in the Russian press and elsewhere was that the United States was engaging in actions that would not solve the problem of terrorism, and was doing so without providing evidence of al Qaeda's guilt to the rest of the world.

Finally, the citizens of several nations stood opposed to nearly all American military efforts, some believing the United States should have pursued a diplomatic solution and others asserting that America's foreign policy and global capitalism were merely reaping what they had sown. Although the official government response of nations such as Egypt and Pakistan, for example, was initially supportive of American strikes against Afghanistan, the people of these countries demonstrated opposition through anti-American street protests and peace vigils. Why such a reaction? One factor is that many nations in the Middle East and Asia have large Muslim populations, who expressed concerns that an attack on one Muslim nation could spread to others. This was the case in Turkey, where 80 percent of Turkish citizens opposed an American military response in Afghanistan.

In the years since 9/11, this division between America and the Arab world, and the broader Muslim world, has deepened as American military efforts turned from Afghanistan to Iraq, with increasing hints that Iran might be a future target as well. Though attitudes toward the American people and the values of freedom and democracy remained largely favorable, a 2004 survey of six Arab nations indicated declining attitudes overall over the past two years. Opposition to American terrorism policy ranged from 75 to 96 percent and opposition to American Iraq policy ranged from 78 to 98 percent. A 2008 poll indicated that American leadership received only a 17 percent approval rating in the Middle East, the lowest of any region and only about half of the world average.

How did you initially react to the attacks on America? What policy approaches have you approved of and disapproved of since then? Are the world's citizens correct to criticize American foreign policy, or are their perspectives too limited by the information they receive? Is there such a thing as an objective, or "correct," view of politics?

SOURCE: The Gallup Organization, "Reactions to the Attacks on America and U.S.-Led Response," October 9, 2001, http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr010914f. asp (4 November 2001); The Gallup Organization, "Attack on America: Key Trends and Indicators," October 23, 2001, http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr01092 6c.asp (30 October 2001); CNN.Com, "World Reacts to War on Terror," http:// www.cnn.com/ (3 November 2001); and World Press Review, "After September 11: A New Worldview," http://www.worldpress.org/specials/wtc/front.htm (3 November 2001); Zogby International, "Impressions of America 2004: How Arabs View America, How Arabs Learn About America," 2004; The Gallup Organization, U.S. Leadership Approval Lowest in Europe, Mideast," April 2, 2008, http://www.gallup .com/poll/105967/US-Leadership-Approval-Lowest-Europe-Mideast (15 July 2008).

http://www.gallup.com/

Keep your finger on the pulse of American public opinion with the latest polls from the Gallup Organization.

In fact, the general trend seems to be away from clear-cut differentiation and toward greater homogeneity. Some attribute this trend to the "nationalization" of American culture and politics, which tends to blur regional differences. Americans in all parts of the country eat the same fast food and buy the same national-brand products. Most important politically, they read the same wire-service news stories and national news magazines and watch the same network news broadcasts. As a result, public opinion in the United States is becoming more and more uniform from region to region.

One other aspect of diversity in political socialization involves gender differences. Much of the early research on political socialization portrayed females as less political than males, and traced those differences back to the childhood years.[43] The changing social and economic role of women from the eighteenth century to today is both a cause and a result of changes in the political interest, competence, and involvement of women.[44] The move toward more equal roles for men and women fostered by feminist movements is likely to manifest itself in, and benefit from, less political difference between young males and females.

Political Participation

So far we have examined what Americans think about politics and why they think what they do. The next step in our discussion is to focus on what Americans do about what they think. In other words, how is public opinion translated into political participation? Of course, putting it in those terms suggests that political participation stems exclusively from political considerations such as concern about issues and ideology. Such considerations are only part of the story.

Motives for Political Participation

The conventional image of political participation is that of concerned citizens trying to advance their views by engaging in political activity. This is no doubt an accurate picture for some people. However, substantial numbers of people who are relatively unconcerned about politics nevertheless participate, and substantial numbers of people who are concerned about politics do not participate. Obviously, other factors must also motivate political participation.

political efficacy
A person's sense of being able to accomplish something politically, an important determinant of political participation

sense of duty
A motivating factor, felt by some citizens, to get involved in politics

Some participation is sparked by *political motivations.* **Political efficacy** is a person's sense of being able to accomplish something politically. It involves judgments both about one's own competence in the political arena (sometimes called *internal efficacy)* and about the responsiveness of the political system to one's efforts (external efficacy). People with a very strong sense of efficacy are more likely to be politically active than those with a weak sense of efficacy. Other citizens are motivated to become involved by a **sense of duty.** They may care less about the issues or be put off by politics, but they have been socialized to think that good citizens get involved in politics. People with a strong sense of duty are more likely to participate politically than those without it.

party identification

Psychological attachment that a citizen may feel toward a particular political party

Party identification, the psychological attachment that many Americans feel toward a particular political party, also provides a strong impetus to political action. The highest rates of political activity are observed among people with a strong commitment to one or another of the political parties. A person who strongly supports programs advocated by the Democratic Party, for example, will probably work to promote a Democratic victory. Yet someone who sees little difference between the parties and who cares little about issues may not even vote.

Other factors spurring people on to political involvement are essentially nonpolitical or *social motivations.* Many people engage in political activity for its social rewards: meeting people, making friends, and developing new relationships. People low in self-esteem or lacking in confidence may attempt to bolster their self-image by taking on the social opportunities and challenges that political activity offers. In other cases, concern about an issue may initially mobilize a citizen into political involvement; but even when the concern fades away, the social connection keeps the person going.[45] This is not to say that political activity so inspired is of no political consequence; the labor, the money, or the vote of such a person counts the same as that of the most ideological partisan. Rather, the point is that not all political actions can be understood simply in terms of political motives.

Forms of Participation

Any American who wants to become politically involved has a broad range of options, from merely glancing at the TV news occasionally all the way to running for president of the United States. Some of these forms of participation are the focus of other chapters in this book. Participation related to campaigns and elections will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8. Much political activity occurs within the framework of interest groups and political parties. These facets of participation will be examined closely in Chapter 7. The rest of this section focuses on some of the most important other ways in which Americans can participate politically.

Following Politics Just paying attention to politics constitutes a simple form of political participation. For many Americans politics is, if nothing more, an entertaining spectator sport. As noted earlier in this chapter, about two-thirds of Americans say they follow government and public affairs "most" or "some" of the time. How active their pursuit is of public affairs is suggested by this statistic: 57 percent of the American people say they read a newspaper at least several times per week, and about the same percentage say that they regularly watch the nightly network news broadcasts.[46]

Contacting Public Officials One of the most direct ways to convey a political message is to deliver it straight to a politician or governmental authority. Not many Americans do this very often, and the numbers seem to be declining. One study indicates that 23 percent fewer citizens wrote to their legislators between the 1970s and 1990s.[47] So where does all that mail to public officials come from? First, an occasional letter from even a small proportion of a

large number of constituents can generate a lot of mail, as the caseworker in almost any congressional office can confirm. Beyond that, it appears that a small group of letter writers writes a large number of letters. One study estimated that two-thirds of all mail to public officials comes from just 3 percent of the population.[48]

Direct face-to-face contact with members of Congress and other public officials is harder to assess. One estimate is that about 20 percent of Americans directly contact public officials about an issue or problem.[49] Another standard strategy for contacting public officials is the petition, a right protected by the First Amendment. A petition is a written statement requesting that the government follow some course of action, circulated among and signed by a group of citizens. More than one-third (35 percent) of Americans claim that they have signed a petition in the last 12 months.[50]

Protests Within and Beyond the Law Abstract theories of representative democracy and, indeed, the original Constitution itself focus on the election of representatives as the principal means of communication between citizens and government. The First Amendment to the Constitution, in its guarantees of freedom of speech, assembly, and petition, reminds us of other forms of political expression, however. These guarantees reflect a political tradition in which political protest sometimes assumes an important role and embody the view that at least some such actions are legitimate.

Political protest can assume many different forms, some of which are discussed below.

- ***Marches and rallies*** Marches and demonstrations have a long-standing tradition in American politics. Perhaps the most famous example was the great march on Washington in August of 1963. This landmark event in the civil rights movement, which brought more than 250,000 peaceful demonstrators to the Mall, culminated with Dr. Martin Luther King's historic "I have a dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The Vietnam War brought numerous marchers to Washington in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In recent decades, the abortion issue has drawn many pro-choice and pro-life marchers to the streets of the nation's capital and some state capitals, as has the issue of gay rights.
- ***Boycotts*** Boycotts, the refusal of citizens to buy a particular product or use certain service, are another important tool of protest. In the late 1950s, the refusal of African Americans in the South to ride in the rear of buses exerted economic pressure on municipalities and attracted public attention to their cause. Some 15 percent of the American people say that they have participated in a boycott.[51]
- ***Picketing*** Groups of protesters standing in front of a retail store or office building, placards in hand, are a common sight on the American political scene. One of the most frequent uses of picketing in recent years has been for pro-environmental or animal causes, such as pickets in front of the World Trade Organization meetings or protests against human use of animal fur or other inhumane animal treatment.

Protest demonstrations are one of the most visible, though certainly not the most common, forms of political participation in America. Accurate estimates of the extent of protest are notoriously difficult to obtain because people are sometimes reluctant to admit their participation to researchers. That being said, in a 2000 study 7 percent of respondents reported that they had participated in a demonstration, boycott, or march in the previous twelve months and in 2004 seven percent reported having attended a political meeting or rally.[52]

Estimates of participation are even more difficult when it comes to actions that involve violence and crime.

- ***Political violence*** On some occasions, American citizens have engaged in violent outbursts with political connotations. At the very founding of the United States, Massachusetts farmers led by Daniel Shays forced the closing of local and state courts before the rebellion was forcibly put down by the state militia. The antidraft riots of the Civil War, the urban ghetto riots of the 1960s, and the antiwar violence of the Vietnam War era resulted in widespread personal injury and destruction of property for political ends. In the last few years, perhaps the most visible recurring instances of political violence have involved antiabortion protesters forcibly blocking and even burning abortion clinics. An even more dramatic event occurred in the spring of 1992: the large-scale riot in Los Angeles, which followed the announcement of not guilty verdicts in the cases of four police officers accused of brutally beating a young African American motorist, Rodney King. The riot resulted in the destruction of more than $500 million in property and the loss of more than 90 lives.
- ***Politically motivated crimes*** Although riots and other violent outbursts have at least the appearance of spontaneity, other politically relevant acts are clearly premeditated criminal violence. The civil rights movement in particular has spawned a number of violent reactions: the death of four African American children in a fire-bombed church, the murder of three young civil rights workers—Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner—in Mississippi in 1963, and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in Memphis in 1968.

Many types of political protest are perfectly legal, particularly as long as they do not endanger the well-being of others. Peaceful marches and demonstrations certainly fall into this category. Others are clearly illegal: Most people would probably agree that rioting and assassination fall into the latter category because they destroy both life and property. Nevertheless, the line between legitimate and illegitimate political protest is sometimes hard to define. Further, some acts of political protest, even if illegal, are undertaken on the basis of a moral justification. These are acts of **civil disobedience**—deliberate violations of the law as a means of asserting the illegitimacy of the law or calling attention to a higher moral principle. Civil rights activists in the South in the 1950s and 1960s organized sit-ins at lunch counters and other facilities designated for whites only with the explicit intention of being

civil disobedience

A form of political protest in which advocates of a cause deliberately break a law as a means of asserting its illegitimacy or drawing attention to their cause

passive resistance

A form of civil disobedience in which protesters do not actively oppose government's attempts to control them, but rather refuse to cooperate by doing nothing—for example, by going limp when police try to pick them up or insisting on being carried to a police van rather than walking

arrested. They saw such action as a way of calling attention to unjust laws and, more generally, to their unjust treatment. A related strategy is the practice of **passive resistance,** in which protesters do not actively oppose government, but rather refuse to cooperate by doing nothing. For example, protesters may not struggle with angry white citizens or police, but simple lie down in the face of attack or arrest and force the police to drag them off to the police van and jail. In recent years, antiabortion activists have adopted some of these tactics in their efforts to shut down women's health clinics.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., provided a good explanation of the moral legitimacy of an illegal action in a famous letter that he wrote from a Birmingham jail:

> I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law.

Civil disobedience is thus characterized by a moral justification, a willingness to accept whatever penalty the action incurs and, some would add, as a critical element an intention to avoid physical harm to others. Only a small proportion of Americans, 2 percent, say that they have themselves broken the law in a protest for a political or social cause.[53] However, civil disobedience is widely recognized as an acceptable strategy in extreme circumstances: When asked whether people should obey the law without exception, or whether there are exceptional occasions on which people should follow their consciences even if it means breaking the law, 42 percent of a national sample supported obeying the law, whereas 57 percent opted for following one's conscience.[54]

Differences in Participation

What determines the forms of political participation in which citizens tend to engage? In probably the most thorough study yet done of political participation in America, Sidney Verba and Norman Nie identified six categories of citizen participation and determined the kinds of people who fell into each.[55]

1. ***Inactives*** These people, comprising about 22 percent of the population, take virtually no part in political life. Lower-status social and economic groups, African Americans, women, the youngest, the oldest, and the least concerned about politics are particularly likely to fall into this category.
2. ***Voting specialists*** About 21 percent of the population do little more politically than vote regularly. This group is distinctive primarily in its strong sense of partisanship. It seems that some inactives get firmly attached to a party and that connection is enough to bring them to the polls at most elections.
3. ***Parochial participants*** About 4 percent of the population contacts public officials when they have a particular personal problem and seek governmental assis-

tance in solving it. Such activity is more common among lower-status groups, Catholics, and urban dwellers than among higher-status, Protestant, and rural citizens. Such people show little partisan or ideological involvement, but they can sometimes make a difference in what government does.

4. ***Communalists*** Another 20 percent of the population has little involvement in electoral politics apart from voting, but they do engage in group and community activities with the aim of solving social problems. This group is highly involved in politics, but decidedly nonpartisan and nonconflictual in its orientation. This group is very much an upper-status group socially and economically, predominantly white, Protestant, and more small-town and rural than urban.
5. ***Campaigners*** In sharp contrast to the preceding group, this 15 percent of the population engages in little group activity but much campaign activity. This pattern stems, in part, from a highly partisan and more conflictual orientation to politics. The group tends to be of higher status; but African Americans and Catholics are also campaigners, as are urban and suburban dwellers.
6. ***Complete activists*** About 11 percent of the population do it all: voting, contacting, group activities, and campaigning. This is a group highly attuned to politics, predominantly upper-status and middle-aged.

What difference does it make that different groups tend to participate in different ways? Public officials are bombarded with messages from the public and people claiming to represent the public. Public officials have preconceptions and make judgments about the forms of political participation to which they need to be most attentive. Because different kinds of people tend to participate in numerous ways, officials get varying impressions of public opinion depending on the forms of participation to which they pay attention. A senator who focuses on constituency service by reading all the mail from parochial participants will get a different sense of the public's mind than one who hobnobs with campaign workers and financial supporters. The people staging a sit-in in front of a congressional representative's district office have very different things on their minds from those who pulled the lever in the voting booth a couple of Novembers earlier. For politicians assessing public opinion, the medium of participation in large measure determines the message.

http://www.eac.gov/voter/Register%20to%20Vote

Are you registered to vote? You can register using the Election Assistance Commission's National Mail Voter Registration Form at the above Web site.

The Impact of Political Participation

Does political activity really make any difference? The stereotypical notion of democracy is that the people's wishes become the law of the land. However, the democratic process cannot be that simple. On some issues, many people do not know what they want. Even if they do, they may not be moved to express their preferences via the political process. Politicians, whether they are presidents, Senate or House members, or Supreme Court justices, may be attentive to what the "public" wants, but such preferences are rarely the only factors they

take into account. First of all, our nation is comprised of many publics, not just one. Further, constitutional constraints, legal constraints, budgetary constraints, foreign policy constraints on domestic policy, and domestic policy constraints on foreign policy also impact the decisions government officials can make.

Little wonder, then, that most studies of the relationship between public opinion and public policy have found the connection to be a relatively loose one.[56] Public opinion is usually sufficiently amorphous, officials' perceptions of it sufficiently cloudy, and more tangible pressures sufficiently strong enough that officials are not severely constrained by public opinion. But when there is a clearly expressed body of opinion on a salient issue, the relationship between public opinion and public policy can be substantial.[57] For example, growing public concern over drugs in the late 1980s led politicians to move antidrug legislation to the top of the agenda. In 1989, the much-publicized oil spill from the tanker Exxon Valdez into Prince William Sound on the Alaska coast reenergized the flagging environmental movement and sparked a flurry of environmental legislation in the early 1990s. After a series of energy crises in early 2001, 21 percent of Americans in a nationwide poll mentioned energy as the most important problem facing the country.[58] In the wake of recent terrorist attacks, 46 percent of Americans in an October 2001 poll indicated that terrorism was the most important problem.[59] In 2006 Americans named the Iraq War as the most important problem facing the country.[60] By 2008, the struggling economy and concerns over rising fuel prices had overtaken the Iraq War as Americans' number one concern.[61]

A Rationality of Political Participation

Does it make sense to participate politically? Fifty years ago, Anthony Downs pioneered a new field of political analysis in an important and influential book called An *Economic Theory of Democracy.*[62] He examined political activity in terms of the so-called **rational actor model.** In this model, a citizen rationally weighs the costs and the benefits of participating. If the benefits exceed the costs, the citizen participates; if not, the citizen does not. Focusing on voting, Downs pointed out that getting registered, keeping informed, and going to the polls all take a substantial amount of time. The benefits, by contrast, are actually quite low. What politicians from one party or the other actually do after an election may not be very different from what their opponents would have done. Even more important, one individual's vote is very unlikely to determine whether his or her favored candidate wins. These factors make the expected benefit of voting relatively small.

rational actor model

A perspective that looks at politics as a system in which individuals and organizations pursue their self-interests, defined in terms of costs and benefits, and choose to do those things that give them the greatest benefit at the least cost

A similar analysis could be made of most other individual political actions. The costs weighed against the low probability of any benefit make individual political actions appear to be of dubious rationality. One possible exception is what Verba and Nie call "parochial participation." With a narrow personal objective and the expenditure of a fair amount of effort directed toward a particular decision maker, the individual may stand a fair chance of achieving success.[63] Collective activities may also be more effective. Joining together allows

costs to be shared and resources to be pooled. All other things being equal, many citizens will probably be more influential than one.

Finally, even political protest may prove to be a rational strategy. Minority and dissident groups often lack political clout because they lack resources and thus cannot afford the costs of participation. One political scientist has called this the "problem of the powerless."[64] A rational strategy for such people is to attract the attention of those with resources and draw them into the cause. A minimal expenditure of resources is required to engage in unusual or dramatic activities, such as sit-ins and demonstrations, which call public attention to the plight of the protesters. Such activities constitute, to borrow one apt description, the use of "protest as a political resource."[65]

CHAPTER 5 REVIEW

1. Public opinion is complicated because our nation consists of not one public, but many, and because opinion varies over time and in intensity and sophistication. Americans differ widely in their interest in and sophistication about politics; most of them have relatively little day-to-day concern, knowledge, or real understanding about what goes on in the political world. Americans do agree on certain basic values. However, they disagree about exactly what many of these values mean in particular circumstances and about political ideology.
2. Political socialization is the process by which young Americans are taught about political life in the United States. Through various processes of socialization, young people acquire the information and the ability to reason about politics. The values that they draw on as political actors are learned from their parents, schools, peers, and the mass media.
3. Americans involve themselves in politics in many ways for a variety of reasons. Involvement can range from simply following politics and voting to intense immersion in campaigns, community activities, or more dramatic forms of participation such as protest marches, sit-ins, and demonstrations. The impact of participation on policy is often weak, however; and much political participation is hard to justify in purely rational terms.

KEY TERMS

public opinion
political socialization
agents of socialization
political efficacy
sense of duty
party identification
civil disobedience
passive resistance
rational actor model

READINGS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Classic works on public opinion include Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1997) and one of the first major reports on survey research into public opinion, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign,* by Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

Rosalee A. Clawson and Zoe M. Oxley's *Public Opinion: Democratic Ideals, Democratic Practice* (Washington,

D.C.: CQ Press, 2008) provides a more recent overview of public opinion and *Polling and the Public,* 7th ed. by Herbert Asher (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2007) addresses the more scientific aspects of opinion polls.

Perhaps the major contributor to our understanding of basic American political values is Herbert McClosky, who has written (with Alida Brill) *Dimensions of Tolerance* (New York: Russell Sage, 1983) and (with John Zaller) *The American Ethos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

James G. Gimpel, J. Celeste Lay, and Jason E. Schuknecht, *Cultivating Democracy: Civic Environments and Political Socialization in America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 2003) provides a good overview of the topic of political socialization.

An excellent recent study of civic engagement in America is Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Touchstone, 2000).

Perhaps the best overall empirical studies of political participation in all its facets are *Political Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) by Sidney Verba and Norman Nie and *Voice and Equality: Civic Volunteerism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady.

NOTES

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