What do you think about politics and government? In other words, what are your beliefs and opinions about politics and government? Are they the same as your parents’, your friends’, or people in your community? Public opinion polls reveal that Americans are a diverse lot, but nonetheless, agree on many issues. Politicians and others who want to sway public opinion depend on public opinion polls to inform them of what Americans believe and want from their government and elected officials. This is nothing new. Politicians back in the time of the Framers did not have sophisticated public opinion polls to tell them what the citizens believed or wanted, nor did they have national news media to tell them the results of those polls, but they sought to mold public sentiment nevertheless. What opinions do people hold about government, politics, and issues? Why do they count to politicians? And, how are your opinions, beliefs, and values formed and how are they changed? These are vital questions in a democracy. We all want our opinion and our beliefs to mean something to others. We want our voices heard. Do polls effectively reflect our values and beliefs? Do they accurately predict trends, directions, and decisions?

This chapter is designed to give you a better understanding of polling and the nature of public opinion. It is also designed to help you better understand from whence your own opinions, and the opinions of others, have come. The main topic headings of the chapter are:

- What is Public Opinion?
- Public Opinion and Polling
- Why We Form and Express Political Opinions
- How Public Opinion Is Measured
- The Effects of Public Opinion and Polling on Government and Politics

In each section, there are certain facts and ideas that you should strive to understand. Many are in boldface type and appear in both the narrative and in the glossary at the end of the book. Other ideas, dates, facts, events, people, etc. are more difficult to pull out of the narrative. (Keep in mind that studying for objective tests [multiple choice, T/F] is different than studying for essay tests. See the Study Guide section on test taking for hints on study skills.)

In general, after you finish reading and studying this chapter, you should understand the following:

- political socialization and the panoply of factors that influence this process
• public opinion and polling, the role of political socialization in public opinion formation, and the role of public opinion polls in determining public perception of political issues
• why Americans form and express political opinions
• the effects of public opinion and polling on government and politics and how since the writing of *The Federalist Papers*, parties, candidates, and public officials have worked to sway as well as gauge public opinion for political purposes

**Chapter Outline and Key Points**

In this section, you are provided with a basic outline of the chapter and key concepts and terms you should know. Use this outline to develop a complete study guide for the chapter. Use the space provided in this workbook to write notes from your reading, defining the terms and explaining the concepts listed below. You may wish to rewrite the material in your notebook or computer. However you work up this outline, the effort and information will help you study and remember the material in preparation for your tests, assignments, and papers.

John Jay in *Federalist No. 2*—

homogeneous society in early America—

today’s heterogeneous society—

**Political Socialization**

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Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition—

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Views of Whites and Blacks in Wake of Hurricane Katrina (Figure 11.3)—

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Native Americans’ response to issues—

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November 22, 1963—
effects of 9/11 attacks—

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public opinion polls—
George Gallup—
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Walter Lippmann—
*Public Opinion* (1922)—
*Literary Digest*—
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2)  
3)
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Gallup Poll in presidential elections (Fig. 11.1)—
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followers—

presidential efforts to drum up support for their programs—

George W. Bush and fall in public opinion polls over Iraq War—

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Roper Center survey on Americans’ political ideology—

**The Effects of Public Opinion and Polling on Government and Politicians**

*Federalist Papers*’ comment on public opinion—

public opinion influences the actions of politicians and public officials—

political opinion and political capital—

studies on whether public policy is responsive to public opinion—
criticism of political polling—

bandwagon effect in New Hampshire primary—

underdog effect in New Hampshire primary—

effect of strong showing in New Hampshire primary—

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Ideas and Possible Paper Topics</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Use the library or Internet to find the content and results of a number of polls. Bring them to class and in discussion groups, analyze the quality and reliability of those polls. Be sure to discuss sampling, error rates, question wording, how respondents are contacted, and other factors that affect the results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Write a paper based on your own political ideology and opinions. How were they formed? Consider those who have influenced these opinions and political views. Is the text correct in asserting what the dominant factors of political socialization are? Compare your experiences with those of your classmates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Most people's opinions are affected by what can be called a “formative political event.” For some people, this event was the assassination of JFK, for others, it was Watergate or the Iranian hostage crisis, and for still others, it was the Persian Gulf War, the Bill Clinton investigation, 9/11, or the Iraq invasion and occupation. Think about your “formative political event” or first political memory. How did that event shape your political ideas and worldview? What about your parents and grandparents? Ask them what major events affected their political perceptions. Compare notes with your classmates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) As a class project, choose an issue of interest and formulate your own poll. Then administer it on campus. Discuss the process, the results, and problems of your poll and extrapolate that to polling in general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Examine the popularity polls of George W. Bush during his first and second term. Then stage a debate in class based on those results. One side should argue that public opinion polling is inherently problematic and should not be used to criticize a president and his actions. The other side should argue that polling is a valid way to determine the will of the people in a democracy and, thus, should be used to determine the efficacy of a president’s actions in office. Each side should do research to flesh out their arguments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The **Gallup Organization** is one of the best-known and most well-respected polling agencies. Their Web site offers access to reports, polling data, and more about a variety of issues.

[www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com)

The **American National Election Study** at the University of Michigan offers regular polls on elections, voting behavior, and electoral issues.

[http://www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org)

The **National Opinion Research Center (NORC)**, a research arm of the University of Chicago, offers surveys of American attitudes and opinions.

[www.norc.org](http://www.norc.org)

**Roper Center for Public Opinion Research**, located at the University of Connecticut, is the largest library of public opinion data in the world. The Center's mission focuses on data preservation and access, education, and research. Includes the GSS—General Social Survey.

[www.ropercenter.uconn.edu](http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu)

The **Subject Guide to Political Socialization and Political Culture** is a Web site hosted by Appalachian State University.


The **Washington Post Data Directory** is a guide to public opinion data published on the Internet by nonpartisan organizations.

[www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/datadir.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/datadir.htm)

The **Research Industry Coalition** is an organization promoting professionalism and quality in public opinion and marketing research. Their Web site includes an interesting article on the problems with the proliferation of “call in” polls and 900 number polls.

[www.researchindustry.org/index.html](http://www.researchindustry.org/index.html)

The **American Association for Public Opinion Research** is a professional association that publishes *Public Opinion Quarterly* whose tables of contents are available on this Web site.

[www.aapor.org](http://www.aapor.org)

The **Virtual Reference Desk at Binghamton University** offers a Web site devoted to polling and public opinion, including information on bad polls and techniques; also offers links to some opinion sites.

[http://library.lib.binghamton.edu/vrd/polls.html](http://library.lib.binghamton.edu/vrd/polls.html)
MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1) The founder of modern-day polling is
   a. Louis Harris.
   b. George Gallup.
   c. Steve Roper.
   d. Walter Lippman.

2) An unscientific survey used to gauge public opinion on issues and policies is called a
   a. deliberative poll.
   b. exit poll.
   c. straw poll.
   d. public opinion poll.

3) The popular magazine which from 1920 to 1932 correctly predicted the outcome of every presidential election based on unscientific surveys of public opinion was
   a. The American Voter.
   b. The Voice of the People.
   d. Literary Digest.

4) Which of the following would be considered agents of political socialization?
   a. schools and peers
   b. families
   c. television, radio, newspapers and the Internet
   d. All of the above.

5) The influence of family on political socialization stems from
   a. communication.
   b. receptivity.
   c. time with parents.
   d. All of the above.

6) Most first-year college students identify themselves as being
   a. liberal.
   b. conservative.
   c. far right.
   d. middle of the road.
7) Based on public opinion polling, women tend to be
   a. more liberal about issues of social welfare concerns.
   b. more negative about war and military intervention.
   c. concerned about terrorism and national security at home.
   d. All of the above.

8) Which of the following groups tends to be the most liberal?
   a. those who attend church regularly
   b. Jews
   c. Catholics
   d. Protestants

9) What percentage of Americans today report that they consider religion an important part of their lives?
   a. 47
   b. 76
   c. 91
   d. 99

10) The single largest predictor of the vote today, following party identification, is
    a. age.
    b. gender.
    c. race.
    d. religion.

11) People can be influenced in forming political opinions by ideology, party affiliation and social grouping. They may also influenced by
    a. personal benefits.
    b. political knowledge.
    c. cues from leaders and opinion-makers.
    d. All of the above.

12) The political knowledge of Americans is quite low. In a 2002 survey, what percent of Americans could not identify the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court?
    a. 69
    b. 12
    c. 37
    d. 41
13) One reason politicians and the news media have regular opportunities to influence public opinion is because
   a. of the deep trust Americans place in the integrity and reliability of political and media sources.
   b. of the lack of deep conviction with which most Americans hold many of their political beliefs.
   c. of the deep conviction with which most Americans hold many of their political beliefs.
   d. All of the above.

14) One reason that polling results are often skewed, especially when interest groups want a poll to yield a particular result, is because
   a. most people lie on polls.
   b. of the wording of the questions.
   c. pollsters are often bribed by politicians.
   d. computer technology currently makes it difficult to accurately process the raw data.

15) Most national surveys and commercial polls use samples of _________ individuals to obtain fairly accurate polling results.
   a. 75 to 100
   b. 300 to 400
   c. 1,000 to 1,500
   d. at least 5,000

TRUE/FALSE QUESTIONS

1) In elementary schools, children are not taught respect for their nation and its symbols.

2) Straw polls, such as those used on local television newscasts, are scientifically based and accurate.

3) Polls predicting the outcome of presidential races proved embarrassingly inaccurate in 1948 when Governor Thomas E. Dewey defeated incumbent President Harry S Truman.

4) The average television news sound bite for a presidential candidate has increased significantly in length since the 1960s and 1970s, thus giving the electorate a greater chance to evaluate the candidates.

5) In the last two presidential elections, all of the major candidates used the Internet in an attempt to inform and sway voters.

6) Events can have a very strong effect on political attitudes and values.
7) Most Americans, in response to polling, indicate that they are politically moderate.

8) Noted political scientist V.O. Key argued in his 1966 *The Irresponsible Electorate* that most voters “are fools and idiots.”

9) American society is far more heterogeneous today than in the early days of the country.

10) Polls clearly can distort the presidential election process, particularly in the early stages such as the New Hampshire primary, by creating a “bandwagon” effect.

**COMPARE AND CONTRAST**

agents of political socialization: family, mass media, school and peers, events, social groups, and political ideology

random sampling, nonstratified sampling, and stratified sampling

telephone polls and in-person polls

tracking polls, exit polls, straw polls, and deliberative polls

sampling error and margin of error

**SHORT ANSWER AND ESSAY QUESTIONS**

1) Discuss early efforts to measure public opinion.

2) What is political socialization?

3) What is political ideology?

4) Compare and contrast the various ways of sampling used in polls.

5) Discuss deliberative polling. What are the costs and benefits of this method of polling?

6) What is public opinion? How do we measure it, and how accurate are those measurements?

7) Discuss the various processes of political socialization. What factors affect our opinion formation and how do these factors affect the broader political system?
8) How do we form political opinions and ideologies? What is the relationship between opinion and ideology?

9) How do we measure public opinion? Discuss methods of sampling, polling, and their shortcomings.

10) How do politicians and the media use polls? What are the implications of these uses?

ANSWERS TO STUDY EXERCISES

Multiple Choice Answers

1) b
2) c
3) d
4) d
5) d
6) d
7) d
8) b
9) b
10) d
11) d
12) a
13) b
14) b
15) c

True/False Answers

1) F
2) F
3) F
4) F
5) T
6) T
7) T
8) F
9) T
10) T