

Main Idea

Public opinion is the collection of views that people hold on public issues. Public opinion is important because it often influences the political process and affects the actions government takes.

Reading Focus

1. What is public opinion?
2. How is public opinion formed?
3. How does the media affect public opinion?
4. How is public opinion measured?

Key Terms

public opinion
 public policy
 political socialization
 mass media
 propaganda
 poll
 sample
 sampling error
 bias
 objectivity
 exit poll

What Is Public Opinion? (p. 249)

The collection of views shared by a segment of society on an issue of interest or concern is called **public opinion**. Public opinion on an issue is often divided. Also, people who agree on one issue may disagree with each other on another issue.

Public Opinion and Public Policy

Public opinion helps leaders shape **public policy**—that is, the choices the government makes and the actions it takes in response to a particular issue or problem. Public opinion can be looked at in two ways. The first is to view the “public” as one large group of people concerned about public issues. In this view, public opinion is *led* by the decisions and actions of political or social leaders. In the second view, public opinion is seen as many individual “publics,” each with its opinion on issues. Each “issue public” interacts, or is involved with, one or more

decision makers. In this view, people’s attitudes *lead* public policy.

Expressing Public Opinion

Responsible citizens try to shape public opinion by writing to officials to let them know their opinion. They may attend public hearings or march in a protest. Or, they may join a group that represents their views. Many of these groups give money to political campaigns to try to influence public officials or legislation. Finally, responsible citizens express their opinions by voting.

Reading Check Identifying the Main Idea How is public opinion related to public policy?

Forming Public Opinion (p. 250)

People’s opinions are influenced by several factors. The process by which people

acquire, or get, political beliefs is called **political socialization**.

Family A person's family often has the most direct influence on his or her views. Listening to family members talk about issues or events helps shape our attitudes about many issues, including race, religion, and politics.

School and Work School is where we learn about government, citizenship, and other values. Schoolmates also influence people's views and opinions. Teenagers and young adults may be influenced by their place of employment.

Other Personal Factors Age, race, gender, and religion are also factors in shaping opinions. For example, a person's religious views might affect his or her opinions about things such as marriage, abortion, or prayer in school.

Reading Check Summarizing What personal factors shape a person's socialization?

Media and Public Opinion (pp. 250–252)

Public opinion and the public agenda may be shaped by the mass media. **Mass media** are means of communication that provide information to a large audience. Mass media include magazines, television news, and news on the Web.

Media Impact The media monitors, shapes and determines the public agenda. It also covers electoral politics.

The Growth of Mass Media Print media, such as newspapers and magazines, have affected public opinion since the early days of the nation. Newspaper readership has gone down in recent decades. However, around 40 percent of American adults still read a newspaper daily. The growth of radio,

television, and the Internet has brought news and entertainment to millions of homes.

Roles of Media The media shapes public opinion in several ways. One way is through the issues it covers and the issue it ignores. The type of coverage is also important.

Criticism of the Media The most common criticisms of media include:

- Bias in reporting—when reporting is slanted toward a certain point of view.
- Bias in story selection—when a media outlet focuses on one issue and ignores or downplays others.
- Factual inaccuracy—when news sources, especially those on the Internet—are careless about factual accuracy.
- Media consolidation—the fact that around 24 companies own most U.S. media outlets today.

The Future of the Media Today information can be delivered instantly. Just because news can be accessed more quickly, however, does not mean that it is more accurate. It is important to consult a wide variety of information sources. Using multiple sources will help you get accurate information and avoid **propaganda**, or statements meant to influence public opinion or promote a cause or viewpoint.

Reading Check Summarizing Why should you read more than one news source?

Measuring Public Opinion (pp. 252–253)

People are often asked to share their opinions through polls. A public opinion **poll** is a survey of people scientifically selected to provide opinions about something. Scientific polling is a way to find out about public attitudes or preferences about products, issues, or candidates. Most surveys today are scientific polls.

The Polling Process The key to a poll's accuracy is the **sample**, or the group of people who take part in the poll. The size of the sample is important. The sample must also be chosen at random from the sample universe—the total population or market of interest. Finally, the way in which questions are worded or the order in which they are asked can affect accuracy.

A reliable poll states its margin of error, or uncertainty level. The margin of error, or **sampling error**, indicates a poll's accuracy, and is given as a percentage above and below the poll's results.

Evaluating Polls Properly conducted polls produce reliable, accurate, objective, and bias-free results. In polling, **bias** refers to errors introduced by polling methods that lead to one outcome over others.

Objectivity is freedom from bias and

outside factors, such as timing, that may influence results.

Polls and Public Opinion Most polls are conducted scientifically. However, some polls are written in ways to produce certain results. These results may be used to shape public opinion in support of a particular group's political or social agenda.

Exit Polls Another common type of scientific poll is the **exit poll**. Used on election day, an exit poll surveys a randomly selected fraction of voters after they have voted and tells pollsters how people voted before the official vote count. To avoid influencing those who have not already voted, exit poll results are not usually announced until voting has ended.

Reading Check Summarizing What factors can affect the accuracy of a poll?

SECTION 1 ASSESSMENT

1. **Define** What is **public policy**?
2. **Describe** What is **political socialization**?
3. **Explain** How does the media help determine public policy?
4. **Recall** How is public opinion determined?