Measuring Public Opinion

Objectives

1. Describe the challenges involved in measuring public opinion.
2. Explain why scientific opinion polls are the best measure of public opinion.
3. Identify five steps in the polling process.
4. Understand the challenges of evaluating polls.
5. Recognize the limits on the impact of public opinion in a democracy.

Section Preview

The general shape of public opinion on an issue can be found through a variety of means. These include voting; lobbying; books; pamphlets; magazine and newspaper articles; editorial comments in the press and on radio, television, and the Internet; paid advertising; letters to editors and public officials, and so on.

These and other means of expression are the devices through which the general direction of public opinion becomes known. Usually though, the means by which a view is expressed tells little—and often nothing reliable—about the size of the group that holds that opinion or how strongly it is held. In the American political system, this information is vital. To find it, some effort must be made to measure public opinion. Elections, interest groups, the media, and personal contacts with the public all—at least to some degree—provide the means of measurement.

Elections

In a democracy, the voice of the people is supposed to express itself through the ballot box. Election results are thus very often said to be indicators of public opinion. The votes cast for the various candidates are regularly taken as evidence of the people’s approval or rejection of the stands taken by those candidates and their parties.

Lesson Plan

Teaching the Main Ideas

1. Focus Tell students that scientific polls are the best way to measure public opinion. Ask students to discuss what they know about the process of scientific poll-taking.
2. Instruct Ask students to explain why elections are not accurate measures of public opinion. Discuss the weaknesses and strengths of this and other measures of public opinion. Then analyze why scientific polling is the best measure of public opinion.
3. Close/Reteach Remind students that all measures of public opinion are not equal, and that there are limits on the impact of public opinion. Discuss some of those limits.

Block Scheduling Strategies

Consider these suggestions to manage extended class time:

- Have students suppose that a highway bypass of their town has been proposed. Divide the class into five groups. Assign each group one of the five main methods of measuring public opinion. Ask groups to consider the pros and cons of their method. Then have them write a story that reveals how successful their method was in measuring public opinion about the bypass.

- Have small groups of students prepare polls on the same topic. Half the groups should use the straw vote technique, and the other half should use scientific polling. Have the groups poll students in their school, compile the results, and then compare their results. Lead a discussion on the straw poll technique vs. the scientific technique.
Chapter 8 • Section 2

Reading Strategy

Problem Solving
Tell students that a local politician has come to them with a problem. She has to make a decision soon about a vital public-policy issue, but she has no idea how her constituents feel about it. Have students determine, as they read, what would be the best approach to measuring public opinion on the issue.

Point-of-Use Resources

- Guided Reading and Review Unit 2 booklet, p. 28 provides students with practice identifying the main ideas and key terms of this section.
- Lesson Planner For complete lesson planning suggestions, see the Lesson Planner booklet, section 2.
- Political Cartoons See p. 31 of the Political Cartoons booklet for a cartoon relevant to this section.
- Section Support Transparencies Transparency 34, Visual Learning: Transparency 133, Political Cartoon

Answer to . . .

Critical Thinking Possible answer: Protests attract a good deal of media attention, which shows elected officials that a large group of people support a particular position.

Interest groups are a chief means by which public opinion is made known. They present their views (exert their pressures) through their lobbyists, by letters and telephone calls, in political campaigns, and by a number of other methods. In dealing with them, however, public officials often have difficulty determining two things: How many people does an interest group really represent? And just how strongly do those people hold the views that an organization says they hold?

The Media
Earlier you read some very impressive numbers about television. Those huge numbers help describe the place of the media in the opinion process; you will read more of those numbers later. Here, recognize this point: The media are also a gauge for assessing public opinion.

The media are frequently described as “mirrors” as well as “molders” of opinion. It is often said that the views expressed in newspaper editorials, syndicated columns, news magazines, television commentaries, and blogs are fairly good indicators of public opinion. In fact, however, the media are not very accurate mirrors of public opinion, often reflecting only the views of a vocal minority.

Personal Contacts
Most public officials have frequent and wide-ranging contacts in many different forms with large numbers of people. In each of these contacts, they try to read the public’s mind. Indeed, their jobs demand that they do so.

Members of Congress receive bags of mail and hundreds of phone calls and e-mails every day. Many of them make frequent trips “to keep in touch with the folks back home.” Top administration figures are often on the road, too, selling the President’s programs and gauging the people’s reactions. Even the President does some of this, with speaking trips to different parts of the country.

Governors, State legislators, mayors, and other officials also have any number of contacts with the public. These officials encounter the public in their offices, in public meetings, at social gatherings, and even at ball games.

Can public officials find “the voice of the people” in all of those contacts? Many can and
The work of pollsters is vital in ensuring that government agencies offer the best possible services to the public they are charged to serve. A common task of these pollsters is to help determine how the public will react to minor policy modifications, such as changing the hours that a park is open. Policymakers can then adjust their decisions accordingly. Thus, the work of pollsters is vital in ensuring that policymakers offer the best possible services to the public they are charged to serve.

**Polls—The Best Measure**

Public opinion is best measured by public opinion polls, devices that attempt to collect information by asking people questions. The more accurate polls are based on scientific polling techniques.

**Straw Votes**

Public opinion polls have existed in this country for more than a century. Until the 1930s, however, they were far from scientific. Most earlier polling efforts were of the straw vote variety. That is, they were polls that sought to read the public’s mind simply by asking the same question of a large number of people. Straw votes are still fairly common. Many radio talk show hosts pose questions that listeners can respond to by telephone, and television personalities regularly invite responses by e-mail.

The straw-vote technique is highly unreliable, however. It rests on the false assumption that a relatively large number of responses will provide a fairly accurate picture of the public’s views on a given question. The problem is this: Nothing in the process ensures that those who respond will represent a reasonably accurate cross-section of the total population. The straw vote emphasizes the quantity rather than the quality of the sample to which its question is posed.

The most famous of all straw-polling mishaps took place in 1936. A periodical called the Literary Digest mailed postcard ballots to more than 10 million people and received answers from more than 2,376,000 of them. Based on that huge return, the magazine confidently predicted the outcome of the presidential election that year. It said that Governor Alfred Landon, the Republican nominee, would easily defeat incumbent Franklin Roosevelt. Instead, Roosevelt won in a landslide. He captured more than 60 percent of the popular vote and carried every State but Maine and Vermont.

\(^3\)Poll comes from the old Teutonic word pole, meaning the top or crown of the head, the part that shows when heads are counted.

The Digest had drawn its sample on an altogether faulty basis: from automobile registration lists and telephone directories. The Digest had failed to consider that in the mid-Depression year of 1936, millions of people could not afford to own cars or have private telephones.

The Digest poll failed to reach most of the vast pool of the poor and unemployed, millions of blue-collar workers, and most of the ethnic minorities in the country. Those were the very segments of the population from which Roosevelt and the Democrats drew their greatest support. The magazine had predicted the winner of each of the three previous presidential elections, but its failure to do so in 1936 was so colossal that it ceased publication not long thereafter.

**Scientific Polling**

Serious efforts to take the public’s pulse on a scientific basis date from the mid-1930s. Attempts began with the work of such early pollsters as George Gallup and Elmo Roper. The techniques that they and others have developed since then have reached a highly sophisticated level.
Have students list the key terms from the Section Preview, following each by its definition. Then ask students to use each term in a sentence. Finally, have students write a fictional press release from the office of a member of Congress. Students’ press releases should be no more than 100 words in length and should use at least two key terms.

**Background Note**

**Political Talk**

Politicians often consider polls when planning their campaign strategies and actions in office. However, no politician wants voters to think that his or her moves are dictated by poll results. George W. Bush’s speech accepting his party’s nomination for President at the 2000 Republican National Convention provides a good example of a politician’s attempt to demonstrate his independence from polls—and, by implication, to criticize his opponent’s reliance on them. “I believe great decisions are made with care, made with conviction, not made with polls,” the candidate stated, “I do not need to take your pulse before I know my own mind.”

There are now more than 1,000 national and regional polling organizations in this country. Many of them do mostly commercial work. That is, they tap the public’s preferences on everything from toothpastes and headache remedies to television shows and thousands of other things. However, at least 200 of these polling organizations also poll the political preferences of the American people. Among the best known of the national pollsters today are the Gallup Organization (the Gallup Poll) and Louis Harris and Associates (the Harris Survey).

**The Polling Process**

Scientific poll-taking is an extremely complex process that can best be described in five basic steps. In their efforts to discover and report public opinion, pollsters must (1) define the universe to be surveyed; (2) construct a sample; (3) prepare valid questions; (4) select and control how the poll will be taken; and (5) analyze and report their findings to the public.

**Defining the Universe**

The *universe* is a term that means the whole population that the poll aims to measure. It is the group whose opinions the poll will seek to discover. That universe can be all voters in Chicago, or every high school student in Texas, or all Republicans in New England, or all Democrats in Georgia, or all Catholic women over age 35 in the United States, and so on.

**Constructing a Sample**

If a poll’s universe is very small—say, the 25 members of a high school class—the best way to find out what that universe thinks about something would be to poll every one of them. In most cases, however, it is not possible to interview a complete universe. This is certainly true in matters of public policy that affect all the people in the nation. There are simply too many people in that universe to talk to. So the pollster must select a *sample*, a representative slice of the total universe.

Most professional pollsters draw a *random sample*, also called a probability sample. In a random sample, the pollster interviews a certain number of randomly selected people who live in a certain number of randomly selected places. A random sample is thus a sample in
which each member of the universe and each geographic area within it have a mathematically equal chance of being included.

Each major national poll usually interviews just over 1,500 people to represent the universe of the nation’s entire adult population (just over 200 million people today). How can the views of so few people represent the opinions of so many?

The answer to that question lies in the mathematical law of probability. Flip a coin 1,000 times. The law of probability says that, given an honest coin and an honest flip, heads will come up 500 times. Furthermore, the law states that the results of this test will be the same no matter how often you perform it, and no matter what kind of coin you use.

The law of probability is regularly applied in a great many situations. It is used by insurance companies to compute life expectancies, by food inspectors to check the quality of a farmer’s truckload of beans, and by others who “play the odds,” including pollsters who draw random samples.

In short, if the sample is of sufficient size and is properly selected at random from the entire universe, the law of probability says that the result will be accurate to within a small and predictable margin of error. Mathematicians tell us that a properly drawn random sample of some 1,500 people will reflect the opinions of the nation’s entire adult population and will be accurate to within a margin of plus or minus (a) 3 percent.

Pollsters acknowledge that it is impossible to construct a sample that would be an absolutely accurate reflection of a large universe. Hence, the allowance for error. A margin of ±3 percent means a spread of 6 percentage points, of course. To reduce the sampling error from ±3 percent to ±1 percent, the size of the sample would have to be 9,500 people. The time and money needed to interview so big a sample make that a practical impossibility.

Some pollsters use a less complicated, but less reliable, sampling method. They draw a quota sample, a sample deliberately constructed to reflect several of the major characteristics of a given universe.

For example, if 51.3 percent of a universe is female, 17.5 percent of it is African American, and so on, then the quota sample will be made up of 51.3 percent females, 17.5 percent African Americans, and so on. Of course, most of the people in the sample will belong to more than one category. This fact is a major reason why such a sample is less reliable than random samples.

Preparing Valid Questions

The way in which questions are worded is very important. Wording can affect the reliability of any poll. For example, most people will probably say “yes” to this question put this way: “Should local taxes be reduced?” Many of those same people will also answer “yes” to this question: “Should the city’s police force be increased to..
Have students locate a public opinion poll in a newspaper, including the questions that were asked and the responses given. Then have them critique the questions as to their validity, based on the information given in the passages under Preparing Valid Questions on page 219. Finally, have students look at the results of the poll in light of their critique of the questions. They should consider whether they think the wording of the questions may have influenced the poll. Each individual should write one page in which he or she presents the critique. Ask for volunteers to share their critique with the class.

### Background Note

**John Kennedy and Polls**

John Kennedy was the first presidential candidate to use polls to help plan his campaign strategy. He worked with Louis Harris (founder of the Harris Poll) in several key areas, including education and religion. When the results of one poll showed that 30 percent of families were sending their children to college while 80 percent hoped to do so, Kennedy incorporated the idea of improved educational opportunities in his campaign speeches. When he found that 30 States strongly opposed his candidacy based on his Roman Catholic upbringing, Kennedy eliminated those States from his campaign schedule, focusing instead on those States where he stood a better chance. Today, nearly all candidates for public office use polls to plan their campaign strategies.

### Analyze and Report Findings

Polls, whether scientific or not, try to measure people’s attitudes. To be of any real value, however, someone must analyze and report the results. Scientific polling organizations today collect huge amounts of raw data. In order to handle these data, computers and other electronic hardware have become routine parts of the process. Pollsters use these technologies to tabulate and interpret their data, draw their conclusions, and then publish their findings.

### Evaluating Polls

How good are polls? On balance, the major national polls are fairly reliable. So, too, are most of the regional surveys around the country. Still, they are far from perfect. Fortunately, most responsible pollsters themselves are quite aware of that fact and readily acknowledge the limits of their polls. Many of them are involved in continuing efforts to refine every aspect of the polling process.

Pollsters know that they have difficulty measuring the intensity, stability, and relevance of the opinions they report. **Intensity** is the strength of feeling with which an opinion is held. **Stability** (or fluidity) is the relative permanence or changeableness of an opinion. **Relevance** (or salience) is how important a particular opinion is to the person who holds it.

Polls and pollsters are sometimes said to shape the opinions they are supposed to measure. Some critics of polls say that in an election, for example, pollsters often create a “bandwagon effect.” That is, some voters, wanting to be with the winner, jump on the bandwagon of the candidate who is ahead in the polls.

The interview itself, whether by phone or in person, is a very sensitive point in the process. An interviewer’s tone of voice or the emphasis he or she gives to certain words can influence a respondent’s replies and so affect the validity of a poll.

If the questions are not carefully worded, some of the respondent’s replies may be snap judgments or emotional reactions. Others may be answers that the person being interviewed thinks “ought” to be given; or they may be replies that the respondent thinks will please—or offend—the interviewer. Thus, polling organizations try to hire and train their interviewing staffs very carefully.

### Differentiated Instruction

Have students locate a public opinion poll in a newspaper, including the questions that were asked and the responses given. Then have them critique the questions as to their validity, based on the information given in the passages under Preparing Valid Questions on page 219. Finally, have students look at the results of the poll in light of their critique of the questions. They should consider whether they think the wording of the questions may have influenced the poll. Each individual should write one page in which he or she presents the critique. Ask for volunteers to share their critique with the class.

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In spite of these criticisms, it is clear that scientific polls are the most useful tools there are for the difficult task of measuring public opinion. Although they may not be always or precisely accurate, they do offer reasonably reliable guides to public thought. Moreover, they help to focus attention on public questions and to stimulate discussion of them.

**Limits on the Impact of Public Opinion**

More than a century ago, the Englishman Lord Bryce described government in the United States as “government by public opinion.” Clearly, the energy devoted to measuring public opinion in this country suggests something of its powerful role in American politics. However, Lord Bryce’s observation is true only if it is understood to mean that public opinion is the major, but by no means the only, influence on public policy in this country. Its force is tempered by a number of other factors—for example, by interest groups.

Most importantly, however, remember that our system of constitutional government is not designed to give free, unrestricted play to public opinion—and especially not to majority opinion. In particular, the doctrines of separation of powers and of checks and balances, and the constitutional guarantees of civil rights and liberties are intended to protect minority interests against the excesses of majority views and actions.

Finally, polls are not elections, nor are they substitutes for elections. It is when faced with a ballot that voters must decide what is important and what is not. Voters must be able to tell the difference between opinions and concrete information, and should know the difference between personalities and platforms.

Democracy is more than a simple measurement of opinion. Democracy is about making careful choices among leaders and their positions on issues, and among the governmental actions that may follow. Ideally, democracy is the thoughtful participation of citizens in the political process.

**Point-of-Use Resources**

- **Guide to the Essentials** Chapter 8, Section 2, p. 48 provides support for students who need additional review of section content. Spanish support is available in the Spanish edition of the Guide on p. 41.

- **Quiz** Unit 2 booklet, p. 29 includes matching and multiple-choice questions to check students’ understanding of Section 2 content.

- **Presentation Pro CD-ROM** Quizzes and multiple-choice questions check students’ understanding of Section 2 content.

**Section 2 Assessment**

1. They are uncertain because the number of people represented by the group is unknown, as well as how strongly these people hold the views the group espouses.
2. Straw votes rely on quantity rather than quality of the sample and thus do not guarantee an accurate cross-section of the population.
3. Random samples are more accurate because they rely on the law of probability, which says that a properly selected random sample will yield results with a small and predictable margin of error.
4. For public opinion to have an influence on public policy—as it is supposed to have in a democracy—it must be measured.
5. Possible reasons: To know how a candidate is perceived by most Americans, and to gauge important policy issues by being aware of the kinds of questions asked.
6. Possible answer: They may have been suspicious of the value of a poll in reflecting true public sentiment.

**Interpreting Political Cartoons**

(a) What is the cartoon’s message? (b) Does the text support this message?

Possible answer: The usefulness of polls is limited as a means of determining the right course of action at a particular time. In some cases, a person must act without worrying what public opinion of that action might be, otherwise some of the most courageous acts of history might never have taken place.