

Introduction to American Government

POLS 1101

The University of Georgia

Prof. Anthony Madonna

ajmadonn@uga.edu

Polls



The uncertainty in the margin of error reflects our uncertainty about how well our statistical sample will represent the entire population. Other sources of uncertainty, not captured by the margin of error, might include the possibility that people lie to the pollster, are uncertain of what the question means, don't actually have an opinion, etc.

It might also reflect uncertainty about whether the poll question fully captures how people will vote (i.e., there may be variance in weather, events, etc. leading up to the election that will change thing).

Polls



So what can we say about this poll?

Clinton 46 – Trump 43 (WSJ) +/- 3.1

We can conclude with X% confidence (usually 95) that Clinton is favored by between 42.9% and 49.1% of voters. Similarly we can conclude with 95% confidence that Trump is favored by between 39.9% and 46.1% of voters. Thus, we cannot conclude with 95% confidence that either of them is favored.

Polls

To properly evaluate polls you should know (1) how to read the poll, (2) the margin of error for said poll, (3) the types of questions asked, (4) the types of people surveyed and (5) the conditions under which they were surveyed.



In short, much like everything in politics, you should be VERY skeptical about outlying polls or polls with weak theoretical evidence.



Strategic Vision Polling

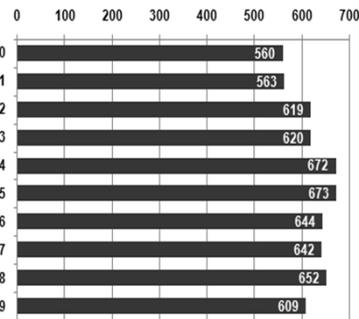
“Strategic Vision Polls Exhibit Unusual Patterns, Possibly Indicating Fraud,” Nate Silver, [fivethirtyeight](#), 1/25/09

One of the things I learned while exploring the statistical properties of the Iranian election, the results of which were probably forged, is that human beings are *really* bad at randomization. Tell a human to come up with a set of random numbers, and they will be surprisingly inept at trying to do so. Most humans, for instance, when asked to flip an imaginary coin and record the results, will succumb to the Gambler's Fallacy and be more likely to record a toss of 'tails' if the last couple of tosses had been heads, or vice versa. This *feels* right to most of us -- but it isn't. We're actually introducing patterns into what is supposed to be random noise.

Sometimes, as is the case with certain applications of Benford's Law, this characteristic can be used as a fraud-detection mechanism. If, for example, one of your less-trustworthy employees is submitting a series of receipts, and an unusually high number end with the trailing digit '7' (\$27, \$107, \$297, etc.), there is a decent chance that he is falsifying his expenses. The IRS uses techniques like this to detect tax fraud.

Certain statistical properties of the results reported by Strategic Vision, LLC suggest, perhaps strongly, the possibility of fraud, although they certainly do not prove it and further investigation will be required... I looked at all polling results reported by Strategic Vision LLC since the beginning of 2005; results from 2008 onward are available at their website; other polls were recovered through archive.org. This is a *lot* of data -- well over 100 polls, each of which asked an average of about 15-20 questions. For each question, I recorded the *trailing digit* for each candidate or line item. For instance, if Strategic Vision had [Obama] beating [McCain] 48-43 in a particular state, I'd record a tally in the 8 column and another in the 3 column.

Distribution of Trailing Digit in All Senate and Presidential General Election Polls, 2008



Strategic Vision Polling

By contrast, here's what we get if we run the same tally for the Strategic Vision polls:

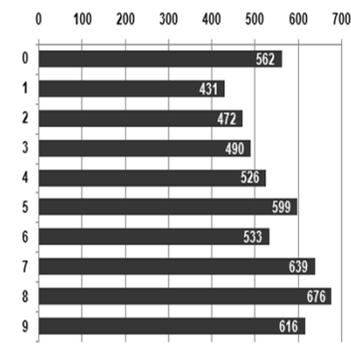
This data is not random at all. For instance, the trailing digit was '8' on 676 occasions, almost 60 percent more often than the 431 times that it was '1'. Over a sample of more than 5,000 data points, such an outcome occurring by chance alone would be an incredible fluke -- millions to one against. Bad luck can essentially be ruled out as an explanation. No one type of question, in no one state, represents more than a relatively small fraction of the sample. Under those circumstances, I can't think of any reason why the trailing digit *wouldn't* approach being random -- although there absolutely might be reasons that I haven't thought of.

I haven't really seen anyone approach polling data like this before, and I certainly haven't done so myself. So, we cannot rule out the possibility that there is some mathematical rationale for this that I haven't thought of. But... There is a substantial possibility -- far from a certainty -- that much of Strategic Vision's polling over the past several years has been forged.

I recognize the gravity of this claim. I've accused pollsters -- deservedly I think in most cases -- of all and sundry types of incompetence and bias. But that is all garden-variety stuff, as compared against the possibility that a prominent polling firm is making up numbers whole cloth.

I would emphasize, however, that at this stage, all of this represents circumstantial evidence. We are discussing a *possibility*. If we're keeping score, it's a possibility that I would never have thought to look into if Strategic Vision had been more professional about their disclosure standards. And if we're being frank, it's a possibility that might actually be a *probability*. But it's only that. A possibility. An hypothesis -- as yet unproven.

Distribution of Trailing Digit in Strategic Vision, LLC Polls, 2005-2009



Public Opinion

Important questions:

Do policy advocates try so hard to move public opinion because people's views are so easy to manipulate or because they are so difficult to manipulate?

Polls often present conflicting evidence about the public's opinions on political issues. When can we believe polling results?

How can stable and coherent public opinion arise from a population that often is uninformed about basic political facts and lacks consistent political views?

To what extent does public opinion determine public policy?



What is Public Opinion?



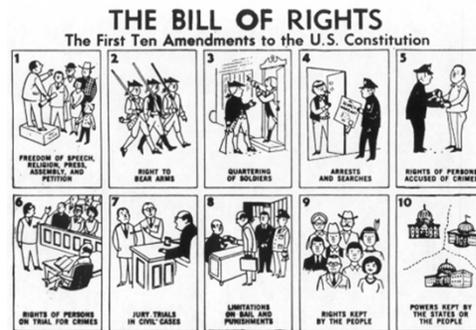
One definition that has endured for three decades states that public opinion consists of “those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed.” -V. O. Key

What is Public Opinion?

In the United States, we have basic constitutional guarantees

- regular elections, broad suffrage, freedom of speech and press, freedom to form and join political organizations

These allow citizens to express their views freely and compel government leaders to take the public's opinion into account if they want to keep their jobs.



Public opinion in America has always been treated as a political force to be alternatively shaped, mollified, or exploited.

- Examples: Object of the Federalist itself was to sway educated public opinion in favor of the Constitution.
- When the public demanded a bill of rights, political leaders bent to its will and ensured ratification.

What is Public Opinion?



The leaders of various movements have all fought to mold public opinion and then to serve as agents for its political expression:

- dedicated to the abolition of slavery
- prohibition of alcoholic beverages
- suffrage for blacks and women
- ending the spoils system
- passing health care

Measuring Public Opinion

Then, as now, interest group entrepreneurs sought to mobilize public opinion as a weapon in the policy wars, threatening electoral retaliation against leaders who refused to support their cause.

Modern efforts to measure, shape, and exploit public opinion have spawned two linked industries:

- Scientific polling (random sampling!)
- Public relations



“Politics is not a major source of income, but it is a major source of branding.” – *John Zogby*

Measuring Public Opinion



Before the advent of scientific polling, politicians had to gauge public opinion haphazardly:

- Relied on information supplied by editorials, pamphleteers, local leaders, and so on.
- Straw polls (throw straw in the air and see which way it blew) were used by newspapers and magazines to gauge public opinion. But generally these were badly biased.

“This might sound odd, but myself and many other members of Congress that I knew, used to get a lot of ideas on how the general public felt by reading the walls in bathrooms in towns and cities that we were in. For example, when I was in Buffalo, New York, I found out that most of the citizens felt I should call Steve for a good time.”

Measuring Public Opinion

Basic techniques of scientific polling:



- select a random sample of the population
- ask the people in the sample some appropriate question about their views
- count up their answers
- In general, the larger the sample, the more closely the sample's answers will reflect the answers the pollster would get if everybody in the population could be asked

Be wary of the types of questions being asked, how the questions are asked and the conditions under which the poll is being conducted.

Measuring Public Opinion

A truly random sample of any population is rarely feasible:

- Why? Because there is no single directory where everyone is conveniently listed and so can be given a perfectly equal chance of being selected



Another problem associated with polling is sample bias.

- With a phone survey the 2 percent without phones will not be reached.
- Those who only use cell phones (about 47 percent) are sometimes omitted because they require drawing a separate sample, which adds to the expense.
- People who answer generally tend to be richer, more educated, and more politically knowledgeable.

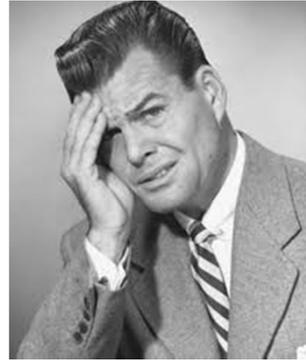
Measuring Public Opinion

Methods have been developed to adjust for sample bias problems:

- Most often weighing the responses of people in underrepresented demographic categories more heavily

Another problem lies in the questions:

- Respondents may not understand the questions or may answer incorrectly
- Even the most carefully designed question is subject to some measurement error because the fit between words and concepts used in questions and how people actually think about issues is never perfect



Measuring Public Opinion—Question Wording

“Poll: Most Don’t Know What ‘Public Option is’ – Including Pollsters”
– Nate Silver, *Fivethirtyeight*, 8/27/09

A new survey by Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates for the AARP reveals widespread uncertainty about the nature of the “public option” -- a government-run health insurance policy that would be offered along with private policies in the newly-created health insurance exchanges. Just 37 percent of the poll’s respondents correctly identified the public option from a list of three choices provided to them:

It is tempting to attribute these results to attempts by conservatives to blur the distinctions of the health care debate. And surely that is part of the story. But it may not be all that much of it. Democrats were more likely than Republicans to correctly identify the public option in this poll, but not by all that wide a margin -- 41 percent versus 34 percent. Meanwhile, 35 percent of Republicans thought the public option refers to “creating a national healthcare system like they have in Great Britain” -- but so did 23 percent of Democrats.

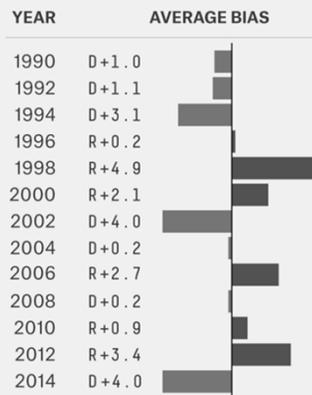
This should serve as something of a reality check for people on both sides of the public option debate. If the respondents had simply chosen randomly among the three options provide to them, 33 percent would have selected the correct definition for the public option. Instead, only 37 percent did (although 23 percent did not bother to guess). This is *mostly* a debate being had among policy elites and the relatively small fraction of the public that is highly knowledgeable and engaged about health care reform; for most others, the details are lost on them.”

When politicians talk about including a “public option” in healthcare reform, what do you think they mean?	All
Creating a government-funded insurance company that competes with existing private insurers to offer health coverage at market rates	37
Creating a national healthcare system like they have in Great Britain	26
Creating a network of healthcare cooperatives	13
Don't know	23

Measuring Public Opinion—Bias

Partisan Bias In Senate Polls

Average statistical bias in polls conducted in final 21 days of campaign, 1990-2014



FIVETHIRTYEIGHT

“The Polls Were Skewed Toward Democrats.” – Nate Silver, [Fivethirtyeight](#), 11/5/14

“For much of this election cycle, Democrats complained the polls were biased against them. They said the polls were failing to represent enough minority voters and applying overly restrictive likely-voter screens. They claimed early-voting data was proving the polls wrong. They cited the fact that polls were biased against Democrats in 2012. The Democrats’ complaints may have been more sophisticated-seeming than the “skewed polls” arguments made by Republicans in 2012.

But in the end, they were just as wrong. The polls did have a strong bias this year — but it was toward Democrats and not against them. Based on results as reported through early Wednesday morning — I’ll detail our method for calculating this in a moment — the average Senate poll conducted in the final three weeks of this year’s campaign overestimated the Democrat’s performance by 4 percentage points. The average gubernatorial poll was nearly as bad, overestimating the Democrat’s performance by 3.4 points.”

Measuring Public Opinion—Herding

“Here’s Proof Some Pollsters Are Putting a Thumb on the Scale.” – Nate Silver, [Fivethirtyeight](#), 11/14/14

“As the election season wore on, new polls hewed somewhat more closely to the polling averages. But the change was marginal until the final week or two of the campaign, when they started to track it much more closely. By the eve of the election, new polls came within about 1.7 percentage points of the polling average.”

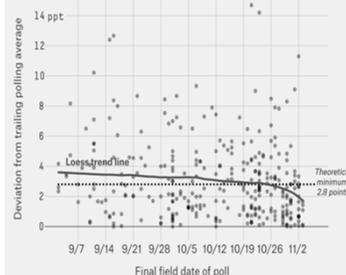
“Perhaps you could construct some rationale, apart from **herding**, for why the polls behaved this way. Maybe it became easier to predict who was going to vote and that made methodological differences between polling firms matter less... But there are two dead giveaways that herding happened. One is the unusual shape of the curve. Rather than abiding by a linear progression, it suddenly veers toward zero in the final week or so of the campaign.” “The other giveaway is... By the end of the campaign, new polls diverged from the polling averages by less than they plausibly could if they were taking random samples and not tinkering with them.”

“To be clear, I’m not accusing any pollsters of faking results. But some of them were probably “putting their thumbs on the scale,” manipulating assumptions in their polls such that they more closely matched the consensus.”

“In some cases, the pollsters’ intentions may have been earnest enough. Perhaps they ran a poll in Iowa and it came back Ernst +7. That can’t be right, they’d say to themselves. No one else has the race like that. So they’d dig into their crosstabs and find something “wrong.” Ahh — that’s the problem, not enough responses from Ames and Iowa City. Let’s apply some geographic weights. That comes out to ... Ernst +3? We can live with that.”

Herding Increases As The Election Approaches

Deviation from trailing polling average, likely voter Senate polls with at least three other polls released in prior 21 days



FIVETHIRTYEIGHT

The Origins of Public Opinion



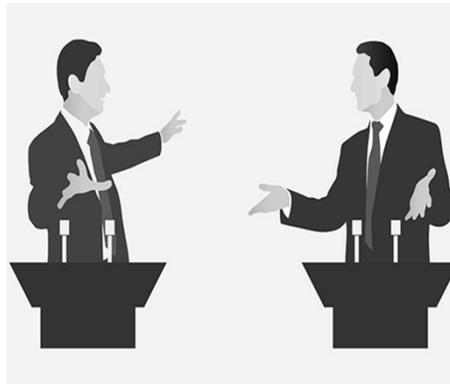
Public opinion is important because of its effect on political behavior, particularly voting.

- Has its political effect as an aggregate (mass) phenomenon, but like the vote, it is the sum of many individuals' acts.
- To understand public opinion, we need to know where individual opinions come from.

The Origins of Public Opinion--Attitudes

Where do the individual opinions that collectively constitute public opinion come from?

- Underlying attitudes. An attitude is "an organized and consistent manner of thinking, feeling, and reacting with regard to people, groups, social issues, or more generally, any event in one's environment".
- When one states an opinion it is the expression of the underlying attitudes evoked by whatever choice is presented.
- Combines feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and predispositions to act a certain way.



Individuals differ widely in the attitudes they bring to bear on political choices.

Some people have an elaborate set of informed, organized, internally consistent attitudes that allow them to understand, evaluate, and respond to political phenomena.

- These individuals are atypical

The Origins of Public Opinion--Attitudes



A more common description of people's attitudes:

- most people have more loosely structured sets of political attitudes, not necessarily consistent with each other or well informed by facts and concepts
- some have only rudimentary attitudes that offer little guidance in making sense of politics

The Origins of Public Opinion--Ideologies

Elaborately organized sets of political attitudes often take the form of political ideologies. Ideologies work to promote consistency by connecting attitudes to something greater, a more general principle or set of principles.

The ideological labels commonly used in American politics are liberal and conservative, but these terms do not guide the political thinking of most citizens. Nor do the opinions most people express fall neatly into one ideological category or the other.

- About half of people consider themselves liberals or conservatives.
- The rest, about 23%, locate themselves in the middle, while another 24% do not place themselves at all.



The Origins of Public Opinion--Ideologies



Conservatives tend to distrust government

- have greater faith in private enterprise and free markets.
- but they are willing to use government to enforce traditional moral standards.

They favor a larger military and a more assertive pursuit of national self-interest.

Conservatives advocate lower taxes, particularly on investment income, to stimulate growth and to restrict the government's capacity to finance social welfare programs.



Liberals typically favor using government to:

- reduce economic inequalities
- champion the rights of the disadvantaged
- and tolerate a more diverse range of social behaviors.

They also believe the rich should be taxed at higher rates to finance social welfare programs.

The Origins of Public Opinion--Ideologies

Some studies suggest that a person's political values reflect a small number of core values, such as:

- individualism
- support for equal opportunity
- moral traditionalism
- opposition to big government



People do not like to be inconsistent in their beliefs:

- people are likely to change one attitude or the other to reduce inconsistency when they are aware of it
- often, though, people remain blissfully unaware, keeping them separate so they do not clash

The Origins of Public Opinion—Genes?

“Are Our Political Beliefs Encoded in Our DNA?”
Thomas B. Edsall, *The New York Times*, 10/1/13

In December 2008, *The New York Times Magazine* reported on the emerging science of “genopolitics.” “For years,” Emily Biuso wrote, “scholars have assumed that a voter pulls the lever because she grew up in a voting household or perhaps sat through a lot of civics classes. But this year two political scientists published studies claiming that in addition to environment, genes may be a primary influence on political engagement.”

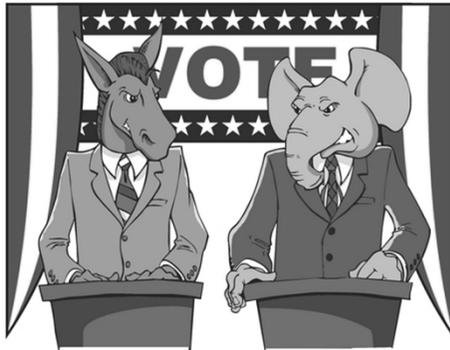


How much does the question of whether our political leanings might be underpinned by our biology really matter?

In an e-mail to *The Times*, John Alford of Rice and John Hibbing of the University of Nebraska make the argument that genetically inherited political predispositions are reinforcing contemporary polarization between Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives.

Alford and Hibbing argue that “it is not so much that people are becoming more in tune with their genetics as that the nature of modern American politics, with ideologically based news outlets and open discussion of hot button social issues, now is free to reflect bedrock divisions. Fissures in the polity now match divisions in people’s biology.”

The Origins of Public Opinion—Partisanship



The political attitude that shapes opinions and organizes other attitudes most consistently is a person’s attitude toward the political parties.

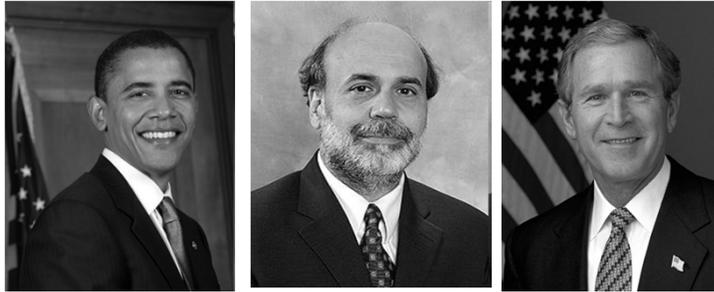
Partisanship is central to voting.

A large majority of Americans identify themselves as Democrats and Republicans.

Party identification:

- psychological phenomenon
- practical aspects
 - shorthand cue some voters, but personal identity for others
- affects beliefs as well as opinions

The Origins of Public Opinion—Partisanship



Gallup has an interesting finding on confidence in Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke. It seems that perceptions of this ostensibly nonpartisan official depend heavily on which President he happens to be working for. – fivethirtyeight.com

Percent Expressing Great Deal/Fair Amount of Confidence in Ben Bernanke:

	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Independents</u>	<u>Republicans</u>
2008	40	43	61
2009	64	44	36

News

House conservatives on Thursday blocked passage of a [fairly] uncontroversial energy and water spending measure after Democrats attached an amendment that would bar federal contractors from discriminating against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The death of an appropriations bill on the House floor underscores the challenges ahead for Speaker Paul Ryan if he wants to continue his commitment to so-called regular order, a process under which lawmakers have more say in what's voted on. After the bill failed Thursday, the Wisconsin Republican would not rule out changes to the "open" amendment process for spending bills that allows members to offer any relevant amendments — even poison pills that could kill the bill or divide the majority.



Former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson “has been on the receiving end of attacks for his vice presidential pick, former Massachusetts Gov. Bill Weld,” CNN reports. “Weld, a former Republican from a blue state, has had a difficult time pitching himself to the Libertarian convention. Many have been skeptical over Weld’s libertarian credentials, especially his record on gun control and support for Republican politicians. Prior to teaming up with Johnson, Weld had endorsed Republican Ohio Gov. John Kasich for President.”

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) said that our system will prevent any “big mistakes” if Donald Trump becomes president, TPM reports. Said McConnell: “Well, one thing I’m pretty calm about is that this is nowhere near the most divisive period in American history. But what protects us in this country against big mistakes being made is the structure, the Constitution, the institutions.” He added “No matter how unusual a personality may be who gets elected to office, there are constraints in this country. You don’t get to do anything you want to.”



Partisanship and Group Identities

DUSTIN HOFFMAN ROBERT DE NIRO



The degree to which members identify with a group and identify who is not part of that group can affect the group's strength, cohesiveness, and survival.

Group identity is not fixed; it can vary in response to events within the group or the experiences of the groups as a whole.

We may not be able to define precisely who is part of the group, but we can often easily define who is not part of the group. You can absolutely define someone who is not part of the group by initiating a conflict with them.

That group becomes “the other,” or the enemy, and you know that one of “them” is not one of “us.”

Partisanship and Group Identities

Conflict is probably the most central element in political group dynamics.

Intergroup conflict tends to generate an increase in the willingness of group members to accept and actively support the leadership of the group.

Group response to external threat is more than just a theoretical concept. There is clear evidence that groups tend to coalesce when confronted with an external threat.

Scholars have found that when nations find themselves in international conflicts, measures of group identification, such as nationalism and patriotism tend to rise; often the rise is dramatic.

In the United States there is what political scientists refer to as the “rally ‘round the flag effect.”



*“It was so much easier to blame it on Them. It was bleakly depressing to think that They were Us. If it was Them, then nothing was anyone's fault. If it was us, what did that make Me? After all, I'm one of Us. I must be. I've certainly never thought of myself as one of Them. No one ever thinks of themselves as one of Them. We're always one of Us. It's Them that do the bad things.” – Terry Pratchett, *Jingo**

•

Leaders

In addition to defining who is or is not part of the group, group identity can also affect the purpose of the group, if not justify its existence.

The identity of the group is crucial to the power and the position of its leader.

Groups usually form for a specific purpose, but they also tend to continue even after they have accomplished the purpose. They adjust to meet new demands or changes in context. They take on added roles and they persist beyond the lifetime of their founders.



"Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it." – President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

-

Leaders

People want to become leaders because of the tremendous individual benefits.

Leaders can be power hungry or they can be interested in extreme personal wealth. They may be after different kinds of benefits, but they all pursue personal benefits.

Even some of the most revered political leaders benefited by gaining notoriety, prestige, and accomplishing their personal, though altruistic or nationalistic, goals through the political process.

Some scholars argue that personal benefits are the only reason people pursue leadership positions.

The greater the benefits to be gained from the leadership position, the more willing people are to invest their own resources and to take risks to attain it.

- And there are risks/costs!



"It's Tuesday night! Who wants another fermented meat beverage?" – President Abraham Lincoln

-

Acquiring Opinions



Attitudes derive from experience:

- growing up and living in the social and political world

Most often the experience is indirect, interpreted, and passed along by families, schools, friends, opinion leaders, and the mass media through the process of political socialization.



This process is most influential during childhood and young adulthood, but new experiences can alter attitudes at any stage of life.

Acquiring Opinions

People adopt values and beliefs that pay off in some way:

- in confirming their identity with a group
- in pleasing people that are important to them
- in making the world comprehensible
- validating material or psychological aspirations



New experiences can alter attitudes at any stage of life

- doesn't have to be from personal experience; can also be from collective experiences

Attitudes can also be formed through the media and pop culture.

Acquiring Opinions



People tend to develop more complex, richly informed attitudes when the cost of doing so is lower and the payoff higher.

Because political attitudes are learned, different experiences produce different perspectives on politics and different levels of political sophistication.

Most people live in environments where politics is not commonly discussed, so they are less likely to develop sophisticated political attitudes.

Cognitive misers:

- reluctant to pay the cost of acquiring information that has no practical payoff
- result: the opinions they express on issues often appear to be uninformed and unstable

Framing and Priming

The most important source of instability in public opinion is probably ambivalence:

- particular issues may evoke attitudes and beliefs that pull in opposite directions; the response to a pollster's questions depends on which considerations come to mind first and seem most weighty.

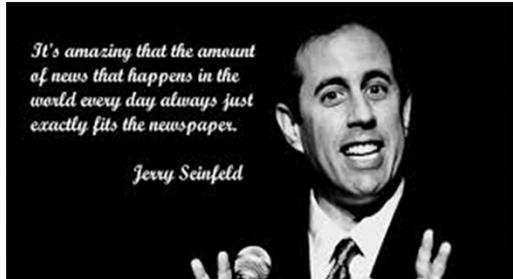
The messages sent by the media and the candidates do not have to change underlying attitudes to change expressed opinion. They simply have to frame the issue in a way that draws out one response rather than the other.

- E.g. Social welfare as “helping the poor” or “social engineering”

What comes to mind first depends on context: recent events, the mention of particularly potent symbols (communism for example).



Framing and Priming



Simply by covering some issues and ignoring others, the news media help to define the political agenda, influencing which considerations are in the foreground when citizens make political judgments:

They can set the agenda for what the public thinks is important.

And by covering certain things more than others, the media may influence which considerations are in the foreground when citizens make political judgments. This is called priming.

They prime their audience to use particular frames responding to political phenomena.

Testing the Public's Knowledge

- 57% knew which party had a majority in the Senate
- 25% of Americans were unable to identify the country from which America gained its independence
- 34% could name John Roberts as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court
- 71% knew the Republicans were the more conservative party
- 40% could identify all three branches of the government.
- In 2011, Newsweek found that 29% of Americans were unable to correctly identify the current Vice President, Joe Biden, when asked to take a simple citizenship test.



Testing the Public's Knowledge

"Don't believe that splashy finding that 10 percent of college graduates think Judge Judy is on the Supreme Court" – John Sides, [The Monkey Cage](#), 1/20/16

Maybe you've seen the finding in the headline of this post. Maybe you saw it here. Or here. Or here. Or here. It's even in US Weekly. It comes from a new survey by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, which paints a grim picture of the state of civic education in the United States. And, yes, it's true that many Americans cannot recall certain facts about American history and government when they are asked questions about those subjects in a survey interview. But this particular finding about "Judge Judy" isn't as bad as it appears.

Here is how ACTA has described this finding: "That same study unearthed the shocking fact that nearly 10% of participants thought that Judith Sheindlin — "Judge Judy" — is on the Supreme Court."...

Reading this, you might have the impression that 10 percent of college graduates said that "Judge Judy" was on the Supreme Court. But if we take a look at the actual survey question, a different interpretation emerges. The question was:

Which of the following people serves on the U.S. Supreme Court?

- a. Elena Kagan
- b. Lawrence Warren Pierce
- c. John Kerry
- d. Judith Sheindlin

First, note that the question doesn't say "Judge Judy." It says Judith Sheindlin. Of course, the vast, vast majority of Americans do not know who Judith Sheindlin is, although they may have heard of Judge Judy. This means that the answers people are choosing from include: the actual Supreme Court Justice (Kagan), a retired judge from the US Court of Appeals (Pierce), the secretary of state (Kerry) and Sheindlin.

So how many college graduates either knew the answer or were able to guess correctly? 66 percent. In other words, a large majority of college graduates got the answer correct. Somehow, this didn't make US Weekly.



Testing the Public's Knowledge

"Political ignorance and bombing Agrabah" – Ilya Somin, [The Volokh Conspiracy](#), 12/18/15

A recent Public Policy Polling survey found that 30% of Republicans and 19% of Democrats say they support "bombing Agrabah" – the fictional nation portrayed in the Disney movie Aladdin. This is not a surprising result. Pollsters have long known that it is easy to get survey respondents to express opinions about nonexistent legislation, such as the "Metallic Metals Act." It is also easy to elicit survey responses that reveal widespread scientific ignorance. For example, one recent poll found that 80 percent of Americans support "mandatory labels on foods containing DNA."



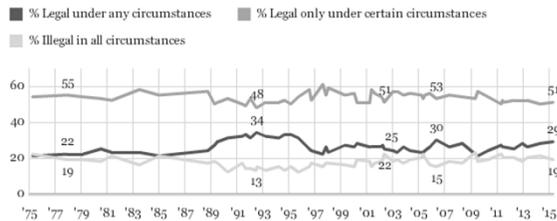
All of this is just part of the broader phenomenon of widespread political ignorance. For most people, ignorance about science and public policy is perfectly rational behavior, because there is so little chance that their vote will decisively affect electoral outcomes.

In responding to surveys, many people don't want to admit they are ignorant about the issues the pollster is asking about. Just as we guess on standardized tests, so many people cover up their ignorance by guessing on polls. In the process, they often rely on crude "information shortcuts." For example, "Agrabah" sounds vaguely Arabic, and survey respondents could assume that the pollster is asking about bombing it because there are radical Islamist terrorists there. That train of thought might lead hawks to support bombing it and doves to oppose it (13% of Republicans and 36% of Democrats said they opposed bombing, rather than challenge the premise of the question, or express no opinion)....

Ultimately, it doesn't matter much whether voters support bombing fictional countries or passing fictional legislation. But their attitudes towards real public policy issues are often based on similar ignorance and illogic. That's a problem that even Aladdin's genie can't easily solve.

Is Public Opinion Meaningful?

Do you think abortions should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances?



GALLUP

If large segments of the public:

- Are politically ignorant?
- Hold inconsistent views?
- Can be manipulated by varying the words or context of questions?

How can public opinion play its assigned role in democratic politics?

Aggregate public opinion is meaningful.

- Stable and coherent.

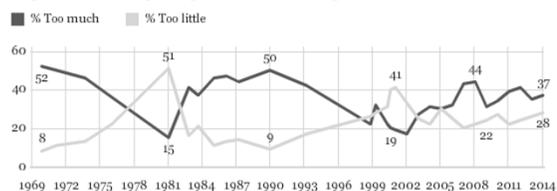
The sum of the public's attitudes is both stable and coherent, exhibiting little change over the course of decades in some areas.

Is Public Opinion Meaningful?

However, when substantial changes occur, they reflect intelligible historical trends or responses to changed conditions:

- public sentiment turning against discrimination
- public opinion turning against higher defense spending amid growing disillusion with the war in Iraq.

There is much discussion as to the amount of money the government in Washington should spend for national defense and military purposes. How do you feel about this? Do you think we are spending too little, about the right amount, or too much?



"About the right amount" not represented on graph

GALLUP

Other studies have detected broad cyclical changes in public opinion across a wide range of issues, with opinions swinging back and forth between liberal and conservative "moods."

Aggregate opinion also varies in coherent ways over the shorter term, e.g. the president's level of public approval

Opinion Leadership

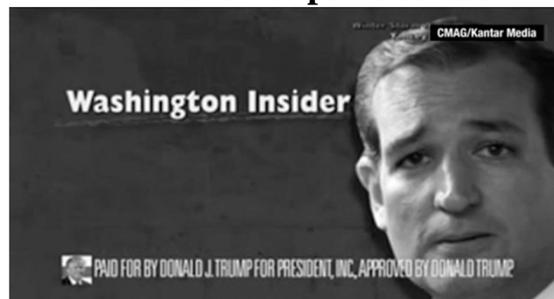
Another reason is found through the use of cues that are generated by opinion leaders.

- Ignorance is quite rational
- High informational costs to stay informed
- Many of these reliable agents belong to issue publics – subsets of the population who are better informed than everyone else about an issue because it touches them more directly and personally.

Cognitive shortcuts of this sort are available because interested people and groups have a stake in gathering and disseminating political information.



Public Opinion



Americans share a broad consensus on basic political values that puts real limits on what is politically possible.

- Consensus on the basics makes politics *possible*.
- Most Americans support the underpinnings of the system
- Much to disagree with as well.
- Disagreement on the details makes politics *necessary*.

Public tends to distrust politicians.

- Nobody runs as a “Washington insider.”

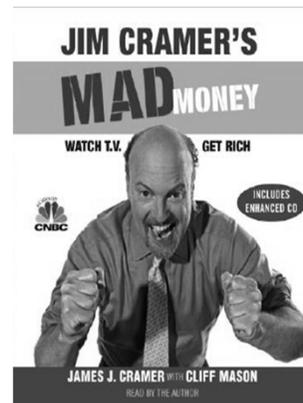
Public Opinion—Economic Issues

Large majorities typically support stable or increased government spending for programs that serve nearly everyone.

However, people are less than enthusiastic about paying the costs of big government.

Majorities responded as liberals when asked about the goals of health care reform, but as conservatives when asked about the means:

- general agreement that taxes are too high
- agreement that government wastes money
- agreement that bureaucrats are too meddlesome
- feeling that people ought to take care of themselves rather than depend on government handouts



Public Opinion—Social and Moral Issues



Politics is about the distribution of goods, which can be moral as well as material:

- great struggles in our history driven largely by moral rather than economic considerations
- today social and moral issues produce some of the most heated political conversations

The most well-known contemporary struggle centers on abortion. In this area the public debate has been dominated by groups with starkly opposing positions:

- however, the majority of public opinion does not side with either extreme



Moreover, aggregate public opinion on abortion is both highly consistent and acutely sensitive to how the issue is framed.

Public Opinion—Foreign Policy



2004, 2006, and somewhat the 2008 election focused public attention on foreign policy due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Because most foreign policy issues are remote from everyday experience and few people pay sustained attention to foreign affairs, public opinion in this area is particularly responsive to opinion leadership:

- unless there is concern in cost in American life and treasure

Since World War II, large majorities have supported an active international role for the United States, but backing for particular policies has been much more variable.

Effects of Background on Public Opinion

People's opinions on specific issues reflect the knowledge, beliefs, and values they have acquired over their lifetimes.

The sharpest differences of opinion between major groups in U.S. politics occur between African Americans and whites, and the biggest gap is on issues related to race.

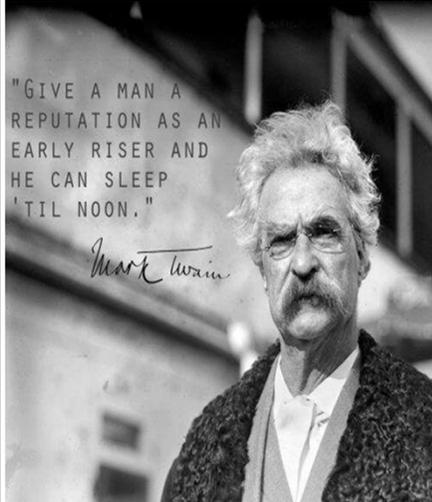
Younger voters tend to be more liberal than their elders on social and economic issues.

- more likely to support gay marriage, marijuana legalization.

City dwellers are more liberal than suburbanites.



A Vital Component of American Politics



Public opinion is important in American politics.

- But it is rarely simple and rarely unmediated.

While individual opinions are both shaped and expressed through leaders and institutions, they are not controlled by them.

For most people, basic political orientations, whether reflections of ideologies, a few core values, or simple party preferences, are quite resistant to change.

Most of the time those who wish to change opinions do so by framing the choice favorably rather than by changing minds.

Reputations and attitudes are very sticky.

Conclusion



Questions?

Enjoy the rest of your week!