Public Opinion

What is public opinion?

Have you ever been in a situation where people were making decisions that affected you? Did you ask those making the decisions to give you a chance to say what you thought about that situation? Did you speak out to let your ideas be known?

That is what many Americans do when they care deeply about political issues. In a democracy, the public—all the people in our nation—are the source of political power. By speaking out, members of the public make their views known. In doing so, they can influence the decisions that leaders make.

The Role of Public Opinion in a Democracy

The term for the views of all Americans is public opinion. Public opinion refers to the ideas and attitudes that people hold about an issue or a person.

Public opinion plays two key roles in a democracy. First, public opinion helps shape the decisions that officials make. Congressional and state legislators often travel back to their districts to meet with voters and talk about bills that are up for a vote. These officials recognize that if they are to represent the people, their votes should reflect the views of the people.

Presidents are guided by public opinion in this way too. They need to have a good sense of when the public is ready for a new idea. President Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “I cannot go any faster than the people will let me.” That statement reflects a truth about leadership in a democracy.

Second, public opinion also shapes how successful a president is in putting his or her plans into action. Presidents need the support of Congress to carry out their programs. A president is more likely to have that support if his or her plans are popular with the public. The same is true of state governors and city mayors. When these leaders have the backing of the public, lawmakers are more willing to go along with their plans.

Of course, public opinion is a complicated thing. The United States has more than 310 million people. They come from different regions and backgrounds. In fact, Americans agree on very few issues. Instead, different groups hold distinct opinions. For instance, some Americans want the government to take a larger role in the economy. Others disagree. They want a smaller, less active government. Between these two positions are many other opinions. When enough people hold an opinion, government officials listen to them.

Sources of Public Opinion

Where do opinions on public issues come from? Why do people hold such different views about these matters? Several factors may influence opinions. One is a person’s background. Another is the mass media. A third is interest groups.

Personal Background

People’s opinions are often based on their experiences and their situation in life. Age and gender—being male or female—play key roles in shaping opinions. So do race and religion. A person’s job, income, and where he or she lives affect opinions too. All these personal factors work together to influence how each individual views public issues.

Think about the issue of education. A mother of two school-age children who lives in a city will probably want her state to invest more money in education. An elderly person who lives in a small town will probably be less interested in seeing increased spending on schools. On the other hand, an older adult who is a teacher would have yet another point of view, even if he or she does not have school-age children.

Mass Media

A second factor shaping opinion is the mass media. A medium is a means of communication. Media, the plural, refers to many different means of communication. Cell phone text messages are a medium of communication. The mass media include all the various methods of communication that reach large numbers of people. These media include television, radio, Internet Web sites, newspapers, magazines, books, recordings, and movies.

The mass media influence public opinion in many ways. Television news shows and newspapers shape public opinion with the stories they publish. If they carry many stories about an issue, people may begin to view that issue as important. The opinions stated by television news commentators can affect the way people respond to issues. Newspapers also publish editorials that take a position on important issues. Editorials can encourage support for the author's point of view. The same thing is true of blogs posted on the Internet.

Interest Groups

A third source of public opinion is interest groups. These groups are made up of people who share a point of view about an issue. Interest groups try to influence public opinion in many ways. They work to convince other people to adopt their point of view. They also work to convince public officials to support their positions. Because they may put political pressure on leaders to act in a certain way, interest groups are sometimes called pressure groups.
Features of Public Opinion

Public opinion is often described in terms of three factors. They are direction, intensity, and stability. Each measures a different aspect of public opinion.

Direction refers to whether public opinion on a topic is positive or negative. For example, are people for or against spending more money on national defense? Are they for or against a cut in taxes? On most topics, the direction of public opinion is mixed. Still, one side can be stronger than the other.

Intensity refers to how strongly a person or group holds an opinion on an issue. Most Americans have the strongest beliefs about issues that directly affect them. For example, farmers are more interested than city dwellers in farm issues. People who use a subway train or a bus to get to work are very interested in mass transit.

When people hold a strong opinion on an issue, they pay more attention to it. They may also decide to become active on that issue. They might join an interest group or work on an election campaign. Still others might take part in public actions aimed at solving a problem.

Stability is a matter of how firmly people hold to their views. In other words, how likely are they to change their minds? Opinions tend to be very stable when they are based on strong beliefs. For example, most people’s opinions about civil rights are more stable than their opinions about political candidates.

Determining Cause and Effect What factors influence public opinion?

Public Opinion Polls

How is public opinion measured?

Public opinion can affect policy, but how do political leaders learn what the public thinks about an issue? They draw on two tools: election results and measures of public opinion.

Election Results

One way to discover public opinion on an issue is by looking at election results. If voters elect a candidate, they probably agree with many of the candidate’s ideas.

Election results are not always a sure way to measure public opinion, however. People vote for candidates for many reasons. Maybe they liked how a candidate looked. Perhaps they supported some, but not all, of the candidate’s views. They may back a candidate because of his or her party. For these reasons, election results give only a rough sense of public opinion.

Another problem with using elections as measures of public opinion is that they happen only every few years. If leaders had to wait until the next election to know public opinions, they could spend two or more years with no sense of what people think.

Polls Measure Public Opinion

To keep in touch with public opinion more regularly, many public officials rely on polls. A public opinion poll is a survey in which individuals are asked to answer questions about a particular issue or person. Today hundreds of groups conduct such polls. Members of the media and politicians refer to poll results to check on people’s attitudes.

Most presidents, for example, have a specialist whose job is to conduct polls. This pollster can measure how popular the president is. He or she can also find out how the public feels about programs that the president is considering. For example, a poll might ask people if they support or oppose a change in immigration laws.

Pollsters have different ways of selecting the people they survey. One way is by picking a group of people at random, or by chance. Pollsters may talk to about 1,500 people from all over the nation. Such a sample usually includes both men and women. It also includes people of nearly all races and ages. Finally, a random sample polls people with different incomes. A good sample is a small representation of the entire population. That way, it can present a reasonably accurate picture of public opinion as a whole. Polls conducted using random sampling are known as scientific polls.

To find out how people really feel about an issue, pollsters must word questions carefully. Poorly worded questions can lead to confused answers. Also, by changing the wording of the questions, pollsters can influence the answers they receive. For example, the question “Do you favor cutting taxes?” might produce one kind of answer from a person. “Do you favor cutting taxes if it means letting poor people go hungry?” might produce a different answer from the same person.

Polls in which the questions are worded so as to shape a person’s responses are called push polls. Push polls are strongly criticized by companies and individuals who carry out scientific polls. When looking at poll results, citizens should ask themselves whether the questions were fair and unbiased. In push polls, questions are designed to create a certain response.

Pros and Cons of Polls

Some people believe that public opinion polls are useful. They say that polls tell politicians what citizens think about issues. Polls show officials whether people approve or disapprove of the way they are doing their jobs. Officials do not have to wait for the next election to find out what is important to voters.
Those in favor of polling also point to another feature of these surveys. People’s responses are often broken down by particular groups, such as how men and women or people earning different amounts of money respond to the same question. These categories help leaders know what specific groups think about an issue. That knowledge can help guide their decisions.

Other people see problems with using polls. They argue that polling makes elected officials focus on pleasing the public. They think officials should instead focus their attention on making wise decisions for the common good.

Many people also worry that polls have a strong effect on how people vote. The media carry out polls constantly during election campaigns and then report who is ahead in the race. Critics argue that these polls treat an election like a horse race. They worry that focusing on polls ignores the candidates’ views on important issues. In addition, some say that polls can discourage voting. If the polls show one candidate far ahead of another, some people may decide not to bother voting.

**Identifying** Besides elections, what is another way to measure public opinion?

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**Florida CONNECTION**

Surveying Florida’s People

The Institute for Public Opinion Research (IPOR)—part of Florida International University in Miami—has been polling the people of Florida since 1963. Each year it conducts the FIU/Florida Poll to identify which issues currently most concern the people of Florida. It also has surveyed older people living in Miami-Dade County to help public officials there identify the needs of this part of the population.

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**21st Century SKILLS**

Recognizing Bias

The way questions are written indicates whether a poll is scientific and objective or a more biased, or slanted, push poll. Suppose one poll has the question “What do you think of Candidate A’s position on taxes?” Suppose another poll asks a similar question but with different wording: “What do you think of Candidate A, who favors high taxes?” Which question would be from a push poll? Why do you say so?

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**LESSON 1 REVIEW**

**Review Vocabulary**

1. Define the terms *mass media* and *public opinion*, and explain how the mass media affect public opinion.

LAFS.68.RH.2.4

2. What is a *public opinion poll*, and who uses the information from one?

LAFS.68.RH.2.4

**Answer the Guiding Questions**

3. **Explaining** What are three features of public opinion? What does each describe?

SS.7.C.2.10

4. **Describing** In polling, what are random samples? What makes a good random sample?

SS.7.C.2.10

5. **ARGUMENT** Supporters of polling argue that it is a tool for democracy. Critics of polling think that it makes politicians reactors rather than leaders. In a paragraph, explain which opinion you agree with and why.
The mass media can be an important source of information about government and public issues.

The Influence of the Media

How do the media influence public opinion and government?

How do you find out what is going on in the world? Do you listen to the radio in the morning? Do you download podcasts? Does your school have a newspaper or a news show that reports events? Do you check headlines on the Internet or watch the evening news on television? If you are like most Americans, you get your news from one or more of these forms of mass media. In the United States, the mass media play a key role in informing people about issues. They also influence government. Finally, the media link the people to elected officials.

There are two types of mass media sources. Print media include newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and books. Radio, television, and the Internet are examples of electronic media.

In using media information, you must remember an important fact. Most American media outlets are private businesses. They are run to make a profit. For that reason, media managers often decide what to publish based on what will attract the most viewers, listeners, or readers. The larger the audience, the more the media can charge advertisers. This fact shapes what the media cover.

Influencing the Public Agenda

The government deals with many problems and issues. Those that receive the most time, money, and effort from government leaders make up what is often called the public agenda. An agenda is a set of items that a person or group wants to address.

The media can influence which problems officials regard as important. When the media focus on a problem, people begin to worry about it. Then they expect the government to deal with it.

Covering Candidates and Officials

The mass media can also influence who runs for office. Usually candidates are experienced politicians. They spend years working in their political parties. Some candidates, though, are people who were famous in another field. For instance, actor Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected governor of California in 2003. When candidates are already well-known, the media cover their campaigns with interest. In this way, the candidate benefits from the media’s desire to cover their campaign.

Reporters and politicians have a complex relationship. They need each other. Reporters need information to write articles. Political leaders need media coverage to get their message out. At the same time, the two groups often clash. As one presidential assistant explained, "Politicians live—and sometimes die—by the press. The press lives by politicians."

Officials try to use the media to their advantage. They may leak, or secretly pass on, information to reporters. They may do this to test the public’s response to a proposal before they openly acknowledge, or admit, that they are considering it. If the public reacts well, officials might act on the idea. If the public reacts negatively, officials can drop it. Politicians also use leaks to shape public opinion on an issue, or to gain favor with a reporter.

At the same time, reporters can present news in ways that show an official in a bad light. They can ask officials tough questions about the positions that the officials take. Politicians sometimes try to avoid this difficulty by refusing to answer their questions. That practice, though, can result in criticism from the media.

Watchdog Role

The mass media also play a crucial "watchdog" role. That means they keep a close eye on government activities. Journalists write stories that expose waste and corruption at all levels of government. These kinds of stories attract a large audience. Throughout our history, the media have played this role. This has served the interests of both the media and the public by exposing wrongdoing by public officials.

Media and National Security

Americans need to stay informed. At the same time, the government must keep some secrets for national security reasons. The government can classify, or label, some information as secret. That information is then off-limits to reporters.

The government can use other methods to try to shape the news. During the first part of the war in Iraq, some journalists accompanied American troops going into battle. They reported on battles and on daily life of the troops. Some critics said that this practice allowed the government to control news reporting.

Categorizing What are the two broad types of mass media sources?
Protecting the Press

What are the restrictions on freedom of the press?

The Framers understood that democracy needs a free flow of information and ideas. Citizens need information to understand public issues. They need that information to be free of government control as well. So the Framers wanted the press to be independent to ensure that goal.

The Framers showed how highly they valued a free press by protecting the press from government interference. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution says that Congress cannot pass any law that would limit the freedom of the press. When it was written, the amendment applied to print media, which were the only forms in existence. Now, though, this protection extends to radio, TV, and the Internet as well.

Because of the First Amendment, the media are free from prior restraint. Prior restraint refers to government censorship of material before it is published. Generally, the government cannot censor the media that way. Reporters and editors are free to decide what they will say, even if it is unpopular. In fact, sometimes the media publish information thatembarrasses the government or a politician.

Freedom Within Limits

Freedom of the press is not unlimited, though. As you have read, the government can keep some information secret. Also, no one is free to publish false information that will harm another person’s reputation. Doing so is called libel. Anyone who believes a written story has harmed him or her may sue the publisher for libel. Government officials rarely win libel lawsuits, however. In New York Times Co. v. Sullivan (1964), the Supreme Court ruled in a libel case. It said that public officials must prove actual malice, or evil intent, to win a libel suit. The official must prove that the publisher either knew the material was false or showed a reckless disregard for the truth.

The media also have some other protections. Gathering news may depend on getting facts from people who do not want to have their names made public. The press and the government have fought many battles over reporters’ right to keep their sources secret. Most states have shield laws that protect reporters from having to reveal their sources.

Regulating the Media

The federal government does have ways to regulate the broadcast media. The airwaves available for radio and TV broadcasting are limited. The government decides who can use them. In order to receive a license that allows them to broadcast, companies must meet certain standards. For example, a portion of their programming must be devoted to covering public affairs, usually through news programs. In addition, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) oversees broadcasters. The FCC is a regulatory, or managing, agency. It cannot censor broadcasts, but it can punish stations that break its rules. Fines for breaking these rules can run to several thousand dollars, so stations are careful about what people say and do on the air. For example, stations edit out words that break FCC rules.

Identifying What are two ways the federal government can manage broadcast media?

21st Century SKILLS

Communication: Summarizing

When you summarize, you briefly tell the main idea of a section in your own words. Read the paragraph explaining why the Framers wanted the press to be free. Then summarize it in your own words.

LESSON 2 REVIEW

Review Vocabulary

1. How are the public agenda and the media connected?
2. How might leaks help the media perform their role as a watchdog?

3. Use prior restraint and libel to explain the limits placed on the free press.

Answer the Guiding Questions

4. Analyzing Why do politicians and the media need each other?

5. Describing What are two ways freedom of the press is limited?

6. ARGUMENT Journalists want to be free of government limits on their work. Government officials want some control over the media. Taking the point of view of a journalist or a government official, write a paragraph to persuade others to your position on how much government should be able to restrict what the media report.
Interest groups are one vehicle people use to make their views known and to work for causes they believe in.

Interest Groups

How do special-interest groups influence public policy?

Have you ever gone to see your senator or representative's social media page or Web site? Have you ever e-mailed or called your representatives? Government officials want to be linked with their constituents—the people they represent. They want to hear from those people, to know what they think and why they think it. If you want the government to take action, you have many ways to contact your representatives.

As an individual, you have just one voice. That voice might not stand out when a member of Congress hears from thousands of people. How can you make your voice stronger?

One way to strengthen your voice is to join with others who agree with you on an issue. When you join together with others, you all pool your resources and increase your influence. Interest groups can be a powerful force to bring about change. An interest group is a group of people who share a point of view and unite to promote that viewpoint. The First Amendment guarantees Americans the right to assemble and to belong to interest groups. The right to petition the government makes it possible for those groups to meet with officials to promote their goals.

Business and Labor Groups

Some interest groups are based on shared economic goals. For instance, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce promotes the interest of businesses. Other interest groups act for specific types of businesses. The National Automobile Dealers Association, for example, works on behalf of companies that sell cars and trucks. These groups try to sway government decisions on issues that affect their industries.

Some interest groups are formed by workers. The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) is the largest such group. It is formed by many labor unions that have joined together. Unions try to improve wages, working conditions, and benefits for their members.

Other Interest Groups

People also join together to work for the rights of people who share similar characteristics. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) tries to improve the lives of African Americans. The AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) stands up for the interests of older Americans.

Other interest groups focus on particular issues. For example, the Sierra Club wants to protect nature. The National Rifle Association (NRA) looks after the interests of people who own guns.

The interest groups described so far promote only the goals of their members' interests. Public-interest groups work to benefit larger sections of society. They support causes that affect the lives of most Americans. One example is the League of Women Voters. This nonpartisan group is free from ties to any political party. Its purpose is to educate voters about candidates and issues. Other public-interest groups work for the rights of all consumers.

Interest Groups at Work

Interest groups play an important role in our country. Their main goal is to influence the decisions that leaders make. To do this, they use four main types of actions. These are being active in elections, working through the courts, working directly with lawmakers, and trying to shape public opinion. Groups can use one or more of these approaches. Many use all four.

Being Active in Elections

Many interest groups become involved in elections. They support certain candidates. For example, the Sierra Club might back candidates who favor laws to protect nature. Many interest groups have formed political action committees (PACs). In fact, most labor unions have PACs. So do many companies and trade associations.

PACs collect money from group members. They give that money to help candidates they think will support their positions on the issues they care about. They can also spend money to oppose candidates they want to see defeated. For instance, a political action committee might buy television or radio ads that criticize a candidate it knows does not share its goals.

Working Through the Courts

Many interest groups try to shape policy by bringing cases to court. For instance, an interest group for women might help a woman worker sue a company if it feels she was paid unfairly. The NAACP has used lawsuits to help end laws that treated African Americans unfairly.

Directly Influencing Officials

One of the most important methods interest groups use to shape policy is lobbying. Lobbyists are people who represent interest groups. They contact lawmakers or other government officials directly. Lobbyists are active at all levels of government—local, state, and
The term lobbyist was first used in the 1830s. At that time, it described people who waited in the lobbies of the state capitol buildings to ask lawmakers for favors. Few lobbyists use that strategy today. Good lobbyists know whom to contact about a particular concern. They understand how the government works and are very good at public relations. They are also skilled at making friends and speaking persuasively.

The most effective lobbyists supply lawmakers with information that helps their causes. They suggest solutions to problems. Sometimes they write drafts of bills for lawmakers to consider. They may even testify before Congress about the bills. All of these activities give lawmakers a lot of information. Of course, these actions also reflect only the interest group’s position on the issue. They are biased, in that they do not present all sides of an issue. When many different groups are involved, however, their different biases may even cut.

The work of lobbyists does not end once a law is passed. Their interest groups also try to make sure the laws are enforced in ways that favor their interests.

Shaping Public Opinion

All interest groups want to influence public opinion. They also want to convince people that their cause is important. Many send information to people by e-mail or regular mail. They use messages to try to convince people to join the group. They also advertise. Maybe you have seen ads urging you to drink milk or buy American-made products. Business groups sponsor these types of ads. Interest groups also hold protests and organize public events to gain media coverage and notice for their cause.

Interest groups can provide useful, in-depth information on an issue. They may also use propaganda techniques to promote their ideas. Propaganda is presenting information in a slanted or biased way. The chart about propaganda techniques describes different methods that groups use. Understanding these will help you identify bias in the information you see.

**Naming** What tools do interest groups use to influence government and public opinion?

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**Why it Matters**

**Propaganda**

Propaganda is a way of persuading people to view a person or an issue in a certain way. Propaganda does not usually use logical arguments. Instead, it appeals to emotions. By learning to recognize propaganda, you can teach yourself to see through it and form your own opinions.

**Regulating Interest Groups**

*How does the government regulate interest groups?*

The Constitution guarantees, or promises, Americans the right to take part in interest groups. Still, both state governments and the federal government have laws about what these groups can do. Some laws limit how much money PACs may contribute to candidates. Others require lobbyists to register with officials who have the authority to oversee them. Lobbyists must also state who hired them, how much they are paid, and how they spend money related to their work. These laws are aimed at preventing lobbyists from gaining unfair influence.

Federal and state laws also require former government officials to wait for a period of time before they can become lobbyists. The delay is meant to stop these former officials from using friendships and inside knowledge to help special-interest groups. This kind of law, however, has not been successful. After waiting for a period of time, former lawmakers do become lobbyists. Because they understand how the legislature works and often still have friends among lawmakers, they can be very influential.

Interest groups have critics and defenders. Some people say that interest groups and lobbyists have too much say in government. They claim that by giving money to a campaign, special-interest groups gain power over elected officials. Many critics point to the example of Jack Abramoff. He was one of Washington’s most powerful lobbyists. In 2006, Abramoff admitted that he corrupted government officials and stole millions of dollars from his lobbying clients. Some critics say that it is wrong for interest groups to have more influence than ordinary voters.

Other people defend interest groups. They say these groups help make known the wishes of large groups of people. In that way, they help make sure that the government responds to people’s concerns. In this view, interest groups provide a service by letting representatives know the people’s wishes.

Supporters of interest groups also say that these groups are an important part of a democracy. They provide a way for Americans to take an active role in government. By joining forces, ordinary people can pressure the government to follow the policies they believe are important.

**Explaining** Why must former government officials wait before becoming lobbyists?
LESSON 3 REVIEW

Review Vocabulary

1. How are public-interest groups and nonpartisan groups similar? How are they different?

2. How do lobbyists differ from political action committees (PACs)?

Answer the Guiding Questions

3. Identifying What are four ways that interest groups promote their viewpoints and try to influence public policy?

4. Explaining Why does the government regulate interest groups, despite constitutional guarantees of their right to exist? Explain the reason for one regulation to support your answer.

5. INFORMATIVE/EXPLANATORY You have read about political parties and about interest groups. Write a paragraph in which you compare interest groups and political parties. How are they similar? How are they different?