Chapter 6: Political Socialization and Public Opinion
Political Socialization and Civic Participation

- The process by which we develop our political values and opinions is called **political socialization**.
- A key aspect of political socialization is whether children are socialized to participate in politics.
The Process of Political Socialization

- Family and school have the strongest influence on political socialization.
- In recent times, media have become one of the prime agents of political socialization.
Participating in Civic Life

- Children whose parents are active in politics or in their community are more likely to be active themselves.
- Schools also play an important role in socializing young people to become active in civic life.
- Research also indicates that socialization actually generates participation.
- There is a strong link between being informed and the likelihood of engaging in civic participation.
Agents of Socialization

Learning, culture, and socialization occur through **agents of socialization**, the individuals, organizations, and institutions that facilitate the acquisition of political views.
Family Influences on Activism and Attitudes

- We learn whether our family members value civic activism by observing their actions and listening to their views.
- Our families also influence what we believe.
- While parents or older siblings may discuss specific issues or policies, their attitudes and outlook also shape children’s general political attitudes and ideology.
- The *Weekly Reader* poll.
The Media’s Ever-Increasing Role in Socialization

- The media, especially television, help shape societal norms.
- The media also reinforce core democratic values.
- The media also help determine the national agenda.
- The media educate the public about policy issues.
- The media, particularly television, can skew people’s perception of public policy priorities and challenges.
Schools, Patriotism, and Civic Participation

- As early as preschool, children in the United States are socialized to believe in democracy and express patriotism.
- Schools socialize children to the concept of democracy by making the idea tangible for them.
- Research indicates that higher levels of education are associated with higher levels of political activism, which is passed through generations.
Churches: The Role of Religion

- A better predictor of the impact of religion on voting is not so much the religion an individual practices but how regularly he or she practices it.
- In general, those who regularly attend religious services are more likely to share conservative values—and support Republican candidates in general elections.
This relationship between frequency of church attendance and identification with the Republican Party is particularly strong among white Protestants.

African Americans are likely to be Democrats no matter how religious they are.

And although religious Latinos are more likely to be Republican, by and large, majorities of Latinos identify as Democrats.
The diagram illustrates the percentage of different demographic groups in various religious categories.

- **Very religious Americans**:
  - Republicans/Republican leaners: 48%
  - Independents/No lean: 13%
  - Democrats/Democratic leaners: 16%

- **Moderately religious Americans**:
  - Republicans/Republican leaners: 37%
  - Independents/No lean: 16%
  - Democrats/Democratic leaners: 29%

- **Nonreligious Americans**:
  - Republicans/Republican leaners: 45%
  - Independents/No lean: 16%
  - Democrats/Democratic leaners: 54%
With respect to the abortion issue, would you consider yourself to be pro-choice or pro-life?

Trend from polls where pro-life/pro-choice was asked after question on legality of abortion

% Pro-choice

% Pro-life

Year

Where Do You Stand?

How much importance does religion have in your life?

a. It’s very important.
b. It’s somewhat important.
c. It’s not that important.

Peers and Group Norms

- Friends, neighbors, coworkers, and other peers influence political socialization.
- Research indicates that the primary function of peers is to reinforce our already-held beliefs and values.
Political and Community Leaders: Opinion Shapers

- Political and community leaders also help to socialize people and influence public opinion.
- The president plays an especially important role in shaping Americans’ views.
- Often we rely on the recommendations and priorities of well-respected leaders who have earned our trust.
Demographic Characteristics: Race & Ethnicity

- Whites, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans prefer different candidates, hold different political views, and have different levels of civic involvement.
- In the 2012 election, 54% of whites supported Mitt Romney, whereas 90% of African Americans (90%) supported Barack Obama.
- President Obama also enjoyed strong support from Hispanics (at 68 percent) and Asian Americans (at 57 percent).
Demographic Characteristics: Race & Ethnicity

- African-American youth are the most politically engaged racial or ethnic group.
- Asian Americans are more likely to have been active in their communities.
- Young Latinos are the least likely to be active in politics or their communities, but they are most likely to have engaged in political protests.
- Young white people are moderately likely to engage in community and political activities.
Candidate Support by Racial and Ethnic Group

- **Whites**
  - Obama: 37%
  - Romney: 54%
  - Other/Undecided: 9%

- **Blacks**
  - Obama: 90%
  - Romney: 5%

- **Hispanics**
  - Obama: 68%
  - Romney: 23%
  - Other/Undecided: 9%

- **Asians and other racial/ethnic groups**
  - Obama: 57%
  - Romney: 30%
  - Other/Undecided: 13%
### Latino Party Identification by National Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NATIONAL ORIGIN</th>
<th>REPUBLICAN</th>
<th>DEMOCRATIC</th>
<th>INDEPENDENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salvadoran</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographic Characteristics: Gender

- **The gender gap** refers to the measurable difference in the way women and men vote for candidates and in the way they view political issues.

- Since the 1980 election, women voters are more likely than men to favor Democratic candidates.

- Women in most age groups—except those under age 25—are more likely to vote than their male counterparts.
Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as president?
Demographic Characteristics: Age and Events

- The **generational effect** is the influence of a significant external event in shaping the views of a generation.
  - 9/11 for younger Americans
  - Vietnam War and societal changes for Baby Boom generation
  - Great Depression & World War II for oldest Americans
Demographic Characteristics: Geographic Region

- Among the most important regional differences in the United States is the difference in political outlook between those who live in the Northeast and those in the South.

- Today, in national elections, Republicans tend to carry the South, the West, and most of the Midwest, except for large cities in these regions.
Demographic Characteristics: Geographic Region

- Democrats are favored in the Northeast, on the West Coast, and in most major cities.
- Religiosity contributes to differences in regional political climate.
- Regional differences in levels of religiosity are compounded by the differences in the dominant religious denominations in each area.
Measuring Public Opinion

- **Public opinion** consists of the public’s expressed views about an issue at a specific point in time.

- One of the most important ways public opinion is measured is through the act of voting.

- Another important tool that policy makers, researchers, and the public rely on as an indicator of public opinion is the **public opinion poll**, a survey of a given population’s opinion on an issue at a particular time.
The Origins of Public Opinion
Polls

- In 1916, the *Literary Digest*, conducted its first successful straw poll, a poll conducted in an unscientific manner to predict the outcome of an election.
- Between 1920 and 1932, *Literary Digest* correctly predicted the winner of every presidential race.
- However, the *Literary Digest* falsely predicted that Alf Landon would defeat Franklin Roosevelt in the 1936 election.
The Origins of Public Opinion
Polls

- In 1935, George Gallup founded the American Institute of Public Opinion, which would later become the Gallup Organization. Gallup gained national recognition when he correctly predicted the outcome of the 1936 election.
- Scientific opinion polls, which rely on the random selection of participants rather than their own self-selection, gained enormous credibility during this era (although note the 1948 election!).
How Public Opinion Polls Are Conducted

- Those conducting the poll first need to determine the population they are targeting for the survey—the group of people whose opinions are of interest and about whom information is desired.

- Polling organizations construct polls carefully to ensure that the questions actually measure what the client wants to know.
Sampling

- Pollsters frequently rely on random sampling, a scientific method of selection in which each member of the population has an equal chance at being included in the sample.

- However, there are number of methodological problems in obtaining a truly random sample.
Sampling

- **Quota sampling** is a more scientifically sophisticated method of sampling than random sampling. A pollster using this method structures the sample so that it is representative of the characteristics of the target population.

- Another method used to address problems in sampling is **stratified sampling**, in which the national population is divided into fourths and certain areas within these regions are selected as representative of the national population.
Sampling Error

- Sampling error (sometimes called a margin of error), which is a statistical calculation of the difference in results between a poll of a randomly drawn sample and a poll of the entire population.

- Most national polls have a sampling error of +/- 3 percentage points (for 1000-1500 respondents).
Types of Political Polls

- **Tracking polls** measure changes in public opinion over the course of days, weeks, or months by repeatedly asking respondents the same questions and measuring changes in opinion.

- **Push polls** are a special type of poll that both attempts to skew public opinion about a candidate and provides information to campaigns about candidate strengths and weaknesses.

- **Exit polls** are conducted at polling places on Election Day to project the winner of an election before the polls close.
What Americans Think About Politics

- Public opinion research is the means by which individuals can convey their opinions and priorities to policy makers.
- Consequently, polls connect Americans to their government.
The Most Important Problem

Since April 2008, “the economy” has been most frequently cited as the most important problem.
Public Opinion About Government

For decades, public opinion researchers have measured the public’s trust in government by asking survey respondents to rate their level of trust in the federal government’s ability to handle domestic and international policy matters and to gauge their amount of trust and confidence in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.
Individual officeholders can use the data as a measure of how well they are performing their jobs.

Trust in government is one measure of the public’s sense of efficacy, their belief that the government works for people like them.

If people trust their government, they are more likely to believe that it is responsive to the needs of citizens—that it is working for people like them.
### Importance of Women’s Rights

How important do you think it is for women to have full equality of rights compared to men?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
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<td>Ukraine</td>
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<td>Russia</td>
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<td>Azerbaijan</td>
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<td>Jordan</td>
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<td>Palestinian ter.</td>
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<td>Iran</td>
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<td>Hong Kong</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>59</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How Would You Describe Your Political Views?

How would you describe your political views?

Year


Percentage

17 18 17 16 16 19 19 19 19 20 20 21 22 21 21 22 23

Conservative  Moderate  Liberal
Trust in Government to Handle Domestic Problems
Trust in the Executive Branch of Government

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Trust in the Legislative Branch of Government

Graph showing the percentage of trust in the Legislative Branch from 1972 to 2014. The percentage has decreased over time, from 71% in 1972 to 28% in 2014.