In a democracy, the people express their opinions in many different ways. One way is through public opinion polls, which are reported almost daily in the media. Public opinion has an impact on presidents and their decisions; however, the extent to which it affects policymaking in general is not always clear.

I. DEFINING PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion is the aggregate of individual attitudes or beliefs shared by some portion of adults. Private opinion becomes public opinion when an individual takes some type of action to express an opinion to others publicly. We can look to the distribution of public opinion to determine how divided the public is on any given issue. When there is general agreement on an issue, there is said to be a consensus. When opinions are sharply divided, there is divisive opinion. Sometimes, most respondents either have no information about an issue or are not interested enough in an issue to formulate a position, which is referred to as non-opinion.

II. HOW PUBLIC OPINION IS FORMED: POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

A. Models of Political Socialization

Political socialization is the process by which individuals acquire political beliefs and attitudes. Although the most important early sources of political socialization are family and school, more sources of information about politics have become available, especially to young people.

B. The Family and the Social Environment

The importance of the family is paramount in the development of individual opinion. Political attitudes begin to develop in children and the major influence on these early values is the family.

1. Education as a Source of Political Socialization. Educational influence on political opinions is also important. Education introduces individuals to ideas outside of the home and outside of the local community. Children also learn democratic decision-making rules and processes through education.

2. Peers and Peer Group Influence. As people interact with others in school, at work or in social activities, various values come into play. These values can influence how opinions are formed.

3. Opinion Leaders’ Influence. Leaders, both formal and informal, also tend to shape the opinions of the public. Formal leaders include political leaders like the president, governors, and members of Congress. Formal leaders make a conscious effort to shape the opinions of the public. Informal leaders may not necessarily attempt to shape the political opinions of the public, but they still exert an influence on opinion formation. Examples of informal leaders are teachers, religious leaders, and civic leaders.
C. **The Impact of the Media**

The media also play a significant role in political socialization. The media present information on important political topics. How topics are presented and which topics are presented have a major impact in opinion formation.

D. **The Influence of Political Events**

Generally older Americans tend to be somewhat more conservative than younger Americans, particularly on social and economic issues. This is known as the **lifecycle effect**. Political events can produce a long-lasting impact on opinion formation. An important example was the impact of the Great Depression on people who came of age in that period. We call such an impact a **generational effect**, or a cohort effect. The events of September 11, 2001 will play an important role in the political socialization of young Americans, but it is unclear what the exact impact will be.

III. **POLITICAL PREFERENCES AND VOTING BEHAVIOR**

The candidate and political party that individuals decide to support are influenced in part by certain demographic and socioeconomic factors.

A. **Demographic Influences**

Demographic traits exert a major influence over the development of one’s opinion.

1. **Education.** For years, higher education levels appeared to correlate with voting for Republican candidates. In recent years, however, this correlation has weakened. In particular, those with a postgraduate education have become increasingly Democratic. Also, those with only a high school degree, who in the past often voted Democratic, have recently been more likely to vote Republican.

2. **The Influence of Economic Status.** Family income is a strong predictor of economic liberalism or conservatism. Those with low incomes tend to favor government action to benefit the poor or to promote economic equality. Those with high incomes tend to oppose government intervention in the economy or to support it only when it benefits business. Recent research, though, indicates that realignment is occurring among those of higher economic status.

3. **Religious Influence: Denomination.** Religious influence appears to have a significant impact on the development of political opinions. For example, the Jewish community is likely to vote for Democratic candidates. Persons reporting no religion tend to be liberal on cultural issues, but to have mixed stands on economic issues. A century ago, Catholics were often Democrats and Protestants Republican, but little remains of that tradition.
4. **Religious Influence: Religiosity and Evangelicals.** Recent trends show that the level of devoutness (rather than denomination) correlates with voting. Those who attend church regularly are more likely to vote Republican, no matter what the denomination. This tendency does not apply to African Americans, however, who demonstrate both high levels of religious commitment and generally liberal politics. Fundamentalists or evangelicals make up about 23 percent of the electorate and overwhelmingly vote Republican.

5. **The Influence of Race and Ethnicity.** In general, members of minority groups favor the Democrats. African Americans do so by overwhelming margins. Latinos are voting Democratic by about two-to-one, though the Cuban-American vote is strongly Republican. Asian Americans tend to support the Democrats but often by narrow margins. American Muslims of Middle Eastern descent gave George Bush majority support in 2000 based on shared cultural conservatism, but went heavily for John Kerry in 2004 on the basis of civil liberties concerns.

6. **The Gender Gap.** Key term: the gender gap, or the difference between the percentage of women who vote for a particular candidate and the percentage of men who vote for the candidate. Since 1980 women have been more likely to support Democratic candidates whereas men have been more likely to support Republican candidates. The gender gap ranges from 7–12 points in presidential elections. As more women are registered and turn out to vote, women can be credited with several Democratic victories due to the gender gap.

7. **Reasons for the Gender Gap.** A number of reasons have been offered, including the increase in the number of working women, feminism, and women’s concerns over abortion rights and other social issues. Other research identifies the changing politics of men as the source of the gender gap. Some researchers have argued that a decline in marriage rates and an increase in the number of divorces have depressed the income of many women, who tend to be helped economically by marriage; and indeed, single women appear to be unusually Democratic. Other researchers, however, note that the gender gap rises with education and that it persists among well-educated married women.

8. **Geographic Region.** In presidential elections, Democrats tend to get support from the Northeast and the West Coast. Republicans do well in the South, the Great Plains, and the Rocky Mountains. The Midwest tends to split (and sometimes decides elections). Even more importantly, cities are typically Democratic whereas the countryside in most places is Republican.
B. Election: The Most Important Influences

1. **Party Identification.** This is the strongest determinant of an individual’s vote. If an individual identifies with a particular party, there is a greater likelihood this person will vote and support the candidates of that party.

2. **Perception of the Candidates.** The candidate who is more successful in projecting an image that the public wants has a better chance of winning the election. Typically, these traits have to do with character, especially trustworthiness.

3. **Issue Preferences.** Although not as important as party identification or image, where a candidate stands on a given issue does have an impact on voters. Economic issues are often the most important. Some voters may cast votes based on their own economic interests, whereas others will vote based on what is happening to the nation’s economy as a whole.

IV. MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

A. The History of Opinion Polls

As early as the 1800s, the press conducted **straw polls.** Such polls were not an accurate reflection of public opinion. The *Literary Digest* conducted the most infamous of these in 1936. Franklin Roosevelt was elected in a landslide after the poll conducted by the *Digest* had projected his defeat. The *Digest’s* sample, taken from its readership, was not representative of the entire nation. In the 1930s, however, relatively accurate polling techniques were developed by George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and others. Survey research centers were set up at several universities after World War II.

B. Sampling Techniques

1. **Representative Sampling.** To accurately predict the whole based on only a sample, the sample must be representative.

2. **The Principle of Randomness.** A purely random sample will be representative within the stated margin of error. For a poll to be random, every person in the defined population has to have an equal chance of being selected. The larger the sample of the population, the smaller the margin of error. If a random sample, with a margin of error of $\pm 3$ percent, reveals that 63 percent of the population favors a reduction in spending for space exploration, the actual number of people favoring such a reduction is somewhere between 60 percent to 66 percent. Making sure that a sample is random is a major task. A technique known as quota sampling may depart from the random model, and thus be less accurate. In quota sampling, researchers decide how many persons of certain types they need in the survey—such as minorities, women, or farmers—and
then send out interviewers to find the necessary number of these types. Within the categories, the sample may be nonrandom and, therefore, biased.

C. Problems with Polls

Although random samples are usually accurate, there can still be problems. If the margin of error is greater than the difference between two candidates, the poll cannot indicate who is leading at that time. Polls are only accurate for the time frame when they were conducted. In the case of an issue in which public opinion changes quickly, the length of time the poll will be accurate will be very short.

1. **Sampling Errors.** Key concept: sampling error, or the difference between a sample’s results and the true result if the entire population had been interviewed. There exists danger if the sample is too small or if the polltakers do not know how to correct for common biases in samples.

2. **Poll Questions.** The design of a question can affect the result. Yes/no answers are a problem if the issue involves shades of gray. Often, people will attempt to please the interviewer and provide answers that are not indicative of their true beliefs.

3. **Push Polls.** Push polls are not polls at all, but are attempts to spread negative views about a candidate. They have been condemned by the polling industry and are considered to be unethical. However, other than complaining to the media, candidates cannot assure that push polls will not be used.

V. **TECHNOLOGY AND OPINION POLLS**

A. The Advent of Telephone Polling

Telephone polling is far easier and less expensive than door-to-door polling, and has become standard.

1. **Telephone Polling Problems.** The telemarketing industry has now become so pervasive that people increasingly refuse to respond. Almost half of households now use caller ID or some form of call screening, reducing the number of people that polling organizations can reach. In addition, the popularity of cell phones means an even greater quantity of numbers that polling organizations can’t reach.

2. **Nonresponse Rates Have Skyrocketed.** The nonresponse rate has reached 80 percent in some cases. A poll in which only 20 percent of the audience is reached can hardly be considered to involve a random sample.

B. Enter Internet Polling

Harris has attempted to design Internet polls that properly weigh respondents to produce an accurate result. However, much of the population is not online (for
example, less than half of all African-American men) so many observers believe that the Harris effort cannot be made acceptable. It must be noted, however, that the online population grows to resemble the population of the nation daily.

1. **“Nonpolls” on the Internet.** There are many unscientific straw polls on the Internet. Although the results are not likely to be accurate or reliable, people still seem to desire the information produced. With the proliferation of unscientific Internet polls there is a risk that people will cease to regard them as believable and to cynically question all polls.

VI. **PUBLIC OPINION AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS**

The president, members of Congress, governors, and other elected officials realize that strong support by the public as expressed in opinion polls is a source of power in dealing with other politicians. Public opinion also helps candidates identify the most important issues and may help them shape their campaigns.

A. **Political Culture and Popular Opinion**

*Political culture* can be described as a set of attitudes and ideas about the nation and government. Certain shared beliefs about important values are considered the core of American political culture. They bind the nation together despite its highly diverse population. These values include liberty, equality, and property; support for religion; and community service and personal achievement.

1. **Political Culture and Support for Our Political System.** General popular belief that the presidential election of 2000 would be settled fairly is an example of how a general sense of support for our political system allows the nation to weather a crisis.

2. **Political Trust.** General levels of trust in government have gone up and down. Levels were low in the wake of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, but rose immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

B. **Public Opinion about Government**

It is clear that there is considerable ambivalence on the part of the public regarding government and other national institutions. Recent data suggests that trust in government peaked after 9/11 but dropped thereafter. When government does not respond adequately to a crisis, public reaction is swift and usually negative. For example, President George W. Bush’s approval ratings dropped precipitously following Hurricane Katrina because the majority of the public lacked confidence in the government’s response to the devastating gulf coast hurricane.

C. **Public Opinion and Policymaking**

What role should public opinion play in the political process? Should political leaders rely on public opinion polls to make public policy? The general public
believes the leadership should pay attention to popular opinion. Leaders themselves are less likely to believe this.

1. **Setting Limits on Government Action.** Public opinion may be at its strongest in preventing politicians from embracing highly unpopular policies.

2. **The Limits of Polling.** There are differences of opinion between the public and policymakers on this issue. Part of the difference stems from one of the flaws of polling: Poll questions largely ignore the context within which most policy decisions take place; i.e., people are likely to express opinions on many kinds of policies without being required to consider the costs or a choice of trade-offs.