

UNIT

6

CHAPTER 16

PUBLIC OPINION

CHAPTER 17

INTEREST GROUPS

CHAPTER 18

POLITICAL PARTIES

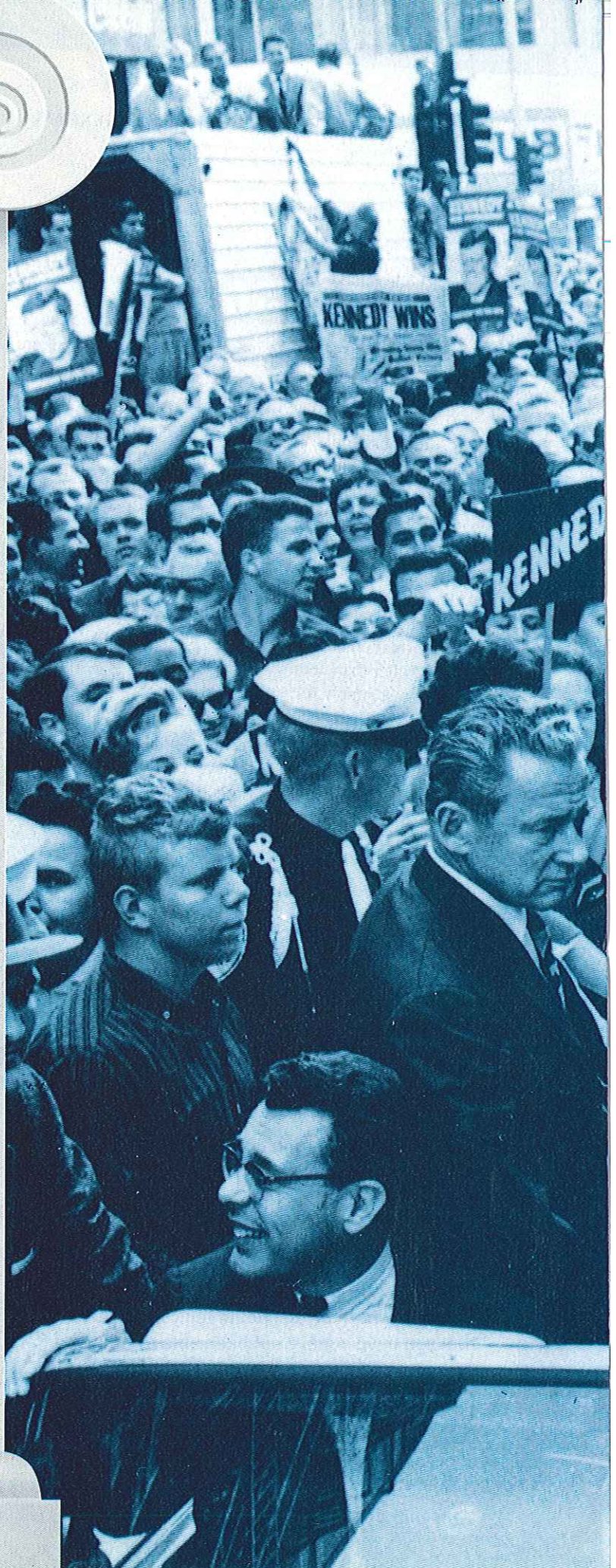
CHAPTER 19

THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

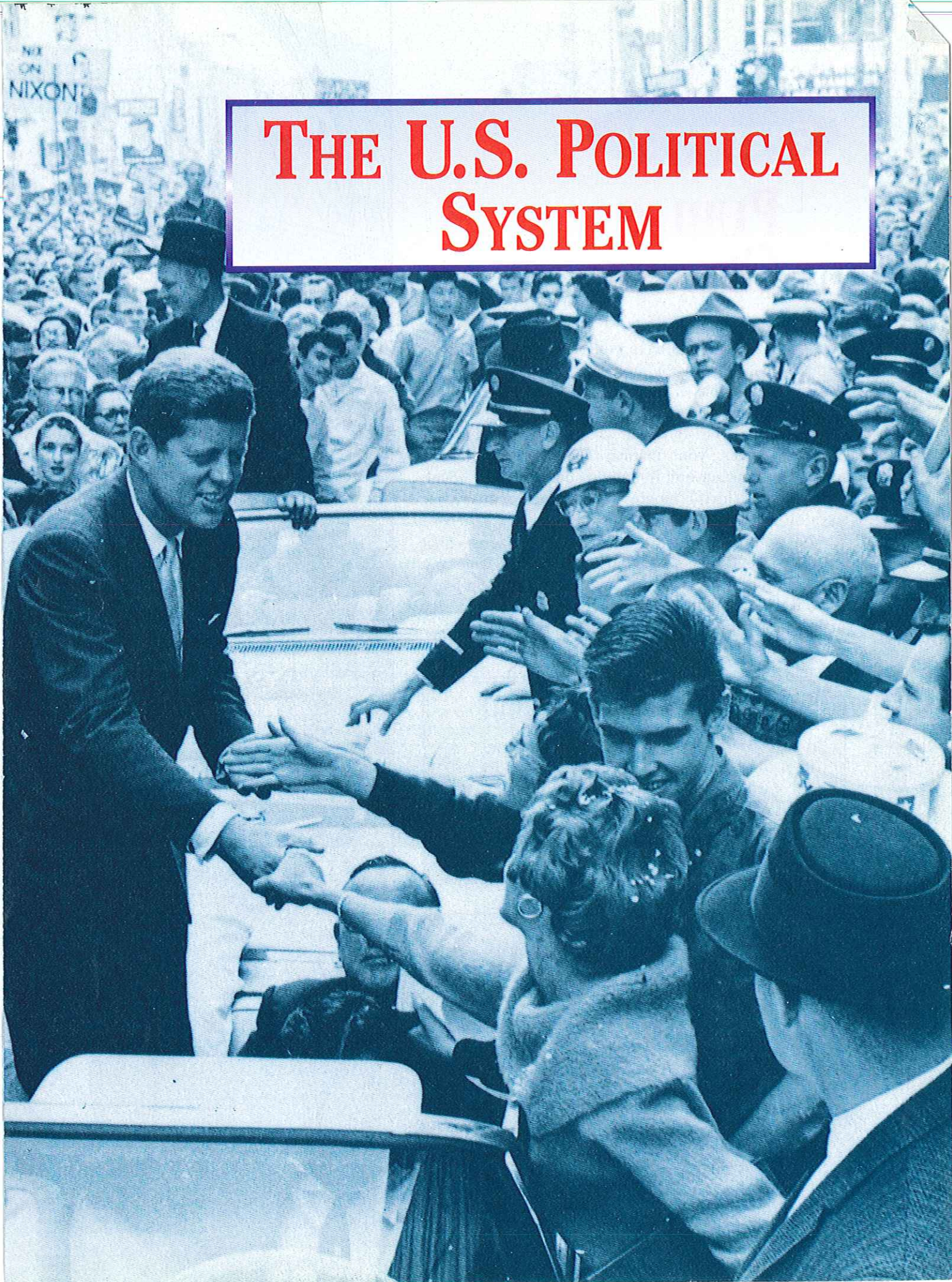
PUBLIC POLICY LAB

How do presidential candidates
prepare for televised debates?

Find out by taking the Public
Policy Lab challenge on
pages 454–57.



THE U.S. POLITICAL SYSTEM



CHAPTER 16

PUBLIC OPINION

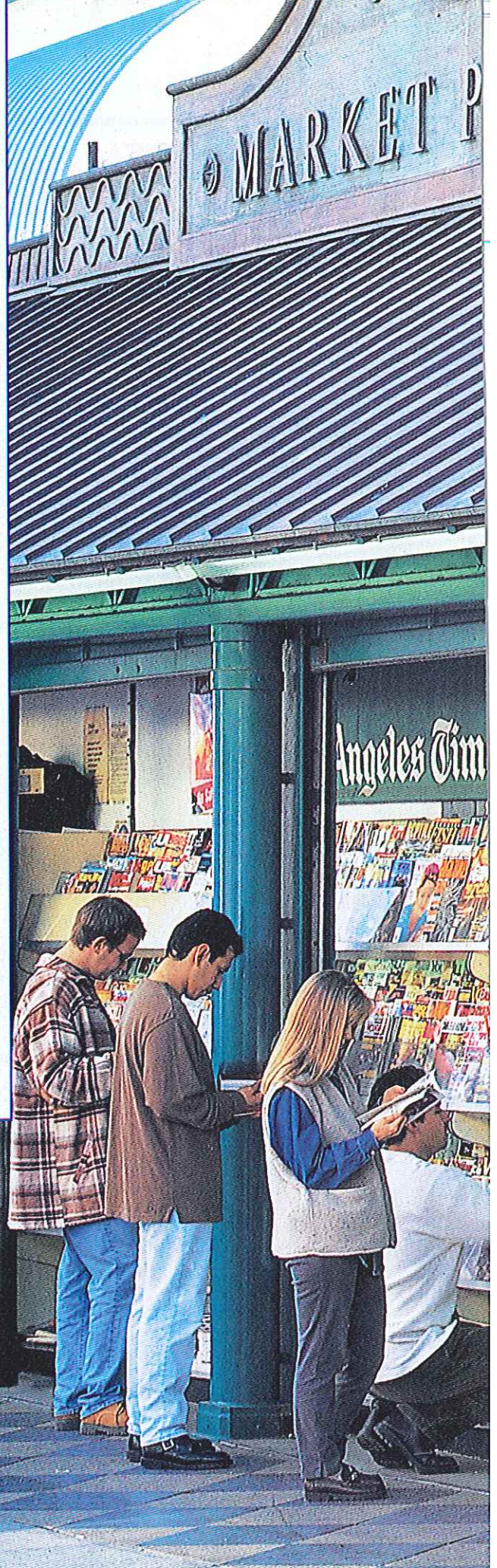
How many times have you been asked the question “What do you think?” Consider all the times a teacher has called on you in class. Think about the hours you spend with your friends and family trying to decide what to do or what to wear. In each of these instances, your teachers, friends, and family asked you for your opinion about something—a novel, a problem, a shirt, a movie. They asked because your opinion matters to them.

Your opinions—and those of other citizens—also matter to government officials. People in office and those running for office are keenly interested in finding out what the constituents in their district think. By making your opinions heard, you can influence not only government but also laws that affect you.



Government Notebook

In your Government Notebook, list all the times in one day that you express your opinion. What forms does your opinion take? Think not only about what you say and write but also about the choices you make in clothes, classes, and activities.



SECTION 1

WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION?

Political Dictionary



public opinion
ideology
political socialization

Objectives

- ★ What is public opinion, and how does it shape political events?
- ★ What factors influence public opinion?
- ★ What is the media's role in influencing public opinion?

Consider the following scenario. Your friend comes to you during the day at school and tells you that he likes a certain girl and wants to ask her out on a date. He wants to know what you think he should do. You tell your friend that in your opinion the best idea is to walk up to her and casually ask her to go to a movie with him. Your friend takes your advice. He asks her out, she accepts, and they make plans. Because he valued your opinion, your friend took your advice. In other words, your opinion influenced your friend's actions.

Just as your friends, family, and teachers want to know your opinion about certain things, public officials want to know what you and the rest of the public think about important local and national issues. The collective opinion of large numbers of people is called **public opinion**.

Role of Public Opinion

In a democracy, government officials respect public opinion as the voice of the majority of the people. Thus, by making their opinions heard on specific issues, people can influence the government policies that affect them.

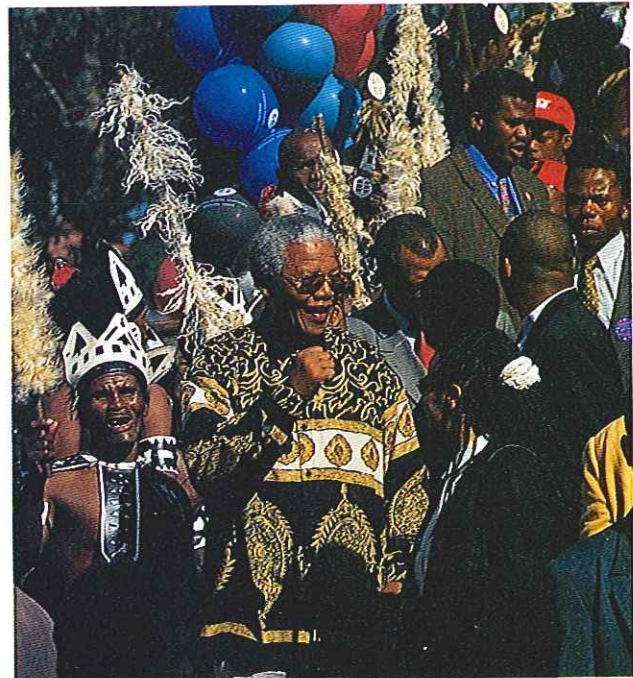
Consider the antiapartheid movement in South Africa. For many years, black South Africans were

suppressed by apartheid, a government system of racial segregation that restricted where they could live and work and that denied them the right to vote. After years of often violent demonstrations against the government and strong actions by other nations, the leaders of South Africa began to allow multiracial elections in 1994. Nelson Mandela, black nationalist leader of the African National Congress Party, was elected president. The pressure of international public opinion had helped to force an end to apartheid.

As a citizen in your own community, you might agree or disagree with certain laws. Have officials in your community ever passed laws about which you had strong feelings? If so, did you express your opinion? In some communities, teens have expressed their opinions about laws by speaking before or writing letters to their city councils. If public opinion about an issue is strong enough, it may cause the law to be changed.

Forms of Public Opinion

How can government officials, researchers, and others concerned with public opinion tell what people's views are? One way is by examining people's



WORLD AFFAIRS Nelson Mandela, South Africa's president, led the antiapartheid movement in that country. How can people living in democratic countries influence government policies?

Citizens Registered and Voting in Federal Elections, 1964–1996

Year	Voting Age Population	Registered	Voted	Percent of Voting Age Population Who Voted
1964	114,090,000	73,715,818	70,644,592	61.92%
1968	120,328,186	81,658,180	73,211,875	60.84%
1972	140,776,000	97,328,541	77,718,554	55.21%
1976	152,309,190	105,037,986	81,555,789	53.55%
1980	164,597,000	113,043,734	86,515,221	52.56%
1984	174,466,000	124,150,614	92,652,680	53.11%
1988	182,778,000	126,379,628	91,594,693	50.11%
1992	189,529,000	133,821,178	104,405,155	55.09%
1996	196,511,000	146,211,960	96,456,345	49.08%

Source: Federal Election Commission

*In federal elections only around half of the eligible voters exercise their right to vote.
In what year did the percent of eligible voters who voted in federal elections drop below 50 percent?*

participation, in the political process. One obvious way people participate in politics is by voting. Citizens who are 18 or over, have not been convicted of a felony, and have taken the time to register are eligible to vote. Unfortunately, only around half of the eligible voters take the time to vote in presidential elections. In other elections, turnout is even lower.

People participate in the political process in ways other than voting, however. No matter what your age and even if you are not a citizen, you can speak out or write about political issues, demonstrate, sign a petition, write a letter to a public official, or join an interest group that has specific political goals. Some people donate money or time to political candidates and interest groups. Through all these forms of political participation, people make their views known.

Influences on Public Opinion

You now know how people express their political opinions, but what helps form those opinions in the first place? Ideology, family, school, and the media all influence how people form their opinions.

Ideology One factor affecting people's viewpoints on certain issues is their **ideology**—or basic set of political beliefs. By conducting interviews, political scientists have discovered that

many people do maintain a set of basic beliefs about freedom, opportunity, and equality, and that this ideology influences their political ideas about both issues and candidates.

You have probably heard relatives or friends speak of themselves as liberal, conservative, or moderate. These are different types of ideology. In general, a person with a conservative ideology believes that in order to promote the public good, government should be less involved in people's lives, while someone with a liberal ideology believes that government should actively protect and advance the general welfare of citizens. A moderate usually holds some liberal and some conservative beliefs.

Political Socialization Some of people's earliest influences, such as family and school, affect how they form their opinions. In fact, family beliefs, ideas learned in school, job experiences, and influences from income, education, age, gender, race, and geographic region all combine to produce a person's **political socialization**. This process helps determine how someone's political opinions will develop over his or her lifetime.

The political socialization process starts very early. Research by political scientists has shown that people develop some basic political preferences as children. Many children can name some countries they like and do not like by the age of six. Studies

Government and Psychology

Politics and the Mind

Why would anyone want to know your emotions on election day? When considering how to vote, you base your decisions partly on personal factors, such as feelings, personality traits, and values. Political psychologists study these factors to help them determine how people make political decisions.

By scientifically studying the public's thoughts and behavior, political psychologists analyze how people form political beliefs and make decisions about political issues. One of the earliest political psychologists was Harold Laswell. In 1930 Laswell published a study arguing that people act according to personal motives when making political decisions. In particular, Laswell thought that many people who had feelings of inferiority sought political power to prove their own worth.

In 1960, Angus Campbell's book *The American Voter* presented the results of surveys in which voters were asked questions about their ability to influence politics. This study showed that people who felt they could bring about political changes were more likely to vote than those who did not feel that their efforts could result in change. This theory was supported by a 1963 study listing a



Political psychologists analyze why some people participate more actively in the political process than others.

number of other psychological factors that also encouraged voting. These factors included a strong sense of identification with a political party, interest in specific issues or candidates, and concern about the results of an election.

Political ideology has also been a focus of political psychology. During the 1940s a group of researchers studied the psychological influences on fascism and anti-Semitism. The study found that people who joined the Nazi Party had harsh, impulsive personalities, favored strict punishment, and tended to blame others—in that case, Jews—for their problems. Supporting these findings, a study in the United States during the 1960s showed that people who felt powerless, isolated, and dissatisfied were more likely to hold extreme views.

Political psychologists also study psychological socialization, or how people's emotions, opinions, and behavior make them part of a larger society. In 1971 psychologist Joseph Adelson studied the development of political thought in adolescents, based on a theory developed by psychologist Jean Piaget. Adelson noted that different stages in children's mental development coincided with changes in political attitudes. The most dramatic changes appeared in children between the ages of 12 and 16, with older adolescents better able to think abstractly about politics.

The political development that teens undergo often reflects their upbringing. Psychologist Judith Gallatin's 1980 study showed, for example, that parents play an important role in the formation of their children's political views. This role is more pronounced when both parents hold similar political beliefs and when political discussion is encouraged in the home. Gallatin's study also showed that teenagers raised in unusually strict or lenient families are less likely to be aware of political issues and tend not to be involved in politics.

What Do You Think?

1. Why might voting be more common among people who believe that their actions can lead to political change?
2. What factors other than parental interest might influence a teen's political beliefs? Explain your answer.



CITIZENSHIP Most U.S. citizens learn to say the Pledge of Allegiance in school at a young age. As adults many citizens continue to promise loyalty to their country by reciting the pledge. In what other ways does political socialization occur?

have shown that children as young as fourth grade frequently have political party preferences. In many cases these choices reflect the political beliefs of the children's parents or guardians.

School is also a significant part of the socialization process. In school you learn about your government, how it was founded, and why it is a good system. You also learn to say the Pledge of Allegiance, in which you promise loyalty to your country.

Other influences, such as those arising from regional background and income, also affect how people form their opinions. For example, people with low incomes are often more likely than those with high incomes to back government programs that provide health care, stimulate job growth, or redistribute income. Though regional opinion differences have lessened over the years, southerners do tend to be more conservative on moral and social issues than people in other regions of the country.

Recent research suggests that the key period in forming political beliefs is during the late teens or early twenties. At this time, people have new experiences, meet new people, and live more independently of their parents. People are open to new influences during that period, and therefore are more likely to be affected by major political events (such as wars or economic crises) and by popular ideas of the day.

Media Another major factor influencing public opinion is the media. Consider your daily activities. Do you spend time watching television or listening to the radio? If so, you may find that the media—magazines, newspapers, television, radio, and books—influence your opinions. The media provide people with much of the knowledge they use to form their opinions.

The media's influence on public opinion has grown over the years with the development of radio and television. Before television became popular, researchers in the 1930s and 1940s studied politicians' ability to affect people's opinions through radio speeches. Radio was used often by the great political speakers of the age, such as President Franklin Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston Churchill. Adolf Hitler, dictator of Germany from 1933 to 1945, also used radio to rally support for his policies. Through radio, politicians had found a way to influence the way these people thought about the issues.

With the rise of television, media's ability to affect public opinion became even greater. One way television affects public opinion is by giving priority to certain issues. "The media do not affect *what* people think," it has been said, "but rather what they think *about*." In fact, some studies have shown that people tend to rank an issue as more important if it has received a high degree of evening news coverage.

In one study conducted in New Haven, Connecticut, for example, researchers had different groups of people watch television news broadcasts for a week. The broadcasts were the same as the actual national news shown each night, but with a few changes. One group of viewers saw a large number of stories on problems with U.S. defense capabilities, and a second saw a large number of stories about defense, inflation, and pollution. A third saw many stories about arms control, civil rights, and unemployment, and a fourth about unemployment only. (The stories, which were taken from earlier newscasts, were inserted into the newscasts without the viewers' knowledge.)

The researchers found that viewers who saw more stories on the targeted problems were more likely than the other groups to rate these problems as major national issues. As you can see from this study, the media play a considerable role in influencing people's opinions. You will learn more about the media, as well as how they affect the public good, in Section 3.

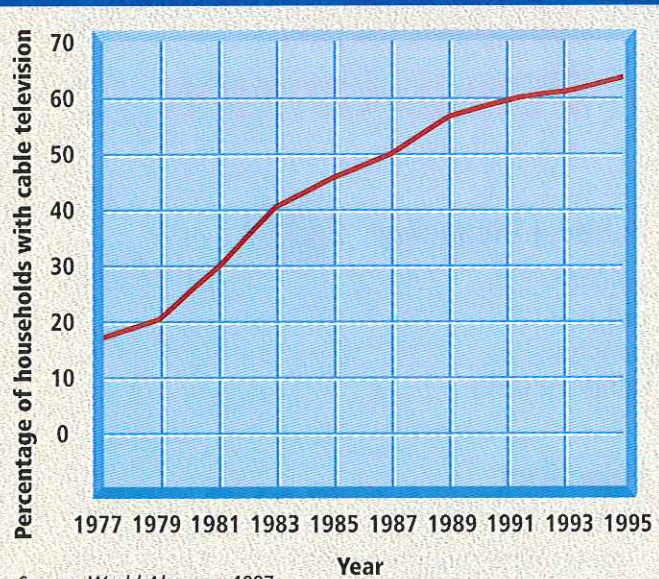
The Nature of Public Opinion

There are two key features that influence the nature of public opinion. These are how strongly people feel about an issue and with which side of the issue people identify.

Strength of Opinion How strongly people feel about an issue is one factor that may determine the nature of public opinion. When answering a question such as “Are you for or against the death penalty?” people generally would say either, “I support it” or “I oppose it.” The answer to such a question, however, would not reveal the *strength* of the opinion held. Because some issues matter a great deal more to some people than to others, determining the strength of people’s opinions is important to understanding the nature of public opinion—strength of opinion can influence someone’s vote, as well as how politically active the person will be regarding an issue.

Face of the Issue Which side of the issue a person identifies with is also an important factor when measuring public opinion. Just about every public policy the government might adopt has attractive and unattractive qualities. Environmental policies can preserve nature, for example, but by forcing factories to spend money on pollution control devices they can also make products more expensive. Not surprisingly, most people want both a clean environment and less

U.S. Households with Cable Television, 1977–1995



With the rise of television’s popularity, the media’s influence has increased. How do media affect people’s opinions?

expensive products. Nonetheless, people often take a stand on a particular side of an issue. Someone who hears about an environmental policy during a broadcast on air pollution would be more likely to support the legislation than someone who hears about it in connection with rising prices for consumer goods. Politicians, interest groups, and political parties frequently try to encourage people to see the “face” of the issue most favorable to their cause.

SECTION 1

REVIEW

1. Define the following terms: public opinion, ideology, political socialization.
2. How can public opinion affect politics?
3. How do school, family, and ideology relate to public opinion?
4. How do media affect public opinion?
5. What two factors determine the nature of public opinion?

6. Thinking and Writing Critically

Would the United States still be a representative democracy if policy makers ignored public opinion? Explain.

7. Applying PUBLIC GOOD

Name some important issues that you have seen or heard covered in the media recently. How much does the media affect your opinion about these issues? Do you think that the media has accurately reported information on the issues?

SECTION 2

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

Political Dictionary



polling
exit poll
sampling
sampling error

Objectives

- ★ What is polling, and how is it used to determine public opinion?
- ★ What types of polls exist?
- ★ What are some of the main concerns in conducting a poll?

Have you ever filled out a questionnaire on the food service in the school's cafeteria or on a theme for a school dance? If so, you were responding to a poll. **Polling**—surveying a population on an issue—is the most reliable way of determining what the public thinks. In this case the pollsters at your school hoped to find out what you and other students thought about the cafeteria food or the dance. In a similar way, pollsters around the country survey people about their opinions on such things as presidential candidates and government policies.

Polling

The history of polling stretches back to the last century, but modern polling started in the 1930s and is now a regular feature of political life in the United States. Pollsters have asked Americans questions about almost everything—not only about politics but also about whether they snore or believe in the predictions of fortune-tellers.

There are several kinds of polls in use today, and they have varying levels of reliability. The most reliable polling methods were pioneered in the 1930s by George Gallup.

Origins of Polling George Gallup is the founder of modern political polling. While working on his doctoral degree, Gallup became convinced that the survey method that newspapers and other organizations were using was inaccurate. Many of the polling questions being asked were open-ended, failing to probe residents for specific, detailed answers. For example, one poll might ask respondents which sections of the newspaper they read. Some people, embarrassed to admit that they read only the comics and not the editorial page, would answer falsely.

Gallup developed a polling method that involved, in this instance, going through each section of the newspaper to determine which sections interested the respondent. In this way the respondent could express interest in each section separately. (In response to an early Gallup poll revealing that not only children but also adults read the comics, the *Des Moines Register and Tribune* decided not to cut back, but to expand its comic section.)

Gallup gained fame in 1936 by attacking the presidential poll that a weekly magazine called the *Literary Digest* had conducted since 1916. The magazine polled voters by mailing out millions of ballots to people whose names had been gathered from lists of automobile and telephone owners. In 1936 the *Digest* predicted that Republican Alfred



POLITICAL PROCESSES Pollsters often ask citizens about their political opinions. How can open-ended polling questions lead to inaccurate survey results?



PUBLIC GOOD Telephone interviews are a quick and inexpensive method for conducting polling surveys. What are other common types of polls?

M. Landon would win over Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Gallup claimed that the methods used in the *Digest* poll were flawed and that the poll was unrepresentative of all voters. He made this determination because the lists on which the poll was based did not include low-income voters, who at that time were less likely to have cars or telephones. Gallup then declared that his own poll would produce more-accurate results. He backed his claim by declaring that if he were proved wrong, he would refund the money that newspapers had paid for the columns he had written. Gallup predicted that Roosevelt would win the election with 54 percent of the vote.

The *Literary Digest* poll was in fact flawed, and for just the reason that Gallup had mentioned. The *Digest's* faulty prediction became perhaps the most famous polling blooper ever, for Roosevelt won the greatest landslide victory in U.S. history up to that point. (Actually, even Gallup's poll was off, underestimating Roosevelt's victory by 7 percent.)

With the success of his 1936 presidential poll, Gallup launched a career as the pioneer of modern polling. Gallup had better results than other pollsters because he used a more scientific method of polling. That is, he polled a group of people who better represented the U.S. population as a whole. Gallup's success firmly established

statistical sampling methods in opinion polling. This kind of scientific polling has become increasingly complex and more accurate as pollsters have developed better techniques.

Types of Polls The most common types of polls are in-person interviews, telephone interviews, and mail questionnaires. In-person interviews were common in the early days of polling and are still used by a few polling organizations, such as the one founded by Gallup. Most polling organizations, however, have abandoned in-person interviews for telephone interviews, which are quicker and less expensive.

Mail questionnaires have also been popular for many years. Some early mail questionnaires used "straw ballots," which people could clip out of a newspaper, fill out, and drop in the mail. Mail polls are inexpensive and allow more questions, but generally fewer people respond to them. In some cases, however, researchers who have carefully selected the population they will be polling have used them with much success.

In 1967 the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) pioneered another technique—the exit poll. An **exit poll** surveys a fraction of voters in randomly selected voting precincts after they have cast their ballots. This allows pollsters to discover how people actually voted without waiting for the official votes to be counted.

The use of exit polls has been criticized in recent elections. In 1980, for example, a television network using exit poll results declared Ronald Reagan the winner of the presidential election while people on the West Coast were still voting. (Because of the time zone difference, polls on the East Coast had already closed.) This early announcement, it was argued, discouraged people from voting, thereby possibly influencing the outcome of other West Coast races, such as those for congressional seats. Today, television networks generally do not broadcast a state's exit poll results while people in that state are still voting.

Conducting Polls

If pollsters are to gain reliable results from a poll, they must follow certain guidelines. Getting accurate results depends on how people are chosen to participate in the poll, the type of poll that is used, proper question wording and order, and how familiar the public is with the issue.

Careers in Government



Pollster

Pollsters conduct surveys on public opinion for many kinds of clients, ranging from political groups to media organizations to business interests. The information they collect can help shape public policy, change corporate plans, and inform the public on important issues. They may conduct polls over the phone, through the mail, on the Internet, or in person.

Some pollsters work as independent consultants. For example, Frank Luntz is an independent pollster whose firm assists Republican candidates for public office. Luntz earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in political science before starting his own business in 1991. In 1994 he guided the polling work that helped Republicans prepare their Contract with America. He then became one of House Speaker Newt Gingrich's advisers on public opinion.

Luntz's job requires him to travel extensively and work long hours. He meets regularly with clients to plan polling strategies and discuss poll results, and he watches television shows and listens to popular music to keep in touch with public attitudes.

Other independent pollsters help businesses test public opinion before marketing new products. Some help local organizations and charities determine the best ways to conduct fund-raising drives or serve the needs of the community. In this way, unpopular initiatives might be avoided or modified before the public votes on them.

Many pollsters work for companies that supply



Pollsters need to know how to listen and communicate well in order to gather accurate information.

news media with polling information. Often these companies work according to tight deadlines, creating poll questions on current news events and conducting polls to characterize public opinion as it changes in response to events.

Some pollsters work for nonpartisan organizations. These pollsters provide information on public views to politicians, journalists, scholars, and public interest organizations. Their goal is to educate the public and help civic leaders create better public policies.

Pollsters must have strong writing and analytical skills to create unambiguous questionnaires and to interpret the results accurately. In addition, pollsters need a clear knowledge of current events so that they can ask questions on important subjects at the appropriate times. They also need to be good communicators and listeners to determine what their clients need to know.

Sampling Modern public opinion polls depend heavily on accurate **sampling**—or the choosing of a group of people to participate in a poll. To get a poll result that accurately reflects the total population's opinion, participants must be chosen at random.

Good polling relies on the randomness of the sample much more than its size. The 1936 *Literary Digest* poll, for example, had a sample of more than

2 million, but came up with inaccurate results because the sample was not random. Many national polls try to determine the opinions of almost 200 million potential voters by questioning only 1,500 respondents. Some people doubt the validity of such polls. Indeed, when Americans once were polled about whether national polls with 1,500 respondents could be accurate, only 28 percent thought they could be, while 56 percent said they could not.

Hundreds of election polls have proved, however, that such a sample size can indeed give accurate results. As one political scientist points out, cooks test soups by sampling only one spoonful from a large pot, and doctors test blood by drawing a single drop from a whole body. Mathematical proofs have demonstrated that a small random sample can accurately represent the opinions of hundreds of millions of people.

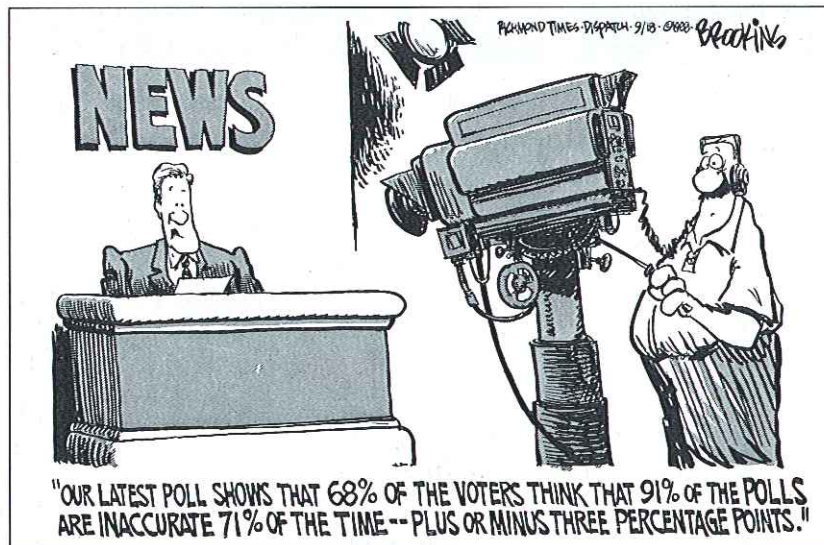
A sample cannot, however, reveal with certainty what the *exact* distribution of opinion in response to a question would have been if everyone in the population had been surveyed, instead of just a sample. The uncertainty that sampling introduces is called **sampling error**.

The likely size of the possible error, which can be determined through statistics, is expressed as a percent above and below a poll's result. For example, a poll might find that candidate A leads candidate B by 55 percent of the vote to 45 percent. If the sampling error were 5 points, however, candidate A might get between 50 to 60 percent of the vote while candidate B might get 40 to 50 percent.

Question Wording The wording of a poll's questions can lead to inaccurate results. Questions that make a one-sided statement and ask poll respondents to agree or disagree with it tend to get biased results.

For example, suppose someone in your school conducts a poll worded in this way: "All students should be allowed to go off campus for lunch. Do you agree or disagree?" Because of how the statement is phrased, most students being polled would probably agree. Now consider this wording: "Some students believe that the school day should start 30 minutes earlier so that there would be extra time to leave campus for lunch. Other students believe that the school should keep the shorter day and continue to hold lunch in the cafeteria. Which belief comes closer to your opinion?" Even though both questions are asking about the same situation, your answer to the second one might be different because it presents more information.

Certain words also can affect results. For example, in a poll about how to cut government



Gary Brookins, 1988, Richmond Times-Dispatch. Reprinted by permission.

PUBLIC GOOD Television networks often broadcast the results of exit polls and public opinion polls. Why is randomness more important than sampling size in getting accurate polling results?

budgets, only 8 percent of the respondents identified "aid to the needy" as an area for cuts. When the poll referred to this budget area as "public welfare programs," however, 39 percent supported cuts. Why the change? The two terms bring up very different images in respondents' minds. "Aid to the needy" calls up a picture of human suffering. In contrast, "public welfare" has become negatively associated with people who take advantage of government welfare programs.

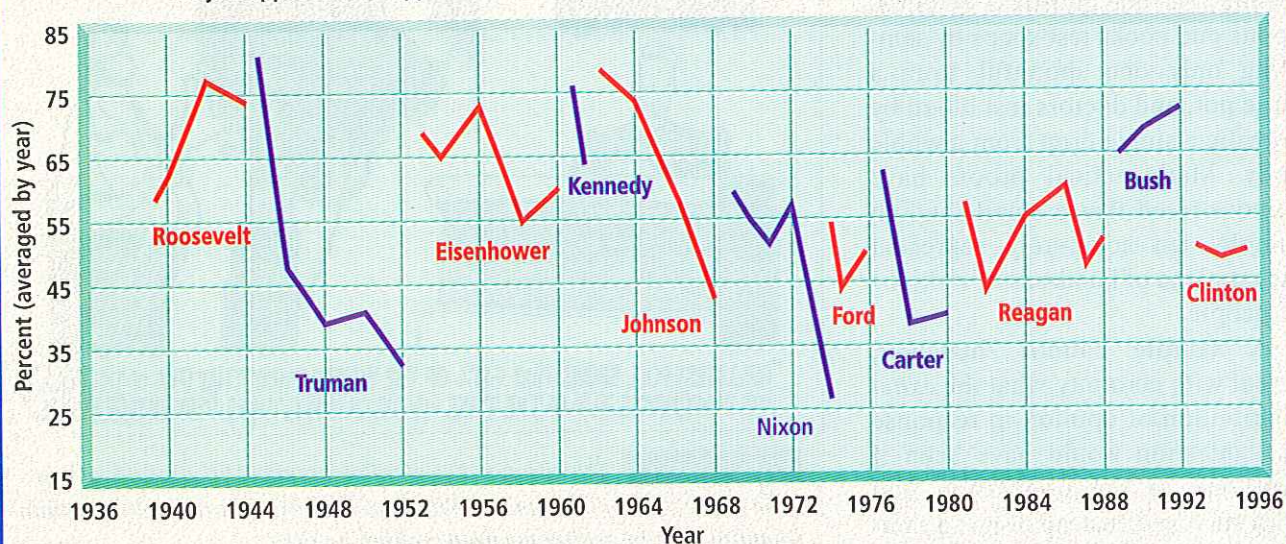
Keep wording's effect on responses in mind when analyzing poll results. Those who wish to use poll results to advance a particular viewpoint can manipulate question wording to create inaccurate results.

Question Order Just as different ways of wording a question can affect a poll's response, so can the order in which questions are asked—even if the wording is unchanged. The earlier questions in a poll may lead people to see an issue in a certain way, thus possibly affecting how they answer later questions.

Think about the following situation. A pollster is conducting a poll during a presidential election year. The economy is in a slump. The order of the pollster's questions is as follows: 1) How well do you think the country is doing these days? 2) What do you think of President Pat Hartley's economic policies? 3) Are you going to vote for President Hartley in the election? The pollster's questions

Presidential Public Approval

"Do you approve or disapprove of the way (last name of the president) is handling his job as president?"



Source: Vital Statistics on American Politics

For more than 50 years citizens have been polled about how well they feel the president is handling his job. Which president experienced the most dramatic drop in his approval rating during his time in office?

remind the respondent that the country is in an economic slump and suggest that President Hartley might be somehow responsible. The respondent thus is more likely to have a negative response to the question about voting for President Hartley.


Timing When a poll is held also can affect its results. Public opinion often can change dramatically, particularly on new issues. Early polls on

such issues often are poor predictors because people have not yet developed strong opinions.

For example, polls sometimes are conducted very early during a presidential race. These polls may give a misleading impression of how people will actually vote. After all, as the events unfold and people find out more information, their opinions about candidates often change. As a result, you should be cautious about results of early polls.

SECTION 2

REVIEW

1. Define the following terms: polling, exit poll, sampling, sampling error.
2. How is polling significant in determining public opinion?
3. Describe the four main types of modern polls.
4. How can a poll's sampling affect its results?
5. **Thinking and Writing Critically**  Your school newspaper has just printed the results of a poll about upcoming student

elections. To determine the poll's accuracy, what questions should you ask about how the poll was conducted? Explain your answer.

6. Applying POLITICAL PROCESSES

Think of an issue about which you would be interested in knowing your fellow students' opinions. Write two different questions regarding the issue that you believe will get two different responses. How do you change wording to get two different answers?

SECTION 3

THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC GOOD

Political Dictionary



censorship
 bias
 objectivity

Objectives

- ★ What is the role of the media?
- ★ What are some criticisms of the media?
- ★ What are the checks on media influence?

On what do you rely to gain information about what is going on in the world around you? If you want information about your school, you might read your student newspaper. If you are looking for news about the music world, you might read *Spin* magazine or watch MTV.

As you can see from these examples, one role of the media is to provide information. By fulfilling this and other roles, the media help promote the public good. The media are not, however, without their critics and limitations.

Role of the Media

As noted in Chapter 13, the First Amendment guarantees freedom of the press. The news media have constitutional protection from government **censorship**—the control of information or speech. This protection of the press, the framers believed, promotes the public good by allowing the media to provide information and to serve as a watchdog over government officials and policies. These are the most important roles of the media, whose freedom enables them to determine how much coverage to give to each story.

Informing the Public The media's role as a source of information is significant because they provide facts that people in a democracy need to

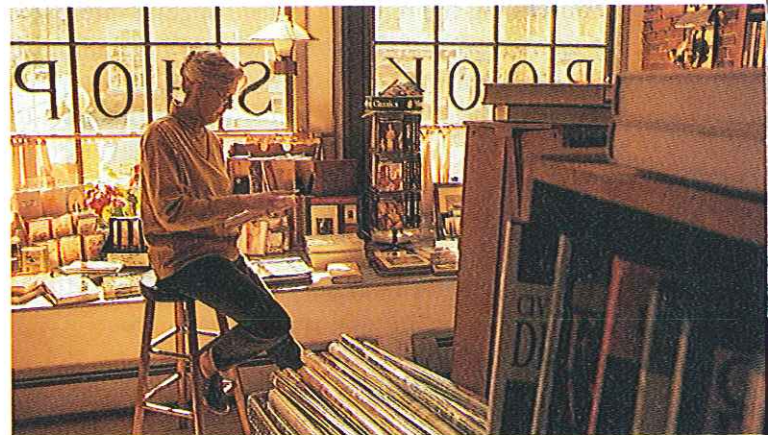
make wise decisions about their government. "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government," wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1787, "I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." By providing information to citizens, the media play a key role in promoting the public good.

CASE STUDY

"Rock the Vote" and "Choose or Lose"

POLITICAL PROCESSES One way that the media can promote the public good is by encouraging citizen participation in elections. In 1990, for example, MTV began airing public service announcements urging viewers to register to vote and to head to the polls. Spots featured pop singer and actress Madonna, rapper Ice-T, and the members of the band R.E.M.

The ads were part of the music industry's Rock the Vote campaign. "The idea is to raise the political consciousness (awareness) of kids and to make voting hip," explained Jody Uttal, cofounder of the campaign. Part of Rock the Vote involved organizing record stores to pass out voter registration materials. Campaign workers also registered thousands of voters at college campuses and at Lollapalooza, a multiperformer concert tour.



CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT *The Constitution guarantees freedom of press. This freedom allows the media to provide information free from government control. Why is the media's role important in a democracy?*

In 1992 MTV also began a political awareness campaign called Choose or Lose. Journalist Tabitha Soren hosted forums with Democratic candidate Bill Clinton and Republican president George Bush. The forums covered issues of concern to young people, including education, the economy, crime, race relations, and AIDS. For the 1996 presidential elections, MTV outfitted a bus for a cross-country voter registration drive. Sporting a Choose or Lose banner that featured quotes from celebrities, the bus stopped at college campuses and rock concerts to register voters. After registering, potential voters signed a pledge promising to “rock the system by exercising my right to vote.”

These media campaigns targeted at young people have had mixed results. In 1992 about 42 percent of eligible voters between the ages of 18 and 24 turned out at the polls—a significant increase from the 33.2 percent of 1988. Four years later in 1996, however, the number of young voters had dropped to about 30 percent.

Serving As a Watchdog In its watchdog role the media check the power of government and other institutions, such as business and sports. They do so by investigating and exposing abuses of power by people who are harming the public good to benefit themselves.

Defending the public against “special interests” is a critical part of this role. For example, suppose that the media run a story about how a company is trying to get the government’s permission to build a pollution-generating factory near a community’s water supply. Without the media’s coverage of this story, the public might have been totally unaware of the company’s efforts. By informing the public, the media help serve as a balance, allowing the voice of the majority to be heard.

Acting As a Gatekeeper Keep in mind that the media—as information providers—also act as a gatekeeper. Because too much happens in the world for every topic to be covered completely the media must select which stories to report and how much importance to assign to them. For example, should an account of a hurricane in the Caribbean

Comparing

...▶ Governments

The Cuban Press

Authoritarian governments around the world generally silence any criticism from the press. In Cuba, for example, all newspapers as well as radio and television stations are owned by the government. Journalists who criticize the policies of the nation’s communist leaders are fired from their jobs. Many are arrested and imprisoned.

In October 1995, for example, Cuban police arrested journalist Olanec Noguera Roce for writing a story on safety problems at a nuclear plant. He was charged with “publishing false information contrary to international peace.” Many other Cuban journalists also have been threatened and had their equipment and files seized.

Despite such harassment and the threat of arrest, some Cuban journalists have founded the Independent Press Bureau of Cuba to market stories outside the country. Independent journalist Yndamiro Restano hopes to establish a free press in Cuba. “It is the only way we can help change our system from an authoritarian government to a democratic one, without violence,” he says.

be a newspaper’s lead story instead of a report on newly released national economic statistics? How much broadcast airtime or front-page coverage should the passing of the federal budget receive in comparison to a plane crash in a foreign country? By making these decisions, the media direct the public’s attention to areas they consider important. In the process, the media serve to promote the public good by enabling people to avoid sifting through mountains of detail just to find out what the big news stories are.

Criticisms of the Media

For the media to promote the public good, they must be fair in providing information and different viewpoints to the public. Many people question whether the media succeed in their roles as

gatekeeper and watchdog. Some critics accuse members of the media of letting bias—personal judgment or prejudice—interfere with their role of informing the public. These critics believe that members of the media too often represent their own personal opinions. Actually, the way events are selected and covered, and with what kind of emphasis, does depend in large part on the judgment of the people who gather the news and decide which stories to publish or broadcast. In addition, some critics believe that by presenting too many negative stories, relying on visual imagery, and focusing on nonsubstantive issues, the media fail to promote the public good as well as they should.

Objectivity The ability to report both sides of an issue without bias is called **objectivity**. Being objective is essential if the media is to provide information fairly and accurately.

Some people question whether objectivity in the media is even possible. They point out that there are many facts connected with any story. At a presidential press conference, for instance, the facts include not only what the president says but also how he or she says it and what he or she avoids saying. In determining which parts of the conference to report, and what (if any) comments to make about them, the reporter has to decide what is important. This decision opens the door for bias to affect how a story is covered or even if it is covered at all.

Are the critics right? Are the media biased? Just as some members of the general population act on their biases, some members of the media allow their personal opinions to affect their reporting. Many other members of the media, however, do strive to report only what they believe to be newsworthy, based on general standards rather than personal bias, or what they believe their readers and viewers would want to know. In the end, citizens as well as the media are responsible for judging information. You, as a consumer of news, must be alert to the possible bias of a journalist, broadcaster, or other media figure, and keep it in mind when evaluating reported information.

Negative Focus Many critics also charge that the media focus on negative or sensational stories just to draw audience attention. A larger television audience or newspaper circulation usually means higher advertising revenues. Some people



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PUBLIC GOOD Although many members of the news media strive for objectivity in their reporting, critics argue that unbiased reporting may not be possible. Why might it be difficult for members of the media to be completely objective in their reporting?

believe that to gain such revenue, the media concentrate too heavily on reporting bad news and problems and on exposing the flaws of politicians and officials.

For example, a study of election coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign concluded that all three candidates received more negative than positive coverage. In fact, according to one analysis, coverage of presidential candidates has become much more negative over the last 30 years. By making policies and institutions seem to work more poorly than they actually do, a negative focus can cause citizens to lose faith in government's ability to handle public problems.

Probably the major reason for the negative tone in journalism concerns newsworthiness—that is, whether or not an event makes a good story. The *unusual* is what is considered news. When social institutions are working as they should, they make no news. In most cases, they make news only when something goes wrong. Thus, the saying “No news is good news” is true: good news tends not to be news!

Though many people dislike this negative focus, others argue that it is necessary for keeping citizens informed about the problems surrounding public

officials and institutions. These people believe that the media's importance as a watchdog outweighs any effects of a negative focus in the media.

Visual Imagery Another criticism of television is that to gain reader or viewer interest, it relies too much on pictures instead of the ideas behind an issue. Because stories often seem more powerful when accompanied by strong imagery, some critics fear that important stories without good pictures might be ignored by television.

For example, the crisis in the savings and loan industry in the 1980s was not a very "visual" story. It could show no storm-ravaged coasts, no blazing fires, no dying victims. Thus, though the crisis ended up costing taxpayers almost \$150 billion, it received little television news coverage. Some critics say that it might have received more attention if the story had been a visual one.

"Horse-Race Coverage" Other critics believe that reporters tend to focus on "horse-race coverage" of politics. By this they mean, for example, that a president's likely success in *passing* an energy policy proposal through Congress often receives more attention than what the policy actually *involves*. Coverage therefore focuses on which side is "winning"—the president or Congress. This, critics argue, draws attention from the ideas behind an issue and indicates media's failure to do their job.

Checks on the Media

Despite the above criticisms, the media do promote the public good in an important way. They

provide information and, through the watchdog role, preserve a balance among government officials, institutions, and the public. At the same time, media's powerful influence on public opinion does have some natural limitations.

One limitation is that the media tend to reinforce the beliefs that people already hold rather than create new ones. For example, some researchers have found that people tend to expose themselves just to those media that support their opinions. Think again about where you find information about the subjects in which you are interested. *You* choose what magazines to read, what stations to listen to, and what shows to watch. In each of these cases you probably choose magazines, stations, and shows that reflect the tastes and opinions that you already hold.

Another limitation on any undue power of the media is that people do not always pay attention to what is on television or in the newspapers. One study found that as much as 40 percent of the time that a person's television set is on, he or she is doing other things. Many people talk with one another, read, or play games, while television merely serves as background noise. Regarding newspapers, most people pay close attention only to the stories that truly interest them.

If citizens are to take advantage of the media's role in promoting the public good, they must recognize the criticisms while working to remain informed. Taking the shortcomings of the media into account, you as a media consumer must analyze the information you receive and use it to make educated decisions about officials, policies, and institutions that affect your everyday life.

SECTION 3

REVIEW

1. Define the following terms: censorship, bias, objectivity.
2. What roles do the media play in influencing public opinion?
3. What factors can prevent the media from performing their roles effectively?
4. What are the natural limitations on the media's influence?

5. Thinking and Writing Critically

Think about your school newspaper. What role does it perform? Does a school newspaper have certain limitations that other papers do not? Explain your answer.

6. Applying PUBLIC GOOD

What role does the media play for you and other people in your age group? Is this a positive or negative role?

SECTION 1 Public opinion is the collective opinion of large numbers of people. It represents the voice of the majority of the people in the country. Because public officials in a democracy must be concerned with what the majority of the population thinks, public opinion is an important factor in forming government policies.

Government officials, researchers, and others concerned with public opinion can tell what people's opinions are by examining their political participation. The ways in which people participate in the political process include voting, speaking or writing about political issues, demonstrating, and joining interest groups.

People form their opinions based on various factors. Their ideology—or basic political beliefs—greatly influences their opinions. Other factors—such as family and school, job, income, education, age, gender, race, and geographic region—combine in a process called political socialization to affect a person's opinions on issues. In addition, the media—magazines, newspapers, television, radio, and books—provide people with much of the knowledge they use to form their opinions.

SECTION 2 Researchers measure public opinion through polling. Polls gained greater reliability with the scientific methods developed by George Gallup in the 1930s. Gallup determined that the survey methods used by newspapers and other organizations at that time produced inaccurate results. Gallup used a more scientific polling method, and his success firmly established statistical sampling as a foundation of modern opinion polling.

The various types of polls, all with varying levels of reliability, include in-person interviews, telephone interviews, and mail questionnaires. In addition, the so-called exit poll surveys a fraction of voters in randomly selected voting precincts after they have voted.

Sampling, question wording and order, and timing affect a poll's accuracy. If sampling is not done at random, the poll will not be accurate. Likewise, if the wording of a question or the order of the questions is misleading, the poll will be inaccurate. Finally, timing can play a big role in a poll's results.

SECTION 3 The media's great influence on public opinion often inspires questions about their role and whether or not they promote the public good. The media serve three main functions—informing the public, acting as a gatekeeper, and serving as a watchdog. In performing these roles, however, the media have been subjected to many criticisms. They are sometimes criticized for their negative focus, a lack of objectivity, and too heavy a reliance on visual imagery and “horse-race coverage” to make an interesting story.

The media's influence does have some limitations. People tend to seek only those sources of information that reflect their own viewpoints. Another limitation is that many people do not always pay attention to what is on television or in the newspapers. An active and informed citizen must be aware of the criticisms of the media while relying on the news to stay knowledgeable about the issues affecting his or her community.



Government Notebook

Review what you wrote in your Government Notebook at the beginning of the chapter about your opinions. How do your opinions on such things as clothes or classes affect the people around you? What caused you to form your opinions on these issues, and where do you get your information? Record your answer in your Notebook.

REVIEW

REVIEWING CONCEPTS

1. Define public opinion, and explain how it relates to the political process.
2. How is public opinion measured?
3. What are some of the factors that influence public opinion?
4. What is the media's role in politics, and does it benefit the public good? Explain your answer.
5. What issues must one consider when conducting a poll or examining its results?
6. Why do some people feel that the media fail to fulfill their role?

THINKING AND WRITING CRITICALLY



1. **CITIZENSHIP** What factors have influenced your political beliefs the most? Do you think that one factor has influenced your political opinions more than others? Explain your answers.
2. **POLITICAL PROCESSES** Do you think that television networks should be allowed to broadcast exit poll results while people are still voting? Why or why not?
3. **PUBLIC GOOD** Do you think that people should be skeptical of "straw poll" results? Give an example of a poll with probable sampling error whose results you have seen or heard. What polling method was used?
4. **PUBLIC GOOD** What kinds of stories most commonly make headlines? Do you think that giving the most prominent coverage to such stories promotes the public good? Explain your answers.

CITIZENSHIP IN YOUR COMMUNITY



With a group, create a questionnaire on an issue that is important to young people—for example, television rating systems or funding for higher education. Before beginning, you might find it useful to examine the common polling pitfalls discussed in Section 2. Have the members of your group poll their family or friends to find out how they feel about the issue you selected. Compare the results of all group members and combine them into one report.

INDIVIDUAL PORTFOLIO PROJECT



Interview one classmate, one family member, and one adult friend or teacher about their political beliefs, or ideology. Ask questions that focus on the government's role in U.S. society and the international community, as well as on freedom, opportunity, justice, and equality. Be sure to ask each person the same questions in the same order. After you have conducted the interviews, write a paper comparing the ideologies of each person. Answer the following questions in the paper:

- ★ What were the major differences in ideologies?
- ★ What were the similarities?
- ★ Were there values shared by all three people?

THE INTERNET: LEARNING ONLINE



Conduct an Internet search for the results of a political public opinion poll. You might start with search words such as *public opinion*, *political polls*, and *surveys*. Create a chart outlining the results of the poll. Also, write down both the list

of questions asked in the poll and the address of the Web site where you found the information.

PRACTICING SKILLS: UNDERSTANDING MEASUREMENT CONCEPTS AND METHODS



Study the chart below, which shows the results of a 1994 survey of high school seniors concerning their life goals. Then answer the questions that follow.

Goals Rated by Seniors as Extremely Important

PERSONAL GOALS

Having a Good Marriage and Family Life	76%
Being Successful in My Line of Work	63%
Having Lots of Money	26%

SOCIAL GOALS

Making a Contribution to Society	24%
Working to Correct Social and Economic Inequalities	14%
Being a Leader in My Community	14%

Source: Bachman, J. G.; Johnston, L. D.; and O'Malley, P. M. "Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire Responses from the Nations' High School Seniors," 1994

1. What additional information do you need to determine the accuracy of this poll?
2. Which personal goal did the smallest percentage of students rate as extremely important?
3. Which social goal did the highest percentage of students rate as extremely important?
4. Which personal and social goals would you rate as extremely important?

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES



SPEECH ON NATIONAL SERVICE

As you have read, George Gallup developed public opinion polling methods that achieve more accu-

rate results than earlier methods. Although Gallup died in 1984, the Gallup Organization, Inc., continues to conduct public opinion polls across the United States and in other countries. Gallup's son, George Gallup, Jr., is now co-chairman of the organization. In the following speech, he discusses public opinion on national service. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

“As far as the American people are concerned, national service on a broad scale is an idea whose time is long overdue. In fact, if a national referendum were held today on whether young men should be required to give a year of service to the nation—in either military or non-military work—the proposal would likely win heavy support. Even greater enthusiasm is found for voluntary programs. In fact, a Gallup Poll found more than eight in ten Americans (83 percent) in favor of setting up a voluntary national program that would permit young people of both sexes to enroll in the military forces or in non-military service projects.

All age groups show high levels of support for giving young people a choice of offering a year of their time following high school or college. In fact, the 18-to-24-year-old age group favors the idea even slightly more (87 percent) than the general public.

Gallup surveys reveal the types of projects the public thinks could be undertaken with a program of national service, including:

- literacy training for children
- conservation, public works, and anti-pollution programs
- working with law enforcement agencies in their efforts to rehabilitate youthful offenders
- disaster-relief
- working with senior citizens in joint volunteer programs.”

1. What percentage of Americans are in favor of a voluntary national service program?
2. Which projects does the public think should be the focus of a national service program?
3. Are you in favor of setting up a national service program? Why or why not?