CHAPTER

1 Public Opinion in a Democracy

AMERICAN NATIONALISM. Populism. Nativism. Identity politics. Racism. Sexism. Antidemocratic impulses. Support for authoritarianism. These are among the perspectives and attitudes of some members of the American public that received significant attention from political commentators and journalists during the lead-up to or since the election of Donald Trump as the U.S. president in 2016. Over this same time period, others have commented on the rise of political interest and attention, engagement in political protests, support for democratic socialism, and tolerance for diversity that have characterized some segments of the American public. These dueling characterizations of the citizenry also hint at other features of the contemporary political landscape: division and polarization.

Placing so much high-profile attention on the views of the public reminds us that in a democracy, such as the United States, what the people think matters. Describing and analyzing citizens' political perspectives is a worthy endeavor. More broadly, in democratic nations we expect the public to have a role in governmental decision making. Yet the precise role that citizens should play in a democracy has been argued about for centuries. Whether the public actually can and really does live up to democratic expectations is also a debatable topic. In the pages that follow, we explore the normative issues related to how the public ought to function in a democracy. Throughout this book, we review empirical studies of public opinion that describe how the public actually functions in America. We then link these studies back to the normative theories of how citizens should behave in a democracy. Focusing on public opinion from these two angles will, we hope, provide you with a broad understanding of this important topic. We will also devote attention to most of the views of the public mentioned in the opening paragraph, in particular describing whether these trends are unique to today's political world or were present before the 2016 presidential election.

Theories of Democracy

A simple definition of *democracy* is "rule by the people." What exactly, however, does rule by the people mean? Answering this and related questions

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

about democracy is neither easy nor straightforward. In fact, many people across many centuries have devoted their lives to examining democracy and delineating the proper characteristics of a democracy. **Democratic theory** is "the branch of scholarship that specializes in elucidating, developing, and defining the meaning of democracy."[1] Among other topics, democratic theorists deliberate over how the people should rule in a democracy (by voting directly on all laws or by electing representatives for this task) as well as who should qualify as a democratic citizen (all adults, only those who are educated, or some other group). Democratic theorists also focus on citizens' ruling capabilities and the role of the public in a democracy, as indicated by the following overview of major democratic theories.

Classical Democratic Theory

The earliest Western democratic societies emerged in the city-states of ancient Greece. In Athens's direct democracy, for example, governing decisions were made by the citizens, defined as all nonslave men of Athenian descent. All citizens were eligible to participate in the Assembly, which met at least forty times per year. Assembly members debated all public issues, often at great length, before making any final decisions. The Assembly tried to reach a consensus on all matters, and unanimous decisions were preferred, under the belief that the common interest would only be realized when everyone agreed.[2] When unanimity was not possible, decisions were made via voting in the Assembly. The implementation of the Assembly's decisions was conducted by smaller groups of men, who had been selected by lot or directly elected by the Assembly. These officials served for short periods of time and were not allowed to serve multiple terms in a row. These procedures ensured that many different men would serve in this executive capacity and that all citizens would have an equal chance of fulfilling these roles.[3]

One of the few surviving descriptions of Athenian citizens and their democratic participation is contained in Pericles's oration at a funeral for fallen soldiers:

> It is true that our government is called a democracy, because its administration is in the hands, not of the few, but of the many; yet while as regards the law all men are on an equality for the settlement of their private disputes, as regards the value set on them it is as each man is in any way distinguished that he is preferred to public honors, not because he belongs to a particular class, but because of personal merits; nor, again, on the ground of poverty is a man barred from a public career by obscurity of rank if he but has it in him to do the state a service. . . . And you will find united

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.
Do not copy, post, or distribute

> in the same persons an interest at once in private and in public affairs, and in others of us who give attention chiefly to business, you will find no lack of insight into political matters. For we alone regard the man who takes no part in public affairs, not as one who minds his own business, but as good for nothing; and we Athenians decide public questions for ourselves or at least endeavor to arrive at a sound understanding of them, in the belief that it is not debate that is a hindrance to action, but rather not to be instructed by debates before the time comes for actions. For in truth we have this point also of superiority over other men, to be most daring in action and yet at the same time most given to reflection upon the ventures we mean to undertake; with other men, on the contrary, boldness means ignorance and reflection brings hesitation.[4]

As Pericles portrays, Athenian democracy was characterized by the active participation of public-spirited men. In fact, he labeled "good for nothing" those men not taking part in public affairs. This passage also alludes to other key characteristics of democratic citizenship that appear in **classical models of democracy**, such as high levels of attention to and interest in political matters and the capability of deciding matters in favor of the general interest rather than only to advance one's own selfish interests.

Writing centuries later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed a theory of democracy that has much in common with the classical model. Rousseau strongly advocated **popular sovereignty**, the principle that citizens hold the ultimate power in a democracy. He argued in *The Social Contract* that "sovereignty [is] nothing other than the exercise of the general will" and "since the laws are nothing other than authentic acts of the general will, the sovereign can act only when the people is assembled."[5] Rousseau also distinguished the "general will" from the "will of all": "the general will studies only the common interest while the will of all studies private interest, and is indeed no more than the sum of individual desires."[6] In other words, the general will is not determined by simply adding up every person's individual opinions but, rather, reflects what is in the best interest of the entire society. Procedurally, Rousseau favored a **direct democracy** in which all citizens (restricted to property-owning free men) were to meet, discuss, and decide on the content of the laws. As in the Athenian Assembly, Rousseau envisaged vigorous legislative debate with a preference for unanimous decisions. Active political participation by the citizenry served multiple purposes for Rousseau. It was the only method by which the general will could be reached and enshrined in law. Active participation was also beneficial for the individual participants; in other words, political participation had "intrinsic value . . . for the development of citizens as human beings."[7]

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Rousseau's theory did depart from classical democratic theory in two important ways. First, Rousseau preferred that the citizens not be as involved in implementing the laws as they were in crafting legislation. He placed less faith in the public's ability to execute laws and proposed that a body of administrators be selected for this duty.[8] The administrators would be selected by the citizens and would be expected to follow the general will but would be distinct from the citizen assembly. Second, Rousseau's vision of democracy relied on relative economic equality among citizens, as enshrined by all free men having only a limited right to property. This does not mean that Rousseau favored *strict* equality of property but, rather, that he opposed *unlimited* accumulation of wealth. Short of this, some inequality was acceptable. Further, according to Rousseau, a citizen would not be able to make decisions for the benefit of all if he were motivated by fear of losing his economic independence. The right to enough property to make each citizen economically free from other citizens would prevent the formation of groups motivated by economic self-interest. Rousseau feared that the existence of such groups would undermine the creation of laws benefiting the common good.[9] In short, economic inequality could produce undemocratic effects.

Later democratic theorists and practitioners have criticized classical democratic theory as unworkable for most societies. First, the city of Athens and Rousseau restricted citizenship rights to a degree that has become unacceptable for many democracies. In both cases, only free men were citizens; women and slaves were not given political rights. Further, the existence of a slave economy in Athens and the reliance on women for unpaid domestic labor created much leisure time for the free men to participate in government.[10] The amount of time necessary to participate in the Assembly debates (forty times per year!) is simply not feasible for most contemporary working adults. Second, most democratic polities are larger than were the Greek city-states or the eighteenth-century towns of Rousseau's Europe. In fact, both the Greeks and Rousseau assumed that "[only] in a small state, where people could meet together in the relative intimacy of a single assembly and where a similarity of culture and interests united them, could individuals discuss and find the public good."[11] One of the primary reasons more modern democratic theories, including those that follow, departed from the classical variants was to accommodate popular rule in large, diverse, and populous nation-states. In fact, and as will become clear as you proceed through the chapters of this book, some democratic theories have very much evolved away from classical democracy in an attempt to speak to actual conditions in present-day societies. In contrast, other theorists emphasize that classic democratic features are possible, even needed, in modern-day complex societies. Finally, contemporary democratic theorists differ along other criteria as well, such as their trust in the capabilities of the public.

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.
Do not copy, post, or distribute

Theories of Democratic Elitism and Pluralism

In contrast to classical democracy, theories of democratic elitism and pluralism do not allocate to citizens direct involvement in governmental decision making. Rather, the citizenry exerts indirect control by electing officials to represent their views and make decisions. This, of course, is the defining characteristic of a **representative democracy**. **Democratic elitists** view frequent competitive elections as the primary mechanism by which citizen preferences are expressed. Voters select their preferred candidates, and the elected officials deliberate over and vote on the nation's laws. These officials (or political elites) are accountable to the public in that they must periodically run for reelection. Thus, the elites have an incentive to represent the wishes of the public, and the will of the public will be reflected, to some degree, in governmental decisions. Yet the daily decisions are made by the elites, who, by their knowledge and expertise, are better able to make these decisions. Joseph Schumpeter outlines his theory of democratic elitism as follows:

> Suppose we reverse the roles of these two elements [the selection of representatives and the decision-making power of the voters] and make the deciding of issues by the electorate secondary to the election of the men who are to do the deciding. To put it differently, we now take the view that the role of the people is to produce a government. . . . And we define: the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.[12]

Pluralists also view competitive elections as one important mechanism by which citizens hold elected leaders accountable. Unlike democratic elitists, however, pluralists emphasize the essential role performed by groups in representative democracies. **Interest groups** are collections of like-minded individuals that attempt to influence elected officials and other governmental decision makers regarding issues of concern to them. As intermediaries between the public and the elites, such groups are especially important for transmitting the wishes of the citizenry to government officials in between elections. According to pluralists, when many groups are actively engaged in debating public issues, bargaining ensues among the groups and the public policies that result are compromises among the various groups' preferences.[13] Because interest group leaders have the desire and knowledge to lobby government officials, members of the public do not need to be actively involved to have their views represented in lawmaking. For example, citizens who care about human rights do not need to write letters to their elected officials but can, instead, have their

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

concerns vocalized by an interest group such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. Leader responsiveness to public concerns should result, argue pluralists.

Why have democratic elitists and pluralists proposed a more minor role for citizens in democratic politics? Simply put, "the individual voter was not all that the theory of democracy requires of him."[14] In practice, much evidence suggests that not all citizens are interested in or knowledgeable about politics, that levels of citizen apathy run high, and that many do not participate in politics. This evidence, collected by social scientists beginning in the 1940s, contributed to the development of democratic elitism and pluralism.[15] Indeed, it was the disconnect between dominant democratic theories and the reality of life in existing democracies that focused theorists' attention on actual democratic practices.[16] Put another way, the theories of democratic elitism and pluralism were constructed by examining contemporary democracies to determine what features they shared, particularly the levels of political involvement and interest among the citizenry.[17] Note that deriving a democratic theory based on observations from existing democracies results in a very different theory than that which emerged from ancient Athens. Having said that, other democratic theorists, such as the participatory democrats we profile in the next section, interpreted the same social science evidence rather differently.

Contemporary democratic elitism and pluralism can trace their intellectual roots to earlier theorists of representative democracy, such as the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and James Mill and the American James Madison.[18] These earlier theorists, especially Madison, advocated that most people are not capable of the democratic citizenship captured by Pericles in his funeral oration. In *Federalist* No. 10, written in 1787, Madison argues that humans are self-interested and will pursue what benefits themselves rather than the nation as a whole. In societies where the liberty of individuals to form their own opinions and pursue their own goals is ensured, groups of similarly interested people will form. By Madison's definition, such groups, or **factions**, consist of citizens "who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."[19] To overcome the negative effects of such factions, the causes of which are "sown in the nature of man," Madison proposes a republic in which a few citizens are elected by the rest of the public to serve in the national government.[20] In his own words,

> The effect of [a representative democracy] is . . . to refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

considerations. Under such a regulation it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose.[21]

Similar beliefs in the decision-making superiority of elite officials are reflected in the writings of contemporary democratic elitists and pluralists. In an especially uncharitable view of the public, Joseph Schumpeter states as fact "that the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede."[22] More broadly, he argues that the public is capable of voting but little else and that therefore the elites should be allowed to make decisions in between elections without public interference. Elite control over decision making should also result in more stable governments, with fewer changes in policy due to public impulses. Some theorists also emphasize that elites are more supportive of democratic norms and values, especially the civil rights and liberties of marginalized and/or unpopular groups, than are members of the public. In general, they suggest, this support for rights and liberties is beneficial to a democracy where decision making is in the hands of the elite.[23] The elites are not immune from public pressures to restrict individual liberties but will typically sort out such issues among themselves, with a preference toward maintaining such liberties.

Critiques of democratic elitism and pluralism have come from many quarters. As previously mentioned, participatory democrats interpret the empirical evidence related to citizen participation vastly differently than do democratic elitists and pluralists. Others have contradicted the pluralist assumptions that interest groups will represent all points of view and that governmental officials are responsive to these groups. Government officials can choose to ignore a group's demands, especially when they believe the group lacks widespread public support. For example, public outcry in favor of the principle of net neutrality contributed to decision making at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). In the spring of 2014, the FCC proposed rule changes that would have permitted the content on some websites to be transmitted more quickly than on other sites. Initially, a few interest groups and Internet companies were active in opposing the proposed rules. Once word of these possible changes spread more broadly, thanks in part to coverage on John Oliver's HBO show *Last Week Tonight*, the FCC received millions of public comments. Most people advocated for an open, neutral web whereby Internet service providers cannot speed up or slow down the delivery of a website's content. The FCC changed course. In February 2015, they dropped their original proposal and instead voted in favor of new regulations that promote net neutrality.[24]

Further, some groups possess more resources than others and thus have more influence over policymaking. As well stated by political scientist E. E. Schattschneider decades ago, "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent."[25] This fact did not go unnoticed by pluralists. Some accepted the inequality of political resources and argued that the inequalities did not accumulate within certain types of people but, rather, were dispersed throughout society. In other words, "individuals best off in their access to one kind of resource are often badly off with respect to many other resources. . . . Virtually no one, and certainly no group of more than a few individuals, is entirely lacking in some influence resources."[26] Pluralists, however, did not fully develop the implications of group inequalities, an oversight that has been somewhat rectified by more recent theorists in this area.[27] Assumptions about noncumulative inequalities have also been challenged. Business groups, these critics contend, occupy a privileged position in U.S. politics due to their wide array of resources[28] and indeed are more likely than the public or other types of interest groups to have their wishes enshrined in public policy.[29] For an example, let's return to the topic of net neutrality. After Donald Trump was inaugurated as president in 2017, he appointed a new chair of the FCC, one who favors business deregulation. In pursuit of this goal and with the support of interest groups representing the cable and telecommunications industries, yet despite millions of public comments that urged the opposite, FCC members voted to overturn the net neutrality rules that had been adopted in 2015.[30]

Finally, Jack Walker's assessment of democratic elitism takes quite a different form. He charges the democratic elitists with changing "the principal orienting values of democracy."[31] Earlier democratic theorists stressed the importance of citizen participation and the personal benefits that accrue to individuals from this participation. In contrast, under democratic elitism, "emphasis has shifted to the needs and functions of the system as a whole; there is no longer a direct concern with human development. . . . [Elitists] have substituted stability and efficiency as the prime goals of democracy."[32] Participatory democracy, the final democratic theory we examine, represents a shift back toward the developmental functions of democracy that Walker supports.

Participatory Democracy

As its name suggests, **participatory democracy** emphasizes the importance of political participation by the public. Whereas participatory democrats recognize the need for representative democracy in nations as large as the United States, they also see the possibility and benefits of more political involvement by the public than is currently practiced.[33] Because participation is linked to social class and wealth today, participatory democrats advocate greater political involvement of all citizens as a means to redress inequality. "This is not to say that a more participatory system would of itself remove all the inequities of our society," writes one theorist. "It is only

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Box 1.1 Gendered Nouns and Pronouns

". . . factions, the causes of which are 'sown in the nature of man . . .'"

James Madison, 1787

". . . make the deciding of issues by the electorate secondary to the election of the men who are to do the deciding."

Joseph Schumpeter, 1976 (originally published in 1943)

"The individual voter was not all that the theory of democracy requires of him."

Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee, 1954

When you read the preceding quotations, did they sound unusual to you? Did you stop and wonder whether the original writers really meant their statements to refer only to men? Or are women implicitly included as well? Would these statements have taken on a different meaning if a female noun or pronoun had been used? What if Madison had stated that the causes of factions are "sown in the nature of woman"? Would you have paused and wondered about that statement? Today, writers often substitute "him or her" for "him" or even alternate using "him" and "her" or "man" and "woman" when their statements apply equally to men or women. This was not always the case, however, and certainly was not the norm in the 1700s or even as recently as the 1950s. One way to determine whether the authors meant to refer only to men when they wrote these sentences would be to read more writings by these authors to try to determine their opinions regarding the political roles and rights of women. It is useful to bear in mind, however, that women's increasing involvement in politics has been accompanied by changes in language use (not coincidentally). Early theorists might not have made their views toward women's role in politics known because this role was minimal, by law and by custom. Furthermore, when women did engage in political activities, they were not viewed as political actors and could more easily be overlooked. Thus, in some instances, it can be difficult to sort out whether these writers really meant to refer to men only or whether by "man" they really meant "human." We encourage you not to just assume that using "man" implies women as well but, rather, to consider the time period in which the author was writing and the nature of his or her conclusions regarding women and men in politics. In other words, do stop

(*Continued*)

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

(Continued)

and think when you encounter "him" or "man" rather than merely breezing over these words.

Beginning with the first edition of this book (published in 2008), our approach was to alternate using male and female pronouns when our statements were meant to apply to both women and men. Unless otherwise specified, when we wrote "she" or "her" we could have also written "he" or "him." However, conventions regarding personal gender pronouns have changed during the years that our book has been in print. This change reflects the reality that some people, including but not limited to transgender individuals or people who identify as non–gender binary, recognize that gendered pronouns such as "she" and "he" are not accurate for everyone. Gender-neutral pronouns such as "ze," "hir," and "they" (used in the singular) thus have become more common in the English language. With this new edition of our book, we also change our language, now using the pronouns "she/her," "he/him," and "they/them" interchangeably.

to say that low participation and social inequity are so bound up with each other that a more equitable and humane society requires a more participatory political system."[34]

This theory of democracy originated during the protest movements of the 1960s and also represented dissatisfaction with the democratic elitist and pluralist models that were dominant at that time.[35] Participatory democrats agreed with these other theorists that levels of disinterest and apathy ran quite high among the American public, but they disagreed over the reason for these attitudes. Rather than citizens being politically disinterested by nature or simply preferring to spend their time on other pursuits, such as family, work, and leisure, participatory democrats argue that the political system, with its relatively few opportunities for meaningful citizen influence, breeds apathy. To political scientist Benjamin Barber, people "are apathetic because they are powerless, not powerless because they are apathetic. There is no evidence to suggest that once empowered, a people will refuse to participate. The historical evidence of New England towns, community school boards, neighborhood associations, and other local bodies is that participation fosters more participation."[36] **Citizen apathy** is thus a problem to be examined and solved rather than an accepted fact of political life in modern democracies.[37]

Participation in democratic decision making provides many personal benefits to those who engage in this activity, according to participatory democrats. On this point, they agree with democratic theorists of earlier eras, especially the nineteenth century's John Stuart Mill.[38] Citizens become

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

more politically and socially educated and can develop their intellect and character through political participation. By communicating with and learning from other members of the public, individuals can look beyond their own self-interest and come to know what is best for the community or nation as a whole. In short, participation, in and of itself, can produce better democratic citizens.[39] Peter Bachrach, in articulating his vision of democracy as fostering individual self-development, states, "The majority of individuals stand to gain in self-esteem and growth toward a fuller affirmation of their personalities by participating more actively in meaningful community decisions."[40]

According to some participatory democrats, a fully participatory society necessitates more citizen involvement in decision making in governmental as well as nongovernmental institutions, such as the workplace or school. As Bachrach asks, why should people be excluded from decision making by private organizations when these decisions strongly affect their own lives and livelihoods?[41] Further, engaging in decision making at work and in other nongovernmental venues could increase governmental participation. Engagement in workplace decision making fosters civic skills, provides valuable experience, and, if effective, could create more confidence in an individual's ability to influence governmental decisions.[42] The flip side of this argument is that the lack of involvement in decision making in daily life might hinder political engagement: "After spending the day following orders without question at the factory, a worker cannot be expected to return home in the evening to act like the civics textbook's inquiring, skeptical, self-actualizing citizen. Students who are taught primarily to obey authority in school are not likely to grow into effective democratic citizens."[43]

Skeptics of participatory democracy argue that the public does not respond to participatory opportunities as the theorists contend they will. When barriers to political participation are eliminated or reduced, citizens have not necessarily become more politically active. For example, the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, more commonly known as the motor-voter bill, made voter registration easier and, supporters alleged, would increase voter turnout once enacted. Even though registration rates did increase in the wake of this reform, the levels of voter turnout did not substantially increase because of motor-voter.[44] More broadly, some scholars conclude that participatory democrats' assumptions about the public might be unrealistic.[45] Rather than desiring to become more involved in politics, some citizens actually dislike politics and wish to avoid the type of conflict that typically emerges during decision making. Yet, other research reaches a different conclusion, demonstrating not only that people wish to have more opportunities for meaningful deliberative democracy but that folks who are especially turned off by the current political scene are particularly interested in this type of political participation.[46] In short, research

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

has uncovered evidence that some citizens wish to engage with and learn from one another, yet other citizens prefer to bypass any opportunity for deliberation, especially if the chance of disagreement is high.

Democratic Theory and Public Opinion

As you can see, these theories of democracy are quite broad, addressing many features of democratic governance. In our overview in this first section (Part I) of the book, we have highlighted aspects of the theories that are most relevant for the study of public opinion. In particular, we have discussed how the different theoretical perspectives answer this question: what should the role of citizens be in a democratic society? This is a key issue that democratic theorists have long debated. In fact, we have organized this textbook around fundamental questions that speak to democratic theory debates about the public.

Part II of the book addresses an important question about the capabilities and competence of citizens: are citizens pliable? Classical democratic theorists and participatory democratic theorists envision citizens who hold informed, stable opinions based on reason and concern for the general will. At the same time, these theorists believe democratic citizens should be open to persuasion from others but not so open that their brains fall out. In other words, citizens should change their attitudes based on information and evidence, not simply change their minds willy-nilly. As we have discussed, elite democrats and pluralists have lower expectations for the public. They presume that many citizens' opinions are ill-informed and that citizens are often influenced by political leaders, the media, and reference groups in society. By examining the role of socialization in shaping political views, the effects of the mass media on opinion, and the stability and instability of political attitudes, Part II of this book addresses the pliability of the public.

Do citizens organize their political thinking? This critical question, addressed in Part III of the book, speaks directly to the quality of public opinion. Classical democratic theorists and participatory democratic theorists expect citizens to hold a wide range of political attitudes that are organized in a meaningful fashion. For participatory democrats, it is crucial that citizens have a sophisticated understanding of politics so they can voice their views and influence elected officials. If such sophistication is lacking, identifying the reasons why is important for these theorists, so that corrective action can be taken. Elite democrats, on the other hand, envision a citizenry that is much less proficient, although they still want citizens to be competent enough to hold officials accountable at election time.

Part IV examines citizens' appreciation for essential aspects of democratic citizenship and governance by asking this question: do citizens

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

endorse and demonstrate democratic basics? The democratic basics we focus on are knowledge of, interest in, and attention to politics; support for civil liberties; and support for civil rights. Whether the public is knowledgeable and interested enough for democratic governance has long divided democratic theorists. Theorists also disagree on what level of citizen support for civil liberties and civil rights is needed for a healthy democracy. Classical and participatory democratic theorists, of course, want citizens to value these democratic basics. Elite democrats and pluralists worry much less about such matters, primarily because they view elites as the key actors in a democracy.

Part V of the book addresses a pivotal question about the nature of citizenship in a democratic society: what is the relationship between citizens and their government? Classical and participatory theorists want citizens to be actively involved in politics. Participatory democrats expect leaders to take public opinion into consideration as they make decisions, which would lead citizens to trust their government. Elite democratic theorists, in contrast, value trust in government for the stability it brings to the political system, not because it is a function of citizens being pleased with the responsiveness of their government. Further, elite democrats prefer that the public's influence on government is largely limited to voting in elections.

In the final section (Part VI) of the book, we pull it all together with this question: what do we make of public opinion in a democracy? We review the theoretical debates and summarize the empirical evidence, but ultimately we leave it to you to make sense of the role of citizens in a democratic society.

What Is Public Opinion?

Public opinion is, on the one hand, a term that is familiar to most people and, on the other hand, rather difficult to define. Popular conceptions of public opinion might include phrases such as "the voice of the people." For most of us, public opinion is probably best represented by the results from opinion polls, such as those reported on the evening television news, in the newspaper, or on online news sites. Among public opinion observers and scholars, many different definitions have been proposed. Although researchers do not agree on one single definition of public opinion, some commonalities exist across specific definitions. First, most emphasize that public opinion refers to opinions on governmental and policy matters rather than on private matters (such as one's favorite flavor of ice cream or favorite movie). This characteristic is implied by a description of public opinion as "those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed."[47] Of course, what constitutes a private matter

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

might be in dispute. For centuries, the problems of domestic violence and rape within marriage were considered to be private affairs best left to a married or intimate couple to resolve. Societal views on this topic have changed, however, so that now people assume governments have to be involved in addressing these serious problems.

Second, in recent decades a consensus definition of public opinion has emerged. As one example, public opinion has been defined as "simply the sum or aggregation of private opinions on any particular issue or set of issues."[48] In this view, public opinion refers to the preferences of individuals, tallied such that each person's opinion counts equally. Following the consensus, this is the definition that we use in this book.

However, despite the consensus, some have raised important objections to defining public opinion as a "one person, one vote" aggregation. One of the earliest critiques came from sociologist Herbert Blumer. Society, according to Blumer, is organized hierarchically and "is not a mere aggregation of disparate individuals."[49] Certain individuals have more influence over the formation and expression of people's opinions, and treating each person's opinion as equal ignores this simple fact. For example, the leaders of labor unions not only attempt to influence the opinions of their members but also present their members' views to government policymakers. Simply tallying up individuals' opinions on a specific issue also overlooks the dynamic opinion formation processes among groups and among people. In Blumer's words, public opinion "is a function of a structured society, differentiated into a network of different kinds of groups and individuals having differential weight and influence and occupying different strategic positions."[50] Blumer further attacks the "one person, one vote" accounting of opinions by arguing that not all opinions are treated equally by government policymakers, in part because not all opinions of the public actually reach these policymakers. Opinions that do not come to the attention of decision makers will not influence their decisions.

Blumer directs his criticisms toward the public opinion polling industry, arguing that polls are incapable of capturing public opinion as he understands the concept. By reporting the opinions from a random selection of individuals, polls epitomize the "one person, one vote" aggregation of people's preferences. Not only are polls an unnatural forum for expressing one's opinions, argues Blumer, but they also are unable to capture the opinion formation process that he identifies. Opinion polls do not report, for example, whether a poll respondent "belongs to a powerful group taking a vigorous stand on the issue or whether he is a detached recluse with no membership in a functional group; whether he is bringing his opinion to bear in some fashion at strategic points in the operation of society or whether it is isolated and socially impotent."[51]

Blumer wrote in 1948, at a time when public opinion polling was in its infancy. Opinion polls have grown in use and influence since then,

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

becoming the dominant method by which public opinion is assessed. Further, as this one method has become dominant, there has been a narrowing in our understanding of public opinion—a narrowing around the consensus definition previously described.[52] Despite this, Blumer's insights are spot-on in the twenty-first century, argues Susan Herbst.[53] Herbst, a public opinion scholar, encourages us to reconsider what public opinion means in our digital age. Citizens engage in political conversations through a variety of means these days: the Internet, cell phones (talking and texting), and social media, to name a few. It is in these (often digital) exchanges where public opinion is to be found and understood. Herbst labels these communication patterns "textured talk" and finds them "so superior to the aggregation of anonymous individuals gathered in our artificial 'publics' produced by polls."[54] In addition to providing more convenient outlets for political expression, new communication technologies have also created audience segmentation. Should they choose to, citizens can rely on digital sources that convey information on specific topics or that present information from only one political viewpoint. For instance, political websites are ubiquitous on the Internet, and many of them are very narrowly focused by issue or by ideology. As technology has led to a rise in public segmentation, should public opinion continue to be defined as the aggregation of each individual's opinion? Perhaps, rather than an aggregate public, it is more accurate today to conceive of public opinion as arising from multiple different publics.[55]

In her book *The Politics of Resentment*, Katherine Cramer argues forcefully that public opinion is much more than what opinion polls (can) measure.[56] As does Herbst, Cramer draws upon Blumer's critiques. Yet, Cramer finds meaningful public opinion in everyday, face-to-face conversations among people rather than in the digital exchanges that Herbst explores. More specifically, by listening in on many conversations among small groups of friends and colleagues, Cramer is able to examine how people make sense of politics and public policies. She is particularly interested in what shapes people's understandings of social and political conditions, specifically individuals' social identities as well as messages communicated by the media and politicians. She further examines how these understandings develop, change, or are reinforced via communication with other citizens. The nuanced portrait of public opinion she presents is one that could not be captured by polling data.

Others have criticized the consensus approach by emphasizing the poor quality of public opinion as assessed by polls, arguing that survey respondents often provide snap, top-of-the-head judgments. Contrast this with **public judgment**, a state that exists when "people have engaged an issue, considered it from all sides, understood the choices it leads to, and accepted the full consequences of the choices they make."[57] Encouraging and cultivating thoughtful public judgment, according to this view, is

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

necessary if we want the public—and not only those people with specialized knowledge and expertise—to govern in a democracy.

We mention these criticisms not because we find them superior to the consensus definition of public opinion. Instead, we are sympathetic to these concerns because we find the "public opinion as aggregation of individual views" definition too limiting. In addition to the concerns already outlined, we are troubled that this consensus approach draws our attention only to one feature of public opinion: the content of people's political opinions. Although it is important to know how the public feels about an issue, focusing only on the content of people's opinions overlooks many equally important features of public opinion. Understanding public opinion requires us to explore other topics, such as the sources of those opinions, the processes by which opinions are formed and altered, the organization of an individual's opinions, and the impact of public opinion on public policy. In the chapters that follow, we describe studies that illustrate a variety of definitions of public opinion. Along the way, therefore, we touch on the many facets of public opinion. But, as will become evident, most scholars of public opinion do rely on the consensus definition of public opinion, whether implicitly or explicitly.

Defining Key Concepts

Each of the chapters in this book addresses a specific aspect of public opinion in America. In these chapters, you will repeatedly encounter a few of the same concepts and terms. We define those concepts here, so that you will understand the later chapters more thoroughly.

Attitude and Opinion

Two terms that we use frequently in this book are *attitude* and *opinion*. These words are undoubtedly familiar to you, and you will probably agree that they are similar to each other. They both have sparked considerable attention to their meanings, however, and numerous definitions have been proposed for each, especially for attitude. The term *attitude* is one of the most important concepts in psychology and has been for many years. Over seventy-five years ago, a prominent social psychologist presented a "representative selection" of sixteen definitions of attitude and then proposed his own comprehensive definition.[58] In the many decades since, still more scholars have discussed and debated the meaning of attitude. Of the many possible definitions of **attitude**, we prefer this one: "Attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor."[59] A similar approach defines an attitude

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

as "a general and enduring positive or negative feeling about some person, object or issue."[60]

These two definitions highlight some key features of an attitude. First, people hold attitudes toward targets ("entity" or "person, object or issue"). In the realm of political attitudes, possible types of objects for which we have attitudes are policy issues, political candidates or politicians, groups (such as the National Rifle Association [NRA] or feminists), and institutions of government. Second, attitudes represent an evaluation of an object, generally articulated as favorable or unfavorable, as liking or disliking, or as positive or negative. So, in terms of specific political attitudes, your friend might favor school prayer, dislike U.S. senator Elizabeth Warren, support the NRA, like conservatives, and disapprove of Congress. It is also possible to have a neutral (neither favorable nor unfavorable) attitude toward a target. Neutral attitudes might result from not being informed enough about an object to evaluate it positively or negatively. Alternatively, you might assess certain features of an object positively and other features negatively. If these cancel each other out and prevent you from an overall positive or negative evaluation of the object, you might conclude that your attitude is neutral.

So, now, what is an **opinion**? Similar to an attitude, an opinion refers to a specific object and expresses a preference, such as support or opposition, toward that object. As with attitudes, opinions vary in that not everyone holds the same opinion toward an object. Though acknowledging these similarities, many scholars distinguish between these two concepts by stating that an opinion is an expression of a latent attitude. That is, whereas an attitude is not observable, an opinion is a verbal or written expression of that attitude. Distinctions such as these are more common in the field of psychology than in political science. In political science, you are not only likely to see the two terms used synonymously but are also more likely to encounter the concept of opinion than attitude. We view these two terms as much more similar than dissimilar and thus use them interchangeably in this book. This no doubt reflects our training as political scientists, but it also reflects common use of the terms. In fact, in most thesauruses, *opinion* and *attitude* are presented as synonyms of each other.

When thinking about a specific attitude or opinion, it is obviously important to consider its *direction* (support vs. oppose, favorable vs. unfavorable, and so on). For the study of public opinion, we also need to bear in mind two other characteristics of attitudes and opinions: extremity and importance. The **extremity** of an opinion refers to whether support (or opposition) for the opinion object is slight or strong. You might, for example, *slightly* favor U.S. intervention in foreign military conflicts but *strongly* favor laws that prohibit testing cosmetics on animals. **Attitude importance**, in contrast, focuses on how meaningful a specific attitude is to you or how passionately you care about the attitude. Although we may have

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

attitudes toward a wide range of political and social objects, not all of these attitudes will be of equal importance, at least for most of us. The more important an attitude is, the less likely it is to change over time and the more likely it will direct certain behaviors, such as thinking about the attitude object or influencing our vote preferences for political candidates.[61] Also, even though it is often the case that more extreme attitudes are also more important, this does not necessarily have to occur.[62] Take the two examples presented here. You might have a more extreme opinion toward animal testing than U.S. military intervention, but the latter opinion might be more important to you, especially when it comes to evaluating national politics, such as the performance of political leaders.

Opinion Ingredients: Beliefs, Values, and Emotions

Specific political opinions do not stand alone in people's minds. Instead, they are often related to, even guided by, other mental constructs, most especially beliefs, values, and emotions. These three often have evaluative content—content that can help to determine an individual's specific opinion toward a related entity. **Beliefs** are thoughts or information a person has regarding an attitude object, often regarding what the person thinks to be true about the object. A person might, for example, believe that the possibility of a very severe punishment, such as the death penalty, will not deter most people from committing a serious crime. Someone possessing this belief would be more likely to oppose capital punishment than would someone who believes in the deterrent power of death penalty laws. Beliefs about the characteristics of members of social groups, such as Black people or Christian fundamentalists, have a specific name, **stereotypes**. Stereotypes can be positive or negative, and people can hold both positive and negative stereotypes toward the same group. Examples of positive and negative stereotypes include viewing Black people as athletic or lazy and Christian fundamentalists as charitable or intolerant. Believing certain stereotypes is often related to support for public policies that affect the group in question. White Americans who believe most Black people are lazy, for instance, are unlikely to support social welfare policies, especially compared with people who do not endorse this stereotype.[63]

Values are specific types of beliefs. According to a prominent values researcher, "a value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct [instrumental value] or end-state of existence [terminal value] is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence."[64] Examples of instrumental values include independence, responsibility, and self-control, whereas examples of terminal values include a peaceful world, family security, and freedom. Unlike other types of beliefs, values refer to ideals.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Values are also assumed to be quite stable over time for individuals, as highlighted by this definition: "By values we mean general and enduring standards."[65] Whereas value change can and does occur, stability is more common. Some have even argued that values are central to people's political belief systems, certainly more central than are attitudes.[66] Further, much public opinion research demonstrates that values are quite important in influencing people's specific political attitudes. For instance, opposition to social welfare spending is more likely among those who value responsibility, a sense of accomplishment, and economic individualism and less likely among those who value equality.[67] Finally, certain values are more salient in American political culture than others in that they guide political opinions more strongly. These include individualism, egalitarianism, and limited government.[68] Not all Americans value these three, to be sure, but whether a person values or does not value each is related to opinions on many specific political matters.

Whereas beliefs are considered to be the cognitive components of attitudes, **emotions** make up the affective component. Emotions are feelings that a person has toward the attitude object and are oftentimes more consequential than beliefs in attitude formation.[69] Emotions are especially common when it comes to evaluating political individuals or groups. You might feel warmly toward a politician and thus evaluate her (and even her job performance) highly. In contrast, fearing a politician would probably lead to poor assessments of her but also might transfer into not supporting the issues that she supports. Negative affect that is felt toward a specific group is commonly referred to as **prejudice** and can influence attitudes toward politicians who are members of that group as well as policies designed to benefit the group. Emotional reactions can also influence opinions toward political issues or public policies.[70] Anxiety that a foreign leader could detonate a nuclear weapon somewhere on U.S. soil could lead a person to support a strong national defense and a preemptive foreign policy. Finally, people can feel positively toward an attitude object but also hold negative beliefs about the object. For example, someone could admire Latinos for their work ethic while at the same time hold negative stereotypes about their intelligence or abilities.

Party Identification

Throughout this book, we present examples of many different political opinions. One opinion that we refer to often, because it is a core opinion for many Americans and crucial to understanding the nature of public opinion in the United States, is party identification. **Party identification** refers to a person's allegiance to a political party (typically the Democratic or Republican Party) or identification as independent of a party. It is a self-classification rather than a description of the person's behavior, as the

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

following excerpt from *The American Voter*, a classic study about voting first published in 1960, highlights:

> Only in the exceptional case does the sense of individual attachment to party reflect a formal membership or an active connection with a party apparatus. Nor does it simply denote a voting record, although the influence of party allegiance on electoral behavior is strong. Generally this tie is a psychological identification, which can persist without legal recognition or evidence of formal membership and even without a consistent record of party support. Most Americans have this sense of attachment with one party or the other. And for the individual who does, the strength and direction of party identification are facts of central importance in accounting for attitude and behavior.[71]

In other words, a person could consider himself to be a Republican without ever formally registering as such or without always voting for Republican candidates. Party identification is, instead, an attitude one has about his attachment to a political party. Typically, then, to determine someone's party identification, a survey taker would not ask whom she voted for most recently but, rather, ask her whether she identifies with a particular party, emphasizing the self-identification component of this attitude. To illustrate, two examples of questions used by national survey organizations to assess the party identification of the American public follow:

> Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what? [If Republican or Democrat:] Would you call yourself a strong (Republican, Democrat) or a not very strong (Republican, Democrat)? [If Independent, Other or No Preference:] Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?[72]

> No matter how you voted today, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, Independent, [or] Something else?[73]

We highlight party identification here because it is important in American political culture for a number of reasons. First, for an individual, party identification is quite stable over time, certainly more stable than other political attitudes.[74] When a change does occur, it is most likely to consist of people switching from identification with one of the two major parties to considering themselves to be Independent or vice versa. That is, switching from identifying with one of the parties to the other does not occur very often. Second, party identification is a global attitude that is related to many specific political attitudes (such as policy

Do not copy, post, or distribute

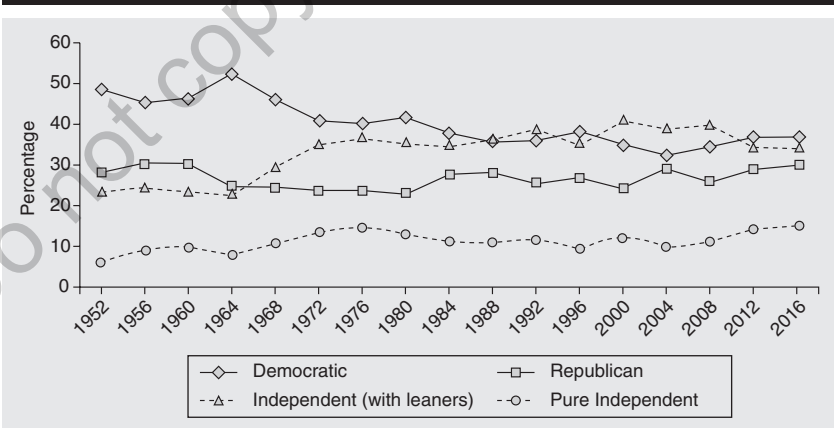
Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

opinions or evaluations of political leaders). Third, people's party identification can influence the interpretation of newly encountered information. When learning of damaging information about a Democratic president, for example, a Democrat is likely to interpret this information quite differently than a Republican. Related to this, party identification can help a person to make sense of political issues and topics, especially those that are unfamiliar. We elaborate on these and other aspects of party identification throughout this book.

In Figure 1.1, we present the breakdown of Americans' party identifications (as Democratic, Republican, or Independent) in every presidential election year since 1952. Focus first on the **partisans**, those who identify as Democratic or Republican (the solid lines). We see that American adults are much less likely to identify with the Democratic Party now than they were in the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas one-half of the population considered themselves Democrats in those decades, since 1988 less than 40 percent have. This does not necessarily mean, however, that Americans are now identifying as Republicans in much larger numbers. Rates of Republican self-identification have been very similar in recent elections to what they were in the 1950s. Perhaps more noteworthy, the percentage of the public identifying as Republican has not varied much (between 23 and 30 percent) over this time period.

The most significant change in party identification over the past fifty years is the switch from partisans to **partisan independence**. In fact,

Figure 1.1 Party Identification, 1952–2016



Source: Analysis of American National Election Studies Cumulative (1948–2004), American National Election Studies 2008, American National Election Studies 2012, and American National Election Studies 2016 data files.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Independents have been more common than either Democrats or Republicans in five of the last eight presidential election years (refer to the top dotted line in Figure 1.1). There was a substantial increase in Independents during the 1960s; only about 23 percent of the population considered themselves to be Independent in 1960, but 35 percent did so in 1972. These percentages, however, include people who lean toward supporting one of the major parties. That is, when initially asked whether they consider themselves to be Democratic, Republican, or Independent, they claim to be Independents. Yet, when then asked if they are closer to one of the parties, most of these Independents do indicate closeness to one party. Removing these **leaners** from the analysis presents a very different picture of Independents (see the dotted line at the bottom of the figure). Although there are more pure Independents now than there were in the 1950s, the increase has not been very large (from 6 percent in 1952 to 15 percent in 2016). Most of the increase in Independents, thus, seems to have been among the leaners, people whose initial identity is as Independent but who ultimately lean toward a party. Finally, in 2016 leaners were nearly equally likely to feel close to the Democratic as to the Republican Party. Among the Independents that year, 30.3 percent indicated that they felt closer to the Republican Party, whereas 29.7 percent leaned toward the Democrats.

Empirical Assessments of Public Opinion

As should have been clear from the democratic theory section earlier in this chapter, the main goal of these theories is to present **normative** conclusions. That is, most theorists outline how a democratic government and society *ought* to be structured, including what ought to be the role of the citizenry. Democratic theories are not entirely normative, however. According to one view, the best models of democracy "have been both explanatory and justificatory or advocatory. They are, in different proportions, statements about what a political system or a political society is, how it does work or could work, and statements of why it is a good thing, or why it would be a good thing to have it or to have more of it."[75]

To rephrase, theories of democracy can contain normative and empirical components. The empirical features are statements about how a society actually *is*, based on observations of democratic societies. These observations of reality can be important components of democratic theories and can complement or contribute to a theory's normative conclusions, as we have discussed with the theories of democratic elitism and pluralism. In contrast to the normative focus of democratic theories, **empirical analyses** of public opinion place primacy on accurately describing and explaining

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

real-life phenomena. Any broader conclusions, whether normative or otherwise, are of secondary importance for fields of empirical study.

Most public opinion scholars, and nearly all that we feature in this book, are empiricists. Examining public opinion empirically requires, of course, that this phenomenon be measured in some way. Measuring public opinion is not an easy or obvious task, however. What if, for example, you wanted to know whether the public supports same-sex marriage. How would you determine public opinion on this issue? You could stop people on the street, ask them if they agree gays and lesbians should be allowed to marry their partners, and tally up the responses. You could read letters to the editor in the newspaper to gauge public sentiment on same-sex marriage. You could look to elected officials' statements about the public to determine how citizens feel about this issue or assume that most people do support same-sex marriage because the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of such marriages. These are just a few possibilities, and although each has its advantages (and disadvantages), none can be ruled out as clearly inappropriate. In fact, all are examples of approaches that have been used, at one time or another, to measure public opinion. The Appendix to this chapter discusses a variety of public opinion research methods, methods that we will illuminate throughout the chapters of this book.

Themes of the Book

By reading this book, you will learn a lot about public opinion in the United States. One way that we try to fulfill this goal is by linking normative democratic theories with findings from empirical studies of public opinion. Rather than only considering what researchers have concluded about public opinion, throughout this book we discuss the democratic theory implications of a study or a body of research. We hope this approach will encourage you to evaluate the public opinion research through the lenses of the democratic theories outlined earlier and also to evaluate the democratic theories in light of the empirical studies. This will deepen your assessments of these democratic theories and provide you with a broad understanding of public opinion.

There are many, many empirical studies on public opinion. Summarizing all of these would be a daunting task for us and would produce a book that would be tedious for you to read. Thus, we have not attempted to discuss every relevant study on each topic. Instead, in each chapter, we focus on prototypical and especially influential studies that bring the fundamental questions into sharp focus. Our discussions of these prototypical studies are detailed and are meant to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of each study. To evaluate well the conclusions from a study, you need to

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

know what is good about the research and what its limits are. Using this approach will, we hope, encourage you to consider how public opinion is studied as well as better understand how a choice of methodology can influence the conclusions that researchers draw. We also anticipate that this feature of our text—what we call "embedded methods"—will teach you about specific research methods better than if the topics were presented in a separate chapter devoted only to methodology. If at any point you want to have more information about a method you are reading about, however, you can always refer back to the Chapter 1 Appendix for details about the specific method.

Finally, as we discussed earlier, the book is organized into parts. Each part poses a question that is important for democratic theory, and the chapters in the part present evidence and arguments to help you answer that question. We will not answer these questions, however. In fact, these questions do not have "correct" answers. Instead, we present evidence and tools to help you think through the material critically and challenge you to make your own judgment regarding the capacity of citizens to function effectively in a democracy.

In Part II we address this question: are citizens pliable? We explore this question through specific chapters devoted to the topics of political socialization, how the mass media shape public opinion, and attitude stability. Chapters in Part III address this question: do citizens organize their political thinking? We begin by examining whether individuals' opinions are organized along a liberal-conservative dimension or by partisanship. We also focus on other factors that might organize opinions, including reference groups, personality, self-interest calculations, values, and historical events. The book then moves on to this question in Part IV: do citizens endorse and demonstrate democratic basics? We focus on how knowledgeable, interested, and attentive citizens are, and we investigate public support for civil liberties and civil rights. Next, in Part V, we ask, what is the relationship between citizens and their government? Specifically, we take up the topics of citizen trust in government and support for the institutions of government. We also examine the relationship between public opinion and public policy. In the final part (Part VI), we take a broad assessment of the role of public opinion in the United States, asking, what do we make of public opinion in a democracy? The concluding chapter reviews normative debates over the role of citizens in a democracy and summarizes the empirical evidence that speaks to these debates.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

KEY CONCEPTS

attitude 18
attitude importance 19
beliefs 20
citizen apathy 12
classical models of democracy 5
democratic elitists 7
democratic theory 4
direct democracy 5
emotions 21
empirical analyses 24
extremity 19
factions 8
interest groups 7
leaners 24
normative 24
opinion 19
participatory democracy 10
partisan independence 23
partisans 23
party identification 21
pluralists 7
popular sovereignty 5
prejudice 21
public judgment 17
public opinion 15
representative democracy 7
stereotypes 20
values 20

SUGGESTED SOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

Each chapter in this book ends with a list of readings and websites. If you wish to investigate any of a chapter's topics further, perusing these lists of suggested sources will be a good step to begin your exploration.

Bachrach, Peter. *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique*. Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980.

Pateman, Carole. *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

Pateman, Carole. "Participatory Democracy Revisited." *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2012): 7–19.

Walker, Jack L. "A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy." *American Political Science Review* 60 (1966): 285–295.

These authors are proponents of participatory democracy. In these works, they present reasons for supporting this theory and explain why democratic elitism is problematic. In her 2012 article, Pateman contrasts participatory democracy with deliberative democracy.

Bryan, Frank M. *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Bryan presents an in-depth and illuminating analysis of the New England town meeting. Unlike representative democracies, these meetings involve all eligible

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

citizens coming together to debate and vote on town matters. For this reason, Bryan labels the town meeting "real democracy."

Cramer, Katherine J. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Cramer's research approach and conclusions illustrate her claim that "public opinion is not just what polls measure" (p. 19). The characteristic of public opinion that she focuses on is rural consciousness, demonstrating how such an identity can fuel a culture of political resentment.

Dahl, Robert A. *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961.

Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy.* 5th ed. London: Allen and Unwin, 1976.

The theories of democratic elitism and pluralism are discussed in these works.

Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (2014): 564–581.

This article is an example of scholars empirically testing normative theories of democracy, including some of the theories described in this chapter.

Held, David. *Models of Democracy*. 2nd ed. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Macpherson, C. B. *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Macpherson and Held have organized the numerous variants of democratic theory into a manageable number of models (four for Macpherson and nine for Held), some of which we have presented in this chapter. For a description of similarities and differences among theories of democracy or an introduction to specific theorists, these books are recommended.

Scudder, Mary F. *Beyond Empathy and Inclusion: The Challenge of Listening in Democratic Deliberation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Scudder examines how to make deliberation in large pluralistic societies more democratic. She argues that listening is what makes deliberation meaningfully democratic. But listening to those with whom we disagree is hard. She considers how to encourage democratic listening among citizens divided by deep difference.

American Association for Public Opinion Research, www.aapor.org

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

AAPOR is the professional organization for public opinion researchers. This website contains information about the organization, statements regarding the misuse of polls and poll results, material concerning the ethics of public opinion research, guidelines for journalists who write about polls, and a helpful (if somewhat dated) list titled "Fifty Books That Have Significantly Shaped Public Opinion Research."

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Appendix to Chapter 1

Studying Public Opinion Empirically

IN THIS APPENDIX, we describe a variety of methods for empirically studying public opinion. As you will see, each method has strengths and weaknesses. Further, some methods are better than others at answering particular public opinion questions. As we proceed, we refer to studies examining death penalty attitudes to illustrate how each method works in practice.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Public Opinion Surveys

Today, the most common method for assessing public opinion is via a **survey** or **public opinion poll**. Most of us are familiar with polls or, at the very least, the results of polls. The survey results that we frequently encounter (in the news media, on the Internet, and so on) are based on the responses provided by a **sample** of people to the same list of questions. In scientific surveys, respondents are *selected randomly* to represent a specific **population** (such as students at the University of Kansas, residents of New Mexico, or citizens of the United States). Survey respondents answer a series of questions, often by selecting one response from a list of options provided by the survey interviewer. For example, to gauge public sentiment on the issue of capital punishment, a survey might include the following question: "are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?" Those being surveyed would respond by selecting "favor" or "oppose" or, in some cases, "no opinion" or "I don't know." These types of questions, with a limited set of response options, are called **closed-ended questions**.

Questions can be worded in a variety of ways, and the choice of which words to include can have important, sometimes even dramatic, effects. To illustrate **question wording effects**, let's examine two ways the Gallup Organization has asked people about their death penalty attitudes. In October 2014, Gallup polled a random sample of 1,017 adults living in the United States. Respondents were asked whether they support the death penalty for convicted murderers (see Table A.1). Almost two-thirds of respondents supported the death penalty. Just one month earlier, in September 2014, Gallup polled a random sample of 1,252 U.S. adults

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Table A.1 Question Wording and Response Options Matter

	Question wording
Response options	October 2014: "Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?"
Favor	63%
Oppose	33%
No opinion	4%
Response options (rotated)	September 2014: "If you could choose between the following two approaches, which do you think is the better penalty for murder: the death penalty or life imprisonment with absolutely no possibility of parole?"
Death penalty	50%
Life in prison	45%
No opinion	5%

Source: Data from Jeffrey M. Jones, *Americans' Support for Death Penalty Stable*, Gallup, Washington, DC, http://www.gallup.com/poll/178790/americans-support-death-penalty-stable.aspx?utm_source=position4&utm_medium=related&utm_campaign=tiles

but this time asked respondents to indicate which they favor more, the death penalty or life in prison. Support for the death penalty dropped to 50 percent when respondents had a choice of punishments for convicted murderers.[1] This is a substantial difference, and very different conclusions would be drawn about public support for the death penalty depending on which survey question was used.

It is also important to pay attention to what response options are presented to respondents as well as the order in which those options are provided. Take Gallup's September 2014 question, for example. When citizens were asked to choose between the two approaches, one-half of the respondents were read the death penalty option first and the life in prison option second. The other half were read the choices in the reverse order. The choices are rotated because of concerns about **response order effects**.[2] Quite simply, citizens' opinions can be influenced by the order in which responses are presented to them. In addition, note that no middle or undecided categories were provided to respondents. As a result, citizens who were ambivalent or indifferent on the topic were unable to express their views.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

If you want to analyze public opinion over time, it is critical to ensure you compare survey data collected using the same question wording and response options. For example, Gallup reported that 56 percent of Americans support the death penalty in October 2018.[3] To know whether that is an increase or decrease in support since 2014, you need to know whether Gallup used the "are you in favor" or the "if you could choose" question. The polling organization used the "are you in favor" version, so therefore 56 percent in favor is a 7 percentage point drop in support since the 2014 survey.

To illuminate another concern about question wording and response options, let's discuss a question used by the National Race and Crime Survey to assess opinions toward the death penalty. The wording is, "Do you strongly oppose, somewhat oppose, somewhat favor, or strongly favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?"[4] Notice that response options from both points of view are provided in the stem of the question, which is what survey researchers call a **balanced question.** In contrast, Gallup's October 2014 question refers only to the pro–death penalty position, which may encourage respondents to answer in that fashion. As a result, balanced questions are considered superior.

So, when you come across poll results, it is important to know the question wording, the response options, and the order in which those options were presented. Similarly, if you ever report the results of an opinion poll, you also need to provide all that information. Otherwise, it is very easy to mislead, whether intentionally or not, those who are reading your summary of the results.

In a perfect world it is also important to know the order in which survey questions are asked. For instance, in the October 2018 Gallup survey, respondents were also asked whether they "believe the death penalty is applied fairly or unfairly in this country today." Forty-nine percent said it was applied fairly, 45 percent said unfairly, and 6 percent had no opinion.[5] This question was asked *after* respondents provided their opinion on the death penalty. But what if this question had been asked *before*? Respondents would have been primed to think about the fairness of the death penalty, which could have influenced their support for the policy. Specifically, the 45 percent of respondents concerned about the fairness of the death penalty might be less likely to say they favored the policy when that concern was fresh in their minds, and vice versa. Therefore, when you analyze a public opinion survey, it is best to examine not only the question you are interested in but also the context in which that question is situated. Unfortunately, researchers and especially journalists do not always provide the text of the entire survey, so it is often difficult to evaluate whether **question order effects** are influencing the results.

Public opinion polls have a number of advantages. Randomly sampling people from a specified population allows us to draw conclusions

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

about the opinions of the entire population. Why is that the case? Because a **random sample** is one in which chance alone determines which elements of the population make it into the sample. For example, let's say you want to draw a sample of twenty-five students from a class (or population) of one hundred students, and you want the opinions of the twenty-five students to reflect the opinions of all one hundred students. How would you draw that sample? You could have students write their names on slips of paper, collect the one hundred names in a hat, give it a good shake to make sure the names are all mixed up, and then draw out twenty-five names. Consequently, it would be chance alone that would determine which twenty-five students ended up in your sample. When respondents are selected in this manner, and *not* on the basis of their specific characteristics (such as race or political views), we can generalize the results from the sample to the larger population from which the sample was drawn. The ability to draw such conclusions is known as **external validity**. For polls that include only respondents who *opt* to participate, the results are applicable *only* to those people who answered the survey questions. Because such poll results are based on what is called a **convenience sample**, not a random sample, they cannot provide information about a larger population.

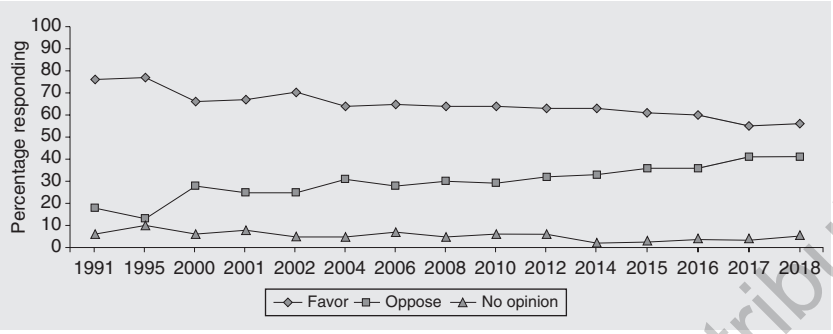
Another advantage of surveys is that answering a closed-ended question is not very time-consuming, so each respondent can answer many questions without being overly burdened. Also, many individuals can be asked the same questions, again because the time commitment per person is not great. Providing survey respondents the same questions with the same response options facilitates the tallying of results (such as 56 percent of Americans support the death penalty) and also allows for a comparison of public opinion over time, as we mentioned earlier. For instance, as shown in Figure A.1, public support for the death penalty has fluctuated since 1991. In the early 1990s, three-quarters (or more) of the public favored the death penalty, but by 2000 only two-thirds did. After 2001, perhaps because of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, support for the death penalty increased somewhat to 70 percent, but since the mid-2000s, support has decreased over time with 56 percent of the public in favor of the policy in 2018.[6]

Surveys also have many uses. News media organizations use polls to measure the public's political and social opinions, and candidates conduct polls to determine which voters support them and why. Public opinion scholars find surveys useful for assessing the content of the public's opinions as well as describing how people's opinions differ. In particular, it is often interesting to examine whether different groups have different attitudes on important issues of the day. A Pew Research Center national survey asks respondents this question: "Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?"[7] The Pew Research Center records respondents' gender and party identification

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Figure A.1 Public Opinion toward the Death Penalty, 1991–2018



Source: Data from *Death Penalty*, Gallup, Washington, DC, https://news.gallup.com/poll/1606/death-penalty.aspx

Note: Here is the question wording: "Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?"

in addition to their death penalty attitudes. The two favor options and the two oppose options are combined to simplify the presentation of results. The Pew survey shows that men and women hold different attitudes on the death penalty. In 2018, for example, 61 percent of men favored the death penalty, whereas only 46 percent of women supported capital punishment for convicted murderers. The gap in attitudes is even greater when you examine differences by party identification. Seventy-seven percent of Republicans support the death penalty compared with 52 percent of Independents and 35 percent of Democrats.[8]

A specific type of survey, called a **panel study** or **longitudinal survey**, allows scholars to determine whether people's opinions have stayed the same over time. In a panel study, the *same* people are asked their opinions on the same issues more than once. A study conducted by Robert Bohm and Brenda Vogel illustrates the use of this type of survey to track people's death penalty attitudes across more than a decade.[9] In the late 1980s, Bohm and Vogel surveyed college students at the beginning of the semester during which they were taking a class on the death penalty. They resurveyed the students at the end of the semester and then again a couple of years later. In 1999, Bohm and Vogel surveyed these (now former) students for the fourth time. The researchers were interested in whether students' attitudes changed after becoming more informed about the death penalty during the class and whether that attitude change was lasting. They found that students were less supportive of the death penalty immediately after

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

taking the class, but over time the students reverted to their initial levels of support for the policy. They concluded that information about the death penalty can influence citizens in the short run but that views on the policy are largely driven by personality traits and values, which are more influential than knowledge in the long run.

Panel studies are ideal for tracking changes in opinion across time, but it is important to note that **attrition** is a potential weakness of such studies. Attrition refers to the drop-off in the number of respondents over time. In the Bohm and Vogel study, for example, 120 college students were initially administered the survey, but only 69 were still participating in the study by the fourth wave. If the students who stopped participating were systematically different from the students who continued to participate, we would need to be cautious about drawing conclusions from the study. Further, this particular panel study did not use a random sample, which limits the external validity of the results; however, many panel studies do rely on random samples, so their results can be generalized to the broader population.

Public opinion data are collected using a particular **survey mode**, such as phone, Internet, mail, or face-to-face. Each of these modes has strengths and weaknesses. Researchers should consider the topic, population of interest, and survey context to determine which mode to use.[10] For example, it is typically better to ask sensitive questions over the Internet or via mail rather than face-to-face. Complex, long questions are generally not appropriate for phone surveys. The Internet is useful to assess people's responses to video clips. In some cases the best approach is to combine modes, which is called a **mixed-mode approach**. For example, a survey researcher might contact respondents via mail with a postcard to inform them they have been chosen to participate in a study to be conducted by phone. The 2018 Gallup survey of death penalty attitudes mentioned earlier was conducted over the phone with 70 percent of the respondents contacted on cell phones and 30 percent on landlines.[11] Obviously it is critical to include cell phone numbers in the sample given their widespread use in society today. In the United States 96 percent of adults own a cell phone.[12] Furthermore, the number of homes without a landline has increased dramatically over the past decade. Fifty-seven percent of homes in the United States are cell phone only, and three-quarters of young adults rely completely on a cell phone.[13]

Do keep in mind that regardless of the particular survey mode, a random sample is necessary to generalize the results of the sample to the population. Gallup, for example, uses a standard technique, **random digit dial**, in which chance alone determines which phone numbers are called in their surveys. This ensures that all phone numbers have the potential to be called rather than just those numbers on a phone list. As a result, Gallup's surveys are generalizable to the population.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

In recent years the number of surveys conducted over the Internet has increased markedly due to their ease and low cost. There is no random digit dial equivalent for Internet surveys, however, so researchers take two different approaches to improve the representativeness of their sample. First, a mixed-mode approach can be used to initially contact respondents by phone and then recruit them to participate in an online survey. The researchers provide a computer and Internet access to those who do not have both to ensure the sample is not biased. This approach can ensure a random sample, but it takes time and money that can defeat the purpose of using an Internet survey.[14]

The second approach is for researchers to rely on **opt-in Internet surveys**. People who volunteer to participate in a survey are different from a random sample because it is not chance alone that determines their selection for participation in the survey. Therefore, when analyzing the survey responses, researchers need to weight the respondents so that the sample mirrors the demographic and political characteristics of a representative sample. The problem is there is no ironclad way to determine exactly how well, or how poorly, the opt-in sample mirrors a representative one. Because Internet surveys are here to stay, many public opinion scholars are working hard to better understand the potential and limitations of opt-in surveys.[15]

Experiments

Another common method used by public opinion researchers is experimentation. Although there are many types of public opinion **experiments**, in the most common form, the researcher manipulates a feature of the study and then assesses individual or group responses. Imagine you wanted to know how individuals respond to different types of news stories on the death penalty. You could assess this experimentally by providing one type of news story to one group of participants in your study and another type of news story to another group. After reading the news stories, these **subjects**, as participants in an experiment are called, would be asked whether they support the death penalty.

Many news media studies use experimental designs just like that to see whether citizens' opinions are influenced by different news content. For example, Frank Dardis et al. created newspaper stories to frame the death penalty in different ways.[16] One story constructed the death penalty as an affront to moral values (the morality frame), whereas another story emphasized that the policy was fundamentally flawed because innocent people might be executed (the innocence frame).[17] Some subjects read the story with the morality frame, and others read the one with the innocence frame. Subjects then completed a questionnaire that asked them to list the

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

important factors they considered when determining their opinion on the death penalty. Dardis et al. found that subjects exposed to the innocence frame were more likely to mention innocence-related considerations as important factors in determining their attitudes toward the death penalty than subjects presented with the morality frame. Thus, the news frames shaped the ingredients of the subjects' death penalty attitudes.

The two key features of experiments that distinguish them from other methods and that allow for powerful causal conclusions to be drawn are manipulation and random assignment.[18] **Manipulation** involves the researcher varying access to information, events, or whatever is the focus of the research among experimental participants. In the example we have been discussing, the researchers manipulated exposure to news frames. **Random assignment** refers to the process by which people are assigned to experimental groups. With random assignment, it is chance alone that determines which subjects get in which condition. For instance, in the Dardis et al. experiment, subjects were randomly assigned to read a story framed in terms of either innocence or morality. Individuals are randomly assigned to groups, perhaps by flipping a coin to establish the person's assignment, in the expectation that individual characteristics that might be related to the study's goals are equally likely to appear in all groups. Because men are more supportive of capital punishment than women, for example, it is important that not all men be assigned to the same group in an experiment designed to assess the impact of news stories on how citizens think about capital punishment. Random assignment ensures that chance, rather than a person's characteristics, determines experimental group assignment.

With successful random assignment, a researcher can be very certain that any differences in opinions or behaviors found across experimental groups are due to their exposure to the original stimulus (that is, due to the experimenter's manipulated feature). Experiments thus allow researchers to conclude that one factor causes another—a feature of research designs called **internal validity**. The ability to draw such causal conclusions is the primary advantage of experiments over other research methods. For example, you could conduct a survey and ask people if they have read news articles framing the death penalty in terms of innocence and whether they support the death penalty. If those who have read these stories are less likely to favor capital punishment, it would be tempting to conclude that the innocence frame influenced individuals' opinions. But you could not rule out the possibility that those who opposed capital punishment *before* exposure to the news stories were more likely to search out and read such stories. So individuals' political opinions might have influenced their news habits rather than the other way around. If, however, you expose some people to the innocence news story and others to a story framed in a different way, and you still find that those exposed to the innocence frame are

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

less supportive of the death penalty, you can be much more certain that the news frame influenced their opinions.

Although experiments possess internal validity, they often have less external validity. That is, by using convenience samples (such as college students enrolled in introductory mass communications courses, as Dardis et al. did in their study) rather than random samples, experimenters cannot claim their sample is representative of the broader population. One way to address this weakness is to include an experimental design within a nationally representative survey. This method, called a **survey-based experiment**, entails randomly assigning survey respondents to experimental conditions. This approach "combine[s] the causal power of the randomized experiment with the representativeness of the general population survey."[19]

Mark Peffley and Jon Hurwitz used this approach in their national survey of race and death penalty attitudes.[20] They embedded an experiment in their survey by randomly assigning respondents to receive one of three versions of a question about the death penalty (see Table A.2). In the baseline condition, respondents received a death penalty question with no additional information. In the other two conditions, respondents received information either about racial disparities or about innocence. Peffley and Hurwitz's results are fascinating. First, whites were substantially more supportive of the death penalty than Black respondents across all three conditions. Second, whites and Blacks did not respond in the same way to the different arguments. Support for the death penalty fell significantly among Blacks when they were exposed to either the racial or the innocence argument. In contrast, whites were not moved by the innocence argument, and they actually became *more* favorable toward the policy when presented with the racial argument. Because respondents were randomly assigned to the conditions, we can conclude with great confidence that the different arguments influence opinion on the death penalty. Moreover, because the respondents were selected randomly from the U.S. population, the results of this study apply to the American public in general.[21] In other words, this study has both internal and external validity.

An important aspect of scientific research, especially experimental research, is **replication**. Replication occurs when scholars repeat a study to determine whether their results are consistent with prior research findings. One study replicated the Peffley and Hurwitz research and did *not* find that whites became more favorable toward the death penalty when exposed to the racial argument.[22] Another replication, by Peffley and Hurwitz themselves, found that only certain whites and Latinos became more supportive of the death penalty when presented with the racial argument.[23] Specifically, whites and Latinos who blamed Black aggressiveness for crime became more favorable toward the death penalty when presented with the racial argument. Where do these mixed results leave us? It is possible that Peffley and Hurwitz's original findings were **timebound**,

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Table A.2 Support for the Death Penalty in a Survey-Based Experiment

	Baseline with no argument	Racial argument	Innocence argument
	"Do you strongly oppose, somewhat oppose, somewhat favor, or strongly favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?"	"Some people say that the death penalty is unfair because most of the people who are executed are African Americans. Do you strongly oppose, somewhat oppose, somewhat favor, or strongly favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?"	"Some people say that the death penalty is unfair because too many innocent people are being executed. Do you strongly oppose, somewhat oppose, somewhat favor, or strongly favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?"
White respondents	65%	77%	64%
Black respondents	50	38	34

Source: Adapted from Table 5.1 of Mark Peffley and Jon Hurwitz, *Justice in America: The Separate Realities of Blacks and Whites* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 158–159.

Note: Figures are the percentage of each group that somewhat or strongly favors the death penalty.

meaning they held at that time but cannot be generalized to a different time period. Or possibly the original findings were simply incorrect. Either way it demonstrates the critical importance of replication to scientific research. Repeated studies are essential to ensure that research findings are valid across different settings, people, and time periods.

Interviews

Asking people about their political views is also accomplished by **in-depth interviewing**. Unlike surveys in which hundreds (or thousands) of people

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.
Do not copy, post, or distribute

are asked a series of closed-ended questions, interviewers ask their respondents much broader, often **open-ended questions**. That is, interviewers typically do not provide their respondents with a list of predetermined response options; rather, they allow the interviewees to answer a question however they want. An interviewer interested in public opinion toward the death penalty might ask the following question: "What do you think about the death penalty?" This question encourages respondents to not just assess their overall opinion on the issue but consider the roots of their opinion and perhaps even grapple with any contradictory thoughts they might have about the policy. Topics such as racial disparities in the application of the death penalty, the deterrent effect of the death penalty, or popular culture references to the death penalty might emerge in response to this question. Note the question does not provide response options, thus allowing the respondent to answer in multiple ways. The question prompts respondents to explain *why* they hold their opinions, and if respondents do not volunteer such information, interviewers can follow up and ask them directly to explain their perspectives. Such *why* questions, because they are open-ended, do not appear frequently on opinion surveys, yet they can provide very useful information about public opinion.

Allowing respondents to decide what is most appropriate when answering questions results in responses that are more likely to reflect their actual thinking (no matter how organized or how messy) on the topic. By forcing respondents to select a preconceived option, surveys might not measure real opinions on an issue. To take an obvious example, survey respondents confronted with the "favor" or "oppose" option to a death penalty question will typically select one of these options even if their real attitude is "I support the death penalty when I am certain that the person convicted of murder did, without a doubt, commit the murder, but often one cannot be certain the person actually did commit the murder and there are now many examples coming to light when incorrect decisions were made by juries." An in-depth interview is likely to capture the nuances of this person's view, whereas a public opinion survey with closed-ended questions simply cannot.

In-depth interviews can be especially useful when researchers are interested in understanding the views of a particular group of people. For example, Sandra Jones conducted in-depth interviews with forty-nine people active in the anti–death penalty movement to understand what mobilized them to get involved.[24] Jones found that many activists were motivated by moral outrage but that their outrage was complex and nuanced. To illustrate, an African American male leader of the movement had this to say about the death penalty:

> Not only is it dehumanizing, but everything else that wraps around it is immoral. It's immoral to have another human being strapped

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

> down for the purpose of killing them. It is immoral to put the warden in such a conflict. The one thing I've learned from doing this work is when I came to it I had such a clear sense of who was good and who was evil. All that got blurred very quickly. You can't hate a guard who cries over an execution. You can't hate a warden who is shaking during an execution.[25]

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to capture the detailed richness of this person's views about the death penalty using a survey, but in-depth interviewing allowed the researcher to assess the fullness of this activist's perspective.

Because open-ended questions typically take longer to answer, the number of individuals participating in an interview is usually much smaller than the number who respond to a survey. With a smaller number of participants in a study, who have not been randomly selected to participate, it is inappropriate to draw conclusions that can apply to a larger population. Thus, studies using interview respondents are often criticized for not being representative of a larger population, a weakness that does not apply to surveys of randomly selected individuals.

Focus Groups

Focus groups resemble interviews in a number of ways. Both are used by researchers to examine how people think about political issues, and both use open-ended questions. The primary differences are that focus group research is conducted on multiple people at once and consists of a group discussion that is moderated and guided by a trained individual. Focus group researchers are often interested in learning how individuals construct political issues in their mind, how people communicate about a particular issue, and how an individual's discussion of a topic responds to communication from others in a group. In this way, focus groups are "a way to observe interaction among people that is important in understanding political behavior that is not possible to observe using more traditional empirical methodology."[26] To examine public opinion on capital punishment, for example, a focus group could be used to assess how people discuss this issue, including which features of it are especially compelling or relevant. Focus group participants could also be asked to read news articles or view movies about capital punishment and then discuss their reactions to determine how a group constructs meaning from such stories.

With the goal of understanding the complexity of citizens' death penalty opinions, Diana Falco and Tina Freiburger conducted six focus groups with twenty participants from Indiana County, Pennsylvania.[27] The researchers asked the participants to brainstorm about their positive and negative beliefs

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.
Do not copy, post, or distribute

about the death penalty and to indicate their general opinion on the policy. Participants were also asked to read various crime scenarios and evaluate whether they would support the death penalty in each situation. Falco and Freiburger found that many citizens held both positive and negative views of the death penalty and that almost all took characteristics of the offender or the victim into account as they responded to the crime scenarios. The researchers concluded that the twenty citizens in these focus groups have views on the death penalty that are much more complicated than suggested by "favor" or "oppose" responses to a survey question. Because the focus group participants do not constitute a random sample, the results cannot be generalized to the public as a whole. Nevertheless, these results are still very important because they help scholars think more carefully about how to design survey questions to more adequately measure the complexity of citizens' subtle, and sometimes tangled, views on the death penalty.

Content Analysis

The final method we profile here is content analysis. As its name indicates, **content analysis** is a technique used to analyze the content of communication. More specifically, it has been defined as "a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication."[28] Content analysis can be applied to any type of communication, such as a news media story, a speech by a politician, a popular television show, a tweet, or a novel. The primary object of content analysis is to systematically summarize the content of the selected source or item. This is done by selecting specific criteria of the communication to analyze and then carefully coding a selection (such as stories or speeches) along these criteria. For example, a speech by Donald Trump could be analyzed for the number of times the word "immigrant" is used; the number of times a topic, such as his poll numbers, is mentioned; or whether he refers to himself in the third person.

In terms of public opinion research, many topics can be examined using content analysis. If a researcher wishes to know how the news media present public opinion on an issue, such as capital punishment, the content of news stories can be analyzed. Is public opinion represented as opinion survey results or as quotations from individual people? Or are elected officials asked what they think the public thinks about this issue?

Content analysis is also used in studies that seek to determine whether news media coverage is related to public opinion. Recall the Dardis et al. experiment we discussed earlier. In that study, subjects were exposed to news stories about the death penalty framed in terms of either morality or

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

innocence. Dardis et al. did not simply pull those media frames out of thin air; instead, they content-analyzed abstracts of capital punishment news articles in the *New York Times Index* between 1960 and 2003 to identify frames. By systematically analyzing what types of arguments were used in these abstracts, the researchers were able to examine common frames used in the *New York Times* coverage. The morality frame, for instance, included arguments about retribution, such as the "eye for an eye" rationale for the death penalty. The innocence frame, in contrast, included arguments about the possibility that a person on death row might be innocent due to a tainted or racist criminal justice system.[29] Dardis et al. found that the innocence frame received little attention prior to the 1980s but that it became a prominent frame in the 2000s. The morality frame received significant attention in the 1970s but has been less prevalent since then, although it continues to receive meaningful attention in the *New York Times*.

Historically, content analysis has been a labor-intensive method requiring humans to read and hand-code textual materials. In more recent years researchers have developed computer-assisted techniques that allow for the quick analysis of huge amounts of textual data. Researchers specify coding rules that enable computers to analyze the massive amounts of information produced in society today. These "big data," such as data from tweets, Facebook posts, website content, and news articles, provide a trove of information that can offer insights about public opinion.

Conclusion

These five methods—surveys, experiments, interviews, focus groups, and content analysis—are the most common approaches used to assess public opinion. Surveys are by far the most frequently used approach, whereas focus groups and content analysis are the least common. Each method has advantages and disadvantages, and some methods are more appropriate than others for addressing particular types of public opinion questions, as the chapters in this book further illustrate.

Last, most of these research methods require human participation. Conducting research on people involves a host of ethical considerations. Chief among these concerns are that participants should voluntarily agree to participate, they should offer their informed consent before the study begins, and they should not suffer undue physical or psychological harm while participating in the study or afterward. For a detailed discussion of these and other ethical matters involved when using people as research participants, refer to The Belmont Report (listed in the Suggested Sources for Further Reading).

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

KEY CONCEPTS

attrition 35
balanced question 32
closed-ended questions 30
content analysis 42
convenience sample 33
experiments 36
external validity 33
focus groups 41
in-depth interviewing 39
internal validity 37
manipulation 37
mixed-mode approach 35
open-ended questions 40
opt-in Internet surveys 36
panel study or longitudinal survey 34
population 30
public opinion poll 30
question order effects 32
question wording effects 30
random assignment 37
random digit dial 35
random sample 33
replication 38
response order effects 31
sample 30
subjects 36
survey 30
survey-based experiment 38
survey mode 35
timebound 38

SUGGESTED SOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

Aronson, Elliot, Phoebe C. Ellsworth, James Merrill Carlsmith, and Marti Hope Gonzales. *Methods of Research in Social Psychology*. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1989.

Gilens, Martin. "An Anatomy of Survey-Based Experiments." In *Navigating Public Opinion: Polls, Policy, and the Future of American Democracy*, ed. Jeff Manza, Fay Lomax Cook, and Benjamin I. Page. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Krippendorff, Klaus. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2004.

Krueger, Richard A., and Mary Anne Casey. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research.* 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2015.

Rubin, Herbert J., and Irene S. Rubin. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data.* 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2011.

Each of these sources provides a detailed overview of one specific research method: experiments, survey-based experiments, content analysis, focus groups, and interviewing.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Asher, Herbert. *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know.* 9th ed. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2016.

Dillman, Don A., Jolene D. Smyth, and Leah Melani Christian. *Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. 4th ed. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2014.

Asher's book is an informative and readable introduction to all aspects of survey research. If you are planning to conduct a survey yourself, the Dillman, Smyth, and Christian book is a must-read. It provides practical advice and detailed examples of best practices.

"The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research," https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/index.html

"Standards and Ethics," American Association for Public Opinion Research, https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics.aspx

The Belmont Report was produced by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in 1979. This influential report established basic ethical principles that should be followed by scholars conducting research on human participants. The American Association for Public Opinion Research has developed standards, identified best practices, and articulated a code of ethics for all public opinion researchers.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.