

Chapter 11. Public Opinion, Socialization, and the Media: Learning to be Ignorant
Last Updated 4-5-2010
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OUTLINE

I. Getting Personal—How You Learned and Didn't Learn About Politics

- A. Focus on You
- B. The Difficulty of Knowing
- C. Anti-Political Culture
- D. Chapter Topics

II. Public Opinion—Learning About How Others Feel

- A. Pervasive Polls
- B. Judging and Understanding Polls and Surveys
 - 1. Who did the survey?
 - 2. How was the sample chosen?
 - 3. How large was the sample?
 - 4. How were questions worded?
 - 5. When was the survey done?
 - 6. Did the questions filter out those without opinions?

C. The Paradox of American Opinion on Services and Taxes—A Look at the Federal Budget, Deficits, and the National Debt

III. Political Socialization—Picking Up Identifications and Opinions

- A. Early Childhood—Parents
- B. Youth—Schools, Peers, and Group Influence
- C. Adulthood—Media and Groups

IV. The Media—Our Windows to the World

A. Short History of the Media—From Word of Mouth to the Web

B. Media Bias

1. Ideological and/or Partisan Bias—Psychological Defenses
2. Structural Bias—Run What Sells
3. Sociocentric Bias

C. Media Impact on Public Opinion

1. Agenda Setting—What We Think About
2. Framing—Context of a Story Influences Our Reaction
3. Long-Term Effects—Media Reliance on Elite Opinion

V. Policy Implications

A. Environment and Global Warming

B. Foreign and Defense Policy

Afterword

TEXT

I. Getting Personal—Learning to be Ignorant, or How You Learned and Didn't Learn About Politics

A. Focus on You

Up to this point we have focused on what you do and do not know about American government and politics. One theme that has run throughout this text is that most Americans, including college students, do not know much about their own government. Hopefully, you know a lot more now than you did when you started reading this text.

Now that we are almost at the end, I want to shift the focus a little bit. Rather than what you know, we will shift to how you came to know what you know about American government and politics. How you learned may help explain why you know so little and why some the things you thought you knew turned out to be incorrect.

Did you ever wonder how you came to know and believe the things you do? Part of being an educated person is understanding the forces that influence you—you really cannot be in charge of your own life unless understand these things.

The way in which people learn about politics and political values and political identities in any society is called “political socialization.” That is the neutral social science term. We could call it “political education” if we wanted to put a positive spin on it. Or we could call it “brainwashing” if we wanted to give it a negative spin. As young people say, whatever, this chapter is about how we learn about politics.

B. The Difficulty of Knowing

Learning what is true and what is not true is harder today than it once was. The difficulty is not because of a lack of information. We have more information and more points of view available to us than ever in history. A few clicks on any topic and you get thousands of entries. In fact, perhaps we get too much information. We get so much that we are often overwhelmed.

A second problem today is that we should not necessarily believe what we see or hear, even if it looks really good in print with cool graphics and videos. The digital world of computers allows people to alter photos and video clips to distort the truth. So we must be skeptical of what we read, see, and hear. When we cannot rely on the things we find on the web, we are tempted to retreat into the bliss of ignorance.

C. Anti-Political Culture

We live in a culture that reinforces our temptation to retreat into ignorance about politics. As I have noted many times in this text, Americans do not like much about politics. We do not like political parties. We feel interest groups to be dangerous. We do not trust Congress. We think that bureaucracy is mindless and insensitive to our individual needs. We have been disappointed in many recent presidents who do not measure up to our high historical standards of greatness. We see political campaigns as overly expensive exercises in mud-throwing and lying. When reformers talk about cleaning up elections by public financing, the typical response is that giving them money will only encourage them. We are absolutely disgusted with the media coverage of politics, a topic in this chapter. We equate the word “political” with selfish and unethical. Is there anything we like about politics? Other than being sometimes entertaining and providing raw material for comedians, the short answer is no.

Our political culture teaches us to learn to be ignorant about politics—another paradox! And we do a good job at it. Some of us even seem to feel proud when we say that we do not pay much attention to politics.

Can we say anything good about being so ignorant? In fact we can! From the point of view of political leaders, our ignorance allows them to have a greater range in

choice in what they do. If we do not follow politics very closely, then much of the time leaders can ignore us. Sometimes, however, we do things that are impossible to ignore, like getting us bogged down in expensive losing wars with significant numbers of young people getting killed. Or sometimes we follow economic policies that cause significant numbers of people to lose their homes or jobs or savings or opportunities for an education. But if our leaders give us peace and prosperity, we pretty much ignore politics and what the leaders do.

While having citizens who do not pay much attention does allow leaders to be creative in policy choices, citizen ignorance carried to an extreme poses a danger. Leaders who make foolish policy choices can create disasters that might have been avoided had citizens been more aware and pressured the leaders to change direction. Our ignorance could allow disasters to happen that might endanger our freedoms, our institutions, and even the survival of our republic. Can you think of times in relatively recent history when this might have happened?

D. Chapter Topics

We shall cover with three major topics in this chapter, all of which relate to how we know about politics. We will begin with public opinion polling. Polls or surveys are not very well understood either by the population or by the media that report survey results. Yet we rely on surveys or polls in many ways. If you want to know what Americans think, you need to be able to evaluate the many surveys in the media. How can you tell a good survey from a bad survey? I will give you some guidelines to help you tell the difference and sort them out.

Next we will move to political socialization. We will look at the forces and institutions that have shaped your political identities, values, and issue positions. Did you arrive at your opinions totally on your own? Would you like to make up your own mind? You cannot really form your own views until you understand the forces that have shaped your views.

Then we will move to the news media, another one of the many disliked political institutions in our society. We will take a brief look at the evolution of the media from newsletters through newspapers through the electronic media to the modern digital world. Do the media manipulate us? Are they biased? How can we evaluate what we get from the news media? That is, how can we know what to believe?

After covering these major topics, we will turn away from how we know about politics to some of the policy implications of our political knowledge and awareness. What we know places limits on what leaders feel they can do. Moreover, shifts in public opinion and awareness can also force leaders to consider policies and actions that they might otherwise have ignored. If you remember back to the definition of power at the beginning of the text, you may remember that I said that power has two faces. Citizen knowledge and awareness includes both faces of political power, getting leaders to do

things they would not otherwise ordinarily do and preventing them from doing things that they otherwise might have done.

President Lincoln was aware of this dynamic in saying that with public opinion all things were possible, but without it nothing was possible. Your awareness empowers you because leaders take public awareness into account in what they do and do not do.

II. Public Opinion—Learning About How Others Feel

A. Pervasive Polls

Polls or surveys are pervasive, that is, they are everywhere in our society. The media use them to generate headlines, often about what or who is popular at the moment. Politicians use them to see how well they are running, to identify areas of weakness, to gauge their support among important groups, or to try out new themes. Policymakers, officeholders, and interest groups use them to gauge public reaction to policy proposals. Corporations use them to measure consumer awareness, corporate image, and product preferences. And the list goes on.

Unfortunately, many of the surveys we see in the news are not really surveys at all. Rather, they are exercises in self-promotion without much concern for accuracy. Sometimes they are fund raising exercises disguised as surveys. Sometimes they are designed to distort the truth or create new truths of their own. All these bad surveys give legitimate polls a bad name.

B. Judging and Understanding Polls and Surveys

Because of the pervasiveness of surveys and their many uses, citizens need to be armed with a few tools to help them differentiate between surveys that are likely to be representative of how some population thinks and poorly done polls that are unlikely to represent anything or those that have a hidden agenda. Here are guidelines to help you evaluate polls and surveys.

1. Who did the survey?

The organization that performed the survey tells you a lot about the likely quality of the survey. If it was performed by a well-know organization (like Zogby, the Pew Center, Harris, Gallup) or a university, it was probably pretty well done and probably followed all the standard procedures. It is likely to be representative of the population surveyed. On the other hand, if the survey was performed by a candidate organization, an elected official or a political party or corporate entity, you should ask a lot more questions about it.

2. How was the sample chosen?

Choosing the sample is critical. Let's start with the **survey population**, the group of people in whose opinions you are interested. The population could be adults over 18 in a city, a state, the nation, or even the world (yes—world surveys exist). It could be those who will presumably vote in some upcoming election.

If the population is people who will vote, then the problem is figuring out exactly who really will vote—likely voters. You could just ask people if they will vote. However, many people will give the socially desirable answer and say they will vote even when they probably will not. Most survey organizations use several questions to screen likely voters. This can get quite complex. Some pollsters ask if you voted in the last election, if you are registered, and even if you can tell the interviewer where you go to vote. When you see several surveys done about an upcoming election or primary and they have different percentages of support for a candidate, one of the most important differences in these numbers is how the survey decided who would be a likely voter. No perfect scheme exists for predicting who will actually vote.

Once pollsters define the population and find ways to screen non-population members out, the survey needs to devise a method of choosing members of that population so that every member of the population has an equal chance of being chosen. This is called a **random sample**. If the sampling method tends to choose certain types of people more than other types of people, then the sample is biased rather than random. Biased samples can cause major problems because they are not representative.

The ***Literary Digest* survey** in the 1936 presidential campaign is the classic example of a biased sample. The magazine chose millions of citizens from telephone directories and vehicle registration lists and sent them questionnaires along with invitations to subscribe to the magazine. Unfortunately for the magazine, this created a major bias in who was selected. Those with higher incomes were far more likely to be on those two lists than those with lower incomes. Remember that this was 1936, when a low percentage of the population had telephones or cars. Moreover, by the 1936 election those with lower incomes were moving to the Democratic Party because of their approval of Roosevelt's New Deal policies. And the wealthier people were becoming even more Republican, convinced that Roosevelt was moving the nation to a socialistic system that might take their wealth away. Based on an unrepresentative sample that included far too many of the well-off, the *Literary Digest* survey predicted that Alfred Landon would beat FDR by a landslide. Landon did win by a landslide among the well-off, but he lost by an even bigger landslide among the more numerous less well-off people. Having an unbiased sample where every member of the population has an equal chance of being chosen is critical for accuracy.

The worst kind of surveys that fail to do this are called **straw polls**. They use what are called "convenience" samples, or "self-selected" samples. The *Literary Digest* survey was a convenience sample, because they just used lists that were convenient to get, not ones that gave all voters an equal chance of being chosen. When you are

invited to email an opinion or call some toll-free number, the sample is self-selected. Sadly, we still see these all too frequently on the Web or on television. The sample represents those who felt strongly enough to respond, or just those who had nothing better to do at the time. Reporters try to cover themselves by saying that this was a “nonscientific” sample, but then go on to talk about it as though it really means something. These samples do not allow any accurate representation of a meaningful larger population. So beware of straw polls because they are not real surveys!

3. How large was the sample?

As we saw from the *Literary Digest* disaster, having a large sample does little to guarantee representative findings if the sample is biased. So a small random sample is better than a large non-random sample, even if that large non-random sample is in the millions. The key word here is “random,” which is more important than size. But if two samples are random, what difference does sample size make? The short answer is a lot of difference. Let me explain.

The expected error due to sampling is called **sampling error**. All surveys should report their sampling error. It is expressed as a plus or minus percentage. For example, consider an exit poll of 1,100 voters. An **exit poll** is a survey done of actual voters as they leave the polls. It is much more accurate than a survey done before an election because you know you have actual voters, not just likely voters. With a sample of 1,100, the sampling error is plus or minus 3%. This means that the percentage who voted for someone in the sample should be within 3% of the actual percentage for everyone who voted in the population. By the way, the laws of mathematical probability apply here—a one in twenty chance always exists that the error is larger, so any one survey could be wrong. But most will be within their margin of error.

Sample size is far more important than population size. Mathematically speaking, it does not matter whether the population was voters in a state for election of a governor or voters across the nation in a presidential election. As long as the sample was randomly chosen for the state and for the nation, a sample of 1,100 will have a sampling error of + or – 3%. Population size does make a real difference in accuracy only when the population is quite small, under about 5,000. (By real difference, I mean reducing the sampling error by a percentage point or more.) But most populations are larger than 5,000. So pay attention to sample size more than population size.

We could use large samples to get quite accurate. A sample of 10,000 reduces sampling error to + or – 1%. But doing surveys with that big a sample is far too expensive. So most national surveys run between 625 (+ or – 4%) and around 1,100 (+ or – 3%) because these sizes are affordable and give reasonably small sampling errors.

4. How were questions worded?

Wording of the questions can have a profound effect on the findings in any survey. Many questions have standard wording that has been well tested over time. Reputable firms are most likely to use these questions. But even the best survey organizations can make mistakes, especially when using new questions. So here are some things to look for.

Loaded terms with positive or negative values attached to them bias questions in one direction or another. For example, when surveys ask Americans about programs for “helping the poor” or the “needy,” they find support for such programs. But when they ask about “welfare,” support turns into opposition. Why? The image most people have of the “poor” or “needy” are those who through no fault of their own fall on bad times. “Welfare” evokes images of people too lazy to work.

Attaching the name of a well-known public official to a policy question biases the question. It measures feelings about that official rather than the policy. So a question about whether or not you approve of “President George Bush’s education policy to test students for learning” will get different results than a question about whether you approve of “a national education policy that tests students for learning.”

The most difficult kinds of questions are those that ask for self-evaluations of some kind. This is because people tend to give the **socially desirable answers**, that is, answers they think will make them look good. Almost no one will say they are a racist or that they oppose civil liberties. But they might say that illegal immigrants are harming American culture and that those who support terrorists should not be allowed to speak in public.

When you ask questions that are self-evaluative, you are measuring is education as much or more than anything else. This is because educated people are more likely to know that some labels are not socially desirable. More objective questions, like possible harms caused by illegal immigrants, may partially get at racism. However, they also may be picking up other attitudes that have little to do with racism. That is why valid self-evaluative question areas are very difficult to construct.

Some unethical organizations use question wording to try and change opinion rather than measure opinion. Campaigns will call potential voters and ask about support for the opposing candidate. Then they reveal something negative about that candidate that may not be true at all or may be only partially true. Then the caller asks whether knowing this fact changes the respondent’s feelings about the candidate. This unethical technique is called a **push poll** because it is designed to push public opinion rather than really measure public opinion.

Campaigns will continue to use push polls until respondents tell them that they resent this tactic. One of my former students told me that she got such a call, and she told the caller that she knew what they were trying to do, and it made her so angry that she was going to volunteer for their opponent! Lots of answers like that would put an end to push polls.

5. When was the survey done?

Surveys are like photographic snapshots. While most are quite accurate at the instant they are taken, things can change by the time you actually look at the finished product. So a survey that is only a few days old may not be accurate if events have taken place that may have changed opinions. The longer the time, the more likely opinions will change. So the media should always report the dates that the survey was done. You should take note of how old it is and anything that might have changed opinions since then.

The classic example of a survey that got it wrong because things were changing quickly was in the 1948 presidential election. Pollsters stopped surveying a week before the election, when Republican Thomas Dewey probably was ahead of Democrat Harry Truman. But Truman was surging. By the time the election took place, Truman actually won by 3.5 percentage points. Based on the earlier polls, newspapers ran headlines that “Dewey Defeats Truman.” One of the most famous pictures in presidential election history is a grinning Truman holding up one such newspaper headline. You can find it easily on the Web by just searching that phrase.

6. Did the questions filter out those without opinions?

People tend to give answers when questions are asked, even when they know little to nothing about the subject. So a lot of uninformed and thoughtless opinions can get mixed in with opinions that are well considered. The term that pollsters use for these opinions dates back to when a lot of door-to-door surveys were done. They are called **door-step opinions** because they get created on the door-step and then left there like an abandoned orphan. These thoughtless opinions are highly unstable and could well change the next time the question gets asked. Including these meaningless opinions can have a great impact on the balance of opinion in a survey.

What can pollsters do about this? The standard technique is to try and filter these opinions out. Interviewers ask respondents if they have thought about some subject, and if not, the interviewer skips the next question. What you should look for is the percentage of those who say they have “no opinion” or “do not know.” The more technical the question—for example a question about details of a plan to provide health insurance to the unemployed or about expanding NATO—the higher that percentage should be. You should be especially skeptical about questions where everyone is reported to have an opinion. If you see few or no “no opinions,” a lot of door-step opinions are likely to be mixed in with real opinions.

C. The Paradox of American Opinion on Services and Taxes—A Look at the Federal Budget, Deficits, and the National Debt

Most Americans want government to do more to help with a variety of problems: health care, combating global warming, preserving natural areas and wildlife, helping

college students pay for the ever increasing costs of higher education, better prepare children to compete in the globalized world economy, keep criminals off the street, inspect foods and drugs for safety, keep bridges from falling down and make roads safer, reduce congestion, help train those out of work so they can find new productive jobs, secure our borders, protect us from terrorism, keep the air traffic control system safe along with the planes in the air, prevent recessions and keep inflation and interest rates low, maintain a viable Social Security system for the retired, protect us from predatory lenders when we buy houses or borrow money for education, and on and on and on. You probably want most of these things as well. You might even add to the list with your own ideas about what government should do. For example you might want more funding for public libraries or more money for scientific research.

Every one of these things involves spending more money for equipment, training, bureaucracy, personnel costs, office space, transportation, and oversight to make sure the money is not wasted. Nothing in this list is free.

At the same time, virtually every survey on taxes shows that Americans think taxes are too high. How can this be? How can we say we want more and better services from government and also want lower taxes?

Most Americans have no problem in resolving these paradoxical feelings about services and taxes. However, the way Americans do this is based on unrealistic assumptions and ignorance about the federal budget. Let's start with how most people would resolve these contradictory desires. Do you know what it is? Think a moment before going on to the next paragraph.

Most people say that we can do the things they want by eliminating government waste and programs that are not needed. Let's look at both parts of this assertion. No doubt waste exists. But finding it costs money. You must have investigators to find it.

In fact we do have investigators who work full time finding waste. These investigators work across the national government under the name **Office of Inspector General**. These government investigators uncover waste and mismanagement and their reports lead to corrections. The question is how much more waste would we save by spending more on this kind of activity. Of course we cannot know for sure, but at some point we would spend more than we would save. Finding waste costs money! And if we try to find every dollar that might be wasted, we will waste money trying to find waste! Logically speaking, every dollar spent for investigations that do not find waste is wasted. So we have another you-know-what, that familiar word that starts with a "p!"

The other problem is that waste and unneeded programs are highly subjective. The retired person who worries about her or his Social Security checks might think that helping college students is an example of waste. College students would most likely see that differently. A consumer living in a city might think that government help for farmers who lost crops in a flood is waste. I suspect the farmers would have a different perspective. For most of us, waste and unneeded programs are the things that others

get, while the services we get are needed. Like so many other things in life, finding and eliminating government waste and unneeded programs is highly subjective and involves political struggle. Like beauty, waste is often in the eye of the beholder.

One program that many people see as wasteful and feel, if eliminated, could provide us with more money for services we want is foreign aid. Unfortunately, regardless of the wisdom of reducing or eliminating foreign aid, this proposal is based on ignorance of the federal budget. Foreign aid is a tiny percentage of the national budget, less than 1%! And it has been falling. Back in the 1960s we spent about 3%. So stopping all foreign aid would have virtually no effect on other programs. The national government already spends about six times as much on education as it does on foreign aid.

Where would you save money if you could control the federal budget? To consider this you must understand that the budget is divided into two large categories, discretionary spending and mandatory spending. **Mandatory spending** includes programs where money has to be spent by law because of programs that created governmental obligations. Such programs include unemployment compensation, Medicare and Medicaid, and Social Security, which is the largest single program run by the national government. Sometimes Social Security is not even included in the budget, but it includes about a fourth of all dollars spent by the national government.

One important and growing category under mandatory spending is paying the interest on our national debt. **National debt** is the amount we owe to those who have loaned us money. The debt has been growing. You can go to any of a number of national debt clocks on the Web to find the latest figures. Like a credit card debt, each year we have to pay interest payments on whatever it is. A great deal of our debt is held by foreign countries from whom we import things, like China. They use some of the dollars we pay for the goods to invest in various kinds of U.S. government securities. Debt and the interest we pay on that debt increase each year in which we have a **budget deficit**, which is the amount that we spend over what we receive in taxes in a given year. Interest payments were about 10% of the budget in 2008. That too has been growing. So about one in every ten dollars we spend buys no new services. But we must pay the interest every year. We have no choice if we want other countries to continue to loan us money.

Discretionary spending includes programs that Congress debates and has some control over each year. This category includes the environment, space, education, veterans' benefits, foreign aid, and scientific research. The biggest one is the defense budget. It ran slightly behind Social Security in size until the peak years of the Iraq War, when defense costs, including the cost of the Iraq War, ran about as much as Social Security.

The problem you would have in changing the national budget is that discretionary spending only makes up about a third of all federal spending. And I suspect that you would like to keep most of these programs running.

You can find numerous breakdowns of the current and recent national budgets on the Web. You might take a look and consider where you would make cuts and additions. You should remember that you would have to do a lot of cutting just to balance the budget in most years. If you want to add programs or services, then very additional expenditure means either higher taxes or more debt and higher interest on that debt.

Resolving the paradox of services and taxes is not easy. Perhaps a first step is for citizens to understand that we can't have both more services and lower taxes.

III. Political Socialization—Picking Up Identifications and Opinions

Having discussed how to evaluate surveys of other people's opinions and identifications, let's move the focus back to you. You might start by thinking about the following things: your party identification, your political ideology, your preference or vote in the last presidential election, how you feel about abortion, in particular under what circumstances it should be allowed, whether teachers should lead their students in prayers in public schools, whether you think government should do more about global warming and whether you believe this is a problem, whether evolution should be taught in science classes, whether guns should be licensed or whether certain types of weapons should be banned, whether all Americans should be covered by health insurance, whether capital punishment should continue to be allowed, and whether taxes are too high. The list could go on. These thirteen questions are the topics of many public opinion surveys, and you probably have opinions on most of these issues.

Where did your opinions and identifications on these things come from? Did you figure each one out on your own? Do you know the counterarguments to each of the positions you take on the issues? If you cannot give the counterarguments to each one, the chances are very high that your opinions are not **reasoned opinions**. The chances are high that they came from others. Do you know how your parents feel about these things? Do you know their identifications?

I would venture a guess that on all but a few of these questions, your opinions are virtually the same as those of your parents. And I would also guess that on all but a few of these issues, your parents either agree with each other or else one of your parents does not express an opinion. Finally, I would guess that you are most likely not to have opinions in the areas in which your parents have never expressed an opinion. If this is mostly true, think about whether you have different opinions if you had different parents? If so, does this suggest that you do not really think for yourself? That might be a good topic for a class discussion.

My point is that parents play an important role in the political socialization of children. **Political socialization** is the process by which we learn basic political identities and opinions on issues. But parents are not the only entities that influence

your opinions. To use the political science terminology, parents are not the only **agents of political socialization**. Next we will examine the socialization agents that affect you as you go through life.

A. Early Childhood—Parents

The first authority figures in the lives of most people are their parents. Parents tell us what to do and what not to do. So our first view of authority is parental authority.

Usually at a relatively young age we learn that another authority, the police, can tell the seemingly all-powerful parents what to do. So the police are likely to be the first governmental authorities of whom we become aware. Whether police are seen as good (parents may say something like “if you get lost, ask a police officer for help”) or bad (where parents see police as “corrupt and prejudiced against people like us”) depends on your family’s demographic group. Minorities and the poor are much less likely to have positive views of police authority. But for most middle class families, parents talk about police in a positive way. However, children clearly pick up that mommy and daddy can be afraid of police when they see the flashing blue and red lights behind the family car!

By the early grammar school years you have learned some other things. You become aware that we have a president, another external authority figure. You probably learned the name of the current president. You also heard about one or more of the great presidents, most likely Washington and Lincoln. Children often give the president the same kinds of powers that the police have, to protect us and tell us what to do.

You are also likely to have learned that your family has a political identity in terms of party. You begin to learn that one party is good and the other is bad. I remember being a little confused about this because my parents said we were in one party yet they voted for the presidential candidate of the other party for several elections.

One interesting theory on early political socialization by George Lakoff suggests that we adopt a dominant authority style from our family. Later in life this style has a large influence on our political ideology. We also apply that style to what we look for in political candidates.

One family authority style is the nurturing benevolent leader model. Parents discuss, debate, and explain rather than simply command. The other is the strict leader model. In this model the parents command, saying things like do this “because I said so.” Most families have a mix of these two models, but one usually dominates. You might think about which model was dominant in your own family.

Children assimilate these values in what they seek from leadership and government. Conservatives value strong and decisive leadership that lays down strict codes of behavior while allowing people to sink or swim on their own. Liberals value

nurturing compassionate leadership that helps people discover and reach their full potential with a lot of help and encouragement along the way.

The theory is consistent with survey findings. When researchers ask people what they value in leadership and their ideology, self-identified liberals are more likely to value compassion over strength in choosing leaders. Self-identified conservatives are more likely to value strength over compassion in choosing leaders. So even though you may not know anything about ideology at an early age, some of the values that are the foundation of ideology may come from your early experiences with family authority.

B. Youth—Schools, Peers, and Group Influence

As you move into the school years, other agents of socialization begin to have some effect. Schools themselves start to teach you about government and politics. But what they teach is very limited and avoids controversy.

You learn a few basics about our government—a very few basics, judging from scores I get from students on their American government tests☺! You learn some reverence for the symbols of the nation, like the flag (you remember the daily exercise of saluting and saying the pledge in school assemblies—studies show that even the youngest children in school recognize the American flag and say that it is their “favorite”) and the Constitution (you may have had to memorize the Preamble at some point in your early education). You learn that you have a duty to vote as good citizens. You learn that good citizens obey laws and feel patriotic.

So schools mostly teach us to feel like Americans and to be compliant law-abiding citizens whose only participation involves voting. Most classes avoid controversial topics because such discussions could raise questions about the authority of teachers and could cause parents to complain. If you were lucky, you had one of those rare brave teachers who dared to get you to ask tough questions.

Our experiences with school elections do little beyond this. School elections usually turn into popularity contests, and winning candidates have no power to enact policies that affect the everyday lives of students. This image of popularity seeking candidates who do not keep promises carries over into adult life.

Your peers, or friends, are another agent of political socialization. But their influence is usually limited as well. Preteens usually only have friends chosen by parents. So they come from “good” families, that is, families with values similar to those of the parents. These friends may come from religious groups or neighborhood families, who again are usually similar to your own family. Parents become concerned if you start socializing with the wrong crowd that might have a bad influence on you. When this happens, children may start to pick up values and ideas contrary to those of their family. Sometimes youthful rebellions do lead to a different set of values that last into adulthood, but usually they are just temporary rebellions.

For children who go to college, a new set of agents has some influence on political socialization. Roughly two-thirds of high school graduates go to college, though only about half of them complete their degrees. Therefore the full influence of the college experience does not affect Americans. In addition, many students continue to live at home and work while in college, perhaps attending a technical or community college in which they do little more than attend classes. This also limits the possible influence of college and peers in college as agents of political socialization.

Nevertheless, college has some influence. Because college students are more likely to be exposed to people who are different and more diverse in their backgrounds and because tolerance of diversity is part of the culture on most college campuses, college educated people at least express greater tolerance for people who are different. However, despite the fact that college professors tend to be liberal in their personal political ideology, most of people who have attended college self-identify as ideological moderates. But compared to those with less education, those who have been to college have relatively more self-identified liberals among them.

Those with a graduate degree—about ten percent of the population—are relatively even more liberal. In fact, more people with graduate degrees claim to be liberal than any other ideological identification. This evidence suggests that college has a significant yet modest liberalizing impact on people.

College has a greater impact on your confidence as a citizen. College graduates are more likely to feel they can have an impact on the political system—**political efficacy**. They are more likely to vote, and are less likely to feel that all politics is corrupt than those who do not go to college. You might think about all this as you go back home and talk to old high school friends who did not go to college. Do they seem different in their attitudes and political identifications than your new friends in college?

By the time you leave college, your basic identifications in terms of party and ideology are pretty much set for life. Studies show relatively little change after college, though sometimes a critical election during a crisis can have an impact.

C. Adulthood—Media and Groups

While most of you do not read printed newspapers, you are likely to get some news from the internet, radio, and television. As you leave school and put down roots in a community, you will pay more attention to the news. You will also join more groups, such as civic and professional groups. What you know about politics will increase as you begin to see how government affects your home, your children's education, and your profession. Obviously the media and these groups can have an impact on your political views. But for the most part neither the media nor groups affect our views. Why? The impact of groups is minimal because we tend to join groups with members who are already much like ourselves. The media have minimal impact because we tend to filter out and/or reinterpret news stories with which we disagree, something we will discuss in detail in the next section.

Religious institutions have the potential for a significant effect on our political identification and on issues. About 80% of all Americans say they attend some religious services at least sometime during the year, according to the 2006 General Social Survey data. Almost 40% say they attend services more than once a month. Which religious group you join makes a significant difference. We also need to distinguish among racial groups because religious institutions tend to be segregated along racial lines. As Martin Luther King once said, Sunday morning is the most segregated morning of the week. Evangelical white Protestant churches tend to be heavily Republican. Black Protestants tend to be Democratic. Catholics lean in the Democratic direction but are relatively evenly divided, though Latino Catholics, as well as Jews, are strongly Democratic.

The question about the impact of religious groups is the direction of causality. Do people change as they join a religious group, or do they self-select religious groups that fit their own preconceived opinions? Remembering that most people get their religious identifications from parents strongly suggests that a lot of self-selection is going on here. So while religious institutions may take political positions on the issues of the day, their members already have chosen that institution because they share basic values they mostly inherited from their parents. We might conclude that religious institutions, like the media and other groups, generally reinforce and give guidance on specific issues. They usually do not change our orientations.

IV. The Media—Our Windows to the World

Consider the sources of your information about the world. You may have traveled and seen a number of places, but first-hand experiences do not convey much knowledge beyond your everyday environment. Most of what you know about the world comes in a second-hand way. You learn from acquaintances who share their experiences or from strangers who tell you things through the media. Because we cannot know very much ourselves in a first hand way or even from personal friends and acquaintances we trust, the news media are our windows to see out into the world. Understanding how the media gather information and knowing how to evaluate that information are critical to your ability to see the world in a realistic way.

Let's start with a definition. Media, which comes from the word "medium," refers to something that transmits knowledge or information. So the **news media** are entities that convey information about recent things that are of public interest.

The first important point relates to proper grammar. Media are plural, not singular. So we have many media. This is truer today than ever in the past, despite the fact that many large corporations have bought and put together many different forms of media.

Today we break the news media down into several categories. The print media include newspapers, magazines, and books. The broadcast media refer to television stations and radio. Broadcast media are sometimes seen as part of a larger group of electronic media, which include not only radio and television, but also motion pictures and the newest member of the media, the internet or the web. The web is creating a media revolution because it includes new forms of media, such as blogs, and all older forms of media are beginning to appear on the web.

So when you hear someone say that “the media tries to manipulate us” or something to that effect, you should immediately think of two things. First, this person considered the media to be a single entity (look carefully at the grammar in that statement), when in fact the media are plural.

Second, even if this person knows that media are plural, he or she thinks that the media all act together in the same direction. This assertion is only true in a narrow sense, although it is an important sense. But before we look at media manipulation, we will first look at how the media evolved.

A. Short History of the Media—From Word of Mouth to the Web

Imagine yourself living as a typical American in the 1790s. You probably lived on a farm in a rural area. You probably would have been illiterate. So even if you could get one of the few newsletters or rare newspapers published at the time, you could not read it. Mostly you would have heard rumors and stories from travelers or peddlers who occasionally came by. I have heard it said that a single daily issue of the *N. Y. Times* today has more political information in it than the average farmer back then got in a lifetime. Even if you had lived in a city and were literate, newspapers were few. Many of those newspapers were highly biased because political parties published them. You would have received most of the news second hand in the form of stories overheard in taverns or places of business.

By the 1830s and 1840s significant changes began to take place. Technology drove the first set of changes. The telegraph allowed transmission of news events around the nation almost instantly. New printing techniques allowed newspapers to be printed quickly and cheaply. Expanded public education created a growing number of potential readers among the public. Finally, a new business model enabled publishers to make money by selling newspapers.

This business model had profound implications for political reporting, implications that are still important today. Publishers did not try to make profits from subscriptions, but rather from advertising. So maximizing the audience was extremely important. The larger the audience, the higher the rates for advertising. This relationship dictated that papers had to publish what sells. We shall return to this point shortly.

By the middle 1800s, newspapers across the nation were following this model. They were called the **penny press** because they were sold so cheaply. The idea was to

maximize the number of readers. Newspapers flourished in cities and towns across the nation. In Doris Kearns Goodwin's marvelous book about Lincoln and the powerful politicians he chose for his cabinet, *Team of Rivals*, she quotes a European tourist's comments about the importance of newspapers in American political life in the 1850s. "You meet newspaper readers everywhere; and in the evening the whole city knows what lay twenty-four hours ago on the newspapers' desks...The few who cannot read can hear news discussed or read aloud in ale-and-oyster houses" (p.141).

In seeking larger and larger audiences, newspapers sought stories and styles that made people want to read them. By the late 1800s the dominant style was called "yellow journalism." This name came from a political comic strip printed in color in two such papers in New York City. In the strip the lead character, "the yellow kid," made comments on the local political scene of the day. The nickname came from his yellow pajamas. You can find examples of this strip on the web. **Yellow journalism** emphasized sensationalism, sex, scandal (both real and alleged), violence, crime, and anything that the reader would find exciting. Truth was secondary to audience size. Papers were highly biased and did not distinguish editorial opinion from the reporting of news.

This style was not entirely negative. More responsible variations of yellow journalism did uncover corruption and exploitation in factories and slums and corporate life. The term applied to this variation was **muckraking**, a reference attributed to Teddy Roosevelt, which refers to the use of rakes to remove manure from stables. Muckraking was really the first form of investigative reporting, which continues today. It sometimes led to a sufficient public outcry to bring about important reforms.

By around 1900 some publishers created a new model to appeal to more educated audiences who were seeking more objective reporting. Journalists were also becoming more professional and saw themselves as seekers of truth rather than promoting political positions. The *N. Y Times* was the first major newspaper to adopt this model. It adopted the slogan "all the news that is fit to print" in 1897. This model spread until it became the dominant model for newspapers. Editorial page positions became clearly separated from news reporting.

But the times were changing. Newly invented technologies began to compete with newspapers, technologies that would reach into the rural houses far from cities and towns. Radio began to cover politics in the 1920s. By the 1930s almost every household in the nation had a radio. Newspapers no longer had a monopoly on political coverage.

Technology marched on. By the late 1950s most households had television sets. People could feel they were at events themselves, seeing and hearing all that took place—at least all that the cameras and microphones captured. The networks covered presidential nominating conventions live. Election night broadcasts turned elections into contests with everyone waiting to hear who would be the winner.

Up until 1960 television treated news purely as a public service. News was a kind of “lost leader” that was not expected to make a profit. The purpose of news was to enhance the network’s reputation. The big three networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS, all covered national and international news in fifteen minute broadcasts each evening.

But then something happened that changed the way television corporate executives looked at news departments. The **televised debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy** captured a huge national audience. It was so big that executives concluded that they could sell advertising if news had a more dramatic appeal.

The networks increased the evening news broadcasts to 30 minutes, and devoted another 30 minutes to local news on a local affiliate stations. Competition for audiences increased. By the middle 1960s most Americans were getting most of their information about politics from television. Newspaper readership started to decline, a decline that continues today.

Cable television and then satellite television began to greatly expand the choices people had. Some observers say that by the 1990s **narrowcasting** was replacing broadcasting. Most stations no longer relied on a signal sent from a large tower to people with antennas within range. Even the networks, which had affiliates in most areas of the nation, began to reach people on cables or by satellite dishes. The old model of assuming that the market would be split three ways, with a little competition from the PBS station that sent poor quality signals from a local university, no longer held. Going after a large audience with broadly appealing shows and news programs began to be replaced by programs that looked for a niche, a smaller audience with particular interests and points of view.

The audiences for the three major network evening news programs began to fall. Between 1980 and the early 2000s the audience dropped an average of about a million viewers a year, cutting total viewers in about half (figures from “The State of the News Media, 2007,” downloaded 4/30/2008 at http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2007/narrative_networktv_audience.asp). It was as though an ice cream store with three flavors was now in competition with a store with dozens and even hundreds of flavors.

Television has fought back to retain audiences in several ways, none of which serve the ideal of objective factual journalism. Television began to shift from the traditional “hard news” format to “soft news” formats. This new format mixes entertainment with the news, **infotainment**, and sometimes mixes historical fact with dramatic fiction, **docudramas**.

The digital revolution of the internet and the World Wide Web only furthered the narrowcasting model. Web pages and blogs with political news are now replacing television as the primary source of news for young people, a trend that will increase as the younger generation grows older. Anyone can get the news with any slant they want,

so people can select a source that fits their own biases. Newspapers, which have been declining in numbers for decades, are attempting to survive by adapting themselves to the internet. A few have gone entirely electronic. As mobile devices connected via satellite or cell phone become more widely available and less expensive, this trend will continue.

The problem news consumers have today is too many choices rather than too few. In a sense the new world of news via the web is somewhat like living in a city in the days of yellow journalism. While people have a lot of choices, many of the sources are likely to be heavily biased and slanted. The ethics of professionalism that arose in the newspaper industry are not necessarily relevant to many of the web sources out there. Anyone with any background can set up a website or blog and instantly spread their own versions of the truth around the world.

B. Media Bias

We have all heard the charge that the media are biased. People are usually thinking about ideological bias when they level such charges. But another kind of bias might also exist. This bias comes from the economic model upon which the news business rests. A third bias results from the national culture in which the media operate. Let's look at each possible kind of bias.

1. Ideological and/or Partisan Bias—Psychological Defenses

What is interesting about the charge that the media have an ideological bias is that every ideological perspective sees bias against their own ideology and in favor of other ideologies. Conservatives think that the media have a liberal bias. Liberals think that the media have a conservative bias. Libertarians see a bias against the libertarian view, and so on.

Interestingly, each perspective has some supporting evidence from scholarly studies. More reporters are liberal in their own personal political orientation than any other ideology and vote for Democrats more than Republicans. On the other hand, more newspapers endorse conservative and usually Republican candidates than Democratic or liberal candidates. Newspapers as well as television networks are hesitant to criticize the corporations that advertise in them, suggesting a pro-business bias. Libertarians complain that their candidates get practically no coverage in the media.

I have had classes of students do analysis of all campaign stories on the three major networks and of major newspapers for three months preceding a presidential election to see if the stories were biased in favor of one candidate or the other. We classified each story by type. For example, some stories were about issues, others were about personality, and others, the most numerous, were "horse race" stories. **Horse race stories** refer to stories that are about who is ahead and who is behind, in effect, how they are running, about campaign tactics and strategy. We also classified each story as favorable, neutral, or unfavorable about whatever candidate was covered in the

story. Interestingly, the dominance of horse race stories meant that the overall balance hurt the candidate who was running behind and favored the candidate who was running ahead—regardless of the media source. So we found no ideological bias.

Other studies show that most citizens feel the media influence other people, but of course not themselves. The second half of this rather arrogant assertion is correct. Most people immunize themselves from media influence in two ways. First, they filter out stories that do not fit their preconceptions by simply not reading or watching them. You can usually quickly tell from the first few words of a story whether it fits your preconceptions. This tendency, well documented in psychology, is called **selective exposure**.

Second, if we do pay attention to a story that presents evidence contrary to our opinions, we tend to reinterpret it so that it does fit our preexisting opinions. This is called **selective perception**. For example, if we disagree with a story that favorably treats a candidate we dislike, we might interpret that story as an example of how the media are biased. Nothing is new about this human tendency. For example, in the famous Nixon-Kennedy televised debates in 1960, Kennedy supporters saw a young energetic man who was not in awe of a sitting vice president. Nixon supporters saw a brash and inexperienced young man who did not show proper respect for a sitting vice president.

Do you think that selective exposure and selective perception apply to you? Do you pick sources for news whose editorial positions fit your own predispositions? Do you tend to skip stories that seem to disagree with your positions? If you do read such stories, how do you go about interpreting it? These would all be good questions for a class discussion or an essay.

2. Structural Bias—Run What Sells

While any ideological bias that exists in news reporting has minimal effects on most people, **structural bias**, the bias that comes from the business structure of media companies, has a more significant impact. Earlier we noted that the news business is just that, a business, and that revenues are based on audience size that generates advertising revenue. So the name of the game is to maximize audience.

All media choose news stories that they think will appeal to the public, stories that are **newsworthy**. Newsworthy stories have several characteristics. They need to be dramatic, involve familiar faces and places or be highly unusual, and, of course, be current, that is, new. Dramatic is the key ingredient. Conflict, violence, and an uncertain outcome make stories dramatic. If you consider these factors, you see why campaign stories about the horse race between two desperate candidates trying to do whatever they can to gain advantage are far more newsworthy than stories about the details of policy proposal differences.

I remember that some years ago, my son was a participant in an All-County Middle School Band concert. As we arrived we saw a local television news team. I happened to know the reporter and said that I was glad to see them covering the concert. The reporter replied, "What concert?" The news team was there to cover the search for illegal drugs. They had good footage of the dogs sniffing around school lockers. They found no drugs, but it was still a good story. You know why, of course. It involved a familiar local place in an unusual situation—drugs in a middle school. They had good pictures with action in them, a must for a newsworthy television story. I told the reporter that he had an opportunity there to cover something positive, children who had worked hard to achieve musical skills, and that story would have good video as well as sound. They filmed some of the concert. So that night my son eagerly watched the late evening news. Leading story? The drug "non-bust," of course! He waited and waited for his story. After the sports and weather, in the last minute of the broadcast, the story finally came. It was a good-feelings closer that went something like this. "Oh, by the way, the county held its all-county band concert tonight, and here is a bit of it" as they showed the credits. My son was shown playing his instrument for about a half second. He was happy—a moment of fame. But the viewers, if they stayed tuned in that long, probably came away with a different impression of the local schools from the news program than my son did.

The result of this structural bias is that we tend to see politics as a competitive game where people do whatever they can to get ahead. Politics becomes reality television. We rarely admire the characters, though we may be impressed by their cunning and savvy. This gives us a very negative view of politics: politics is almost always dirty, and politicians are desperate to get power by any means possible.

This observation results in one more paradox. The news media effort to attract people to political news causes people to dislike political news. Perhaps we watch and read and listen for the same reasons we consume horror movies, the thrill of being shocked with no real danger to ourselves. Shock value sells, or to use the well-known saying about news stories, "if it bleeds, it leads."

Who is to blame for this situation? We complain about not having more stories on issues, but we love to watch the dirt. If we really wanted more stories about issues, we would seek out those stories and the news media business would give us more of these stories. Structural bias gives us what sells, so in effect we have only ourselves to blame. Nevertheless, if you really want in-depth coverage of issues, you can certainly find it both on the Web and in such television news shows as Public Broadcasting's "Evening News Hour" or Public Radio's "All Things Considered."

You might look at a current paper on the Web and figure out why different stories are considered newsworthy. What are their characteristics? Why do some get better placement than others?

3. Sociocentric Bias

Media tend to select and view news stories through the value framework of the society in which the media operate—**sociocentric bias**. We recognize this when we look at foreign media, but usually fail to see it in our own nation's media.

We see the much of the foreign press as anti-American because they often present stories in ways that raise questions about American motives. They often view us as hypocritical selfish bullies who throw our military might around killing innocents to protect access to resources so that we can continue to excessively consume, all the while polluting the environment. On the other hand, because American audiences overwhelming have a positive view of their nation, Americans do not recognize that the American media shape stories that portray the nation in positive ways, downplaying failures and mistakes.

For example, in the initial coverage of the Iraq War that began in 2003, American media gave little to no coverage to questions about the evidence leaders used to justify the war, little coverage to Iraqi civilian suffering, and little coverage to the mistreatment of those imprisoned and harshly interrogated. The emphasis was on our brave troops. That is certainly what American audiences wanted to see and hear. The foreign press focused on the just the opposite, and more frequently used terms like “torture” rather than “interrogation,” playing to what their audiences wanted to hear. Even as the invasion was beginning, the European press asked many more questions about the impact on the Iraqi civilian population than did the American press. Why? First, European public opinion did not support the Iraq War. Second, they had a different historical perspective. They had experienced what it was like to be in a place that was invaded during WWII. Even liberators inadvertently hurt and kill noncombatant civilians. We had not had this experience.

A much less serious example would be to compare how the media from different nations cover the Olympics. Each nation's media give the most coverage to the sports in which their nation's athletes do well.

Structural bias has an impact on sociocentric bias. The media choose stories and shape them in ways that the audience will find interesting and which fit their values. Failing to do so loses audience.

Considering these tendencies, we might wonder if complete objectivity possible? At least for a single or even several media outlets in one nation, the answer is clearly no. They cannot possibly cover more than a tiny portion of all events in the world. The media cannot show all the different points of view, each of which may have some element of truth to it. If you really want to seek the truth, you need to recognize sociocentric bias and examine a wide variety of other points of view. The first step is to know that they exist.

C. Media Impact on Public Opinion

Despite the fact that we are resistant to changing our opinions about issues that are important to us or changing identifications that are products of early socialization, opinion does sometimes change on important matters. The media can and do play a role in this change.

Consider opinions about homosexuality. Prior to the mid 1970s, most Americans saw homosexuality as abnormal, as a disease to be treated. But since then opinions have changed dramatically. Even though that change has been slow and is still continuing, the trend is clear. Most Americans see homosexuality as a trait that people are born with and not something to be treated as a disease. News stories now treat stories about gays more as civil rights stories (“gay rights”) and virtually never as disease stories. Not surprisingly, young people have changed their views more than the older people, in part because young peoples’ views were not as well-formed when media coverage of “gay issues” began to change. The media have also played a significant role in changes in views about the role of women in society and the place of minorities in American life.

1. Agenda Setting—What We Think About

Those who study the media often observe that while the media do not determine what we think, they do determine what we think about—**agenda setting**. That is, the media bring issues and questions to our attention and these are the things we think about from day to day. If the question endures and catches the public’s imagination, policymakers may begin to pay attention and feel they should address the problem.

For example, investigative reporting of how the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) mishandled Hurricane Katrina led policymakers to do their own investigations and then take action in reforming that agency. Some agency leaders lost their jobs. In the 1960s the media gave much coverage to civil rights demonstrations and the violent reaction of local authorities in how they treated peaceful demonstrators in the South. These highly newsworthy stories awakened the nation to the inconsistency between our official value of equal treatment and the actual treatment of African Americans. Media coverage helped get civil rights on the issue agenda.

2. Framing—Context of a Story Influences Our Reaction

The context of the story refers to its **framing**, or how a story is presented. Framing suggests ways in which we can understand the story. For example, suppose the media present a story on criticisms of a political leader as part of a concerted political attack by partisan opponents to gain advantage. Framed as a partisan attack, citizens are likely to discount the attack and not allow it to influence their evaluations of that political leader. This is one explanation as to why President Clinton’s popularity ratings remained high even when he was defending himself in the impeachment and trial proceedings in 1998.

Politicians understand the importance of framing. So they put a lot of effort into influencing how the media frame stories. Sometimes politicians are successful. For example, in the 2004 presidential campaign, the Bush reelection team was successful in framing the Iraq War as part of the war on terrorism to keep us from being attacked at home. The Kerry campaign would have preferred to frame the war as a question of whether the Bush administration planned and managed the war competently.

The media tendency to present most campaign stories into the “horse race” mold can be seen as another example of framing and how the structural bias of the media pushes them to frame stories in the most dramatic way. Sadly for voters who want to understand issues and differences, this tendency pushes policy differences into the background.

You might take a look at some current news stories or political campaigns and see how the media frame them.

3. Long-Term Effects—Media Reliance on Elite Opinion

Some of those who study the media have observed that the media are highly dependent on elite opinion in almost all of their stories. Some of this elite opinion is from government sources, but not all. Any good reporter goes to policy experts outside of government to either verify or contradict what the government is saying. Some of the worst reporting in the history of American journalism can be attributed to relying only on official government sources (early reporting on the Vietnam War and the second Iraq War).

Nongovernment experts and what they say have a great impact on how the media frame stories and on the content of the stories. In turn, these stories can have a great impact on public opinion. If elite and expert opinion is in agreement on some issue, the public begins to shift in that direction.

Take opinion on gay rights, our earlier example. What happened in the 1970s that caused opinions to start to shift? In 1974 the American Psychological Association issued a statement that homosexuality was not a disease to be treated. Rather, it was a natural predisposition. Virtually all experts agreed. The media began to frame stories on homosexuality as civil rights stories rather than disease stories.

On the other hand, if experts disagree, then public opinion does not change very much. Interest groups that have an invested interest will go great lengths to try to create doubt and controversy in expert opinion. Tobacco interests were able to do this for decades by sponsoring their own studies and funding their own experts after the rest of the scientific community had concluded that smoking caused cancer.

Who the elites are makes a difference in the impact they have on opinion. Citizens use short-cuts to evaluate elite opinions they hear in the news. Citizens are most likely to adopt positions taken by those they like and respect, or those who share

some common characteristic with themselves. For example, popular presidents are more likely to be believed than unpopular ones—part of the president's "power to persuade," if you remember that idea. Well-known and respected news commentators will have a greater impact on opinions than average reporters. (I would note that with the movement toward narrowcasting and decline of the major networks, no commentators today have anything close to the credibility or status that Walter Cronkite had in the 1960s and 70s.) Celebrities have more influence than average people who sometimes get interviewed. Experts from major research institutions or prominent universities can have significant influence. Whites are more likely to believe statements about improving race relations coming from white commentators than from African American commentators, and visa versa. Republicans are more likely to be influenced by statements from prominent Republicans, and Democrats by Democrats.

Which citizens are most likely to change their opinions? Those who do not have well-formed opinions are more likely to be influenced. Therefore, young people who are still forming their opinions are more likely to change views than adults who have well-formed opinions. So the young are more likely to embrace racial equality, feminist views on sexism in our society, gay rights, environmental values, and so on.

V. Policy Implications

Our ignorance about politics, our mostly unreasoned opinions, and the sensational superficial media coverage of political news have profound impacts on public policy in the United States. Because we rarely look beyond immediate headlines and problems, we miss important long-term problems until they reach some climax. At that point, it may be too late to avoid a disaster.

In addition, how the media cover long-term problems may cause great misperceptions about the problem. This creates public confusion. Many people just throw up their hands and do not even try to form a reasoned opinion.

Political leaders have little incentive to focus on long-term problems in such an environment of opinion. Addressing a long-term problem has no political payoff and a lot of political risk when voters do not understand or care about something that does not yet affect their daily lives.

On the other hand, when the media do cover long-term problems in a concerted and dramatic way, leaders feel they must respond. Wise leaders can exploit the media desire for drama and well-socialized cultural values to gain popular support for policy proposals.

At the same time, fear of public outrage can have a braking effect on what leaders feel they are able to do. So public opinion can both empower leaders to act and limit leader actions. To illustrate these implications, we shall examine two policy areas.

A. Environment and Global Warming

Scientists have been doing research on global warming for many years. By about 2000 the scientific community reached a consensus that global warming was real and that it would likely have profound implications for life on earth. Much less agreement exists about the precise nature, timing, and extent of these implications.

The public became aware of the reality and size of the problem around 2006 with the widespread publicity of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, a movie that was really a narrated Power Point show. For publicizing the problem, Gore received a Nobel Peace prize in 2007. After denying that this was a problem for most of his presidency, President George W. Bush finally acknowledged the problem in 2007 and announced some token steps to address it, steps that fell far short of what scientists said was necessary. Estimates are that dramatic changes need to take place to even slow the warming trend, changes that not only stop the increase in greenhouse gas emissions, but steps that reduce emissions somewhere in the range of at least half. However, the longer we wait to take action, the more dramatic the necessary changes will become.

If you look at **media coverage of global warming**, even when this text was being written in mid 2008, you might draw a very different conclusion about the problem. The media tend to see **balanced coverage** as giving two sides to almost any question equal coverage, even if one side clearly has overwhelming scientific evidence in its favor.

Scientific research published in peer-reviewed journals, that is, research that was judged to be well done in following the required scientific steps, all support the conclusion of a warming trend related to human carbon emissions. Yet almost every time the media reported on this, they found some skeptic to give a contrary view, even if the view was not based on recognized science. The skeptic is often supported by interest groups with a financial stake in continuing to rely on carbon-based fuels. They fund research for the purpose of raising doubts just as did tobacco companies in funding research to raise doubts about the link between smoking and cancer. I did a web search on this as I was writing this section, and found many sources that question global warming, seeing it as a myth. Some see global warming as part of a conspiracy. Some use the illogical argument of in effect saying, prove that there is not a conspiracy. The point is that these sources fall short of well-established standards of science, so objectively speaking, they should carry very little weight.

The way the media have reported on global warming has certainly increased public awareness that a problem may exist, but has confused the public about the scientific consensus that exists. That confusion gave political leaders a free pass to ignore the problem for a long time or respond to it in symbolic words rather than real actions.

The public seems unaware of how global warming is related to other issues. Take for example energy usage and our reliance on carbon-based fuels like gasoline.

The United States produces the greatest amount of greenhouse gas per capita in the world. A significant part of this comes from burning gasoline in our automobiles.

We can reduce gasoline consumption by improving gas mileage. But people are unwilling to buy more fuel efficient cars as long as they can afford gasoline. However, as gasoline prices have risen, the outcry has not been to demand that automakers produce all-electric cars and more really efficient hybrids. Rather, many in the public demand that we find more oil and/or lower our gasoline taxes that are already very low compared to the highly taxed gasoline in most of the rest of the world.

Finding more oil, even if that would decrease reliance on foreign oil (a proposition that many economists find doubtful), creates two problems (not counting potential environmental problems with the drilling process). First, it might lower the price of gasoline (many economists find this doubtful as well). Lower prices would discourage conservation and movement toward alternative energy sources. Second, if we find oil and turn it into gas, someone will burn it. Burning gasoline is precisely what we want to discourage if we want to slow or reverse global warming (not to mention have cleaner air for public health reasons).

If we really want to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and decrease dependence on foreign oil (which ties us to many awful governments in the world that provide us with our “fix” on gasoline), we need higher gasoline taxes, not lower taxes. These taxes could go into the new technologies that will help us lead the world in the transition from a carbon-based energy system to more environmentally friendly systems. If we lead that change as we led the computer revolution of the 1980s and 90s, it could be the economic engine for our economy. Moreover, this change would have the side benefit of ending the drain of American dollars to foreign oil-producing nations.

While many of the details of these policy options are subject to debate, the point is that global warming is related to many other issues in ways that most Americans do not perceive. These other issues are critical to our economy, our health, and military security. We cannot even begin that debate until the larger public becomes aware of all the connections. So, in a very real sense, our ignorance about these things endangers the very future of this republic. This is exactly what Ben Franklin worried about in 1787.

B. Foreign and Defense Policy

What factors explain the foreign policy and defense policy of the United States over history? Certainly many factors have played important roles, and these factors have changed over time. A thorough analysis of all these factors would require years of study. They are the stuff of many different undergraduate and graduate college courses. So what we will do here is necessarily very superficial.

A very good American government text I used for many years attempted to explain much of our foreign and defense policy in terms of a belief that the United States was vulnerable to outside forces (Alan R. Gitelson, Robert L. Dudley, Melvin J.

Dubnick, *American Government*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008). Fears of vulnerability to Native Americans, European colonial powers, fascism, Communism, nuclear attack, immigrants, and terrorists have all played important roles in driving our foreign and defense policies.

However, other factors like the desire for economic markets, corporate profits, and idealistic goals for expanding freedom and democracy have also played roles in driving foreign and defense policies. Some people, especially those in other nations, focus on the more selfish factors and see the United States as an imperialist nation driven by corporate greed. Others both here and abroad see the United States as naïve “do-gooders” who think they can transform other nations to little American-style democracies. We end up getting bogged down in long hopeless conflicts when the natives have other ideas. The truth involves all these factors and more.

The three subjects of this chapter—public opinion, how we are socialized to think about the United States and the world, and how the media cover our policies—have always played important roles in foreign and defense policy. Of course, in a democratic republic, public perceptions should play an important role. Let’s look at how these factors have shaped major trends in our foreign and defense policy.

Public opinion seems to swing in moods, back and forth, supporting involvement with the world and then moving back in the direction of ignoring the world—**isolationism**. For more than the first century of our history, the dominant mood was one of isolationism, tempered only by a strong public sentiment that our nation was destined to expand to the Pacific Ocean, the idea of **manifest destiny**. Heaven help anyone or anything in our way, whether they were buffalo or Native Americans or Mexicans. The Mexican-American War of 1846-8 expanded United States boundaries to include what became the states of California, Arizona, and New Mexico, as well as adding Texas, which had fought its own successful war for independence. Those who opposed this war saw it as a naked land grab and as an effort to expand slavery to the west. The U.S. government jailed famous author Henry David Thoreau for refusing to pay taxes to support the war. Thoreau authored his famous essay “Civil Disobedience” to justify his actions. Despite this, public opinion supported the war on the grounds of manifest destiny.

We pursued a policy of isolationism mainly with respect to European nations, fearing that involvement in their wars would distract and weaken us during this period of expansion. One of the earliest debates was whether we should side with France in its war with Great Britain in the 1790s. The Federalists won that debate, and we stayed out of that war. George Washington’s farewell address when he left the White House was to warn us to avoid “entangling alliances” with the rest of the world. The **Monroe Doctrine** of 1823 declared that all of the Americas (North, Central, and South) were no longer open to European colonization.

Public support for isolationism was a major barrier to our entry into both of the world wars. President Wilson won re-election in 1916 on the boast that he had kept us

out of war. President Franklin Roosevelt's efforts to come to the aid of Great Britain and France before our entry in the Second World War were opposed by **the "America First" movement**. This powerful interest group opposed American involvement in WWII because they saw the war as none of our business, as a European matter. This view echoed Washington's call to stay out of alliances with European powers.

You already know that Americans are socialized to be very patriotic. When a political leader takes a dramatic action in defense of the United States, all of our socialization moves us to support that action and the leader who was bold enough to act. Those who study public opinion call this the **rally-round-the-flag effect**. Presidents ordering military actions, the spilling of American blood, and certainly attacks on our citizens, all trigger this effect. Of course the media always give such dramatic events a great deal of coverage because they are "newsworthy."

The Founding Fathers were also aware of this tendency and feared that a president might use military action to build personal power. In order to limit the ability of presidents to get us into wars, they gave the **power to declare war to Congress, not to the president**. Nevertheless, presidents have been so successful getting around this restriction that most Americans, including most students, think that the president has the power to declare war. Legally and constitutionally speaking this is wrong, though in a practical sense presidents can start wars that Congress has little choice but to support.

Despite our long-term tendency to be isolationist, presidents down through history have overcome our isolationist tendencies and rallied support for military action, usually after some kind of attack or perceived threat of attack. Wilson was able to get us involved in the First World War after German submarines sunk American ships. Franklin Roosevelt had public opinion behind him following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. President Lyndon Johnson got support for military escalation in Vietnam following claims that two U.S. Navy destroyers were twice attacked in the Tonkin Gulf off the coast of North Vietnam. We now know that the first attack was only after provocation and the second never took place at all. And we know that Johnson knew this. President George W. Bush gained nearly unanimous support from both the public and Congress immediately following the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001. Once the nation or its armed forces have been attacked, Congress feels great political pressure to give the president either a declaration of war or a resolution short of a declaration that allows the president to take a wide range of military actions to defend the nation and its armed forces. The media, which could play a role in raising questions about sometimes dubious claims and charges, usually play right along with public opinion (sociocentric bias).

Sometimes the media have purposefully aroused public opinion in favor of military action. The most obvious case of this was the Spanish-American War of 1896-8. William Randolph Hearst, publisher of a major New York newspaper, ordered a photographer to go get pictures of the war in Cuba, then a Spanish colony—before it broke out! The photographer replied that he thought there would be no war. Allegedly, Hearst said "You supply the pictures and I will supply the war." The sinking of the

American battleship "The Maine" cinched the deal for public opinion. The United States quickly defeated Spanish forces and took over Puerto Rico and Guam, which became United States territories, as well as Cuba and the Philippines, both of which eventually became independent.

Following most of our military actions, the public mood usually shifts back in the direction of isolationism. For example, following the First World War isolationism won out. Isolationism foiled Woodrow Wilson's best efforts to rally public support for entry into the League of Nations to create an international framework to prevent future wars.

However, the end of the Second World War was different. Our split with our wartime ally the Soviet Union, as it gobbled up land previously held by Nazi Germany and set up puppet governments, ultimately led to the longest war in American history, the **Cold War**. It is called the Cold War because we never had a direct shooting confrontation with the Soviet Union. Rather, we and our allies, organized into the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** (NATO), had a number of smaller wars with smaller states that were supported by the Soviet Union as well as its other major Communist partner and sometimes competitor, the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Korean War may be the best example of this. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. followed a strategy of **containment** to prevent further expansion of the Soviet Empire. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Cold War was that President Truman was able to build support for it without any direct attack on American forces.

The Cold War, lasting from 1947 until 1989 (the year the Berlin wall fell), was fought on many fronts. The economic aspect of the war initially involved the **Marshall Plan**, an effort to help the nations of Europe rebuild after the devastation of the Second World War. The idea was that economic prosperity would prevent people from turning to the false but appealing promises of communism. That part of the policy was very successful. Ultimately the economies of western European democracies became much stronger than any of the nations under Soviet control. This contributed to the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The military side of the Cold War was only somewhat successful. We fought to a stalemate in Korea, at a considerable cost in lives and fortune. Vietnam was a rather clear failure for two major reasons. First, we failed to recognize that it involved nationalism more than communism. Second, the pro-American government we supported there had little support from the general population outside the cities. Ultimately, that government was unable to defend itself from Vietnamese revolutionary forces without massive American military help. More than 58,000 American soldiers died in that failed and foolish conflict.

The new military element in the Cold War was nuclear weapons. This new and frightening technology had a profound effect on all aspects of the conflict and remains a major concern in American foreign and defense policy today. For a while after World War Two the United States had a nuclear monopoly. That is, we were the only nation with the weapons, or the only nation with significant numbers of weapons. That enabled

us to use nuclear weapons to threaten our enemies, a strategy called **massive retaliation**. President Eisenhower used that threat to force a cease-fire in Korea.

However, that monopoly began to erode. Following the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, in which we forced the Soviet Union to withdraw nuclear missiles from Cuba because they were badly outgunned in terms of the number of weapons, the Soviets engaged in a massive nuclear arms build-up. We matched that buildup. Both sides built far more weapons than either needed to destroy the other. We could no longer use the weapons to threaten the other side because they had a lot of weapons as well. As a result, the only purpose of the weapons was to deter the other side from using them. Thus our nuclear strategy was transformed from Massive Retaliation to what was called **Mutually Assured Destruction**, or MAD for short. Public opinion generally supported building these weapons because of fear of the Soviet Union.

But the madness of MAD did begin to have a toll on public opinion. Ultimately, MAD involved an inescapable paradox. The purpose of the weapons was not to use them. If they had to be used, then they had failed.

MAD also led to many difficult questions. How many weapons did we really need? At what cost? Moreover, expensive new technologies (MIRV, Star Wars, and Cruise Missiles, for example—you might look them up on the web) did not seem to make us any safer.

By the 1980s a significant number of Americans, including many experts, began to call for a nuclear freeze, stopping the building of more weapons. Under considerable pressure, President Reagan, who had opposed strategic arms limitations talks (SALT), began to pursue his own negotiations with the Soviets under a different name, the strategic arms reduction talks (START).

Ultimately, under great economic strain, the Soviet Union broke up in 1991. We and Russia (the largest remaining part of the old USSR) reached nuclear arms agreements. This led to significant reductions in weapons. The process of negotiating these agreements continues on to this day, regardless of who is in the White House.

The greatest fears of nuclear weapons today are tied to fears of **nuclear proliferation**. We are concerned that the spreading of nuclear weapons might allow terrorists to obtain crude weapons or smaller nations to gain weapons and use them against neighbors. A small nuclear war could lead to a big war that would likely end life as we know it on this planet.

Presidents are able to rally the nation around dramatic events behind a policy for only a limited amount of time if that policy does not yield at least some observable success. In this situation, public opinion can have a braking effect on political leaders.

For example, after several years of failed promises of progress in Vietnam, public opinion turned against the war. Once that happened, the press began to ask hard

questions and political leaders began to search for a way out. The same thing happened in the second Iraq War, the longest shooting war in American history, a war that was supposed to only last a few months and pay for itself with Iraq's oil revenue. On the other hand, the public may continue to support a difficult war and make great sacrifices if the president can make the case that national survival is clearly at stake, as was the case in the Civil War and World War Two.

The nation will be faced with crises in the future. Asking tough questions before we rally around some military adventure in an emotional display of patriotism might be wise if we want to preserve our republic. As we learned in Vietnam and Iraq, we do not have unlimited numbers of troops who are willing to die. We do not have an unlimited fortune that we can spend on military actions without eroding our national physical and human infrastructure, including transportation and communication and human services, education, and scientific research investments. Is the cause vital enough to go it alone in unilateral action and risk our health and wealth? Are you willing to die? Or suffer a lower standard of living?

An educated citizenry should ask these questions. We should want the media to ask these questions to independent nongovernment experts, and we should insist that those running for office answer these questions before we give them our votes. Old Ben Franklin might also want us to teach our children to ask these questions as well, not just blindly follow their parents, their peers, or the political leaders of this democratic republic.

Afterword

A few days after I finished the first draft of this text I visited a museum exhibition at the Columbia, S.C. Museum of Art, "Excavating Egypt: Great Discoveries." The artifacts were interesting, but the notes on the civilizations from which they came really fascinated me.

These early civilizations, dating as far back as five thousand years or so, lasted for thousands of years. Judging from the rituals the people followed and things they created, including the great burial grounds of stone and pyramids, these ancient peoples deeply believed that they had achieved lasting greatness. I am sure that they believed as much as we believe today that their civilization was the pinnacle of human achievement. Yet today all we have to remember them by are ruins and fragments.

Our republic may be the most powerful nation that ever existed. But what will it look like to those who view our fragments in museums thousands of years from now? Will those museum visitors be our descendents living in a continuation of our republic or people of another great civilization? Of course I am assuming that humankind will still be around to look at artifacts. Will we last as long as the great Egyptian civilizations? We have a long way to go to match their longevity, having not yet reached the 250 year mark.

Each generation has the responsibility to help keep the republic that Ben Franklin and the other Founders gave us. Franklin only lived a few years after he told us in 1787 that he and the other Founders had given us a republic. If any generation fails, we will be relegated to be someone's museum display. Our republic will seem as irrelevant to those who view us as mummy masks of Egypt seem to us today. One colossal failure or a series of small failures may lead to irreversible decline. It is as simple as that.

Most texts have some kind of concluding chapter. I gave a great deal of thought to what kind of conclusion this text might have. Honestly, the real conclusion for keeping our republic has little to do with any words I can write. The real conclusion cannot be written, but rather it is how you will live. It is whether you cherish and protect our freedoms when they are under assault. It is whether you really think about political questions and identities or just play follow-the-leader. It is whether you are willing to sacrifice your own narrow present self-interest for the future of those who have no vote because they are not yet alive to vote. It is whether you understand that not everyone wants to be just like us or just assume that we should impose our values and ways of doing things on other civilizations. It is whether we recognize the limits of our power and influence or overextend our finite resources, as have so many other great civilizations that are now gone. It is whether you make sacrifices so that future generations will have their chance to preserve—and improve—our republic.

Many of the basic paradoxes of American government and politics will remain unresolved because they may be impossible to resolve. Understanding these paradoxes will help us as citizens and future leaders to ask the right questions about present and future challenges.

One challenge will remain the same. The future of our republic is up to the next generation—you. I and my generation will be gone within a few short decades.

KEY TERMS AND IDEAS

survey population
random sample
1936 *Literary Digest* survey
straw polls
sampling error
exit poll
socially desirable answers
push poll
door-step opinions
Office of Inspector General
mandatory spending
national debt

budget deficit
discretionary spending
reasoned opinions
political socialization
agents of political socialization
political efficacy
News media
penny press
yellow journalism
muckraking
the 1960 televised debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy
narrowcasting
infotainment
docudramas
horse-race stories
selective exposure
selective perception
structural bias
newsworthy
sociocentric bias
agenda setting
framing
media coverage of global warming
balanced coverage
isolationism
Manifest Destiny
The Monroe Doctrine
The “America First” movement
rally-round-the-flag effect
power to declare war
Cold War
North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)
containment
Marshall Plan
Massive Retaliation
Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)
nuclear proliferation

Possible Internet Exercises

1. Search the web for some political public opinion survey results. Evaluate the quality of a survey. What was the sample size and how was it selected? Do you see anything in the question wording that suggests wording bias? Did the answers exclude those who did not have opinions?

2. Locate the Office of Inspector General on the web. Use your own words to describe what this office does.
3. Search the web to find the current sizes of the most recent annual deficit and the national debt. Be careful because the debt can be measured in several ways.
4. Find the major spending categories in the national budget for the last fiscal year. How would you change spending if you could?
5. Find an example of the “yellow kid” political comic strip. What kind of comments does “the kid” make?
6. Look at a current newspaper on the web and evaluate two stories in term of the qualities that make them “newsworthy.”
7. Look at a current news story from some web source and describe how it is “framed.”