

Chapter Seven

Public Opinion

What is Public Opinion?

- **Public opinion:** How people think or feel about particular things
- Not easy to measure
- The opinions of active and knowledgeable people carry more weight

How Polling Works

- Pollsters need to pose reasonable questions that are worded fairly
- They have to ask people about things for which they have some basis to form an opinion

Random Sampling

- Random sampling is necessary to insure a reasonably accurate measure of how the entire population thinks or feels
- For populations over 500,000, pollsters need to make about 15,000 phone calls to reach 1,065 respondents, insuring the poll has a sampling error of only +/- 3%

How Opinions Differ

- **Opinion saliency:** some people care more about certain issues than other people do
- **Opinion stability:** the steadiness or volatility of opinion on an issue
- **Opinion-policy congruence:** the level of correspondence between government action and majority sentiment on an issue

Political Socialization

- **Political socialization:** the process by which personal and other background traits influence one's views about politics and government
- Family: Party identification of your family is absorbed, although children become more independent-thinking with time
- Religion: Families form and transmit political beliefs through their religious tradition

The Gender Gap

- Men have become increasingly Republican since the mid-1960s
- Women have continued to identify with the Democratic Party at approximately the same rate since the early 1950s
- This reflects attitudinal differences between men and women about the size of government, gun control, social programs, and gay rights

Table 7.3: The Gender Gap: Differences in Political Views of Men and Women

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Issue	Men	Women
Federal spending for welfare programs should be increased.	8%	14%
Abortion should be permitted by law.	57	60
Sexual harassment is a very serious problem in the workplace.	24	38
This country would be better off if we just stayed home and did not concern ourselves with problems in other parts of the world.	24	29
Generally speaking, I think of myself as a Democrat.	32	44
The United States should increase defense spending.	37	26
The United States should increase spending on solving the problems of the homeless.	51	63
Ban all handguns except for the police.	33	58

Source: ICPSR American National Election Survey, 1996. Pre- and Post-Election Surveys.

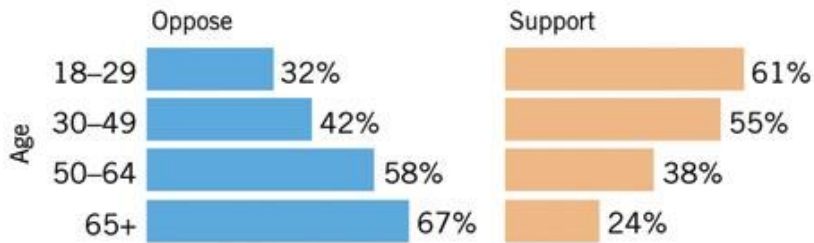
Education

- From 1920s through 1960s, studies showed a college education had a liberalizing effect, possibly because of exposure to liberal elites
- Contemporary college students' opinions are more complicated

Figure 7.1: Generational Gaps on the Issues

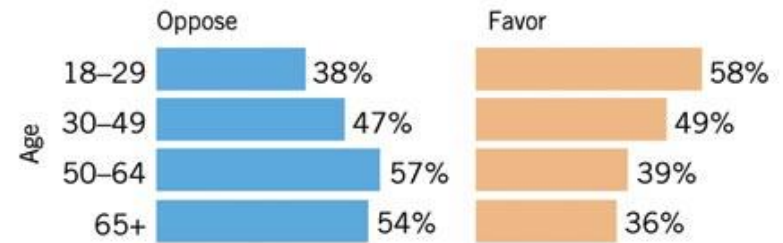
Social Security

Would you support or oppose a plan in which people who chose could invest some of their Social Security contribution in the stock market?



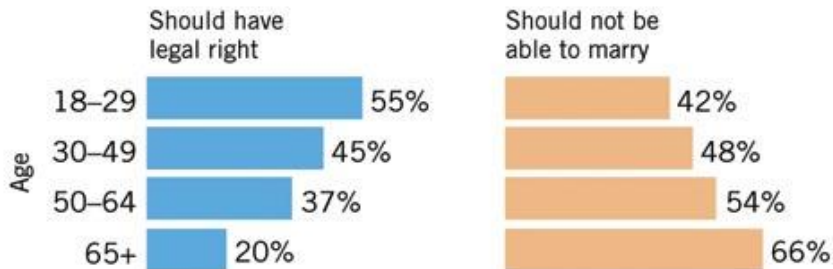
School Vouchers

Do you favor or oppose providing parents with tax money in the form of school vouchers to help pay for their children to attend private or religious schools?



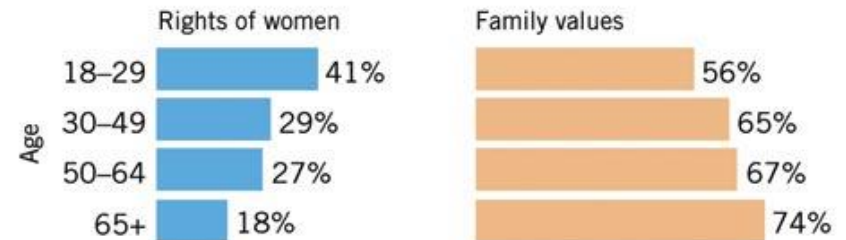
Gay Marriage

Do you think gays and lesbians should have the legal right to get married, or do think they should not be able to get married legally?



Women's Rights

If you absolutely had to choose between each of the following two values, which is more important to you, personally — working for the rights of women or preserving traditional family values



Survey by *Washington Post*/Henry J. Kaiser Foundation/Harvard University, August 2-September 1, 2002, as reported in Elizabeth Hamel et al., "Younger Voters," *Public Perspective*, May/June 2003, p. 11.

Social Class

- Social class: ill-defined in U.S., though recognized in specific cases (e.g., truck drivers and investment bankers)
- Social class is less important in the U.S. than in Europe; the extent of cleavage has declined in both places

Race and Ethnicity

- Similarities and differences between blacks and whites are complex, but there is some evidence that they may be narrowing
- Latinos tend to identify as Democrats, though not as strongly as African Americans

Table 7.4: African American and White Opinion

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	African American	White
Favor expanding affirmative action programs ^a	53%	22%
Believe the justice system is racially biased against blacks ^a	72	44
Favor harsher treatment of criminals by the courts ^b	78	76
Favor more spending on national defense ^c	13	18
Favor national health insurance by government ^c	39	23
Believe the U.S. Census Bureau should stop collecting information on race and ethnicity ^d	48	47
Believe abortion should be legal in all cases ^e	24	28
Approve of black/white marriages ^a	77	61
Willing to vote for a black person for president ^a	93	91
Believe that too much is made of the differences between blacks and whites and not enough of what they have in common ^f	89	92

Sources: (a) *Black/White Perspectives in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: The Gallup Organization, June 1997), 14, 16, 23, 24; (b) Gallup Polls, 1993 and 1994; (c) American National Election Survey, 1996; (d) "The Newsweek Poll," *Newsweek* (February 13, 1995): 65; (e) *The Public Perspective* (May 1995): 19; (f) *The American Enterprise* (November/December 1998): 92, reporting results of a March–April 1998 Public Agenda survey of white and black parents or guardians of children in kindergarten through twelfth grade.

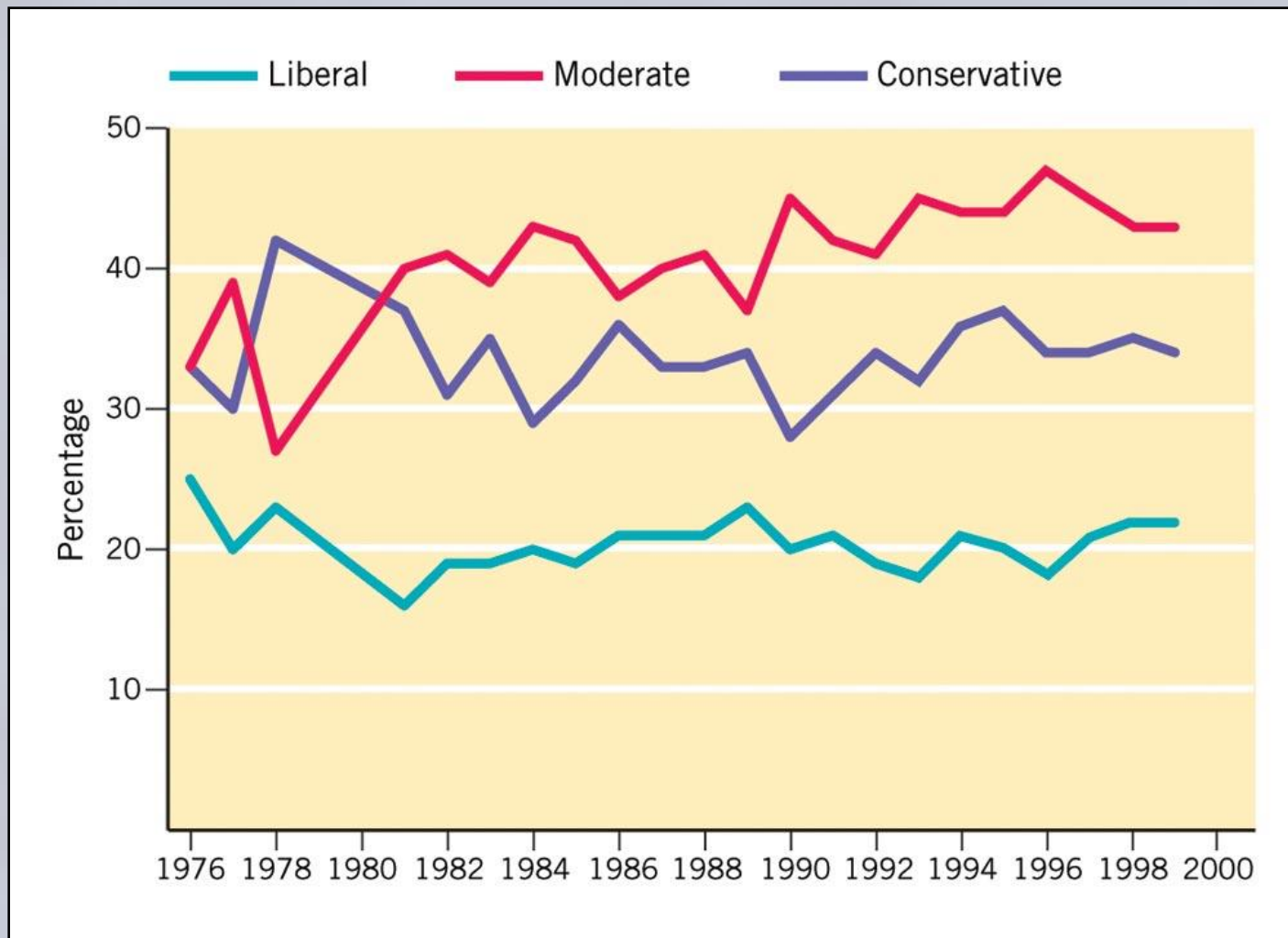
Regional Differences

- White southerners were once more conservative than other regions regarding aid to minorities, legalizing marijuana, school busing, and rights of the accused
- Southerners are now significantly less Democratic than they were for most of the 20th century

Political Ideology

- **Political ideology:** a more or less consistent set of beliefs about what policies government ought to pursue
- The great majority of Americans do not think ideologically
- People may have strong predispositions even if they do not satisfy the condition of being “ideological”

Figure 7.3: Ideological Self-Identification



The American Enterprise (March/April 1993): 84, Robert S. Ericson and Kent L. Tedin, *American Public Opinion* (New York: Longman, 2001), 101, citing surveys by CBS/*New York Times*.

Liberals and Conservatives

- Economic policy: liberals favor jobs for all, subsidized medical care and education, increased taxation of the rich
- Civil rights: liberals favor strong federal action to desegregate schools, hiring opportunities for minorities, and strict enforcement of civil rights laws
- Public and political conduct: liberals are tolerant of protest demonstrations, favor legalization of marijuana, and emphasize protecting the rights of the accused

Table 7.6: How Liberals and Conservatives Differ

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Belief	Support Among Self-Declared Liberals	Support Among Self-Declared Conservatives
The government should provide "more services even if it means an increase in spending."	73%	32%
The government should guarantee "that every person has a job and a good standard of living."	55	21
Favor "government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone."	82	27
The government "should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks."	55	18
The U.S. "should spend less on defense."	85	65
"Aid to [Russia] should be increased."	36	32
"Women should have an equal role in running business, industry, and government."	96	81
The United States should always permit abortion "as a matter of personal choice."	72	36
"Homosexuals should be allowed to serve in U.S. Armed Forces."	70	45
"Oppose death penalty for persons convicted of murder."	35	15

Source: Robert S. Erikson and Kent L. Tedin, *American Public Opinion*, 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 69. Copyright © 1995 by Addison-Wesley-Longman. Reprinted with permission.

Liberals and Conservative

- **Pure liberals:** liberal on both economic and personal conduct issues
- **Pure conservatives:** conservative on both economic and personal conduct issues
- **Libertarians:** conservative on economic issues, liberal on personal conduct issues
- **Populists:** liberal on economic issues, conservative on personal conduct issues

Table 7.7: Policy Preferences of Democratic and Republican Voters

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Issue	Preferences	
	Democrats	Republicans
Should allow people to invest part of Social Security taxes on their own.	44%	61%
For murder, penalty should be death.	46	55
Unfavorable opinion of National Rifle Association.	44	20
Abortion should be available to those who want it.	48	25
Must protect environment even if jobs are lost.	72	57
Parents should get tax-paid vouchers to help pay for children attending private schools.	41	53

Source: Adapted from *New York Times/CBS News* poll, *New York Times*, (August 14, 2000), A17. Copyright © 2000 *The New York Times*.

Political Elites

- **Political elites:** those who have a disproportionate amount of some valued resource
- Elites influence public opinion by framing issues and stating norms
- But elite influence only goes so far; they do not define problems that are rooted in personal experience