

# Backgrounder: An Intro to Public Opinion & Political Socialization in the US

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## Introduction

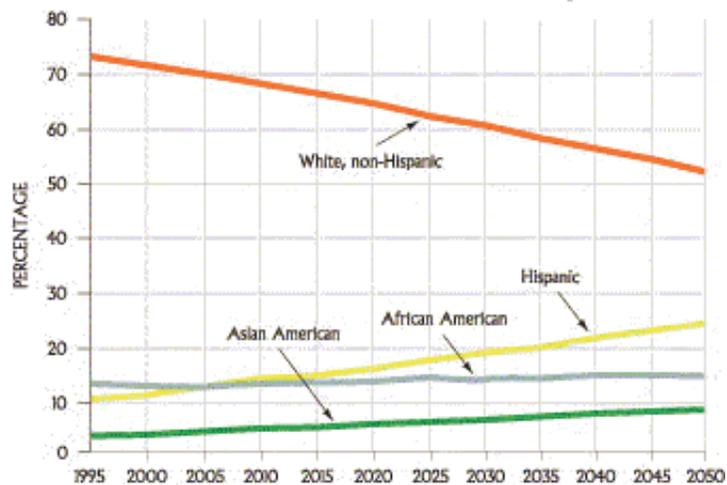
- | Public Opinion
  - The distribution of the population's beliefs about politics and policy issues.
- | Demography
  - The science of population changes.
- | Census
  - A valuable tool for understanding population changes - required every 10 years.

# The American People

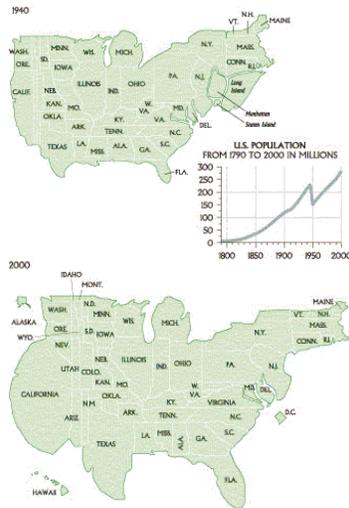
## The Immigrant Society

- African Americans face a legacy of racism. Hispanics are the largest minority group, faced with the problem of illegal immigration (Simpson-Mazzoli Act).
- Asian immigration has been driven by a new class of professional workers.
- Political culture is an overall set of values widely shared within a society.

# The American People



## The American People



### The Regional Shift

- Reapportionment:  
The process of reallocating seats in the House of Representatives every 10 years on the basis of the results of the census.

## The American People

### The Graying of America

- Fastest growing age group is over 65
- Potential drain on Social Security
- “Gray Power”

# How Americans Learn About Politics: Political Socialization

- | Political Socialization:
  - “...the process through which and individual acquires [their] particular political orientation”
- | The Process of Political Socialization
  - The Family
    - | Time & emotional commitment
    - | Political leanings of children often mirror their parent’s leanings

# How Americans Learn About Politics: Political Socialization

**Table 6.1 How Party Identification Is Passed Down from One Generation to the Next**

The National Election Study has often asked respondents whether their parents thought of themselves as Democrats, Independents, or Republicans when they were growing up. In the most recent available data, 87 percent of those who could identify the partisanship of both parents reported that their parents agreed on partisan choice. Here you can see how these respondents have generally followed in their parents’ footsteps politically.

	DEMOCRAT	INDEPENDENT	REPUBLICAN	TOTAL
Both Parents Democrats	59	29	13	100%
Both Parents Independents	17	67	16	100%
Both Parents Republicans	12	29	59	100%

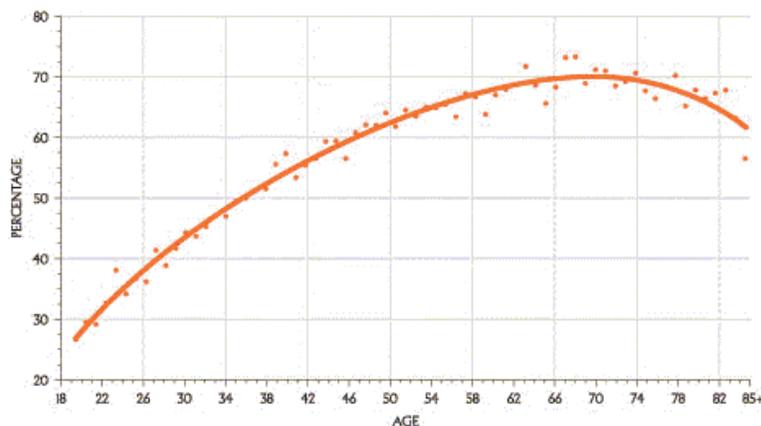
Source: Authors’ analysis of 1992 National Election Study data.

# How Americans Learn About Politics: Political Socialization

- | The Process of Political Socialization
  - The Mass Media
    - | Generation gap in TV news viewing
  - School / Education
    - | Used by government to socialize the young into the political culture
    - | Education produces better jobs and a more positive view of government
- | Political Learning Over a Lifetime

# How American Learn About Politics: Political Socialization

| Turnout by Age, 2000



## Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information

### How Polls Are Conducted

- Random Sampling: The key technique employed by sophisticated survey researchers, which operates on the principle that everyone should have an equal probability of being selected for the sample.
- Sampling Error: The level of confidence in the findings of a public opinion poll.

## Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information

### The Role of Polls in American Democracy

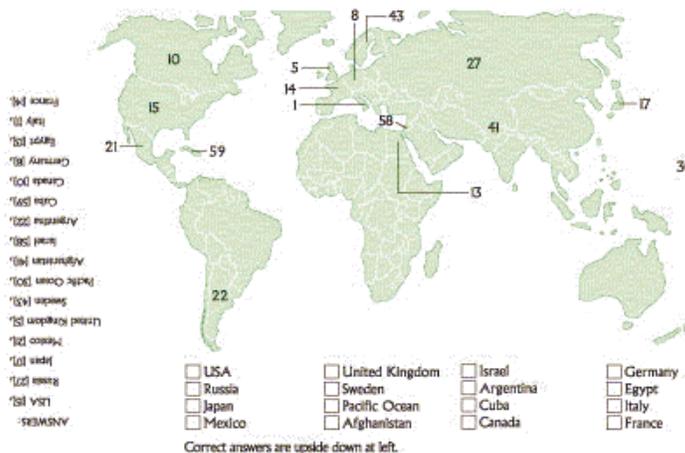
- Polls help politicians figure out public preferences.
- Does it make politicians think more about following the polls?
- Exit Polls - used by the media to predict election day winners.
- The wording of questions makes a difference.

# Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information

- | What Polls Reveal About Americans' Political Information
  - Americans don't know much about politics.
  - Americans may know their basic beliefs, but not how that affects policies of the government.
- | The Decline of Trust in Government
  - Since 1964, trust in government has declined.
  - Trust in government has gone up somewhat since September 11.

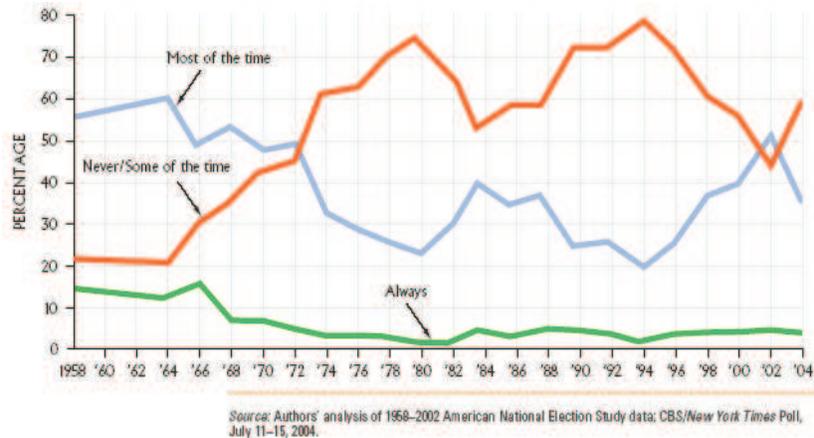
# Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information

Citizens Show Little Knowledge of Geography



## Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information

The Decline of Trust in Government, 1958-2004 (Figure 6.4)



## What Americans Value: Political Ideologies

### Political Ideology:

- A coherent set of beliefs about politics, public policy, and public purpose.

### Who Are the Liberals and Conservatives?

- Views change over time
- Currently about 37% conservative, 23% liberal, 40% moderate

# What Americans Value: Political Ideologies

**Table 6.2 How To Tell a Liberal from a Conservative**

*Liberal and conservative*—these labels are thrown around in American politics as though everyone knows what they mean. Here are some of the political beliefs likely to be preferred by liberals and conservatives. This table, to be sure, is oversimplified.

	LIBERALS	CONSERVATIVES
<b>FOREIGN POLICY:</b>		
Military spending	Believe we should spend less	Believe we should maintain peace through strength
Use of force	Less willing to commit troops to action, such as in the 2003 war with Iraq	More likely to support military intervention around the world
<b>SOCIAL POLICY:</b>		
Abortion	Support “freedom of choice”	Support “right to life”
Prayer in schools	Are opposed	Are supportive
Affirmative action	Favor	Oppose
<b>ECONOMIC POLICY:</b>		
Scope of government	View government as a regulator in the public interest	Favor free market solutions
Taxes	Want to tax the rich more	Want to keep taxes low
Spending	Want to spend more on the poor	Want to keep spending low
<b>CRIME:</b>		
How to cut crime	Believe we should solve the problems that cause crime	Believe we should stop “coddling criminals”
Defendants’ rights	Believe we should guard them carefully	Believe we should stop letting criminals hide behind laws

# What Americans Value: Political Ideologies

## Do People Think in Ideological Terms?

- Ideologues: think in ideological terms - 12% of the population
- Group Benefits: rely on party labels - 42% of the population
- Nature of the Times: current times are good or bad - 24% of the population
- No issue content: based on personalities - 22% of the population

## How Americans Participate in Politics

- | Political Participation:
  - All the activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue.
- | Conventional Participation
  - Voting in elections
  - Working in campaigns / running for office
  - Contacting elected officials

## How Americans Participate in Politics

- | Protest as Participation
  - Protest: A form of political participation designed to achieve policy changes through dramatic and unconventional tactics.
  - Civil disobedience: A form of political participation that reflects a conscious decision to break a law believed to be immoral and to suffer the consequences.

# How Americans Participate in Politics

## Class, Inequality, and Participation



## Understanding Public Opinion and Political Action

- Public Attitudes Toward the Scope of Government
  - Many people have no opinion.
- Democracy, Public Opinion, and Political Action
  - We select our leaders, not policies.
  - We protest for specific policies, not against the government.