

Bachrach, in articulating his vision of democracy as fostering individual self-development, states, “the majority of individuals stand to gain in self-esteem and growth toward a fuller affirmation of their personalities by participating more actively in meaningful community decisions.”⁴¹

According to some participatory democrats, a fully participatory society necessitates more citizen involvement in decision making in governmental as well as nongovernmental institutions, such as the workplace or school. As Bachrach asks, why should people be excluded from decision making by private organizations when these decisions strongly affect their own lives and livelihoods?⁴² Further, engaging in decision making at work and in other nongovernmental venues could increase governmental participation. Engagement in workplace decision making fosters civic skills, provides valuable experience, and, if effective, could create more confidence in an individual’s ability to influence governmental decisions.⁴³ The flip side of this argument is that the lack of involvement in decision making in daily life will probably translate into disengagement from political participation, as the following clearly demonstrates: “After spending the day following orders without question at the factory, a worker cannot be expected to return home in the evening to act like the civics textbook’s inquiring, skeptical, self-actualizing citizen. Students who are taught primarily to obey authority in school are not likely to grow into effective democratic citizens.”⁴⁴

Skeptics of participatory democracy argue that the public does not respond to participatory opportunities as the theorists contend they will. When barriers to political participation are eliminated or reduced, citizens have not necessarily become more politically active. For example, the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, more commonly known as the motor-voter bill, made voter registration easier and, supporters alleged, would increase voter turnout once enacted. Even though registration rates did increase in the wake of this reform, the levels of voter turnout did not substantially increase because of motor-voter.⁴⁵ More broadly, some scholars conclude that participatory democrats’ assumptions about the public are unrealistic.⁴⁶ Rather than desiring to become more involved in politics, many citizens actually dislike politics and wish to avoid the type of conflict that typically emerges during decision making. In other words, although citizens might in fact learn from one another, as participatory democrats suggest, the more likely response of citizens, others argue, is to bypass any opportunity for deliberation, especially if the chance of disagreement is high.

Democratic Theory and Public Opinion

As you can see, these theories of democracy are quite broad, addressing many features of democratic governance. In our overview in this first section of the book, we have highlighted aspects of the theories that are most relevant for the study of public opinion. In particular, we have discussed how the different theoretical perspectives answer this question: What should the role of citizens be in a

democratic society? This is a key issue that democratic theorists have long debated. In fact, we have organized this textbook around fundamental questions that speak to democratic theory debates about the public.

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

Do citizens organize their political thinking? This critical question, addressed in the third section of the book, speaks directly to the quality of public opinion. Classical democratic theorists and participatory democratic theorists expect citizens to hold a wide range of political attitudes that are organized in a meaningful fashion. For participatory democrats, it is crucial that citizens have a sophisticated understanding of politics so they can voice their views and influence elected officials. Elite democrats envision a citizenry that is much less proficient, although they still want citizens to be competent enough to hold officials accountable at election time.

The fourth section examines citizens’ appreciation for essential aspects of democratic citizenship and governance by asking: Do citizens endorse and demonstrate democratic basics? The democratic basics we focus on are knowledge of, interest in, and attention to politics; support for civil liberties; and support for civil rights. Whether the public is knowledgeable and interested enough for democratic governance has long divided democratic theorists. Theorists also disagree on what level of citizen support for civil liberties and civil rights is needed for a healthy democracy. Classical and participatory democratic theorists, of course, want citizens to value these democratic basics, whereas elite democrats and pluralists worry much less about such matters.

The fifth section of the book addresses a pivotal question about the nature of citizenship in a democratic society: What is the relationship between citizens and their government? Classical and participatory theorists want citizens to be actively involved in politics. Participatory democrats expect leaders to take public opinion into consideration as they make decisions, which would lead citizens to trust their government. Elite democratic theorists, in contrast, value trust in government for

the stability it brings to the political system, not because it is a function of citizens being pleased with the responsiveness of their government. Further, elite democrats prefer that the public's influence on government is largely limited to voting in elections.

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

WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION?

Public opinion is, on the one hand, a term that is familiar to most people and, on the other hand, rather difficult to define. Popular conceptions of public opinion might include phrases such as “the voice of the people.” For most of us, public opinion is probably best represented by the results from opinion polls, such as those reported on the evening news or in the newspaper. Among public opinion observers and scholars, many different definitions have been proposed. While researchers do not agree on one single definition of public opinion, some commonalities exist across specific definitions. First, most emphasize that public opinion refers to opinions on governmental and policy matters rather than on private matters (such as one's favorite flavor of ice cream or favorite movie). This characteristic is implied by a description of public opinion as “those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed.”⁴⁷ Of course, what constitutes a private matter might be in dispute. For centuries, the problems of domestic violence and rape within marriage were considered to be private affairs best left to a married or intimate couple to resolve. Societal views on this topic have changed, however, so that now people assume governments have to be involved in addressing these serious problems.

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

However, despite the consensus, some have raised important objections to defining public opinion as a “one person, one vote” aggregation. One of the earliest critiques came from sociologist Herbert Blumer. Society, according to Blumer, is organized hierarchically and “is not a mere aggregation of disparate individuals.”⁴⁹ Certain individuals have more influence over the formation and expression of people's opinions, and treating each person's opinion as equal ignores this simple fact. For example, the leaders of labor unions not only attempt to influence the opinions of their members but also present their members' views to government policymakers. Simply tallying up individuals' opinions on a specific issue

also overlooks the dynamic opinion formation processes among groups and among people. In Blumer's words, public opinion “is a function of a structured society, differentiated into a network of different kinds of groups and individuals having differential weight and influence and occupying different strategic positions.”⁵⁰ Blumer further attacks the “one person, one vote” accounting of opinions by arguing that not all opinions are treated equally by government policymakers, in part because not all opinions of the public actually reach these policymakers. Opinions that do not come to the attention of decision makers will not influence their decisions.

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

Blumer wrote in 1948, at a time when public opinion polling was in its infancy. Opinion polls have grown in use and influence since then, becoming the dominant method by which public opinion is assessed. Further, as this one method has become dominant, there has been a narrowing in our understanding of public opinion—a narrowing around the consensus definition previously described.⁵² Despite this, Blumer's insights are spot on today, argued Susan Herbst in 2011.⁵³ Herbst, a public opinion scholar, encourages us to reconsider what public opinion means in our digital age. Citizens engage in political conversations through a variety of means these days: the Internet, cell phones (talking and texting), and social media, to name a few. It is in these (often digital) exchanges where public opinion is to be found and understood. Herbst labels these communication patterns “textured talk” and finds them “so superior to the aggregation of anonymous individuals gathered in our artificial ‘publics’ produced by polls.”⁵⁴ In addition to providing more convenient outlets for political expression, new communication technologies have also created audience segmentation. Should they choose to, citizens can rely on digital sources that convey information on specific topics or that present information from only one political viewpoint. For instance, political blogs are ubiquitous on the Internet, and many of them are very narrowly focused by issue or by ideology. As technology has led to a rise in public segmentation, should public opinion continue to be defined as the aggregation of each individual's opinion? Perhaps, as one communication scholar and pollster recently stated, rather than an

aggregate public, “multiple publics have become the defining characteristic of public opinion.”⁵⁵

In contrast, Robert Weissberg is not much bothered by the manner in which the concept of public opinion is defined.⁵⁶ Rather, he is worried when the public’s policy opinions *as measured by polls* too strongly influence the decisions of elected officials, particularly in the domain of social welfare. Compared to the complex choices officials confront, poll respondents are often faced with simple options, such as whether social welfare spending should be increased, be decreased, or remain at current levels. When responding to such a poll question, an individual might consider what the trade-offs to increased spending would be, such as whether taxes would increase or other areas of government spending would decrease, or she might not consider these trade-offs at all. Knowing that a majority of the public supports increased spending not only does not provide specific enough policy advice to policymakers but might also result in representatives rushing to follow the wishes of the public without considering the budgetary implications of doing so. “Governance via public opinion polling,” concludes Weissberg, “does not fortify democracy.”⁵⁷

Others have also emphasized the poor quality of public opinion as assessed by polls, arguing that survey respondents often provide snap, top-of-the-head judgments. Contrast this with **public judgment**, a state that exists when “people have engaged an issue, considered it from all sides, understood the choices it leads to, and accepted the full consequences of the choices they make.”⁵⁸ Encouraging and cultivating thoughtful public judgment, according to this view, is necessary if we want the public—and not only those people with specialized knowledge and expertise—to govern in a democracy.

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

DEFINING KEY CONCEPTS

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

Attitude and Opinion

Two terms that we use frequently in this book are *attitude* and *opinion*. These words are undoubtedly familiar to you, and you will probably agree that they are similar to each other. They both have sparked considerable attention to their meanings, however, and numerous definitions have been proposed for each, especially for attitude. The term **attitude** is one of the most important concepts in psychology and has been for many years. Over seventy-five years ago, a prominent social psychologist presented a “representative selection” of sixteen definitions of attitude and then proposed his own comprehensive definition.⁵⁹ In the many decades since, still more scholars have discussed and debated the meaning of attitude. Of the many possible definitions, we prefer this one: “Attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor.”⁶⁰ A similar approach defines an attitude as “a general and enduring positive or negative feeling about some person, object or issue.”⁶¹

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

So, now, what is an **opinion**? Similar to an attitude, an opinion refers to a specific object and expresses a preference, such as support or opposition, toward that object. As with attitudes, opinions vary in that not everyone holds the same opinion toward an object. While acknowledging these similarities, many scholars distinguish between these two concepts by stating that an opinion is an expression of a latent attitude. That is, whereas an attitude is not observable, an opinion is a

verbal or written expression of that attitude. Distinctions such as these are more common in the field of psychology than in political science. In political science, you are not only likely to see the two terms used synonymously but are also more likely to encounter the concept opinion than attitude. We view these two terms as much more similar than dissimilar and thus use them interchangeably in this book. This no doubt reflects our training as political scientists, but it also reflects common use of the terms. In fact, in most thesauruses, *opinion* and *attitude* are presented as synonyms of each other.

When thinking about a specific attitude or opinion, it is obviously important to consider its *direction* (support versus oppose, favorable versus unfavorable, and so on). For the study of public opinion, we also need to bear in mind two other characteristics of attitudes and opinions: extremity and importance. The **extremity** of an opinion refers to whether support (or opposition) for the opinion object is slight or strong. You might, for example, *slightly* favor U.S. intervention in foreign military conflicts but *strongly* favor laws that prohibit testing cosmetics on animals. **Attitude importance**, in contrast, focuses on how meaningful a specific attitude is to you or how passionately you care about the attitude. Although we may have attitudes toward a wide range of political and social objects, not all of these attitudes will be of equal importance, at least for most of us. The more important an attitude is, the less likely it is to change over time and the more likely it will direct certain behaviors, such as thinking about the attitude object or influencing our vote preferences for political candidates.⁶² Also, even though it is often the case that more extreme attitudes are also more important, this does not necessarily have to occur.⁶³ Take the two examples presented here. You might have a more extreme opinion toward animal testing than U.S. military intervention, but the latter opinion might be more important to you, especially when it comes to evaluating national politics, such as the performance of political leaders.

Opinion Ingredients: Beliefs, Values, and Emotions

Specific political opinions do not stand alone in people's minds. Instead, they are often related to, even guided by, other mental constructs, most especially beliefs, values, and emotions. These three often have evaluative content—content that can help to determine an individual's specific opinion toward a related entity. **Beliefs** are thoughts or information a person has regarding an attitude object, often regarding what the person thinks to be true about the object. A person might, for example, believe that the possibility of a very severe punishment, such as the death penalty, will not deter most people from committing a serious crime. Someone possessing this belief would be more likely to oppose capital punishment than would someone who believes in the deterrent power of death penalty laws. Beliefs about the characteristics of members of social groups, such as blacks or Christian fundamentalists, have a specific name, **stereotypes**. Stereotypes can be

positive or negative, and people can hold both positive and negative stereotypes toward the same group. Examples of positive and negative stereotypes include blacks as athletic or lazy and Christian fundamentalists as charitable or intolerant. Believing certain stereotypes is often related to support for public policies that affect the group in question. White Americans who believe most blacks are lazy, for instance, are unlikely to support social welfare policies, especially compared with people who do not believe this stereotype.⁶⁴

Values are specific types of beliefs. According to a prominent values researcher, "a value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct [instrumental value] or end-state of existence [terminal value] is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence."⁶⁵ Examples of instrumental values include independence, responsibility, and self-control, whereas examples of terminal values include a peaceful world, family security, and freedom. Unlike other types of beliefs, values refer to ideals.

Values are also assumed to be quite stable over time for individuals, as highlighted by this definition: "By values we mean general and enduring standards."⁶⁶ Whereas value change can and does occur, stability is more common. Some have even argued that values are central to people's political belief systems, certainly more central than are attitudes.⁶⁷ Further, much public opinion research demonstrates that values are quite important in influencing people's specific political attitudes. For instance, opposition to social welfare spending is more likely among those who value responsibility, a sense of accomplishment, and economic individualism and less likely among those who value equality.⁶⁸ Finally, certain values are more salient in American political culture than others in that they guide political opinions more strongly. These include individualism, egalitarianism, and limited government.⁶⁹ Not all Americans value these three, to be sure, but whether a person values or does not value each is related to opinions on many specific political matters.

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

positively toward an attitude object but also hold negative beliefs about the object. For example, someone could admire Latinos for their work ethic while at the same time hold negative stereotypes about their intelligence or abilities.

Party Identification

Throughout this book, we present examples of many different political opinions. One opinion that we refer to often, because it is a core opinion for many Americans and crucial to understanding the nature of public opinion in the United States, is party identification. **Party identification** refers to a person's allegiance to a political party (typically the Democratic or Republican Party) or identification as independent of a party. It is a self-classification rather than a description of the person's behavior, as the following excerpt from *The American Voter*, a classic study about voting first published in 1960, highlights:

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

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

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

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

We highlight party identification here because it is important in American political culture for a number of reasons. First, for an individual, party identification is quite stable over time, certainly more stable than other political attitudes.⁷⁴ When a change does occur, it is most likely to consist of people switching from identification with one of the two major parties to considering themselves to be Independent or vice versa. That is, switching from identifying with one of the parties to the other does not occur very often. Second, party identification is a global attitude that is related to many specific political attitudes (such as policy opinions or evaluations of political leaders). Third, people's party identification can influence the interpretation of newly encountered information. When learning of damaging information about a Democratic president, for example, a Democrat is likely to interpret this information quite differently than a Republican. Related to this, party identification can help a person to make sense of political issues and topics, especially those that are unfamiliar. We elaborate on these and other aspects of party identification throughout this book.

In Figure 1-1, we present the breakdown of Americans' party identifications (as Democratic, Republican, or Independent) in every presidential election year since 1952. Focusing first on Democrats and Republicans (the solid lines), we see that American adults are much less likely to identify with the Democratic Party now than they were in the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas one-half of the population considered themselves Democrats in those decades, since 1988 fewer than 40 percent have. This does not necessarily mean, however, that Americans are now identifying as Republicans in much larger numbers. Republican self-identification was slightly less common in 2008 than the early 1950s. Perhaps more noteworthy, the percentage of the public identifying as Republican has not varied much (between 23 and 30 percent) over this time period.

The most significant change in party identification over the past fifty years is the switch from **partisans** to **partisan independence**. In fact, beginning in 1988, Independents have been more common than either Democrats or Republicans in all but one presidential election year (1996; refer to the top dotted line in Figure 1-1). There was a substantial increase in Independents during the 1960s; only about 23 percent of the population considered themselves to be Independent in 1960, but 35 percent did so in 1972. These percentages, however, include people who lean toward supporting one of the major parties. That is, when initially asked whether they consider themselves to be Democratic, Republican, or Independent, they claim to be Independents. Yet, when then asked if they are closer to one of the parties, most of these Independents do indicate closeness to one party. Removing these **leaners** from the analysis (see the dotted line at the bottom of the figure) presents a very different picture. Although there are more pure Independents now than there were in the 1950s, the increase has not been very large (from 6 percent