Chapter 19
Public Opinion & Interest Groups

- In what ways can public opinion affect government policy?

- How do special interest groups seek to influence US public policy?
What is **Public Opinion**?

- **Def.**: Politically relevant opinions held by ordinary citizens that they express openly.
- **Attitudes and opinions of a large group of people on particular issues**

  - **Representative Democracy**
    - **Popular Rule** – people are active in the Gov’t
      - Elect representatives
    - Gov’t is protected from the shifting ideas of the people
Political Socialization

• Political Socialization: the learning process by which people acquire their political opinions, beliefs, and values.

  – Family + Home – Parents are influential on their children’s political ideas

  – School and Peers – Classes play a vital role (History, Sociology, Government…)
    • Peer Groups – friends, clubs, co-workers

  – Personal Experience – socioeconomic situation (location and wealth)
    • Urban/Rural.. East or West… Male or Female…
Political Socialization

• Mass Media – communicating information to the general public.
  • TV, Internet, Radio, newspapers, magazines, movies… etc.
    – CNN / FOXNEWS / MSNBC

• Other Influences –
  – Government leaders, interest groups, religious groups
    • President is the most influential government official.
  – Interest Group – try to influence public opinion
    • Public opinion can pressure government officials
      – Change / Create laws
Political Culture

• Most (if not all) Americans fall into a large **Political Culture**: The Characteristic and deep seated beliefs of a particular people about government and politics.
  
  • EX: Life, Liberty Happiness, Freedom,  
    – Bill of Rights

  – Political Culture can change from Country to country or region to region.
    – USA has different views / beliefs and beliefs from China / Russia.

  – However, **Americans are a part of a larger, common political culture upon which they can all agree.**
Aspects of American Culture

Political Scientists agree on 3 main aspects:

• Commitment to Liberty (freedom)
• Equality
• Self-government

Other aspects that play a prominent role:

• Private Property
• Personal Rights
• Civic Duty
Varying Public Opinion

• Outside of the main aspects of American Culture, public opinion varies in the U.S.

• Importance of issues also vary, especially over time.

• Ex.
  – The War in Afghanistan
  – Global Warming
  – Income Disparity
  – Banking Regulations
How Americans think Politically

• While all people have their own opinions as a result of their socializing agents, public opinion is a collection of those opinions into similar coherent thought.

• Three major frames of reference shape public opinion:
  – Partisanship (Party Identification)
  – Ideological Leanings
  – Group Attachments
Political Efficacy

• Political Efficacy – person’s belief that they can impact the government and policies
  • People take action / join groups
    – Vital to democracy –

• Interest Groups - private organizations whose members share certain views and work to shape public policy.
  • Their members work to spread the opinions of the group to make positive change.

• * Do not try to win elections *
Nature of Public Opinion

• Three factors influence public opinion

  – 1. Diversity
    • America's diversity leads to different opinions
      – Social, Cultural, Religious, Gender, Ethnic

  – 2. Communication
    • Ideas must be communicated to the Government
      – Interest Groups, Opinion Polls, letters, emails, social networks

  – 3. Significant Numbers
    • Enough people must hold a particular view / opinion to make the government listen and act.
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Measuring Public Opinion
Elections

• **Democracy** – people express their beliefs with the ballot box
  – Votes are taken as evidence of the people’s opinion
    – Accept or reject
  – Politicians and parties have a **mandate**
    • Instructions or commands the people give its elected officials
      – Election results are seldom a good reflection of public opinion
        » Some candidates will run on different policies than their political party.
Measuring Public Opinion

- Public Opinion Polls - Gallup Poll and Harris Survey use telephone questions to sample large groups on their public opinion

- Pollster - A person who surveys people's attitudes about an issue
Nonscientific Methods

- **Party Organization (Rep, Dem, Green, Ind.)**
  - Political leaders at all three levels gain information from people
  - Interest Groups helps officials identify people’s opinions.
    » Not very reliable

- **Mass Media**
  - Ratings / visitors to a certain TV program or Website reflect people’s views.
    » “Lead Story” (Trending) Twitter *

- **Constituent Views**
  - Emails, Phone calls, Tweets, Messages, Letters,
    - Social media allows for immediate feedback

- **Straw Poll**
  - Unscientific to measure public opinion
    - People voluntarily respond to polls / questionnaires.
      - Doesn’t tell the true feelings of the American population
      - Straw Polls do not reach everyone
The Polling Process

**Defining the Universe:** Population the poll aims to measure. (City of CLE/ College Students/ Elderly/ Veterans)

**Constructing a Sample:** A representative slice of the whole universe. Random individuals from random places

**Random Sample**

**Preparing Valid Questions:** Avoid wording questions with emotionally charged words.

**Interviewing:** Many are face to face, but in more recent times moved to email, mail, and telephone.

**Analyze the Report Findings:** Modern days done with computers and other technologies.
Scientific Polling

• Gallup Polls
    • Uses the scientific method to evaluate the opinion of people
  • Essentially they are highly sophisticated polls
    – www.gallup.com/home.aspx
Evaluating Polls

- **Pollsters** have trouble measuring three things:
  - **Intensity** – the strength of feeling with which an opinion is held
  - **Stability** – the relative permanence or changeableness of opinion
  - **Relevance** – how important a particular opinion is to the person who holds it.

- “**Bandwagon effect**” – people want to be on the winning side, and will often say they support the side that is currently perceived to be ahead.
Use of Data

• Polls show the opinion of the people
  – Influences elected officials and candidates
    • Waffling – failing to have any principles that guide their work
      – Listen to ‘opinion” too much

• Media – uses data to tailor their shows
  – Release election results

  – Exit Polls – asking voters who / what they voted for after they voted.
    • TV networks use exit polls to release results
      – Some exit polls seem to be wrong
Influence of Public Opinion

- Questions about what the impact of Public Opinion on governing arise often:
  - How much **DOES** Public Opinion impact legislation?
  - How much **SHOULD** Public Opinion impact legislation

Both these questions can be answered as **SOMEWHAT** influencing government
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Interest Groups
Interest Groups

- Interest Group - group of people who share a similar point of view about an issue and unite to promote their beliefs

  - Interest groups try to persuade public officials toward their point of view
What Do Interest Groups Do?

• Some are non political.

• Political interest groups
  – increase representation and participation
  – increase public awareness about important issues
  – help frame the public agenda
  – monitor programs to guarantee effective implementation
  – engage in lobbying and election activities
Political parties and interest groups are different:
a. Political parties aim to attain or maintain power, however interest groups do not have such an aim, instead they aim to influence decision making and the politicians.

b. Second, parties blend various demands, not just support particular ones because they have to appeal to more people, however interest groups focus upon particular issues.

C. Political parties nominate candidates for elections. Interests groups do not nominate candidates
The Character of Interest Groups

• **Interest group**: organization that tries to influence the government’s programs and policies

• **Lobby**: like an interest group, but focused on trying to influence elected officials

• **Public affairs committee**: fund-raising organization that tries to influence elections

Groups may include various combinations of these three factors.
• Problem is they also give wealthy and powerful the opportunity to influence policymakers at all levels of government

  – **Disturbance Theory**: To form an interest group to counteract other interest groups

  – **Lobbyist** is a representative hired by an interest group to push their particular agenda

• Many states and municipalities retain lobbyists to work on their behalf in Washington (but isn’t that what Congressman are supposed to do?)
Techniques Interest Groups use to influence public opinion (cont.)

- Bandwagon: Everyone else is voting for candidate, so you should too!
- Glittering Generality: A statement that sounds good but is meaningless. (ex. A Thousand Points of Light!, A Bridge to the 21st Century!)

“CHANGE WE CAN BELIEVE IN.” - BARACK OBAMA, AMERICAN PRESIDENT
Techniques Interest Groups use to influence public opinion

- Symbol: Use of the flag, eagle, Uncle Sam, etc. to appear patriotic
Types of Interest Groups

• Economic Interest Groups
• Public Interest
• Civil Rights
• Single-Issue
• Ideological
• Faith-Based
• Professional
• Government
Economic Interest Groups

• Business Organizations, professional associations, labor unions, industrial and trade associations.

• Ex. American Medical Association (doctors), The Bar Association (Lawyers), American Federation of Teachers, United Auto Workers
Public Interest

• Policies the effect the general public
  – Environment, consumers, public health, families, governmental reform… etc.

• Common Cause – reform campaign financing
Civil Rights

- NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
- NOW: National Organization for Women
- AARP: American Association of Retired People
Single Issue

- **Greenpeace**: Environmental Issues
- **Amnesty International**: Human Rights Issues
- **National Rifle Association**
- **PETA**: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
• Religious Group
  • Specific religion

• Professional
  • Represent specific professions
    » Teachers, lawyers, police, bankers,
    – American Bar Association

• Government
  – Groups that represent elected officials at all three levels.
19.4
Affecting Public Policy

*How a bill becomes law in Congress*

Congressman, here's your bill. Here's your law.

Special Interest

Photo courtesy: Creators Syndicate, Inc.
Lobbyists

- People who are paid to attempt to persuade government officials to vote in favor of an interest groups concern
What role do lobbyists play in Congress? This cartoon presents one popular, although not always correct, view of how legislation gets enacted on Capitol Hill.
How Interest Groups Influence Congress

• Direct lobbying: an attempt by a group to influence the policy process through persuasion of public officials.

• Many methods:
  – Meetings where information is shared
  – Lawsuits
  – Public relations campaigns (ads directed at members, the public and elected officials)
  – Fund-raising for candidates, parties, and/or issues
How Interest Groups Influence Congress

Interest group
- Gaining access—information, development of personal contacts and ties, favors
- Activate constituents whose jobs or businesses are affected; provide them with information and arguments; help them organize, write letters, leaflets, etc.

Congressional staff
- Letters; e-mails; phone calls; letters to news editors; visits to Washington; work in elections

Targeted members of Congress
- Advice
- Alliances and logrolls
- PAC funds; endorsements; information campaigns; testimony

Other members of Congress
- Direct lobbying
- News stories and editorials favorable to interest group

Media
- Mobilizing public opinion—release of favorable research findings; news releases; public relations campaigns; tips to reporters

Constituents
- Activate constituents whose jobs or businesses are affected; provide them with information and arguments; help them organize, write letters, leaflets, etc.
Lobbying the President
How Interest Groups Influence Congress

• Effective lobbyists have two things:
  – Access to members of Congress (policy-makers)
    • Strong ties between the lobbyist and Congress; very often former members themselves or former high-ranking congressional staffers
    • Raise money for MC’s campaign in return for access

  – Information
    • Research complex topics and extensive details on specific issues to convince Congress and key staffers
    • Share in manner easy to grasp AND take a side (theirs)
Political Action Committees (PACs)

• PACs are political fundraising organizations established by special interest groups

What they do:

• PACs raise money for candidates that support their ideas
Growth of Political Action Committees, 1980–2012
The Problem with PACs

- Politicians need money to run campaigns, so they **accept money from PACs**

  - In return PACs expect politicians to vote on the issues they value

  - Politicians, therefore, have to choose between their constituents and PACs. Doing the right thing, may be political suicide!