

Influencing Government

Public Opinion

Bell Ringer Activity

Student Opinion Poll

- 1. Do you think that the school board's decision to provide every student with an I-pad was a good investment or a poor investment?**
(good investment; poor investment)
- 2. How much of your school work is now strictly done using the I-pad?**
(All assignments for every class; Most assignments for most classes; A few assignments for most classes; A few assignments for only a few classes)
- 3. How useful have the I-pads been in helping you complete your school work?**
(Very useful; Somewhat useful; Hardly useful; Not useful at all)
- 4. In your opinion, how much has using the I-pads in class helped you improve your overall academic performance?**
(It helped a lot; it helped somewhat; it hasn't helped all that much; it hasn't helped at all)

Public Opinion

What is public opinion?

- The ideas and attitudes that most people have regarding a certain issue or political candidate.
- It is a complex collection of opinions held by many different people. However, not everyone in the group may fully agree with one another. Therefore, public opinion is not uniform.
- It includes only opinions which relate to public issues, public policies, and politics in general.

Public Opinion

How does public opinion influence government?

- **Politicians often make decisions based on public opinion. Therefore, the more people who share an opinion on an issue the more influence they have on public policy formation.**
- **Government officials know that in order to pass certain laws they need the support of the people**
- **If public support for a proposed law or government program is low, then it is unlikely that the law or program will be passed in congress.**

Example: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal

“I cannot go any faster than the people will let me.”¹

Sources of Public Opinion

What are the sources of public opinion?

1. Personal Background

- Everyone's opinion is greatly influenced by their own personal experiences in their lives.
- Important factors: age, gender, ethnicity, religion, occupation, income, and place of residence.

Example: an old rich man who lives in New York City is likely to have a very different view of social welfare than a young woman living in a small town in Kansas who is currently unemployed.

2. The Mass Media

- Methods of communication that are used to reach a large portion of the population.
- Types include: television, radio, the internet, magazines, newspapers, and books.

Sources of Public Opinion

What are the sources of public opinion?

3. Public Officials

- Political leaders and government officials
- Public officials state their views on certain issues in order to persuade the public to support their positions.
- By electing a political candidate the public indicates their trust in that candidate's views.

4. Interest Groups

- People who share a certain point of view about and an issue often unite in order to promote their shared beliefs.
- Interest groups use various tactics to put pressure on government officials in order to persuade them to act in favor of their interests

Features of Public Opinion

1. Direction

- Is public opinion for a particular issue negative or positive?
 - Do people support the idea or do they oppose it
 - Public opinion is often mixed on most issues

2. Intensity

- How strong is someone's opinion on a given issue?
 - Example: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree

3. Stability

- How firmly do people hold to their opinions?
 - For some issues people will not change their views
 - For other issues people are more open to changing their mind

Measuring Public Opinion

How is public opinion measured?

1. Public Opinion Polls

- Surveys that request individuals to answer questions about a specific political or social issue
- Hundreds of organizations conduct public opinion polls
 - Example: The Gallup Poll
- Who are Pollsters?
 - Specialists who conduct public opinion polls regularly

Measuring Public Opinion

How is public opinion measured?

2. Election Results

- When a candidate or a political party win big in an election, it indicates that the public supports their position on various issues.
- Election results often reflect the public's approval rating of an incumbent candidates performance.
 - Many organizations conduct opinion polls during elections in order to determine the approval ratings of various candidates.

Taking a Public Opinion Poll

How are public opinion polls conducted?

1. Random Sample

- Pollsters survey only a randomly chosen group of people because it is seldom possible for them to check with the entire population.
- Sample Requirements:
 - It must include: both men and women of nearly every race, age, socioeconomic status, and viewpoint. In doing so, the survey will provide a more accurate representation of public opinion as a whole.

Taking a Public Opinion Poll

How are public opinion polls conducted?

2. Wording the Question

- The way pollsters word the questions in their opinion polls can influence the responses they receive.
- Therefore, careful consideration needs to be taken to avoid this problem.
 - Example: 1) Do you want to pay higher taxes? 2) Would you be willing to pay more in taxes if the extra income is used to support the local school system.

3. Push Polls

- Opinion polls that are purposely worded in such a way so as to influence the responses a person gives.
- In doing so, pollsters are able to determine the outcome of their opinion poll.

Public Opinion Polls

Why do some people like public opinion polls?

- **The belief that public opinion polls serve a useful purpose by allowing elected officials a way to keep in touch with the changing opinions of the citizens.**

Why do other people not like public opinion polls?

- **The belief that elected officials become more concerned with pleasing the public instead of concentrating on the task of making their own wise decisions due to public opinion polls.**
- **The belief that election outcomes are influenced by public opinion polls. Some voters might base their decision of who to vote for on the results of the many polls taken to determine which candidate is ahead, rather than examining where each candidate stands on the various issues.**

Analyzing a Public Opinion Poll

Instructions

1. Follow along as I read through the introduction to the worksheet.
2. Carefully examine the four questions and answers taken from the 2005 Gallup Poll “George W. Bush’s War Speech Reaction Poll.”
3. Take out a separate sheet of paper and answer the four questions on the back page which analyze the public opinion poll.
4. Also, on the same sheet of paper, I want you to identify elements in the poll which illustrate the direction, intensity, and stability of public opinion.
5. Lastly, I want you to summarize the public’s response to President Bush’s speech using the data provided on the worksheet and your responses to the questions. Your summary should at least be a paragraph in length.

References

- ¹ Clayton, G. E., Patrick, J. J., Reny, R. C., Saffeli, D. C., & Zike, D. (2010). *Civics today: Citizenship, economics, and you*. Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill, Inc.