5.4: Public Opinion

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section, you will learn:

1. How public opinion is demonstrated.

Media coverage sways public opinion, and interest groups often hope to. The people tend to matter as well. For all the influences on public opinion, the people do have minds of their own.

Public opinion is made evident in a number of ways. Voting is the obvious way, as it's the only poll that truly counts for something. But it also shows up in direct participation, direct communication, survey research, and protests. Public opinion seems to matter. For example, studies show that, broadly speaking, Congress tends to follow the will of the American people. Most elected officials understand that they ignore the passions of their constituents at their own peril. So while an official may try to persuade voters to in one direction, most try to keep an ear to what people are saying back home.

How Citizens Get Involved

Citizens can get involved in a variety of ways.

Direct Participation

As distant as government may seem sometimes, there are many ways for people to participate in politics. Campaigns in
the United States and elsewhere are always looking for volunteers (and for anybody who’s really interested in politics, there’s probably no better way to get your foot in the door). Local governments also have advisory boards of many types (such as planning, building, arts and parks commissions), which rely on citizen volunteers to staff them. Citizens on such panels do research and hear requests from the public, and report to city councils on what they think should happen next.

Direct Communication

People talk to their elected officials—in person, by telephone, by letter and by e-mail. Elected officials say that letters tend to have more impact, because e-mails are to easy to send. A stamped letter tends to say the person cares deeply about this particular issue. Elected officials often have open forums where voters come and say what they think (which, officials will privately say, can be a challenge when folks show up who are obsessed with a particular issue, or who just want to complain). You can also show up at a hearing, at city hall or at the state Legislature, and have your say. In a typical legislative committee meeting, when there’s a hearing on a particular bill or topic, there’s a sign-up sheet and if you’re there, you get your three minutes to speak your mind. In any case, democratic systems tend to be remarkably open to citizen input.

Survey Research

Another way in which public opinion is evidenced is survey research, or opinion polling. A survey is just asking a lot of people the same questions. Done correctly, this can be a fairly accurate gauge of what people are thinking. Scientific survey research involves random sampling of a population, and some fancy math to extrapolate those results to the public at large. A random sample means that everyone in the target population has an equal chance of being chosen. Survey research firms generate random lists of telephone numbers of voters in a state, district or even an entire country. What you should look for in reports about survey research is 1. a specified margin of error (you don’t get one without doing the fancy math), and 2. the sample size. The margin of error is a way of judging how confident we are that the results of the survey are in range of what the entire population thinks. If this information is included in the survey, you have some assurance that it’s a scientific survey, and not, say, one taken by a congressman by mass-mailing his district.

Legislators and members of Congress infrequently survey people back home, usually by doing a mass mailing to all the registered voters in the district. The problem with those sorts of surveys is that they are not random samples, but self-selecting samples. The only people who respond to such surveys are those with really strong feelings about an issue, and what we know about them is that there tend to be fewer of them than the mass of folks in the middle. So the answers may not be indicative of what the general population thinks. Public officials who conduct such surveys only seem to pay attention to the surveys when they confirm what the official already thinks.

A good survey also avoids question bias—questions should not lead the respondent to an answer. I had some rather substantial arguments when I was a legislative staffer over that one. The people I worked for tended to want to write questions that more or less said “do you agree with this or are you stupid?” The surveys were by no means scientific, but it seemed like we would needlessly aggravate people who read the survey and didn’t agree with the conclusions we were trying to get them to reach.

News organizations will often partner with survey research firms to find out what people are thinking about particular
topics, such as whether they support a particular policy initiative or who they’re going to vote for. Political campaigns survey voters to find out what’s working and what isn’t, and which groups they’re connecting with. Surveys also depend upon people telling the truth. Most of the time, they do. In Nicaragua in 1990, however, voters told pollsters that they would re-elect the Sandanistas to power. When election time rolled around, the opposition coalition managed a convincing victory. Voters were simply not used to being asked such questions as the pollsters posed, and apparently feared retaliation by the Sandanista-led government.

Protest

Protest is yet another form of measuring public opinion, and clearly not one to be underestimated. The classic example in American politics has to be the Vietnam War. Although we tend to dwell on the many tragic aspects of the war, it was in fact a triumph of democracy. Was there ever another nation as powerful as the U.S. that changed its foreign policy so radically as a result of public protest? People—many, many young people—marched; sat in (sit-ins, which predate the Occupy movement, involved occupying public spaces in hopes of disrupting somebody’s activities, to make a point); and generally advocated an exit from Vietnam. This did not produce immediate results, but the public dissent clearly made it harder for elected officials to continue the war.

Protest can be non-violent, such as much of the Civil Rights movement, or violent, from the WTO riots in Seattle in 1999, all the way to acts of terrorism.

Non-violent protest goes at least back to the 19th century American writer Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). In his 1849 essay Civil Disobedience, Thoreau wrote that if one viewed a law as unjust, one should not obey it. Thoreau was unhappy over slavery and the Mexican-American War, and advocated resisting what he saw as government-sponsored injustice, for example, by not paying your taxes. (He spent a night in jail for this, before someone paid his taxes and he was released.)

Thoreau was a big influence on Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi (1869-1948), who led one of the most successful non-violent protest movements in history. Gandhi was born in India, which had been effectively conquered by the British earlier in the 19th century. Gandhi went to Great Britain and studied to be a lawyer, and ended up working South Africa. After getting thrown off a train for refusing to move to a third-class coach (he had a first-class ticket), Gandhi pondered how he should respond. He recognized that he couldn’t fight his oppressors; they were too many. If he simply went along, he was empowering them. Finally, he decided, the best answer was to simply resist the unjustice he was facing as a person of color in South Africa by disobeying what were clearly unjust laws. Over the next several years, he developed what he called "satyagraha," a Sanskrit word meaning “truth-force,” or devotion to truth.

Gandhi established the basic tenets of non-violent resistance. It is active, not passive: One actively resists injustice without being violent. Violence only begets more violence, Gandhi reasoned; non-violence disarms one’s oppressor because the oppressor can point to nothing that justifies his use of violence. Using these tactics, Gandhi was able to win some consideration for the many Indians the British had imported to South Africa, before he returned to India in 1915. There he began to lead the movement that would eventually win India’s independence from Great Britain, again relying exclusively on non-violent tactics. Gandhi and his followers marched to the sea to make salt (the British held the monopoly on making salt in India); they spun cloth in protest of British control of the textile industry; they resisted British rule whenever possible. Finally, in 1947, the British gave up and went home.
It may seem odd that Gandhi chose this method; the British had about 100,000 soldiers maintaining control over a nation of at around 400 million people (at that time). Clearly, they could have violently ousted the British, especially during World War I and II when the British were largely occupied elsewhere. But Gandhi seems to have recognized that the Indian state would be better off if born in peace rather than violence. Today it stands to as a relatively peaceful and democratic society, despite its occasional clashes with Pakistan and China. For example, it is one of the only liberated ex-colonies to never have suffered a military coup. Although Gandhi was assassinated (by a Hindu nationalist who thought he was being too kind to Moslems), Gandhi succeeded in winning independence for India and Pakistan (part of which is now Bangladesh) without any shots being fired.

Gandhi and Thoreau were big influences the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who led the U.S. Civil Rights movement until his assassination in 1968. Dr. King, in following their lead, organized Americans of all races to protest the unfair treatment of people of color in the U.S. Beginning with a boycott of city buses in Montgomery, Alabama, (where African-Americans had to sit in the back) in 1955-1956, King led a series of peaceful, direct-action “campaigns” to protest everything from school segregation to lack of voting rights for African-Americans in the south. That meant arrests, beatings, attacks by police dogs and fire hoses. A key moment—and a good example of how non-violent resistance can work—was a march from Selma to Montgomery to protest the lack of voting rights in 1965. On March 7, a day that became known as “Bloody Sunday,” 600 marchers were attacked by Alabama state troopers using horses, tear gas and billy clubs. National television cameras were there and the nation, including President Lyndon Johnson, watched. Under court order and with protection of federal troops, the march eventually proceeded, but the important detail is that the event helped push support for the Voting Rights Act of 1965, outlawing a century of political discrimination against African-American citizens. Like Gandhi, King seems to have understood that non-violent resistance would win more support and more converts than would violence.

Contrast this with the 1999 WTO riots in Seattle. The World Trade Organization, which tries to set the terms of trade between nations, drew representatives of states from around the world, and perhaps 40,000 protestors as well. Most of them were peaceful, but those who weren’t did $20 million in property damage and lost sales in downtown Seattle. One of my students’ parents had to be rescued by police when demonstrators attacked her car as she drove to work. What did this accomplish? The protestors had plenty of legitimate complaints about globalization, issues that at least deserve to be discussed (environmental degradation, the unequal impacts of trade around the world), and the protest did help put those issues on the map. On the other hand, violent actions tend to take sympathy away from the protestors. Protestors have claimed that they changed the course of history, but more than a decade later, it’s hard to tell what’s different when it comes to world trade.

The Occupy movement seems to have learned from this, and has maintained a non-violent stance throughout its brief history. Occupy, which began in New York in September 2011 with Occupy Wall Street, has grown into a global movement protesting all manner of social and economic injustice and inequality. Like other recent protest movements, Occupy has had the benefit of using social media such as Facebook and Twitter to spread its message and coordinate activities. Occupy has probably helped frame the debate over economic policies in the U.S. and around the world, but tangible results are few (although it’s early in the game). The other problem that Occupy faces is coming up with a coherent agenda. The Civil Rights movement had the luxury of having a narrowly focused agenda: changing laws that restricted people’s rights. Changing people’s attitudes has proven much more difficult. Dr. King, despite his great skills as a leader and orator, had some of the same troubles when he moved his work from civil rights to economic justice. Laws are easy to change; people’s beliefs not so much. As one elected official who met with Occupy people told one of
my classes, “They’re angry. They have a right to be angry. But they don’t have a plan.” This doesn’t mean that the Occupy movement can’t or won’t accomplish what it wants to, but it won’t be a quick or a simple task.

Economic change is somewhat easier to accomplish if economic results can be demonstrated via a lack of change. The Rev. Jesse Jackson had success, for example, in getting Coca-Cola to hire and promote more African-Americans when he was able to point out how important that market segment is to Coke’s success. The Occupy movement might have more success by organizing more boycotts of firms whose practices it doesn’t like. Moral arguments in such a case might be loftier, but money talks.

Not all non-violent protest is successful. In 1989, thousands of Chinese young adults (mostly students, the shock troops of every revolution), gathered in Tiananmen Square in the heart of Beijing, the Chinese capital. As many as 500,000 people may have assembled there at the peak of the demonstrations. The protests were uniformly peaceful, with demonstrators calling for the usual litany of economic and political opportunity and reform. They even went so far as to build a papier-mâché replica of the Statue of Liberty. But Chinese officials who opposed the protests won out over those who favored it, and on June 4 Chinese army units forcibly removed the demonstrators from the square. Casualty estimates range from hundreds to thousands; no official number was ever released.

Sometimes protests grow violent, and sometimes they start out that way. And there’s violence, and then there’s violence. Trashing businesses isn’t in the same league with blowing things up and killing people. Sadly, terrorism has become a tool of politics in recent decades.

Consider the Middle East. Some people of Jewish descent had long dreamed of returning to their historical homeland of Israel, having been forcibly ejected by the Romans in the Second Century BCE. They had been persecuted nearly everywhere they went, so reconstituting the state of Israel seemed like a chance to be left alone. But the former territory was occupied by Palestinian Arabs, ruled first by the Turkish Ottoman Empire and then by the British. Jews began to move there, nonetheless, and in 1917 the British government more or less guaranteed the Jews access to territory there. Friction resulted—between Arabs and Jews, and between Jews and the British, and in 1948, the new state of Israel declared its independence. A series of wars between Israel and its neighbors ensued, and the territory that would have been Palestine became, instead, Israel after the Arabs attacked Israel in 1948. This left a dispossessed population of Palestinian Arabs, who, unfortunately, turned to violent forms of protest against the Israelis. That has led to 60 years of intermittent warfare and frequent violence, with little to show for it but the gravesites.

The airborne terrorist strikes of September 11, 2001, are, in a way, only one chapter in a long-running clash between parts of the east and parts of the west. U.S. involvement in the Middle East is unpopular with some Arab Moslems, particularly U.S. support for Israel. But what could move people to such horrible acts?

Terrorism is politically driven, targets civilians rather than military targets, and aims to change political attitudes and decision-making. Terrorism seems to occur when one group of people can see no way of achieving their objectives other than inflicting pain on the people with whom they disagree. Usually, then, the terrorists must feel some degree of powerlessness, as the perceived oppressor has a distinct military advantage over the group that feels oppressed. Terrorists aim to spread fear among citizens, who then will put pressure on their government to change policy.

Terrorism is not new; people we might describe as terrorists have been assassinating political leaders since the 1800s. The targeting of civilians is new, as is the potential access to weapons that can kill a lot of people. But while acts of
terrorism have killed more than 4,000 people in the last few decades, little has changed in terms of policy and leaders in the states where the terrorists have made their targets. In some ways, like war, terrorism is as much the failure of politics as it is a way of achieving change.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

• People participate in politics in a variety of ways, including direct participation and communication.
• Surveys, media reports, and interest groups are all ways that public opinion is relayed to candidates and elected officials.
• Non-violent resistance is an active method protesting unjust laws.
• Terrorism is a method of political protest that seeks to spread fear among citizens, who will put pressure on leaders to change policy.

EXERCISES

1. Have you ever actively engaged in a political protest? What issues might make you do so?
2. Survey other students about their attitudes about a political issue. Check your results against those of existing scientific surveys on the same topic.