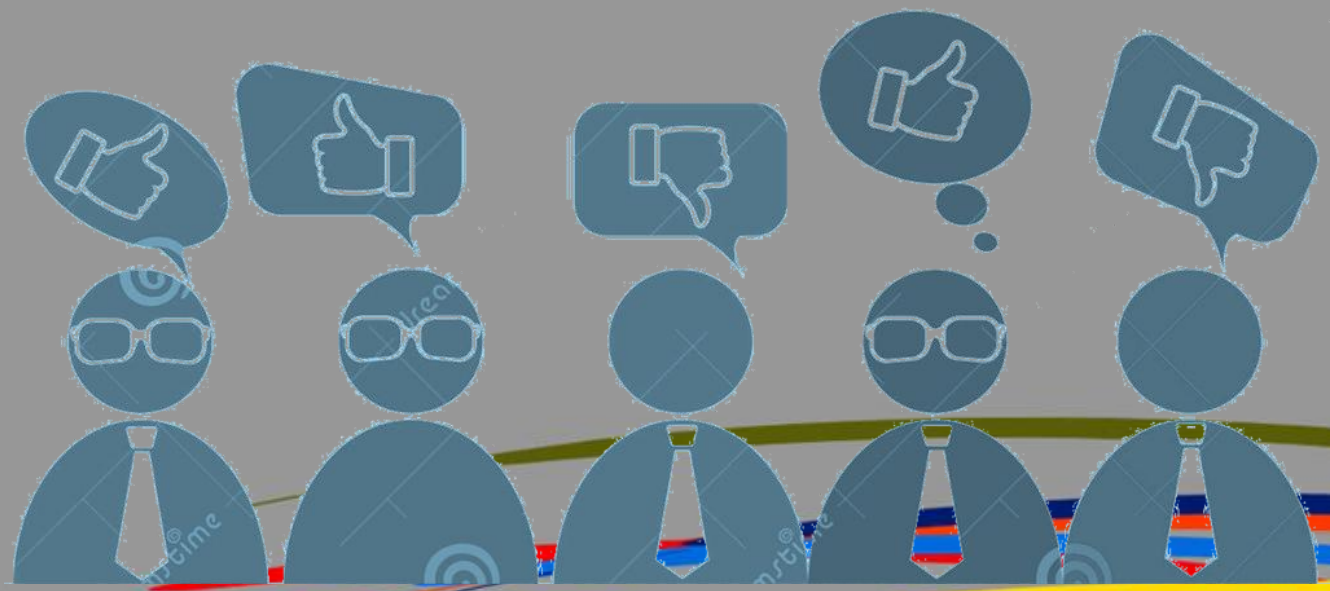
Measuring Public Opinion

We all do no end of feeling and we mistake it for thinking.
And out of it we get an aggregation which we consider a boon.
Its name is public opinion. It is held in reverence.
It settles everything. Some think it is the voice of God.

Mark Twain

Public Opinion

...aggregate of individual attitudes or beliefs shared by some portion of the adult population



Measuring Public Opinion

- We need to combine these individual opinions so that we can then determine what the public *as a whole* believes.
- Must collect data in a *scientifically* rigorous fashion.

Steps in Measuring Public Opinion

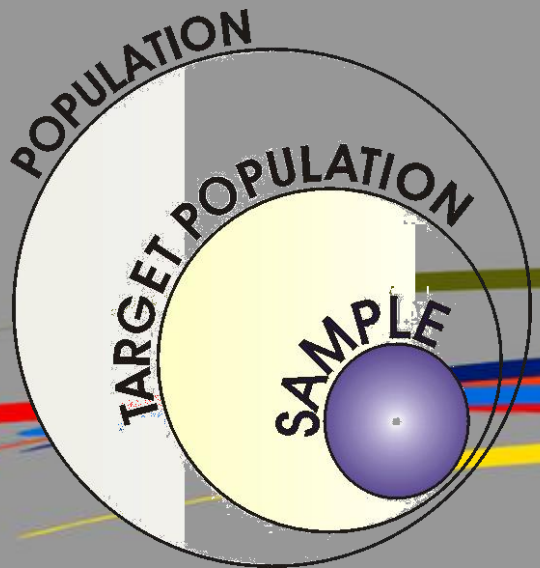
- target population identification
- random sample selection
- question construction
- poll administration
- data analysis

Measuring Public Opinion: Target Population Identification

Who's opinion are you interested in measuring?

target population: the total group of individuals from which the sample might be drawn

generalizability: the extent to which we can apply the findings of our research to the target population we are interested in



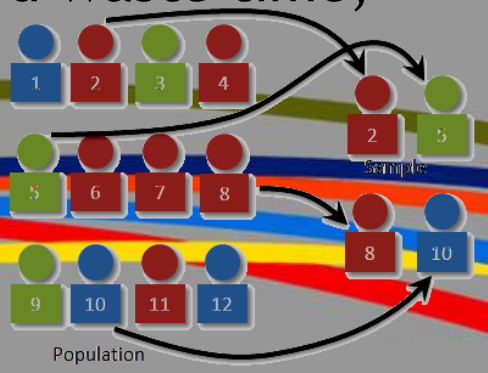
Measuring Public Opinion: Random Sample Selection

A sample is a subset of people, items or events from a larger population that you collect and analyze to make inferences about the larger population.

To represent the population well, a sample should be randomly collected and adequately large.

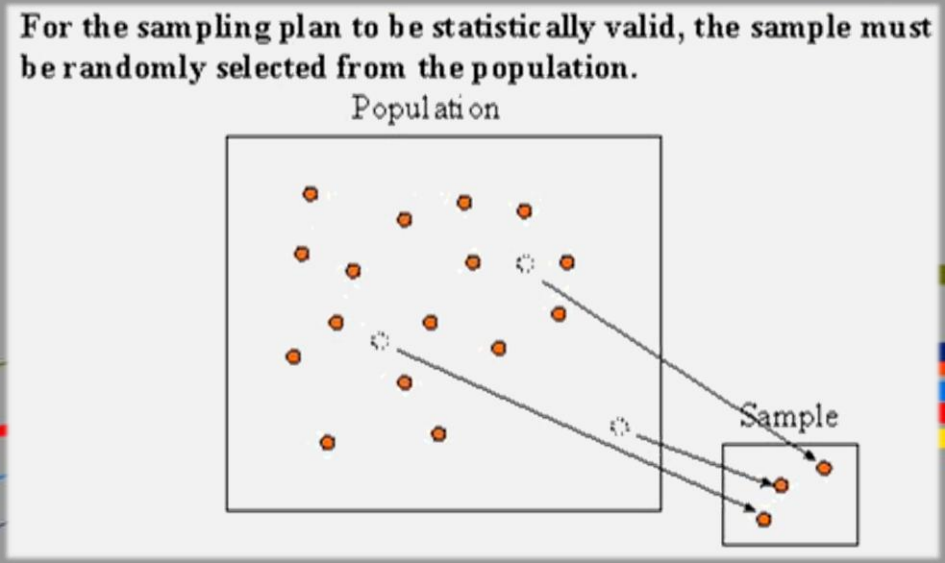
Randomly collected means that every person in the target population must have an equal and known probability of being included in the sample.

size: The sample must be large enough to adequately represent the population but not larger than necessary or you waste time, effort and money.



Scientific vs. Unscientific Polls: Random Sample

- The key is whether the sample is random.
  - Remember that every person in the target population must have an equal and known probability of being included in the survey.
  - Allows us to calculate the margin of error and the confidence interval.

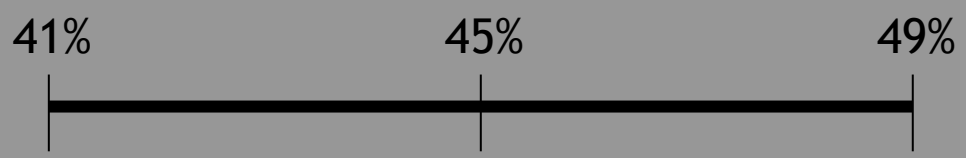


Scientific vs. Unscientific Polls: Random Sample

margin of error: how much the sample's opinions differ from the total population's opinions (Unless you survey the entire population, there will always be a margin of error.)

+/- 3.5% to about +/- 6%

45% with a 4% margin of error



confidence interval: A confidence interval is a range around a measurement that conveys how precise the measurement is, how sure we are of the results.

0.01 to 0.05

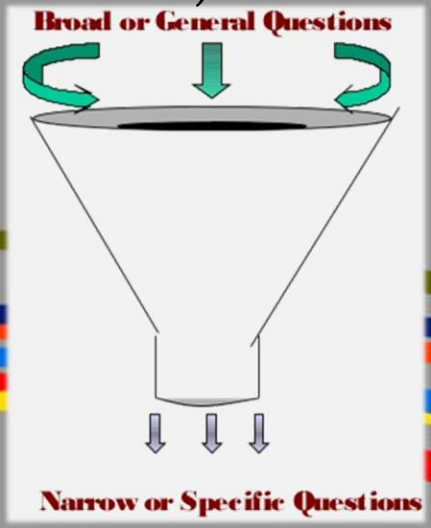
99% to 95% confidence

Scientific vs. Unscientific Polls: Random Sample

- Need to be able to determine how much your sample differs from the total population and how sure you are of the results.
- If the sample isn’t random, there’s no way to determine that.

Measuring Public Opinion: Question Construction

- The proper wording and phrasing of questions are vitally important to producing reliable, objective data.
- loaded or leading words: Subtle wording differences can produce great differences in results (The Supreme Court could /should/ might change the limits on free speech in light of terrorist activities). Strong words, such as “prohibit” may represent control or action and influence responses. Word questions and answers in a *neutral* fashion, without taking sides on an issue, and representing both sides fairly.
- question order: Avoid questions placed out of order or out of context. Use a funnel approach ... broad and general questions at the beginning, more specific questions, followed by more general easy questions (like demographics).



Measuring Public Opinion: Question Construction

- use closed-ended vs. open-ended questions appropriately
  - closed-ended: limits respondents with a list of answer choices from which they must choose to answer the question (yes or no, like or dislike or not sure, walk or car or bus or other, etc)
  - open-ended: no answer choices given, respondent answers any way desired (Why did you choose that answer? What is the purpose of government? etc)
- clear and understandable questions : Be specific in what you want to know. Do you like the president? (personally? politically? on the issues? respect? vote for?) Do you contact the government regularly? (what's regularly? any kind of contact? anyone connected to government? elected? post office?)
- length: When you increase the length of questions, you decrease the chance of receiving a completed response.

Do you think government cares about you?

___ yes

___ no

___ I'm not sure.

What does / could government do to show it cares about you?

_____

Measuring Public Opinion: Question Construction

- confusing or unfamiliar wording: Avoid jargon, acronyms, rarely used words, sentences with multiple phrases or more than one negative, language inappropriate for all educational levels.

Use . . .	Instead of ...
Work	Employment
Tired	Exhausted
About	Regarding
People who live here	Occupants of this household
Your answers	Your responses to this questionnaire
Job concerns	Work-related employment issues
Providing health care	Health care provision

- forced private responses: If asking about income, age, race, etc include a prefer-not-to-answer choice.
- non-exhaustive closed-ended responses: If you're not sure you've included all possible responses for a closed-ended question, include an other-please-specify choice.
- double-barreled questions: Make certain a question isn't really two questions that might have two different answers (What is the most responsive and efficient form of government?).
- dichotomous questions: Answers should always be independent. *Do you think politicians are honest or incompetent?* is not dichotomous. They could be both.

Measuring Public Opinion: Poll Administration

Contact those selected in the random sample.

- Two of the most common ways that public opinion polls are conducted include telephone and/or face-to-face interviews. Other methods include mail and self-administered surveys.
- telephone polls: use a sample of randomly-generated phone numbers that has been purged to eliminate business numbers, dead lines, etc ... Because nearly 25% of the US population (as of 2014) has a cell phone but no landline, true scientific samples should include a subsample of cell phone users. Cell phone sampling comes with its own unique challenges. The interviewer will randomly select a person in the household to be interviewed, commonly by asking for the adult who had the most recent birthday.
- face-to-face polls: conducted with the interviewer and the interviewee next to each other ... The interviewer reads material from the survey and records the responses. The interviewer may hand a card to the respondent for him/her to select responses.
- self-administered poll: respondent is handed the questionnaire to fill out ... Exit polls are examples of self-administered surveys.

Measuring Public Opinion: Data Analysis

Interpret what the numbers mean.

- When researchers analyze polls they mean one of two things: statistical analysis of the polls or interpretive analysis of the polling results.
- statistical analysis: disaggregate (or break down) the data and run tables that show how different groups in the sample responded to the questions, usually by using a statistical computer software package ... involves counting and organizing the responses

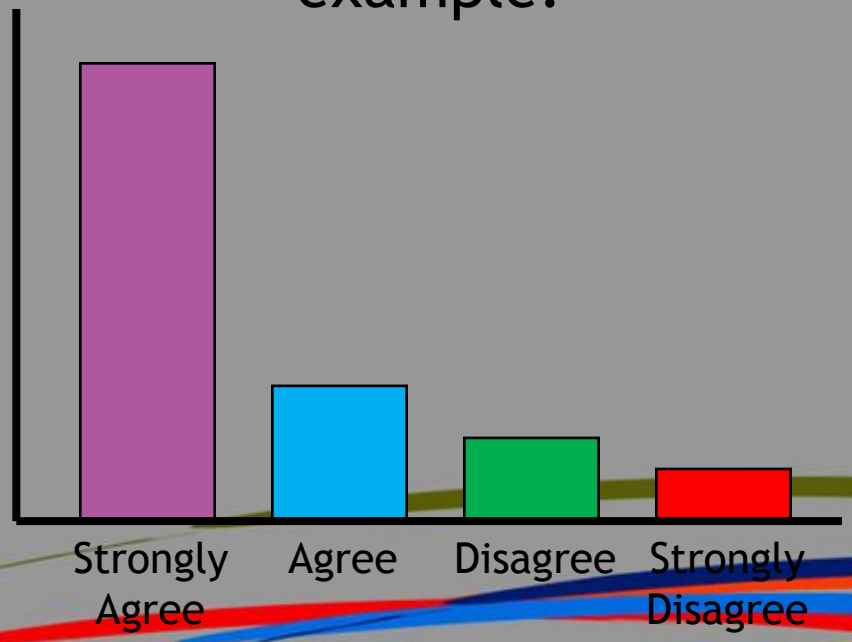
EMPLOYMENT STATUS	RACE: WHITE	RACE: BLACK	RACE: OTHER	
UNEMPLOYED	236.0	39.0	5.0	280.0
PARTTIME	84.0	8.0	8.0	100.0
FULLTIME	415.0	69.0	16.0	500.0
RETIRED	105.0	14.0	1.0	120.0
	840.0	130.0	30.0	1000.0

- interpretive analysis: provides an explanation of what the data mean ... Understanding a poll can be a challenging task, requiring critical thinking and common sense to interpret what the responses mean.
- Some of the things you might look for are indications of intensity, salience, consensus, divisiveness and/or stability.

Measuring and Analyzing Variables: Intensity

How strongly held is an opinion?

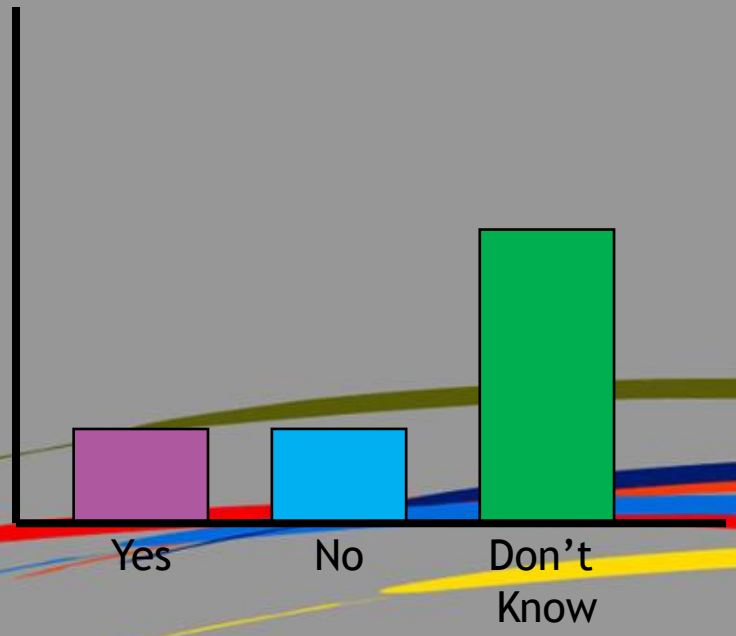
Polls may indicate wide support for something, but fail to indicate that the support is not strongly held, for example.



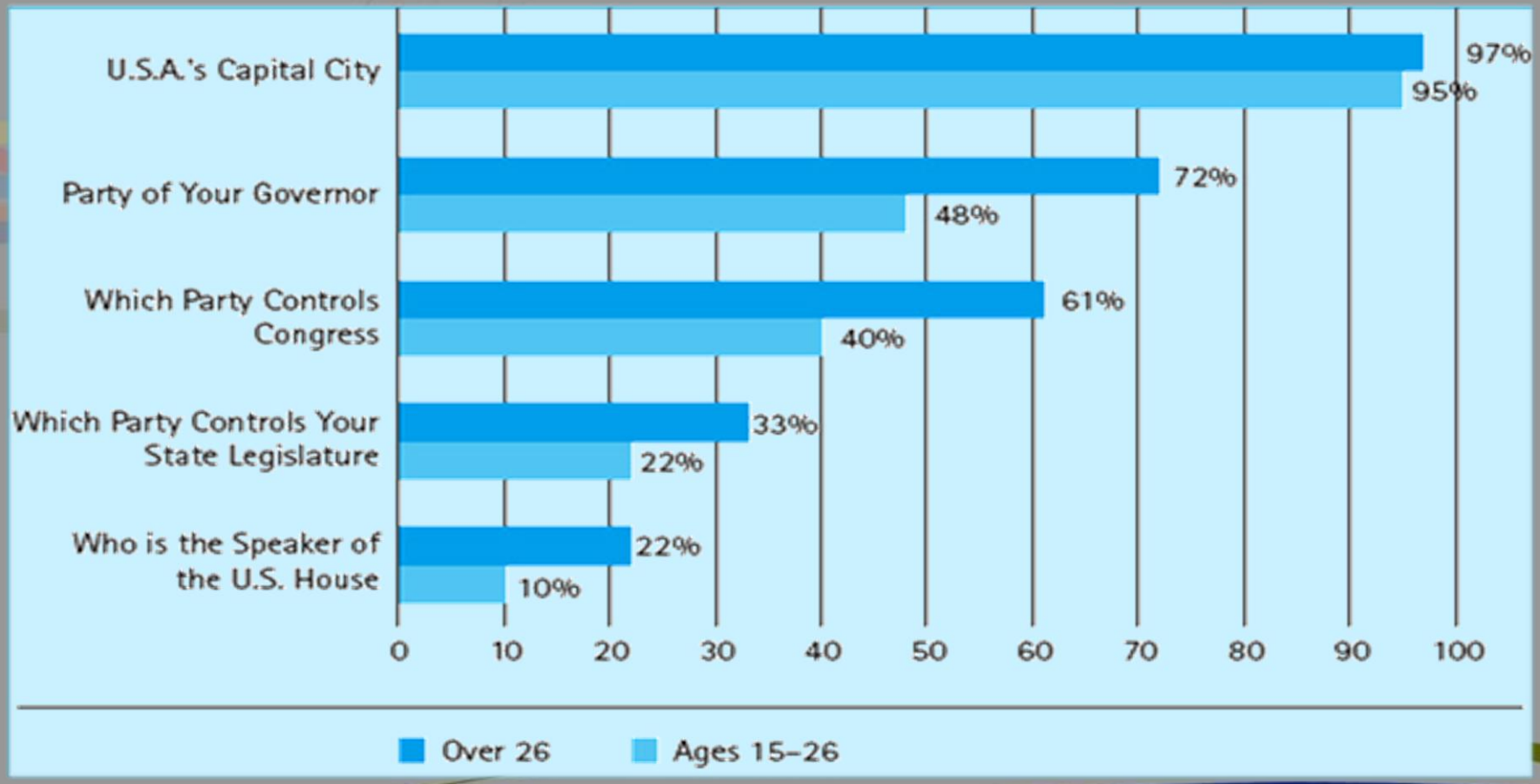
Measuring and Analyzing Variables: Salience

How important is the issue to people?

Most people don't have strong opinions about or even knowledge of issues. They respond to polls based on what some group or the majority thinks, what sounds right or etc rather than saying they don't know.



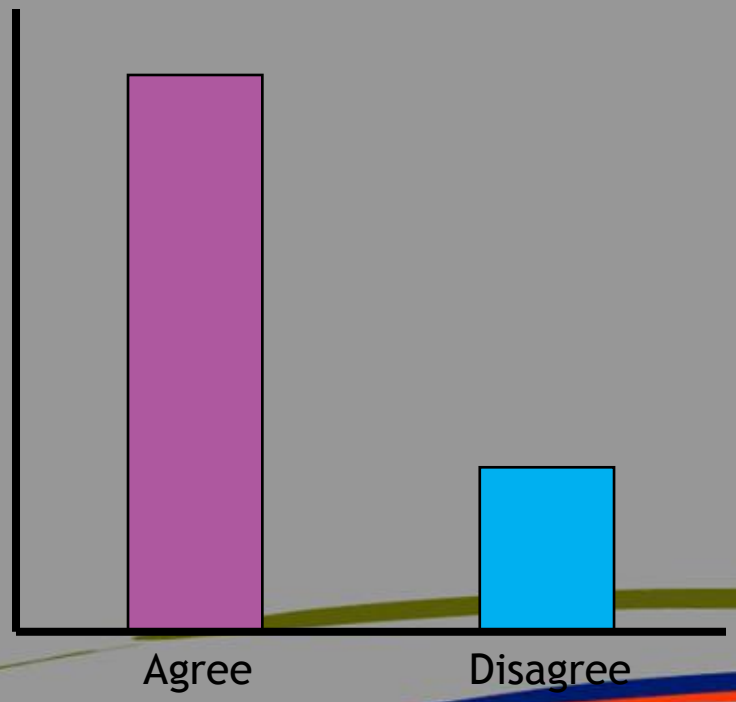
Measuring and Analyzing Variables: Salience



Americans are not very knowledgeable about the specifics of American government because it's not very important to them. Young people know even less than relatively ill-informed older Americans.

Measuring and Analyzing Variables: Consensus

Is there general agreement among the citizenry on an issue?



Measuring and Analyzing Variables: Divisiveness

How deeply is the public divided on an issue?

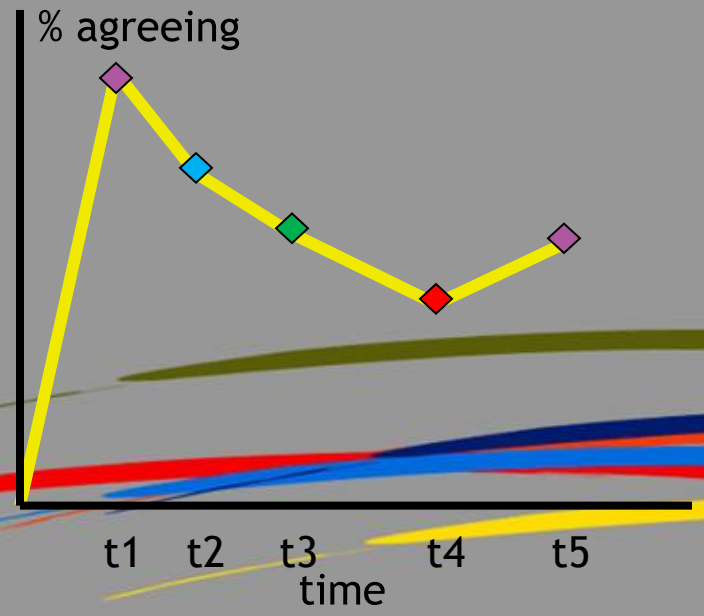
This is of concern especially when opinions are also intense, salient and stable.

Measuring and Analyzing Variables: Stability

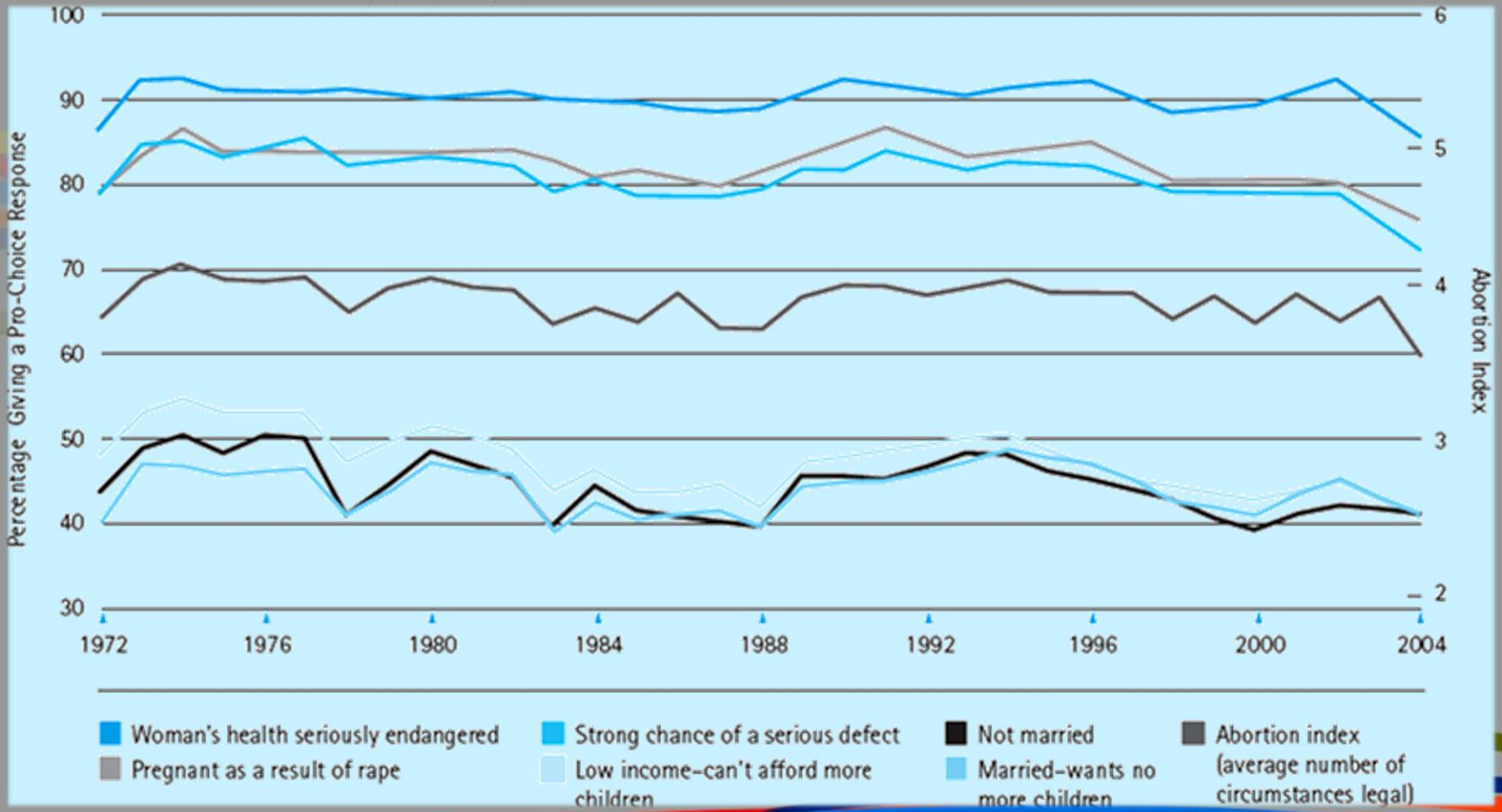
Is public opinion stable (the same over time) or unstable (likely to change often)?

Stability may also indicate intensity and salience.

latency: A latent opinion is formed on the spot, only when needed (as distinct from a deeply held opinion, which is stable over time). For *most* Americans, *all* opinions are latent.



Measuring and Analyzing Variables: Stability



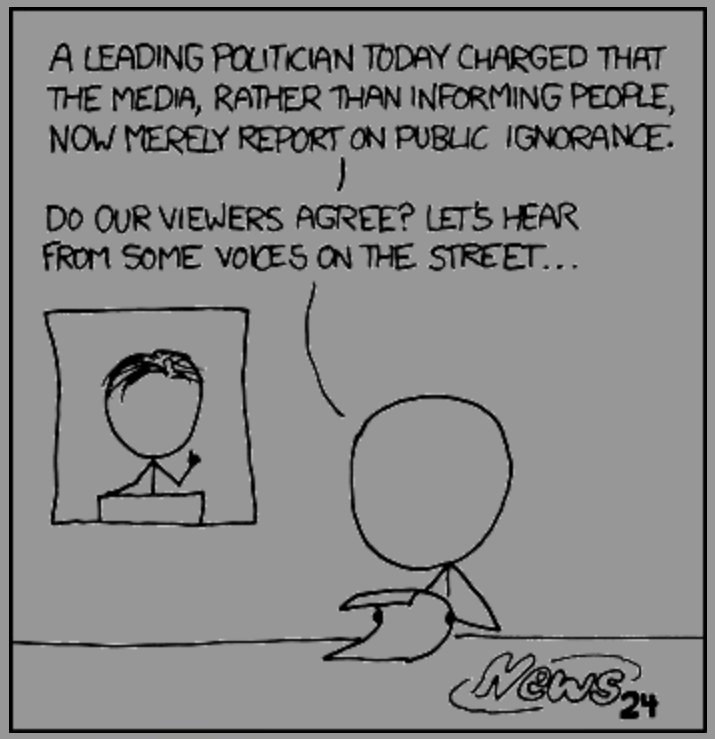
Popular attitudes toward abortion have been remarkably stable since *Roe v. Wade* (1973).

Factors that Shape Public Opinion

- family
- education
- media
- race
- gender
- age
- career
- religion
- income
- current events
- geography
- political party
- (There are at least as many factors as there are individual characteristics.)

The Importance of Public Opinion

- Public opinion is important IF it...
  - connects us to democracy
  - shapes public policy
  - informs political leaders
  - controls political leaders to some extent



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