



Public Opinion and Government Responsiveness Part I

How confident are we that the power to drive and determine public opinion will always reside in responsible hands?

Carl Sagan



Public Opinion

- ▶ ...the distribution of individual preferences for or evaluations of a given issue, candidate or institution within a specific population
- ▶ the political attitudes expressed by ordinary citizens and considered as a whole
- ▶ **evaluating democracy**: How closely does government policy correspond to the expressed wishes of its citizens?
- ▶ important to democracy ... Why?
 - ▶ need not be actively expressed ... Public opinion influences government if only indirectly and passively.
 - ▶ **law of anticipated reactions**: Even if public opinion is silent, or latent, public officials may act or fail to act because they fear arousing it.





Characteristics of Public Opinion

- ▶ Public opinion is **uninformed**.
 - ▶ On many issues people (in US and other countries) have little information.
 - ▶ Information costs are high.
 - ▶ **information costs**: the time and mental efforts required to absorb, store and process information, whether from conversations, personal experiences or the media.





Characteristics of Public Opinion

- ▶ Public opinion is uninformed but **some people do better.**
 - ▶ **issue publics:** people particularly affected by or concerned with a specific issue
 - ▶ These people find relevant information valuable and can gather it more cheaply.
- ▶ Why does an ignorant America hinder measurement of public opinion?
 - ▶ People answer questions whether they know anything or not. Never know whether response is a considered, informed opinion or a spur-of-the-moment “guess.”





Characteristics of Public Opinion

- ▶ Many of the opinions expressed in polls are **not strongly held**.
- ▶ Public may say one thing, but when asked again, may seem to say something else.
- ▶ **non-attitudes / doorstep opinions**: the phenomenon of people offering an opinion even when they don't actually have one
- ▶ The United States of Apathy's Motto Is 'We Don't Care'





Characteristics of Public Opinion

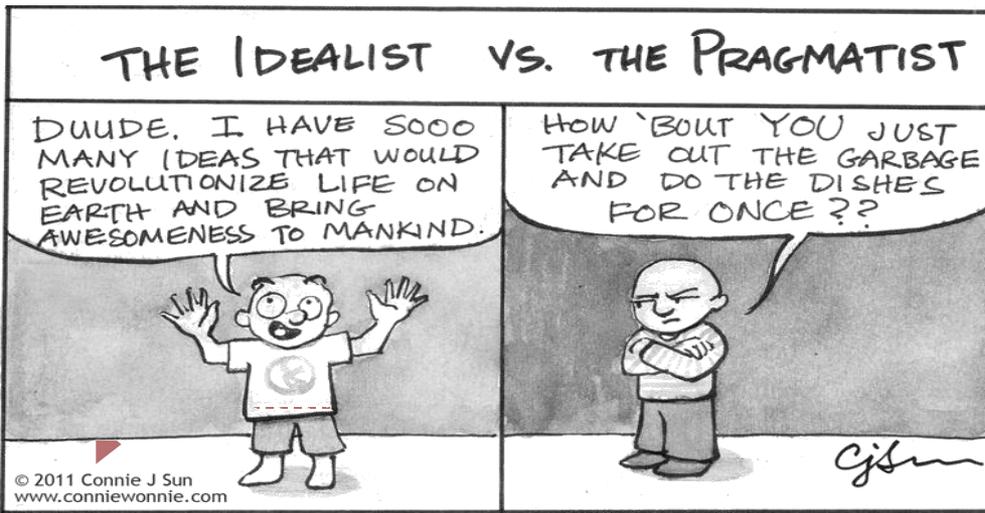
- ▶ Public opinion is **not ideological**.
 - ▶ **ideology**: system of beliefs in which one or more organizing principles connect an individual's views on a wide range of issues
 - ▶ **political elites**: tend to have well-structured ideologies
 - ▶ **mass public**: ordinary citizens for whom political involvement is limited ... usually are not ideological





Characteristics of Public Opinion

- ▶ Public opinion is **inconsistent**.
 - ▶ Sentiments on policy do not always match the principles that people claim to endorse.
 - ▶ Public opinion may not provide a **clear mandate** ... it can confuse the political debate.
 - ▶ Why this inconsistency?
 - ▶ ignorance, inaccurate information, hypocrisy
 - ▶ Or, perhaps Americans are not absolutists, but rather **pragmatists** that make trade-offs on a case-by-case basis.



(There has been past research that indicates that Americans are more pragmatic and much less ideological than citizens in European democracies.)



How People Differ

- ▶ Although it is possible to discuss American public opinion as a collective whole, there are important distinctions among different sorts of people in different circumstances ... and those **differences affect our opinions.**
- ▶ race and ethnicity
 - ▶ African Americans
 - ▶ Hispanics
 - ▶ Asian Americans
 - ▶ white ethnics





How People Differ

- ▶ socioeconomic class
- ▶ region and urban vs. rural
- ▶ level of education
- ▶ sex and gender
- ▶ age and stage of life
- ▶ religion
 - ▶ denomination
 - ▶ religiously committed vs. less committed and secular





Democracy and Public Opinion

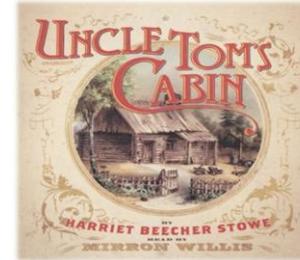
- ▶ Many leading political theorists doubt the **wisdom** of the public.
- ▶ **non-attitudes**: modern survey research shows public ignorance and apathy
- ▶ National officials also seem to doubt the wisdom of public opinion.



Early Efforts to Influence Public Opinion



- ▶ *Federalist Papers*: one of first major attempts to change public opinion regarding ratification of Constitution
- ▶ *Paine's Common Sense and The Crisis*: revolutionary cause
- ▶ *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: anti-slavery
- ▶ WWI
 - ▶ Wilson's creation of the **Committee on Public Information**: created to influence US public opinion regarding American participation in World War I
 - ▶ American journalist **Walter Lippmann's** concern: government can easily manipulate public opinion



Recent Efforts to Influence Public Opinion



- ▶ **Tonkin Gulf incident:** In August 1964, the US destroyer *Maddox*, on routine patrol in international waters, exchanged shots with North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin after they fired on the *Maddox* without provocation. Two days later, the *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy* reported once again coming under unprovoked fire. By the end of the day, President Johnson had ordered “retaliatory air strikes,” and by late 1965 some 180,000 American troops were on the ground with more on the way. [President Johnson's Message to Congress August 5, 1964](#)



- ▶ Most historians, including those with the US military, have since concluded that both destroyers were on an espionage mission in North Vietnamese waters, that the *Maddox* fired first and that the second of those attacks never even occurred. It served, however, as the **pretext** for an immediate ramp-up of the Vietnam War.
 - ▶ A **pattern** took hold: continuous government misrepresentations passed on by the mass media to the American public.
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Recent Efforts to Influence Public Opinion



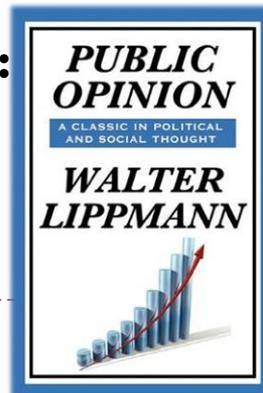
- ▶ 1964: majority of American population supported administration policy in Vietnam ... end of 1965: small but outspoken minority, including many students
- ▶ anti-war protests gained strength over next two years, joined by Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King Jr, many returning veterans ... 1968: only 35% approved of the war
- ▶ Government officials are able and willing to **lead or manipulate** public opinion.
- ▶ Public opinion can have a strong impact on policymaking, even on foreign policy.
- ▶ **Fahrenheit 9/11**: 2004 documentary film by Michael Moore that takes a critical look at the presidency of George W. Bush, the War on Terror and its coverage in the news media, the highest grossing documentary of all time, contends that American corporate media were cheerleaders for the 2003 invasion of Iraq and did not provide an accurate or objective analysis of the rationale for the war or the resulting casualties





Measuring Public Opinion

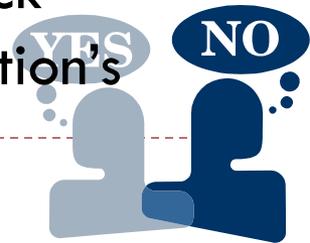
- ▶ The views of acquaintances, letter writers, rally audiences and callers on radio talk shows do not represent the public as a whole.
- ▶ Most of the guesswork can now be eliminated by conducting an opinion poll or random sample survey.
- ▶ **public opinion polls**: interviews or surveys of samples of citizens that are used to estimate the feelings and beliefs of the entire population
- ▶ Public opinion polling did not begin to develop until the 1930s.
 - ▶ Spurred on by **Lippmann's *Public Opinion*** (1922): critical assessment of functional democratic government



Early Efforts to Measure Public Opinion



- ▶ originally used **straw polls**: unscientific surveys used to gauge public opinion on a variety of issues and policies
- ▶ **Literary Digest**: venerable magazine founded in 1890 ... had correctly predicted the outcomes of the 1916, 1920, 1924, 1928, and 1932 elections by conducting polls ... 1936 prediction that Landon would win in a landslide over Roosevelt (polled about 2 million people, most of whom were magazine readers, car owners, telephone customers, had money during the Depression ... not a representative sample)
- ▶ **George Gallup**: used a random sample of 50,000 people and made his own prediction before *Literary Digest*, saying magazine would get it all wrong, despite its decent track record in previous polls ... established Gallup as the nation's pre-eminent pollster





Recent Efforts to Measure Public Opinion

- ▶ 1940s: Polling techniques became more sophisticated.
 - ▶ Setback with prediction that Dewey would defeat Truman in the 1948 general election (again, sample used was not representative sample)
- ▶ Gallup: American research-based, global performance-management consulting company founded by George Gallup in 1935, known for public opinion polls conducted in several countries
- ▶ American National Election Studies (ANES): collaboration of Stanford University and the University of Michigan, producing data on voting, public opinion and political participation
- ▶ internet: Social Media and Public Opinion, Globalization, the Internet and Public Opinion, The Internet and Public Opinion, Effects of the Internet on Politics: Research Roundup





Measuring Public Opinion

- ▶ importance of **random sampling**: a subset of individuals (**sample**) chosen from a larger set (**population**), with each individual chosen randomly and entirely by chance, and having the same probability of being chosen at any stage during the sampling process ... an unbiased polling technique ... if a sample is not random it will not accurately represent the population
- ▶ traditional and emerging **problems** in political polling
 - ▶ wording
 - ▶ closed-ended or forced-choice questions
 - ▶ decreased willingness of Americans to participate in surveys
 - ▶ increased use of caller-ID to screen pollster calls
 - ▶ difficulty of surveying people who rely on cell phones



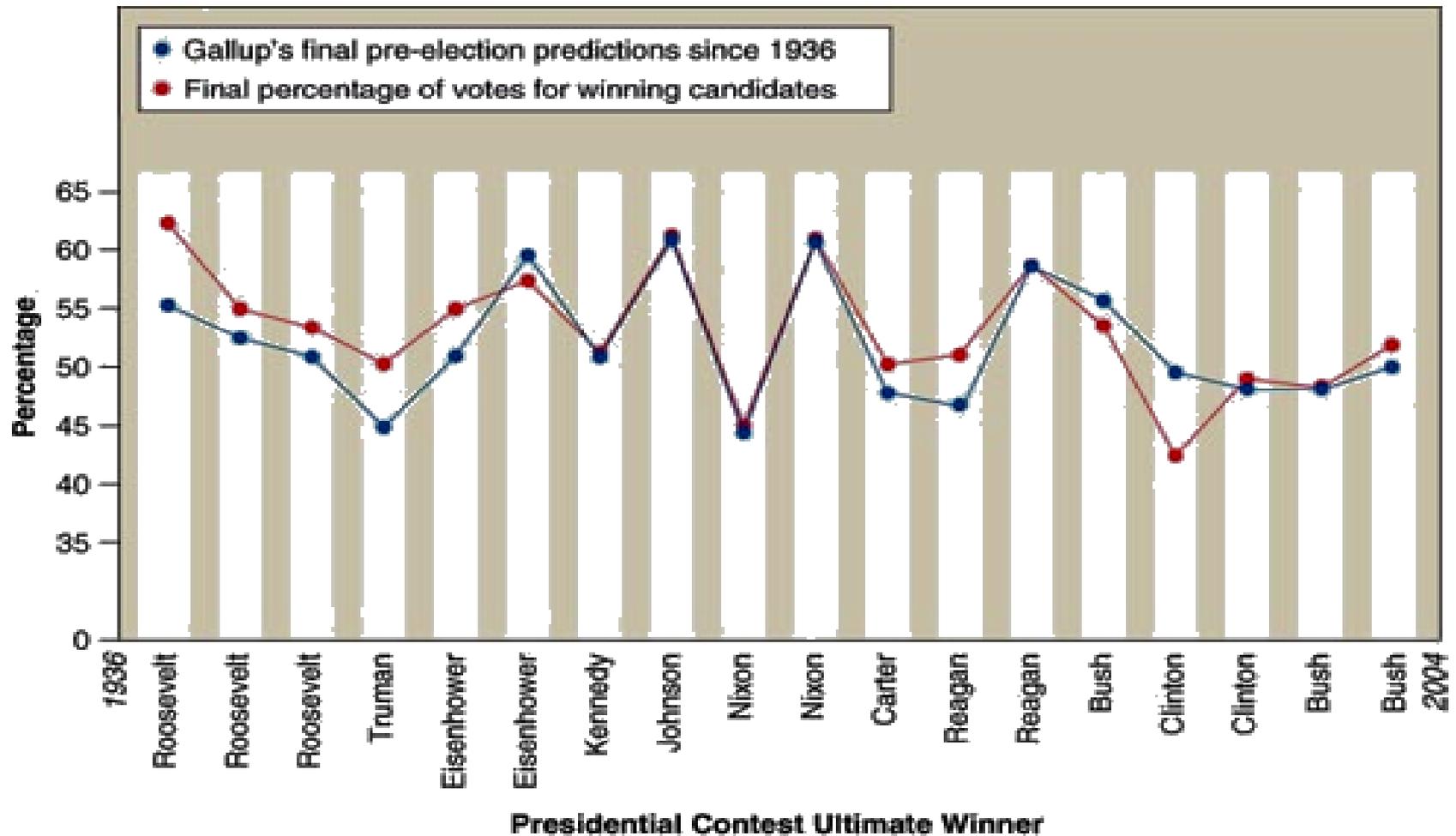


Types of Polls

- ▶ traditional **random sample poll**
- ▶ **push poll**: ostensible opinion poll in which the true objective is not to solicit opinions but to sway voters using loaded or manipulative questions (not really a poll)
- ▶ **tracking poll**: continuous polling that enables a campaign to chart its daily rise or fall in support
- ▶ **entrance poll**: taken directly before voters cast their votes ... margin of error usually lower than that of an opinion poll since voters are unlikely change their minds at the last minute
- ▶ **exit poll**: sample every tenth voter exiting polling places ... purpose to gain early indication of election results, help the news media predict outcomes of key races.
 - ▶ 1980 exit polls caused Carter to concede 3 hours before the polls closed on the West Coast. Networks agreed not to predict the results of future presidential contests until all polling places were closed.



Success of Gallup Poll Predictions in Presidential Elections, 1936-2004

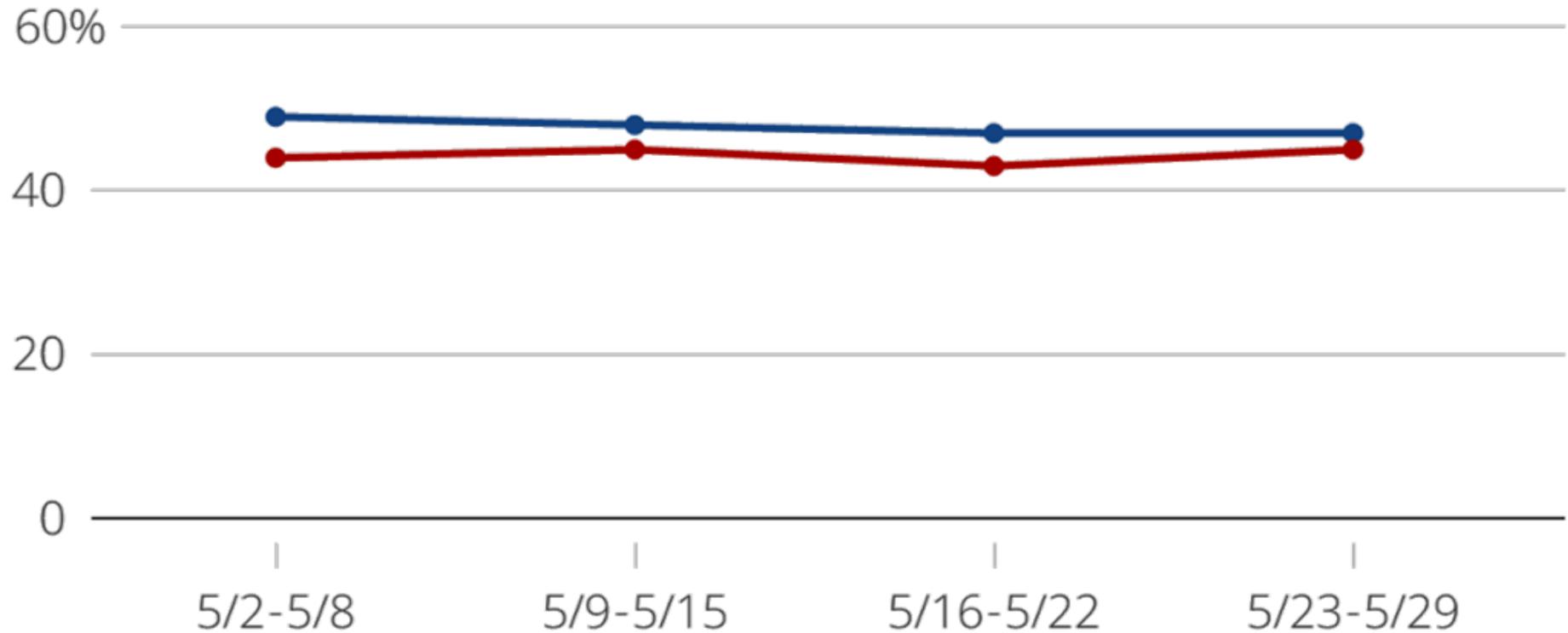


Weekly Tracking Poll, 2016 Presidential Election



If the 2016 presidential election were being held today...

■ Clinton ■ Trump



Errors in Opinion Polls



- ▶ **sampling error**: the error that arises in a public opinion survey as a result of relying on a representative, but small, sample of the larger population ... measure of the **accuracy** of a public opinion poll
- ▶ **margin of error**: statistic expressing the amount of sampling error in a survey's results ... answers provided by a random sample of 1,500 Americans on any political question would fall within 3% of national opinion 95% of the time
- ▶ **selection bias**: a sample systematically includes or excludes people with certain attitudes and so of no scientific value ... If a survey has selection bias it will not be representative of the larger population.





Errors in Opinion Polls

- ▶ **measurement error:** may occur when attempting to measure something subjective, such as opinion
 - ▶ Opinions are hard to quantify.
 - ▶ Answers can vary dramatically depending on how a question is asked.
 - ▶ Question wording can be confusing, leading or oversimplified.





Problems with Polls

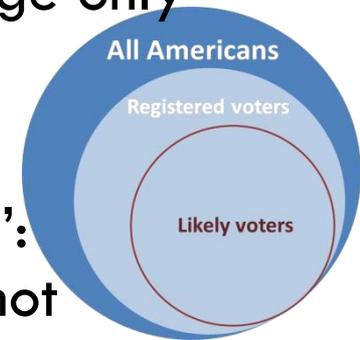
- ▶ Inaccurate results can be dangerous.
- ▶ **Voter News Service** (VNS) made errors in estimation of Florida during the 2000 presidential election.
 - ▶ failed to estimate the number of voters accurately
 - ▶ used an inaccurate exit poll model
 - ▶ incorrectly estimated the number of African American and Cuban voters
 - ▶ results led to a declaration of the winner long before possible
 - ▶ VNS disbanded in 2003.
- ▶ Major networks and Associated Press joined together to form a new polling consortium, the **National Election Pool**.





Problems with Polls

- ▶ **limited respondent options:** polls can be inaccurate when they limit responses
- ▶ **difficulty measuring intensity of feeling:** Does the response represent a *superficially held view* which may be discarded the next moment or a *cherished conviction* which will change only under unusual pressure?
- ▶ respondents' **lack of interest** in political issues
- ▶ (tracking/election polls) how to identify “**likely voters**”: Respondents overstate their likelihood of voting. it is not uncommon for 60% to report that they definitely plan to vote in an election in which only 40% will actually turn out.
- ▶ By 2014 the **response rate** (percentage of households in a sample that are successfully interviewed) had fallen to 8%.



Two Major Problems with Poll Reliability



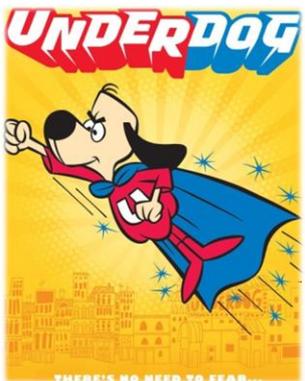
- ▶ Many people who are questioned do not have **adequate knowledge** on the question they are asked. They usually choose a random answer to avoid looking uninformed and thus the outcome of the poll is not always accurate.
- ▶ **unequal sampling**: For example, in some polls the poor and homeless are underrepresented causing the poll to show an inaccurate outcome. Had that group been sufficiently represented, the poll would have shown a different outcome.



How Public Opinion Affects Politicians, Politics and Policy



- ▶ Politicians and government spend millions each year to take the pulse of the public.
- ▶ They rely on polls but we do not know to what degree.
- ▶ Early tracking poll success/failure can make/ruin a candidate.
- ▶ Polls can distort the election process with bandwagon or underdog effects.
 - ▶ **bandwagon effect**: people vote for / support something primarily because other people are doing it, regardless of their own beliefs, which they may ignore or override
 - ▶ **underdog effect**: when at an election voters perceive a particular party or candidate to be the likely winner, they tend to support a competitor who is expected to lose, an underdog in the race



How Public Opinion Affects Politicians, Politics and Policy



- ▶ **George Gallup:** Believed leaders must constantly take public opinion, no matter how short lived, into consideration.
- ▶ **Benjamin Ginsberg criticism:** Polls allow governments and politicians to say they have considered public opinion even though polls don't always measure the intensity of feeling on an issue or might over-reflect the views of the public. Democracy is better served by reliance on telephone calls and letters (active signs of interest) than on the passive voice of public opinion (polls).
- ▶ **George Gallup's response:** One might as well insist that a thermometer makes the weather.





Why We Form Political Opinions

- ▶ personal benefit
- ▶ political knowledge
- ▶ cues from leaders or opinion makers





Personal Benefit

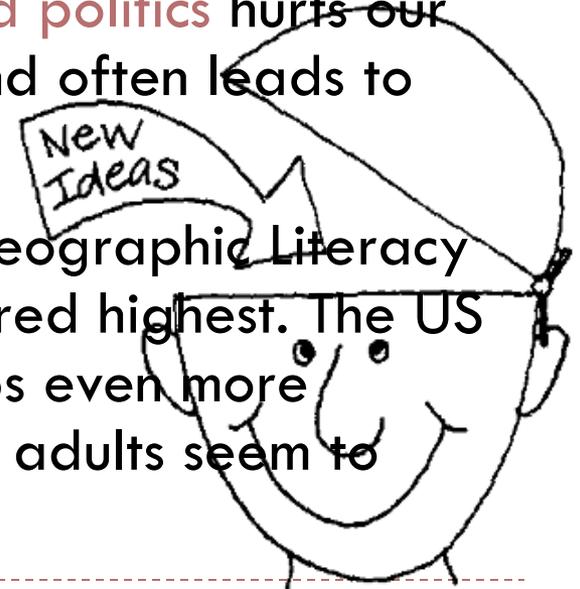
- ▶ **self interest:** Most Americans are “I” centered.
- ▶ Attitudes on moral issues are often based on underlying values.
- ▶ If faced with policies that do not affect us personally and are not moral in nature, we have difficulty forming an opinion.
- ▶ Foreign policy is such an example.





Political Knowledge

- ▶ Political knowledge and political participation have a **reciprocal relationship**. The more people know, the more they participate. And the more they participate, the more they know.
- ▶ high literacy rate but lack of knowledge in specific areas
- ▶ A low level of knowledge about **history and politics** hurts our understanding of current political events and often leads to contradictory opinions.
- ▶ **geographically illiterate**: On the Global Geographic Literacy Survey, 18- to 24-year-olds in Sweden scored highest. The US was next to last, just above Mexico. Perhaps even more worrisome is the finding that few US young adults seem to care. [[Official Survey Site](#)]





Political Knowledge

(percentage of respondents answering the question correctly)

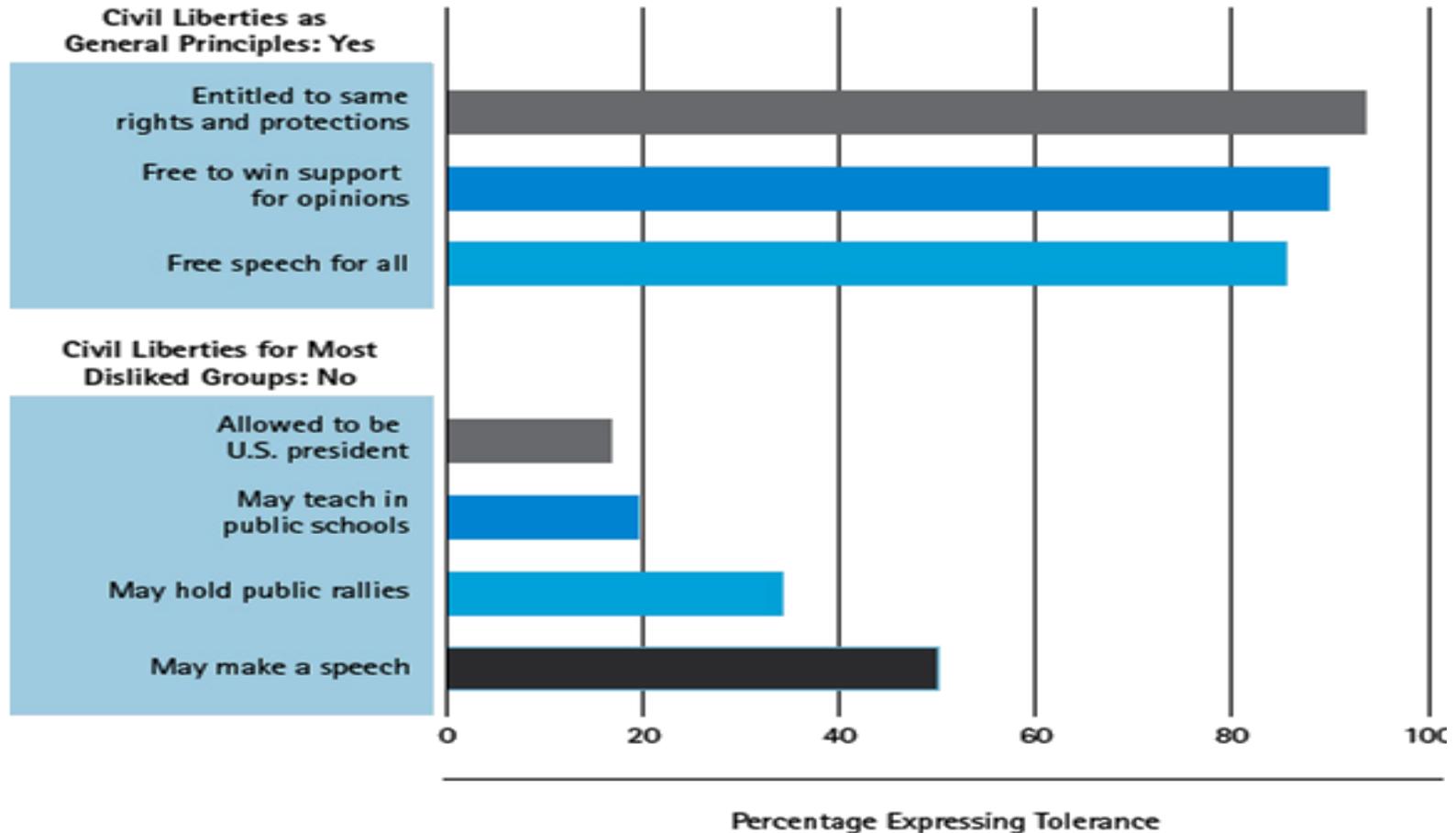
Shockingly, elected officials perform worse than the average American.

	< High School	High School	Some College	College
Presidential Succession	31%	38%	49%	61%
# of U.S. Senators	24%	37%	54%	78%
U.S. House Member Term	30%	34%	45%	55%
# Supreme Court Justices	28%	27%	42% +%	61%
First Amendment to Constitution	16%	16%	27%	46%
Election	36%	44%	47%	54%

- ▶ After the Vice President, who is next in line for the US presidency?
 - Secretary of State
 - President Pro Tempore of the Senate
 - Speaker of the House of Representatives
 - Secretary of the Treasury
- ▶ How many senators are in the US Congress? (open-ended question)
- ▶ How long is the term for members of the House of Representatives? (open-ended question)
- ▶ How many justices serve on the Supreme Court? (open-ended question)
- ▶ Which one of the following rights is guaranteed by the 1st Amendment to the US Constitution?
 - Protection from unreasonable search and seizure
 - Right to petition the government for redress of grievances
 - Right to a speedy trial by jury
 - Right to bear arms
- ▶ Which of the following statements is NOT true about American presidential elections?
 - A candidate can win the popular vote and not be elected president
 - Presidential election ties are decided by the Supreme Court
 - The electoral college is mandated by the US Constitution
 - Presidential candidates are selected by national nominating convention delegates



Endorse Principles but Not Specifics



The first 3 items show the percentage of people supporting the general principles indicated. The last 4 show the percentage supporting specific civil liberties for the group they dislike the most. We believe in civil liberties because that's what Americans believe in but we don't know what that means.



Cues from Leaders

- ▶ Low levels of knowledge can lead to **rapid opinion shifts** on issues.
- ▶ Political leaders may move these shifts.
 - ▶ **President** is in an important position to mold public opinion.
 - ▶ But who is truly leading, public or president?





Continued in Public Opinion and Government Responsiveness Part II

