PSCI4120 Public Opinion and Participation
Introduction

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Democratic institutions should result in government decisions that reflect the views of everyday people.

How effective is the public at controlling what its government does?

The mechanism of popular control

What is public opinion and how it is measured?

Where does public opinion come from?

How and to what extent does it influence electoral and policy outcomes?
Our Plan

(1) Nature of Public Opinion
Various Factors → Public Opinion → Elected Leaders → Policy Outcomes

(2) Formation of Public Opinion
Various Factors → Public Opinion → Elected Leaders → Policy Outcomes

(3) Political Participation
Various Factors → Public Opinion → Elected Leaders → Policy Outcomes

(4) Impact of Public Opinion
Various Factors → Public Opinion → Elected Leaders → Policy Outcomes
Political theorists speculated about “group mind” or “general will” and how it might influence the political order.

Emergence of the idea of popular control in the 18th century.

Governments would find it necessary to take account of public opinion and its distribution throughout the polity.

In the early years of the American republic, it was generally thought that public opinion was easily swayed and subject to fits of passion.

Political institutions were developed, such as the Electoral College, and the indirect election of senators, to distance political leaders from the opinions of everyday people.
Despite the concern regarding people’s ability, public opinion became powerful in the 19th century in the U.S.

It was impossible to argue that the public’s opinion could be ignored.

Tocqueville: “There is no county in which ... there is less independent of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America.”

Bryce: “In no country is public opinion is so powerful as in the United States.”
Lippman: “Mass opinion was subject to passions that could be induced by elite propaganda.” The images of politics are “pictures in people’s head.”

Lippman challenged traditional democratic theory and its notion of an informed and rational public basing opinions on a considered judgement of the facts.

The average person had little time for political affairs.

The mass public is not competent in political matters.
The appearance of scientific polling and Gallup gave a new focus on the debate over the role of public opinion in democracy.

Gallup argued that poll results are a concrete expression of the policies the public desires the government to enact.

Critiques

1. Not all opinions are counted equally
2. The mass public is competent?
The development of deliberative poll

- The careful examination of a political problem, identification of solutions to that problem, and debate over the merits of proposed solutions
- A byproduct of deliberation is that policy preferences are more informed, enlightened, and authentic.
- Does deliberation have positive effects?
Empirical questions

- Most current research on public opinion does not address normative issues about the proper role of opinion in the governmental process.
- How much does the public know about public affairs, and how is that knowledge organized?
- Can people with little political knowledge make a reasonable choice?
- Whose voices are heard?
- Who is more likely to participate?
Definition

- An opinion is a **verbal expression of an attitude**.
- Opinions are **disagreements about matters of preference**, which cannot be resolved using the rules of science.
- **Public opinion** is defined as the preferences of the adult population on matters of relevance to government.
  - Limited to opinion on politics
  - “The public” includes all adults (citizens)
  - Affect (＝feelings) and cognition (＝the process of knowing)
The Evolution of Public Opinion Polls

- Straw polls by newspapers and magazines (nonscientific sampling method)
- Unreliability of straw polls
  - *Literary Digest Poll* of 1936 on Alf Landon VS FDR
  - The poll predicted Landon’s victory. What went wrong?
  - The poll relied on a huge sample drawn from telephone directories and automobile registration lists
- Commercial pollsters (Gallup, Crossley, Roper)
- Let’s look at [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com).
- NORC and General Social Survey (GSS): 1972 to present
- SRC and National Election Study (NES): 1948 to present
- The media also conduct their own polls
Political Consequences of Public Opinion Polls

- Opinion polls allow politicians to know more about the public’s preferences over policies.
- Polls results are brought forcefully to the attention of government authorities at all levels.
- President’s approval rating and his power.
- Citizens’ voices are more likely to be counted equally.