6: Political Socialization and Public Opinion

American Democracy Now, 5th edition
Political Socialization and Civic Participation

- Process by which we develop our political values and opinions is called **political socialization**
- Children absorb the political views of their parents
- One key aspect of political socialization is whether children are socialized to participate in politics
The Process of Political Socialization

• Family and school have the strongest influence on political socialization
• In recent times, media have also become one of the prime agents of political socialization
Participating in Civic Life

• Children whose parents are active in politics or in their community are more likely to be active themselves
• Schools also play an important role in socializing young people to become active in civic life
• Research indicates that socialization actually generates participation
• There is a strong link between being informed and the likelihood of engaging in civic participation
Agents of Socialization

• Learning, culture, and socialization occur through agents of socialization: the individuals, organizations, and institutions that facilitate the acquisition of political views.
Family Influences on Attitudes, Opinions, and Actions

• We learn whether our family members value civic activism by observing their actions and listening to their views.

• Our families also influence what we believe.

• While parents or older siblings may discuss specific issues or policies, their attitudes and outlook also shape children’s general political attitudes and ideology.
  – Weekly Reader poll
The Media’s Ever-Increasing Role in Socialization

• Television, radio, social media, the Internet, and various forms of electronic entertainment and print media help shape our political perspectives
  – Help shape societal norms and reinforce core democratic values
  – Help to determine the national agenda
  – Educate the public about policy issues
Schools, Patriotism, and Civic Participation

• As early as preschool, children in the United States are socialized to believe in democracy and express patriotism

• Schools socialize children to the concept of democracy by making the idea tangible for them

• Research indicates that higher levels of education are associated with higher levels of political activism, which is passed through generations
Religious Institutions: Faith as an Agent of Socialization

• Predictor of the impact of religion on voting is not so much the religion an individual practices but how regularly he or she practices it
• In general, those who regularly attend religious services are more likely to share conservative values—and support Republican candidates in general elections
Religious Institutions: Faith as an Agent of Socialization

- The relationship between frequency of church attendance and identification with the Republican Party is particularly strong among white Protestants.
- African Americans are likely to be Democrats no matter how religious they are.
- Religious Latinos and Asians are more likely to be Republican.
  - By and large, however, majorities of both groups identify as Democrats.
A large proportion—at 49 percent, nearly a majority—of highly religious people are Republicans or lean Republican in voting. Among the moderately religious, Democrats held sway with 44 percent leaning Democrat and 38 percent leaning Republican. Among the nonreligious, 52 percent identify themselves as Democratic leaners, while 29 percent of the nonreligious identify as leaning Republican.

Figure 6.1 Political Party Affiliation by Religiosity
Peers and Group Norms

• Friends, neighbors, coworkers, and other peers influence political socialization

• Research indicates that the primary function of peers is to reinforce our already-held beliefs and values
Political and Community Leaders: Opinion Shapers

- Political and community leaders also help to socialize people and influence public opinion
- President plays an especially important role in shaping Americans’ views
- Often we rely on the recommendations and priorities of well-respected leaders who have earned our trust
Demographic Characteristics: Our Politics Are a Reflection of Us

• Who we are often influences our life experiences, which shape our political socialization and therefore what we think

• Racial and ethnic groups to which we belong, our gender, our age, and where we live all play a role in how we are socialized to political and community life
Race and Ethnicity

- Whites, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans prefer different candidates, hold different political views, and have different levels of civic involvement.
- In the 2016 election, 58% of whites supported Donald Trump, whereas 88% of African Americans supported Hillary Clinton.
- Donald Trump also had weak support from Hispanics, Asians, and other ethnic groups, at 29%.
Race and Ethnicity (2)

• African American youth are the most politically engaged racial or ethnic group
• Asian Americans are more likely to have been active in their communities
• Young Latinos are the least likely to be active in politics or their communities, but they are most likely to have engaged in political protests
• Young white people are moderately likely to engage in community and political activities
Figure 6.2 Candidate Support by Racial and Ethnic Group
## Table 6.1 Latino Party Identification by National Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NATIONAL ORIGIN</th>
<th>REPUBLICAN</th>
<th>DEMOCRATIC</th>
<th>INDEPENDENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvadoran</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender

• **Gender gap**: the measurable difference in the way women and men vote for candidates and in the way they view political issues

• Since the 1980 election, women voters are more likely than men to favor Democratic candidates

• Women in most age groups—except those under age 25—are more likely to vote than their male counterparts

• Women’s and men’s opinions also differ on public policy, although often in unexpected ways
Figure 6.3 The Gender Gap in the 2016 Election

In 2016, the gender gap was particularly apparent, with Hillary Clinton, the Democratic nominee, garnering a sizable majority of women’s votes.

Geographic Region

• Among the most important regional differences in the United States is the difference in political outlook between Northeast and the South
  – These differences date from English colonial times
  – Immigration patterns greatly shaped them
  – Democrats are favored in the Northeast, on the West Coast, and in most major cities.
  – Republicans are favored in the South, the West except the coast, and most of the Midwest

• Religiosity also contributes to differences in regional political climate
Figure 6.4 Levels of Religiosity in the United States

The most religious states are found primarily in the South (Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, South Carolina, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia), and none of the most religious states are in the Northeast or on the West Coast. Contrast that with where we find the least religious states: Nearly all are found in the Northeast (Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and Rhode Island), and four are in the West (Alaska, Oregon, Nevada, and Washington).

Age and Events

• **Generational effect**: the influence of a significant external event in shaping the views of a generation
  – 9/11 for younger Americans
  – Vietnam War and the societal changes of the 1960s for the Baby Boom generation
  – Great Depression and World War II for the oldest Americans
The Socialization and Opinions of Millennial Americans

• Millennial Generation comprise about a third of the U.S. population

• Majority were “wanted” births, and this informed several spin-off characteristics:
  – Helicopter parented, and socialized in a child-centric era
  – Hyper-scheduled “leisure” activities
  – Psychology of “specialness”

• American Millennials are the most educated, diverse, and tolerant generation of Americans
Figure 6.5 Support for Same-Sex Marriage by Generation

Millennials supported same-sex marriage earlier than other generations, and greater proportions of Millennials have always supported same-sex marriage.
Today, 69% percent of Millennials support legalization, with support more than doubling in less than a decade. Among Gen-Xers, 53 percent agree that marijuana should be legalized (up from 19 points in 2006), and 52 percent of Baby Boomers say it should (up from 18 percent). Members of the Silent Generation (those born between 1928 and 1945) remain largely opposed, at 30%.


Table 6.2 Preferences of Size of Government by Generation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENERATION</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE FAVORING “SMALLER GOVERNMENT, FEWER SERVICES”</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE FAVORING “BIG GOVERNMENT, MORE SERVICES”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Millennials</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen X</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/chapter-2-generations-and-issues/
Measuring Public Opinion

- **Public opinion** consists of the public’s expressed views about an issue at a specific point in time.
- One of the most important ways public opinion is measured is through the act of voting.
- Another important tool that policy makers, researchers, and the public rely on as an indicator of public opinion is the **public opinion poll**: a survey of a given population’s opinion on an issue at a particular time.
The Origins of Public Opinion Polls

- Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*, published in 1922
- In 1916, *Literary Digest* conducted its first *straw poll*, a poll conducted in an unscientific manner to predict the outcome of an election
- Between 1920 and 1932, *Literary Digest* correctly predicted the winner of each presidential election
- In the 1936 presidential election, *Literary Digest* wrongly predicted a win for Alf Landon
The Origins of Public Opinion Polls

- In 1935, George Gallup founded the American Institute of Public Opinion, which would later become the Gallup Organization.
  - Gallup gained national recognition when he correctly predicted the outcome of the 1936 election.
- Scientific opinion polls, which rely on the random selection of participants rather than their own self-selection, gained enormous credibility during this era.
How Public Opinion Polls Are Conducted

• Those conducting a poll first need to determine the population they are targeting for the survey—the group of people whose opinions are of interest and about whom information is desired.

• Polling organizations construct polls carefully to ensure that the questions actually measure what the client wants to know.
Sampling

• Pollsters frequently rely on random sampling, a scientific method of selection in which each member of the population has an equal chance at being included in the sample.

• However, there are number of methodological problems in obtaining a truly random sample:
  – Population identification
  – Landline to cellular transition
  – Nonresponse rates among cellular users
Sampling (2)

• **Quota sampling** is a more scientifically sophisticated method of sampling than random sampling
  – Pollster using this method structures the sample so that it is representative of the characteristics of the target population

• Another method used to address problems in sampling is **stratified sampling**
  – National population is divided into fourths, and certain areas within these regions are selected as representative of the national population
Sampling Error

• Key to accurate opinion polls is having a sample that accurately reflects the population

• To adjust for problems with sampling, polls use a compensatory calculation called a sampling error
  – **Sampling error** or **margin of error** is a statistical calculation of the difference in results between a poll of a randomly drawn sample and a poll of the entire population

• Most polls have a sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points
Types of Political Polls

• **Tracking polls** measure changes in public opinion over the course of days, weeks, or months by repeatedly asking respondents the same questions and measuring changes in opinion.

• **Push polls** attempt to skew public opinion about a candidate and provide information to campaigns about candidate strengths and weaknesses.

• **Exit polls** are conducted at polling places on Election Day to project the winner of an election before the polls close.
What Americans Think About Politics

• Public opinion research is the means by which individuals can convey their opinions and priorities to policy makers

• Consequently, public opinion polls connect Americans to their government
The Most Important Problem

• In 2016, 27 percent of Americans cited economic issues as the most important problem

• Among non-economic issues:
  – Race relations and racism, 18 percent
  – Dissatisfaction with government, 16 percent

• Other problems Americans identify as important include ethics, immigration, and national security
Public Opinion About Government

• For decades, public opinion researchers have measured the public’s trust in government.

• Survey respondents are asked to rate their level of trust in the federal government’s ability to handle domestic and international policy matters and to gauge their amount of trust and confidence in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.
Public Opinion About Government

- Individual officeholders can use the data as a measure of how well they are performing their jobs.
- Trust in government is one measure of the public’s belief that the government is working for them.
- If people trust their government, they are more likely to believe that it is responsive to citizens’ needs.
  - Trust peaked just after 9/11 but sank as conflicts continued.
  - Faith in Obama’s ability to handle international problems increased leading up to the 2012 election but declined after an early bungled response to ISIS.
Figure 6.7 Trust in Government to Handle International Problems

Public trust in the government’s ability to deal with international problems has decreased since 2012. Why do you think this is the case?

Figure 6.8 Trust in Government to Handle Domestic Problems

What impact does the state of the economy have on the public’s trust in the government’s ability to handle domestic problems?

Figure 6.9 Trust in the Executive Branch of Government

The public’s trust in the executive branch declined steeply (from 73 percent to 40 percent in two years) during the Nixon presidency as a result of the Watergate scandal. The declines during George W. Bush’s and Barack Obama’s presidencies were more gradual, from 72 percent to 42 percent and 61 to 43 percent, respectively, in six years. Was this decline partly to be expected for any second-term president?

Public Opinion About Government

• Congress also faces ups and downs in terms of its public approval rate

• Since the early 2000s the legislative branch has failed to win approval from the majority of Americans
  – Often only one-third of Americans approve of the way Congress is handling its job

• Judicial branch consistently scores higher in levels of public trust than do the other two branches
Trust in the legislative branch plummeted from 62 percent in 2005 to 28 percent in 2014 before rebounding slightly—to 35% in 2016.

**Figure 6.10 Trust in the Legislative Branch of Government**

Figure 6.11 Trust in the Judicial Branch of Government

Trust in the judicial branch is consistently high, but has declined since 2012.

Review

• **Then**—Families and schools were the most important influences on children as they developed their political views.

• **Now**—Families and schools remain influential, but the media have been enormously important in developing the political views of the Millennial generation.
Next:

- How will technology affect the socialization of new generations of Americans?
- How will polling organizations find ways to harness the power of the Internet to predict political behavior accurately?
- How can pollsters measure opinions of potential respondents who may not make their true preferences known?
Figure 6.2 Candidate Support by Racial and Ethnic Group Appendix

- Clinton had the support of 38% of whites; 88% of blacks; 65% of Hispanics; and 65% of Asians and other racial/ethnic groups.
- Trump had the support of 58% of whites; 8% of blacks; 29% of Hispanics; and 29% of Asians and other racial/ethnic groups.
- 5% of whites, 4% of blacks, 6% of Hispanics, and 6% of Asians and other racial/ethnic groups supported another candidate or were undecided.