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CHAPTER

The Meanings of Public Opinion

Public opinion is endlessly discussed in American politics and culture. The president, members of Congress, candidates for public office, interest group leaders, journalists, and corporate executives, as well as ordinary citizens, routinely ask: "What does the public think?" Political leaders need to know what sorts of policies and initiatives voters support, but other groups and individuals also need a working knowledge of public opinion. Interest group leaders must decide which battles to wage and how best to mobilize potential supporters. Journalists, who are key players in measuring and communicating public opinion, strive both to inform those of us who are curious about our fellow citizens' attitudes and to understand what their audience wants. Corporate executives must pay attention to trends in American culture—what consumers think about, what they purchase, and generally, how they choose to live.

How can all these parties—and the rest of us—obtain information about American public opinion? There are many sources. Perhaps the most obvious indicator of public opinion is the sample survey or opinion poll. Quantitative data from surveys can often give us a sense of how Americans feel about policy issues, social practices, or lifestyle issues. The results of elections and referenda sometimes reveal citizens' preferences in very dramatic ways; it is often said that an election is the only poll that matters. Yet students of American politics must go beyond these obvious techniques and consider all of the "places" that people's opinions can be found: in the scripts of television programs; at political rallies, town meetings, or city council hearings; in the rhetoric of journalism; in the dialogue among friends who frequent a coffeehouse or neighborhood bar; in the political discussions one sees on the Internet and on social media or hears on

talk radio. This book takes a broad view of what the phrase "public opinion" really means. To focus on survey results alone is to miss most of the story.

Three key terms summarize the concerns of this text: politics, communication, and social process. What do we mean by these words? *Politics*, in the context of this book, refers to the ways Americans govern ourselves and implement public policy. Our discussions of public opinion in politics go far beyond campaigns. Political campaigns do often attract close attention to—if not obsession with—every shift in the "horse race" for public support. The role of public opinion in policy debates receives less (although still considerable) media coverage, but may be even more important. Even politicians who claim not to care much about public opinion often watch closely for insight into how to present their policy proposals or which proposals are better not presented at all.

Although the connections between public opinion and politics are widely studied, *communication* issues have received far less scholarly attention than they deserve. How is public opinion expressed in America? How do the media influence the ways opinions are communicated and even the substance of those opinions? It is widely said that we live in an "information age," but how have new communication technologies influenced public opinion? This book explores how both mass media and interpersonal forms of communication shape public sentiment. Since the diffusion of film in the early twentieth century, communication researchers have studied how mass media both reflect and shape people's preferences and models of the political world. Social psychology provides insights into how a human tendency toward conformity often affects how people talk, behave, and vote.

Finally, public opinion is the result of *social processes*. That is, it is intertwined with various societal forces and institutions, such as the changing American demographic profile, the problems of inner cities, and the state of family life. Public opinion is embedded in culture and should always be considered in its social context.

WHY STUDY PUBLIC OPINION?

Public opinion research is a very broad field, because scholars in many disciplines need to understand how attitudes about public affairs are formed, communicated, and measured. As we will see in Chapter 2, public opinion study is as old as democracy itself: the ancient Greek philosophers believed that democratic institutions, to be effective, had to be grounded in a solid analysis of popular sentiments. Here we consider four broad reasons why so many scholars and public officials study and care about public opinion.

1. The Legitimacy and Stability of Governments Depends on Public Support

The US Declaration of Independence states that governments "deriv[e] their just powers from the consent of the governed." That assertion implies that if citizens withdraw their consent, the government has no legitimate powers. "Democracy" may entail much more than public consent, but democratic theorists generally agree that it involves at least that much. Note that the declaration makes a claim about justice. Here, legitimacy is a *normative* concept—that is, an opinion (or a debate) about how things ought to be.

Normative issues aside, we might wonder: If citizens don't support a government, is it likely to collapse? How public attitudes affect government stability is an *empirical* question, or a matter of fact. Perhaps widespread public dissatisfaction with government and lack of commitment to democratic values put democratic states at risk. Many observers believe that one or both of these factors helped Germany's Nazi Party gain power in the 1930s and may explain the demise or fragility of democratic governments today. Others think that public opinion makes relatively little difference in whether democracies survive.

Public opinion researchers have investigated Americans' attitudes toward government and political arrangements for many years. How much do members of the public trust their political leaders? Do they believe that Congress is responsive to their needs? Do they believe that political campaigns help them choose the best candidates? Do they yearn for a powerful leader who can "get things done," essentially a dictator? Questions like these continue to inform—and at times to inflame—debates about legitimacy, stability, and other issues.

2. Public Opinion Constrains (or Should Constrain) Political Leaders

People's opinions about policy issues, like their opinions about government and democratic values, engage both normative and empirical questions. Normatively, how should public opinion influence policy? Should governments do whatever citizens want them to do? Does the answer depend on the issue, or on exactly what citizens want? Empirically, how does public opinion influence policy? To what extent, and under what circumstances, does public opinion cause political leaders to do things they would not otherwise do or prevent them from doing what they want? What are people's opinions about policy issues, anyway? Questions such as these inspire much research, debate, and armchair speculation.

FIGURE 1.1 **Public Opinion Demonstration during the Vietnam War Years.**
SOURCE: Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Chapter 10 explores the links between public opinion and public policy in depth, and that linkage is among the most important reasons we study popular attitudes. Presidents, members of Congress, state legislators, and even local city council members must always be aware of public opinion. Sometimes leaders promote a policy and the public quickly supports their ideas, such as when the public "rallies around the flag" in the early days of a military conflict. At other times a groundswell of public opinion comes first, and leaders respond with action (see Figure 1.1). For the most part, however, the interaction between leaders and the public is far more complex, because communication is so imperfect. Journalists, for example, can knowingly or unknowingly distort public opinion; policymakers can confuse the "voice of the people" with the voices of media professionals. Or journalists may affect public opinion by misrepresenting or ignoring aspects of a policy debate.

3. Public Opinion Provides Clues about Culture

Public opinion on policy and social issues can offer crucial insights into larger currents in American culture. Since it is difficult for social scientists to study the many dimensions of American culture, we often draw inferences about that larger culture from narrower studies of public attitudes.

For example, researchers have researched public attitudes about welfare programs to study broader cultural attitudes. Since the 1960s, when the US government initiated several large antipoverty programs, public opinion researchers have asked Americans how they feel about such programs. The results of these studies tell us a lot about American norms and values. (Of course, varying descriptions of the programs can elicit very different answers—and those differences can contribute to our knowledge.) If, over the course of several years, survey respondents increasingly support the idea that welfare recipients should be required to work, we learn something about changing values: the trend may indicate a growing impatience with the poor, a renewal of the work ethic, or a general resurgence of conservative political ideology. All of these hypotheses need more rigorous study, but social scientists are often "tipped off" about larger cultural trends by survey results or other evidence about public opinion.

One might argue that public opinion and culture are so intertwined as to be inseparable. In addition to being the source of aesthetic "products" (e.g., art, music, dance, and the like), culture is a sum of people's norms, values, and sentiments—common subjects of public opinion research (see Box 1.1). In this text we do not assume that any part of popular culture is inherently outside the bounds of public opinion, but neither do we argue that public opinion subsumes everything worth knowing about culture.

4. Political Leaders Seek to Change or Mobilize Public Opinion

While political leaders may be constrained by public opinion, they also try to influence it. The most obvious circumstance is wartime, when presidents typically urge citizens to make large sacrifices: to send their sons and daughters off to war, to conserve scarce resources, and to contribute in other ways. During World War II this sort of mobilization was not particularly difficult. That war was widely perceived as, to use Studs Terkel's phrase, a "good war," in which we were fighting for freedom for ourselves and others. Other mobilizations for war have been more difficult or more complicated. A vocal and intelligent antiwar sentiment existed in the days before our entry into World War I, for example, as a variety of writers and artists attempted to persuade Americans that the United States should stay out of European affairs (see Figure 1.2). And in the 1960s President Lyndon B. Johnson attempted to convince an increasingly resistant

BOX 1.1
Culture, Art, and Public Opinion

History often provides excellent examples of how culture and public opinion are interwoven. Let us take one interesting historical case of this relationship—the popularity of Shakespearean drama in nineteenth-century America—to illustrate that nexus. Our example comes from historian Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Today Shakespeare is generally considered "highbrow" entertainment with limited appeal, but in the nineteenth century his plays were vastly popular across class lines.

Levine argues that Shakespeare's drama was so popular because it appealed to some basic beliefs among Americans at the time. In particular, Shakespearean drama emphasized the struggle of the individual: "His plays had meaning to a nation that placed the individual at the center of the universe and personalized the large questions of the day."[1]

Levine gives an example of how popular political feeling of the period manifested itself in May 1849, when two leading Shakespearean actors (the American Edwin Forrest and the British star William Charles Macready) were giving competing performances in two different New York theaters:

> Forrest's vigorous acting style, his militant love of his country, his outspoken belief in its citizenry, and his frequent articulation of the possibilities of self-improvement and social mobility endeared him to the American people, while Macready's cerebral acting style, his aristocratic demeanor, and his identification with the wealthy gentry made him appear Forrest's diametric opposite. On May 7, Macready and Forrest appeared against one another in separate productions of *Macbeth*. Forrest's performance, at the Broadway Theater, was a triumph both dramatically and politically. When Forrest spoke Macbeth's lines, "What rhubarb, senna or what purgative drug will scour these English hence?" the entire audience, according to the actor Lester Wallack, "rose and cheered for many minutes." Macready's performance, at the Astor Place Opera House, was never heard—he was silenced by a storm of boos and cries of "Three groans for the codfish aristocracy," which drowned out appeals for order from those in the boxes, and by an avalanche of eggs, apples, potatoes, lemons, and ultimately, chairs hurled from the gallery, which forced him to leave the stage in the third act.[2]

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BOX 1.1
Culture, Art, and Public Opinion

The next evening 1,800 people gathered at the Opera House to shout Macready down. A riot ensued, and when it was over, 22 people were dead and more than 150 injured.

For our purposes, this colorful yet tragic incident in American theatrical history has a variety of implications. To begin with, it demonstrates how the performing arts rest on ideology: Americans of the mid-nineteenth century, as well as those living in the early twenty-first century, have often been hostile toward art and artists who somehow reflect unpopular beliefs. This example also underscores the fact that public opinion and culture are inextricably intertwined: Americans have never drawn a sharp dividing line between politics and art. Finally, the riot illustrates how political expression (violent expression, in this instance) manifests itself in a variety of forms. In this case, a dramatic performance served as a trigger for public discourse and action, but often speeches, telecasts, and actions of our leaders serve as catalysts for the display of pent-up ideological feeling.

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[1] Lawrence W. Levine, Highbrow, *Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 63.

[2] Ibid.

public that US military action in Vietnam was proper and morally sound. Often, of course, political leaders do not agree about what should happen, and then they may engage in a struggle to win public opinion over to their respective sides.

A political leader who needs to mobilize public opinion must first understand its nature. The same holds true for students of politics, who try to make sense of government-inspired collective action. Under what circumstances do people support the president with patriotic fervor, and why? How should military leaders present the nature of a conflict to the public to make the cause a popular one? Having an understanding of public attitudes, beliefs, and values is important if leaders are to persuade us with their rhetoric, but they must also have a good grasp of public opinion dynamics: the interaction of media and

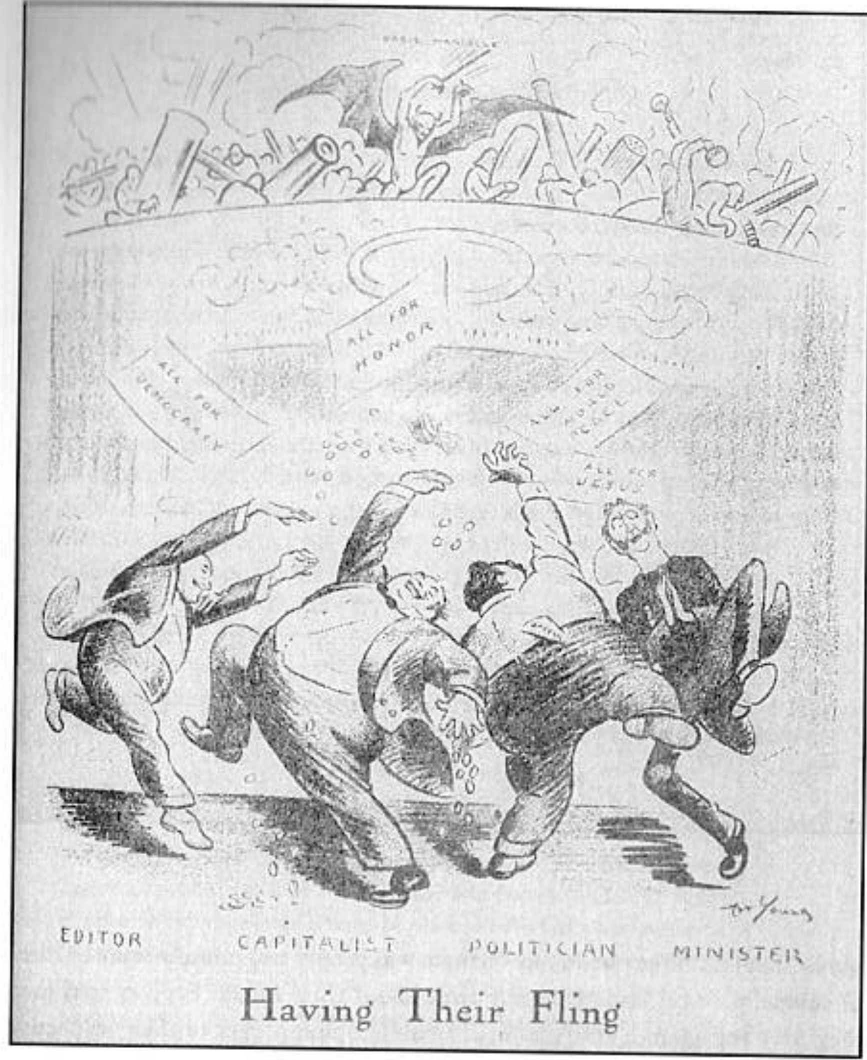

FIGURE 1.2. **"Having Their Fling."** This cartoon, drawn by artist Art Young in 1917, depicts a variety of parties who supported US participation in World War I, which Young opposed. The drawing eventually was used in a landmark sedition case against Young and several other writers and artists who produced the antiwar, socialist magazine called *The Masses*. A jury found the group not guilty, although *The Masses* eventually folded due to a variety of other financial and political problems.
SOURCE: www.archive.org.

public opinion, the concept that different channels of communication have different effects on audiences, and the like.

THE MEANING OF PUBLIC OPINION

Although "public opinion" is an essential concept in democratic theory, it eludes a simple and agreed upon definition. Researchers and theorists from many disciplines, applying disparate assumptions and methodologies, often use distinct definitions. This diversity reflects the inherent complexity and ambiguity of the subject. Also, the meaning of public opinion is tied to changing historical circumstances: the sort of political culture that exists, the nature of communication technology, and the importance of public participation in the everyday workings of government.

A good place to begin our discussion of how to define "public opinion" is to consider what constitutes a "public." The concept of a public grew out of Enlightenment democratic ideals and the many important social transformations that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe. A working definition of a public grew from its contrasts to other kinds of social formations, most prominently crowds and masses.

The Crowd

In the early twentieth century the new science of "crowd psychology" (a forerunner of social psychology) developed to explain how individuals could be caught up in mass behavior and transformed. How was it that people were collectively enticed to do things they would never dream of doing alone? For example, how can cheerleaders at a football game get people in the stands to jump, shout, yell, and carry on in ways they normally would not? During the early twentieth century societies were becoming more urban, and the labor and socialist movements were beginning to assert themselves. There were strikes, riots, and other instances of collective behavior that many elites feared signaled impending disaster.

The most prominent of the crowd psychology scholars was Gustave Le Bon, whose famous study *The Crowd* appeared in 1895. Le Bon believed that crowd behavior resulted from (1) the anonymity of crowd members, resulting in a perception of "invincibility" and lack of personal responsibility; (2) the contagion of ideas and feelings in the crowd, producing rapid shifts in behavior; and (3) the

suggestibility of the crowd, enabling people to hold ideas and behave in ways they normally would not behave.[1] In fact, William Trotter likened crowds to animal herds—with the actions of the "lead" individuals transmitting to the others by "suggestion."[2]

A crowd is commonly defined by its "unity of emotional experience."[3] According to contemporary opinion researcher Vincent Price, "The crowd develops in response to shared emotions."[4] The study of crowds has expanded to consider fads, crazes, and social movements, and some scholars believe that crowd-like phenomena could be central to the early formation and expression of public opinion.[5]

The Mass

Crowds are defined by their shared emotional experiences, but masses are defined by their interpersonal isolation. Sociologist Herbert Blumer, writing in the 1940s, states that a mass is composed of anonymous individuals who engage in very little interaction or communication.[6] Price notes that a mass is extremely heterogeneous, including people from all strata of society and all walks of life.[7] A mass "merely consists of an aggregation of individuals who are separate, detached, anonymous," reacting in response to their own needs, Blumer argues.[8]

This concept of a mass, like the "crowd" concept, grew out of the social transformations occurring around the turn of the century. People became more mobile. Many moved to the cities and became disconnected from their roots in family and village life. They worked long hours and returned home to anonymous neighborhoods. This disconnection tended to remove the checks on antisocial behavior and the pressures of conformity that are possible in families and villages where everyone knows everyone else. Yet masses are not asocial; instead, they have distinct social dynamics. Blumer suggests that what binds a mass together is a common focus of interest or attention. As examples of masses, Blumer mentions individuals "who are excited by some national event, those who share in a land boom, those who are interested in a murder trial which is reported in the press, or those who participate in some large migration."[9] Members of a mass have an experience or an idea in common, but they may be unaware of this fact because they are unaware of each other. Despite this lack of awareness, mass behavior can have social consequences, such as when the individual buying decisions of millions of people turn an unknown recording artist into a star. Similarly, individual voting decisions can elect a new and largely unknown political candidate to office.

The Public

A public, as commonly defined, is sharply distinct from a crowd or a mass. Blumer defines a public as "a group of people (a) who are confronted by an issue, (b) who are divided in the ideas as to how to meet the issue, and (c) who engage in discussion over the issue."[10] Thus, a public emerges and is sustained through discourse over a controversy. Entering a crowd requires only "the ability to feel and empathize"—to share an emotion—whereas joining the public requires also, in Robert Parks's words, "the ability to think and reason with others." A public may be influenced by a shared emotional drive, but "when the public ceases to be critical, it dissolves or is transformed into a crowd," which according to Blumer creates "public sentiment" rather than public opinion.[11] Unlike a mass, a public is self-aware and interactive.

How realistic is this definition? Perhaps the citizens in a small town can form a public, but can the hundreds of millions of people in the United States really be said to "engage in discussion"? Many, including sociologist C. Wright Mills, doubt it. Mills argues that Americans are better construed as a mass than as a public: many more people receive opinions from the media than express opinions to each other.[12] Others argue that although the "American public" is far-flung and diverse, most people do somehow participate in a sort of national conversation. For some observers, the definition of public becomes a standard for evaluating political and social institutions: What do Americans need to function as a public?

Defining Public Opinion

Despite a chronic definitional problem, public opinion research is still a field with boundaries. Not all studies of American culture are studies of public opinion, because the study of public opinion does concern the formation, communication, and measurement of citizens' attitudes toward public affairs. We believe that there are five reasonable definitions of public opinion that are distinct but that also overlap to some extent. The differences among these definitions reflect ongoing debates in the field. While you are likely to prefer some of these definitions to others, they all merit your consideration.

Category 1: Public Opinion Is an Aggregation of Individual Opinions. Many researchers, journalists, policymakers, and citizens think of public opinion as the simple sum of many individual opinions. This is the most common definition of

public opinion in contemporary American politics, and it serves as the justification for using surveys and polls to measure public opinion. By using the process of random selection, opinion polls enable an efficient aggregation of individual opinions. Because professionally conducted polls interview people across social groups, the results can be used to make general claims about the entire population. (We discuss this process at length in Chapter 3.)

This definition is widely accepted in public life today, for several reasons. First, it provides a straightforward prescription for measuring the public mood: if public opinion is the aggregation of individual opinions, it is clear that we must interview individuals and add their opinions together to ascertain it. Moreover, polling methodology has become routinized, so any trained researcher with resources can conduct a competent survey of the public. Second, this definition of public opinion resonates with the structure of the democratic elections. Surveys are like elections in the way they tally "votes" (opinions), so they seem to fit our particular system of governance. Third, this sort of quantitative approach to understanding public opinion enables researchers, journalists, and others to engage in complex causal analyses. If an analyst polls a sample of American citizens about welfare reform, for example, that makes it possible to test hypotheses about the relationship between support for reform and one's race, class, gender, political affiliation, or religion, as well as other attitudes and values.

Polling is used by legislators, presidents, and journalists to explore how people feel about various policy issues, but surveys also provide insight into more general attitudes about social life. The mass media regularly conduct and report on surveys of public attitudes on race relations, gender roles, religious values, and the like. Sometimes these polls shed light on policy debates, but more often they are interesting notes on culture in and of themselves.

Category 2: Public Opinion Is a Reflection of Majority Beliefs. Several theorists argue that we need to think of public opinion as the equivalent of social norms: that majority values and beliefs are the true basis of public opinion. Here "majority" is defined not as "greater than 50 percent," as in many elections, but as "dominant"—that is, so widely and/or intensely held that to challenge those norms is to stand apart in a way that most people would rather avoid. Theorists who use this definition are not making a judgment about the majority being right or wrong on a particular subject; they are simply arguing that people do pay close attention to the opinions of friends, coworkers, and neighbors and tend to conform to majority opinion.

One researcher who supports this definition of public opinion is Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, whose work we discuss in greater depth in Chapter 7. Noelle-Neumann argues that public opinion is best defined as the "opinions on controversial issues that one can express in public without isolating oneself."[13] She believes that citizens do a surveillance of their environment, try to get a sense of what majority opinion is like on a particular topic, and then either express themselves or keep quiet on the subject. If people determine that they hold a minority opinion, they often remain silent, contributing to what Noelle-Neumann calls a "spiral of silence" in which others likewise withhold their opinions, thus making that view seem even rarer than it is.

There is considerable debate about Noelle-Neumann's hypothesis. First, various researchers have challenged her methodology, that is, how she tries to measure conformity dynamics. (How *does* one measure opinions that people decline to express?) Second, the term "majority" implies that people are equally likely to conform on any issue about which they are outnumbered. This seems unlikely—but if people feel more pressure to conform on some issues than on others, the theory doesn't explain why. Noelle-Neumann's theory raises many unanswered questions, which is not a bad thing. However, some researchers find her emphasis on conformity fundamentally misguided, given all the issues on which people freely and openly disagree.

Despite these reservations, Noelle-Neumann's definition of public opinion (among similar definitions) exposes limitations in construing public opinion as whatever surveys measure. One is that if we do not always honestly and fully express our opinions to each other, we probably don't do so to pollsters, either. So researchers need more sophisticated methods to explore what people really think. But there are other questions. If people are willing to say things to pollsters that they do not tell each other, does it make sense to think of their survey responses as "real" public opinion? Doesn't people's day-to-day behavior matter more than what they might tell an unknown interviewer? No matter how you answer these questions, you can see how survey results alone do not paint the entire picture.

Category 3: Public Opinion Is Found in the Clash of Group Interests. Some scholars believe that public opinion is not so much a function of what individuals think as a reflection of how their opinions are cultivated, crystallized, and eventually communicated by interest groups. These interest groups include political parties, trade organizations, corporations, and activist groups like the Sierra Club or the Christian Coalition. The strength of this definition is that it underscores power dynamics: in political reality, organized groups are those that lobby

for legislation, have spokespeople who influence journalists, and mobilize votes during election campaigns. Under this definition, then, public opinion is the result of public debate among groups.

This definition of public opinion assumes that conflict is pervasive in social and political life, that groups are constantly engaged in a struggle to define social problems and provide solutions to them. People who subscribe to this definition do not discount the opinions of individuals but are most interested in how those opinions are translated into interest group behavior: policymakers and journalists are more likely to be attentive to what interest groups say and do than to what individual citizens think.

One theorist advocating this definition is Herbert Blumer, mentioned previously in our discussion of masses and publics. In a famous article published in 1948, Blumer argues that public opinion should be construed as the pattern of views "that come to the individuals who have to act in response to [the public opinion]."[14] (See Box 1.2.) He critiques the common assumption of survey research that every respondent's opinion should be treated as equally important. However democratic that might seem, Blumer says that it is fundamentally misleading, because all citizens are not equal; some are far more influential than others. Surveys are not well suited for measuring those differences in influence, and most do not even attempt to do so.

Category 4: Public Opinion Reflects Media and Elite Influence. Some political observers have suggested that public opinion is best understood as the product—or even, at times, a projection—of what journalists, politicians, pollsters, and other influential "elites" believe. This notion—that public opinion is a creation of social leaders—may sound cynical, but it has many adherents. The most famous is probably Walter Lippmann, a journalist and political philosopher who was prominent from World War I through the early years of the Vietnam War. Lippmann argued that the common citizen could not possibly stay informed on all public issues and therefore could hardly produce meaningful opinions on them. At most, then, public opinion consists of people's simplistic reactions to what they learn from the media and relatively few opinion leaders.

One can find a large number of policy matters about which the American public knows very little (see Box 1.3). Lippmann emphasized that the public's inability to opine on all issues was not a matter of laziness, but stemmed from inherent human limitations. He wrote in 1925:

> My sympathies are with [the private citizen], for I believe that he has been saddled with an impossible task and that he is asked to practice an unattainable ideal. . . . I have not happened to meet anybody, from a President of the United States to a professor of political science, who came anywhere near to embodying the accepted ideal of the sovereign and omnicompetent citizen.[15]

Lippmann's book *Public Opinion* (1922) focuses not on what Americans think about various political issues, but on *how* Americans typically think—for instance, by relying on broad "stereotypes" and yes-or-no reactions to positions formulated by others—and on how opinion leaders' rhetorical choices and media reporting influence that thinking. Lippmann argues that political parties and newspapers often state symbolic principles on which many people can

BOX 1.2
Do Groups Matter More Than Individuals, When It Comes to Public Opinion?

In his 1948 essay on opinion polling, sociologist Herbert Blumer tried to take the perspective of a legislator or executive. What kind of public opinion data would be important to them? Blumer argued that public opinion polls are practically irrelevant to a policymaker, who must "view society in terms of groups of divergent influence; in terms of organizations with different degrees of power; in terms of individuals with followings; in terms of indifferent people—all, in other words, in terms of what and who counts in his part of the social world." According to Blumer, polls:

> are unable to answer such questions as the following: . . . who are these people who have the opinion; whom do they represent; how well organized are they; what groups do they belong to that are stirring around on the scene and that are likely to continue to do so; are [they] . . . very much concerned about their opinion; are they going to get busy and do something about it; are they going to get vociferous, militant, and troublesome; . . . does the opinion represent a studied policy of significant organizations which will persist and who are likely to remember; is the opinion an ephemeral or momentary view which people will quickly forget?

SOURCE: "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review* 13 (1948): 547.

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BOX 1.3
An Ignorant Public?

Levels of civic knowledge among Americans, as measured by surveys, have always been lower than political scientists would like. In 2011 the Annenberg Public Policy Center conducted a study to measure knowledge about basic constitutional issues and contemporary politics. Some of the results are recorded below. Do you think Americans should be able to answer these questions correctly?

Question	% of Respondents Giving Correct Answer
What is the highest court in the United States?	91
What do we call the first ten amendments to the US Constitution?	78
How much of a majority is required for the US Senate and the House of Representatives to override a presidential veto: 51 percent, two-thirds, three-quarters, 90 percent, or are you not sure?	51
Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the US Senate?	42
Do you happen to know any of the three branches of government? Would you mind naming any of them? [% named all three] .	38
If a person disagrees with a ruling by the Supreme Court, can he or she appeal the ruling to the Federal Court of Appeals or not, or are you not sure?	37
Do you happen to know who the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court is?	15

SOURCE: Annenberg Public Policy Center, "New Annenberg Survey Asks: 'How Well Do Americans Understand the Constitution?'" Press release, September 16, 2011. http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/Downloads/Releases/Civics%20Knowledge/Final%20CIVICS%20knowledge%20release%20corrected2.pdf

agree—such as "Americanism," "law and order," or "justice"—instead of specific policies on which people would sharply disagree. Lippmann concludes that advances in communications and psychological research have given political leaders an unprecedented capacity for "the manufacture of consent."[16] We can only imagine what Lippmann would think more than eighty years later.

While most scholars agree that elites wield great influence over public opinion, to define public opinion in terms of that influence goes further. It implies that for most purposes, at least, we can understand public opinion better by studying what leaders and the media say about issues than by studying what most people think about them. The next definition of public opinion has even less to do with "the public."

Category 5: Public Opinion Is a Fiction. Some theorists argue that public opinion is a phantom, a rhetorical construction that has no real connection to "the public" as a group of citizens. These theorists argue, for example, that journalists and politicians often make claims about public opinion on some issue without any evidence whatsoever. If people can invoke public opinion so indiscriminately, does the phrase have any objective meaning? Even if a political leader can cite a survey that indicates public support for his or her position, how solid are the opinions measured, and how consequential are they? And would citizens act on those opinions? If politicians or pundits make contradictory claims about public opinion, are some of these claims more correct than others, and does it really matter if they are? Theorists in this category consider "public opinion" fundamentally a mystification that puts words and ideas in the public's collective mouth. Crucially, they choose to study this fiction: public opinion is what leaders say it is, because any alternative "real" public opinion is unknown (perhaps even unknowable) and not practically relevant.

Scholars in this category focus on the rhetoric of public opinion: how speakers essentially manufacture a public (and its opinions) to suit their needs. Sometimes carefully worded polls are used to produce the desired results. At other times, speakers simply assert that their positions represent what "we Americans believe," "who Americans are," or "American values." Public opinion can also be manufactured through sophisticated public relations efforts intended to create the impression of widespread public support.

Critics in this category underscore the difficulty, if not futility, of trying to adjudicate competing claims to represent "real" public opinion. For example, scholars have noted that citizens think about politics using different terminology than do pollsters and policymakers. Some doubt that average citizens and political elites even recognize the same problems as being political in nature. Pierre

Bourdieu, a French sociologist, comments on the propensity of journalists to "further simplify the already simplified [polling] data." Bourdieu argues that a close analysis of multiple polling questions and answers would be "the only way to know what were the questions the people really thought they were answering."[17] Bourdieu does believe that academics, with great care, can occasionally conduct useful surveys, but he does not think that these surveys necessarily measure "public opinion." As a practical matter, "public opinion" is whatever people say it is, however fanciful and mutually inconsistent their statements may be.

Table 1.1 takes up the policy debate over health care reform and discusses how theorists from each category might explore the role of public opinion in this debate.

TABLE 1.1. **Thinking About and Measuring Public Opinion: American Health Care**

Definition of Public Opinion	*In the Context of Health Care Reform*
Category 1 (aggregation)	Researchers would construe public opinion as what most private citizens would say when questioned on the subject. These scholars would use sophisticated survey methods to explore Americans' opinions: Do they approve or disapprove of the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare")? Which specific provisions do they support or oppose? What do they think of other proposals? Focus groups also might be used to collect more data in a more conversational forum.
Category 2 (majority opinion)	Scholars would construe public opinion as the opinion(s) that people feel comfortable expressing in public. They would ask: What are people saying about Obamacare and health care? Because it is difficult to observe people's speech directly, researchers might use special surveys or focus groups to explore this broad question. Or they might conduct a content analysis of social media to judge what opinions dominate public discourse.
Category 3 (clash of groups)	This approach would focus most rigorously on the "interests" and coalitions in the debate, such as the insurance industry, lobbying groups such as the

(continues)

(continued)

TABLE 1.1. **Thinking About and Measuring Public Opinion: American Health Care**

Definition of Public Opinion	*In the Context of Health Care Reform*
Category 3	older-American group AARP, and the president and political party leaders. How do the leaders of these groups characterize the opinions of their constituencies on Obamacare? Researchers would study public statements and would also conduct interviews with group leaders and members. Crucially, they would attempt to understand the way groups clash, by examining points of contention, areas of common ground, and the evolution of groups' strategies and approaches.
Category 4 (media/elite opinion)	Researchers in this tradition would focus on media and elite expressions of opinion on Obamacare and health care reform. Typically, they would perform content analyses of selected media sources—perhaps television news, major newspapers, and/or Internet news sites—to evaluate the range of opinions and information available to the public. The results may substantially diverge from other methods. For example, these sources may tend to convey positive or negative messages about Obamacare (such as families' successes or difficulties in obtaining affordable coverage), which may not match people's perceptions as reported in surveys.
Category 5 (public opinion as fiction)	Scholars in this category would argue that although people may have some latent opinions about Obamacare and how to improve health care, the expression of these opinions is entirely constructed by interest groups, public officials, and media. These parties are exaggerating actual opinion at times, but often they are constructing "public opinion" out of nothing at all. Researchers in this tradition often emphasize the failings and limitations of the methods used by other researchers, which may provide much insight into the fiction of public opinion, but far less into the reality.

DIMENSIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION

Regardless of their favored definitions of public opinion, most scholars agree that average citizens have opinions and attitudes that are at least potentially relevant to various policy issues. In general, when we refer to "public opinion" without specifying a definition, we refer to people's policy-relevant opinions and attitudes. Researchers' knowledge of public opinion in this sense is usually very limited. As Bourdieu pointed out, one or two survey questions and answers barely begin to reveal what people think. Public opinion has multiple, interdependent dimensions that are important to bear in mind.

First, consider the *direction* of public opinion. Simply put, it matters where people stand on issues: what they favor, oppose, or are uncertain about. People's opinions may often be more complicated than a simple "pro" or "con." For example, while people's opinions on abortion are often characterized as either favoring or opposing legal abortion rights—"pro-choice" or "pro-life"—many people believe that abortion should be legal in some circumstances but not in others, though they may not necessarily have thought through exactly what those circumstances are.

Second, the *intensity* of opinion can be critical. How strongly do people feel about an issue? Where an issue has intense advocates on both sides, as the abortion issue does, the result can indicate deep social divisions. If an intense minority confronts a relatively apathetic majority, majority public opinion may be ignored by policymakers seeking to appease the vocal minority. One of the unresolved problems of democracy is balancing majority and minority opinion. When a minority of people feels strongly on an issue, should its opinion outweigh that of the more apathetic majority? If neither side is particularly intense, policymakers may view the public opinion environment as permissive and enact the policies they themselves favor. Alternatively, if an issue draws an intense majority, policymakers may feel compelled to respond to the demands of public opinion.

Third, the *stability* of public opinion can affect scholars' and leaders' evaluation of the issue. Stability refers to the consistency of people's opinions over time. If public opinion on an issue is stable, leaders may be more likely to pay attention to it than if it changes frequently. This situation occurs because stable public opinion is believed to reflect true public desires, whereas unstable public opinion is perceived as capricious and uninformed. However, just because public opinion changes over time does not mean that those changes are not heeded by leaders. Political scientist Michael Corbett points out that "in 1953, 68 percent of Americans favored capital punishment for convicted murderers; then the proportion favoring capital punishment declined until it reached 42 percent in 1966; but then the proportion rose again until it reached 72 percent in 1985."[18] During this span of time, the death penalty was abolished, then reinstated.

The stability of public opinion can be affected by many things. One factor is intensity, already discussed. But stability is also affected by the *informational content* of the opinion. Informational content is the fourth quality of public opinion that scholars frequently explore. There is much evidence to suggest that people do not know very much about public issues. Some of this evidence we have already seen in Box 1.3, and a more complete discussion appears in Chapter 9. For now, it may be enough to say that scholars are unsure about exactly how much information the public needs to form "rational" opinions about public issues. However, it seems unlikely that uninformed public opinion will have as much impact on political leaders as will informed public opinion.

WHICH MEANING OF PUBLIC OPINION IS BEST?

It is difficult to say which definition of public opinion is "best." In contemporary American life, all the definitions are used, depending on the circumstances in which the public mood is being discussed. Scholars certainly use all five categories in their work, as do journalists and public officials. Some might argue that because of the popularity of polling, the first category (public opinion as an aggregation of individual opinions) is most common, but journalists and our leaders often gain knowledge of public opinion by speaking with interest group leaders. And almost all reporters and policymakers have, either knowingly or unknowingly, manufactured notions of public opinion through their spoken and written rhetoric.

The definition one chooses depends on several factors, including the following:

1. The type of research one is conducting matters. For example, if one is exploring how American women of the late nineteenth century viewed suffrage (the right to vote), they might look for evidence of public opinion in the letters of suffragettes or in the documents of women's rights organizations. This research assumes that public opinion is the product of interaction between individuals and organized interest groups. Since the question is a historical one, a researcher cannot define public opinion as the opinions of an aggregation of individuals. That would demand a survey, and in this case, the respondents died long ago.

2. Historical conditions often dictate the definition of public opinion one uses. We will see in the next chapter, for example, how the form of government can influence the ways leaders and citizens think about the public. In a dictatorship, public opinion is often used rhetorically (category 5) to manipulate the populace and make people think that leaders are acting in the interests of the citizenry. In a situation like this, public opinion really is a phantom, manufactured to make people feel as though they are listened to (even if that is not the case).
3. The kind of technology that exists in a particular society at a certain point in time may determine which meaning of public opinion is used. Take opinion polling as an example of technology. Today, computers are used extensively in the interviewing process and in analysis of survey data. Although opinion polling was developed to aggregate individual opinions (category 1), the technology for conducting a scientific poll has become so easy to use that people employ the aggregation approach because they can do surveys so quickly. This is not to say that the availability of technology always determines how we see the political and social world, but it is the case that we are attracted to techniques that enable us to understand the world in what seems an efficient manner.

As students of public opinion and political processes, we must live with ambiguity when it comes to defining public opinion. The fact that we cannot define the term with precision does not mean that the field has no boundaries, as we will see in subsequent chapters. The intellectual debates, political phenomena, and theories that are described in this book will give you a firm understanding of what the field of public opinion is about—what is included under the general heading of "public opinion studies" and what is not.

NOTES

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3. Vincent Price, *Public Opinion* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992).
4. Ibid., 26.
5. Nelson N. Foote and Clyde W. Hart, "Public Opinion and Collective Behavior," in Muzafir Sherif and Milbourne O. Wilson, eds., *Group Relations at the Crossroads* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1953), 308–331.

6. Herbert Blumer, *Collective Behavior* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1946).
7. Price, *Public Opinion*.
8. Blumer, *Collective Behavior*.
9. Ibid., 185.
10. Ibid., 189.
11. Price, *Public Opinion*, 26; quotes from Robert E. Park, *The Crowd and the Public and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1904), 80.
12. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).
13. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
14. Herbert Blumer, "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review* 13(1948): 545.
15. Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925).
16. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922).
17. Pierre Bourdieu, "Public Opinion Does Not Exist," in Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub, eds., *Communication and Class Struggle* (New York: International General, 1979), 124–130.
18. Michael Corbett, *American Public Opinion Trends* (New York: Longman, 1991), 24.