**Key Points**

1. What is public opinion?
   1. The opinion or attitude of a significant group of people about a matter concerning public affairs
      1. “Public affairs include politics, public issues, and the making of public policies—those events and issues that concern the people at large” (McClenaghan, 2009)
      2. Examples: political parties and candidates, taxes, unemployment, foreign policy, etc.
   2. The “public” refers to a significant group of people that share a view of an issue that effects the people ; there are many different publics and many different public opinions
   3. Some general characteristics of public opinions
      1. They are difficult to measure
      2. They are learned
      3. They change
      4. They influence government decisions
      5. They can overlap or conflict
   4. How opinions differ
      1. Opinion saliency – some people care more about certain issues
      2. Opinion stability – opinions on some issues are relatively steady, but can be more volatile on others
      3. Opinion-policy congruence – public opinion and public policy are in sync for some issues and out of sync for others
2. How is public opinion influenced?
   1. Political socialization
   2. Political efficacy
   3. Mass media
   4. Peer groups
   5. Opinion leaders
   6. Historic events
3. How is public opinion measured?
   1. Public opinion polls – “devices that attempt to collect information by asking people questions” (McClenaghan, 2009)
      1. Straw votes
         1. Involve asking the same question to a large group of people
         2. Are highly unreliable
         3. Do not ensure a reasonable cross-section of the entire population
   2. Scientific polling
      1. Began in the mid-1930s
      2. Has become highly sophisticated
      3. Is performed by commercial polling organizations, of which two of the best known are
         1. Gallup Organization (the Gallup Poll)
         2. Pew Research Center for People and the Press
      4. “A number of the leading national polls are joint efforts of major news-gathering and professional polling organizations
      5. They report public attitudes on current issues (i.e. support of the President or Congress)
      6. Is extremely complex but can be described in five basic steps
         1. Define the universe to be surveyed
            1. Universe – entire population that the poll aims to measure
            2. Example: every high school student in Texas
         2. Construct a sample
            1. Most pollsters draw random samples

Sample – a representative portion of the total universe

Random sample – composed of randomly selected people so that all the members have an equal chance of being interviewed

* + - * 1. Most major national polls use samples with approximately 1,500 people to represent the nation’s adult population (over 200 million people)
        2. The mathematical law of probability makes a sample an accurate representation if the sample selected is

A sufficient size and

Properly selected at random from the entire universe

* + - 1. Prepare valid questions
         1. The wording of questions is critical to the reliability of the poll
         2. Responsible pollsters avoid

Questions that are emotionally “loaded”

Questions that lead the participants to the desired answer

Terms that are difficult to understand

* + - 1. Select and control how the poll is taken
         1. A pollster’s method of communication can affect the poll’s accuracy

Face-to-face

Telephone calls

Is the most common method

Utilizes random-digit dialing

Mail

* + - * 1. An interviewer’s tone of voice and/or word emphasis can affect the participants’ responses and a poll’s validity
        2. Polling organizations try to hire and train their interviewing staff very carefully
      1. Analyze and report the findings to the public
         1. Polls measure people’s attitudes
         2. Scientific polling organizations

Collect huge amounts of raw data

Use technologies to

Calculate and interpret their data

Draw conclusions

Publish findings

* 1. Evaluating Polls
     1. Weaknesses
        1. Pollsters acknowledge their difficulties measuring
           1. Intensity – the strength of the feeling with which an opinion is held
           2. Stability (or fluidity) – the relative permanence of an opinion
           3. Relevance (or pertinence) – how important an opinion is to the person who holds it
        2. Critics say that pollsters shape the opinions they are supposed to measure
     2. Strengths
        1. Scientific polls are the most useful tools for measuring public opinion
        2. They are not precise, but they are reliable
        3. They help specify questions and stimulate discussion of them

1. Other methods are unreliable but may be used to find key indicators
   1. Elections
      1. Are rarely an accurate measure of public opinion
      2. Are occasionally useful indicators of public opinion
   2. Interest Groups
      1. Are private organizations that work to shape public policy to their objectives (i.e. pressure groups or special interest groups)
      2. Provide a primary method to make a public opinion heard
      3. Apply pressure through
         1. Lobbyists
         2. Letters
         3. Telephone calls
         4. Emails
         5. Political campaigns
         6. Other methods
   3. Personal Contacts
      1. Are a resource that public figures use to try and gauge public opinion
      2. Some public officials can do this successfully, but many are biased and only see what they want to see
2. How does public opinion affect public policy?
   1. Public opinion has a powerful role in US politics
   2. Framers of the Constitution wanted to create a representative democracy that would
      1. Give the people an active voice in government (popular rule)
      2. Insulate the government from the whims of an ill-informed public
   3. The following aspects of our constitutional government protect the minority interests from the majority views and actions
      1. Separation of powers
      2. Checks and balances
      3. Civil rights and liberties
   4. Public opinion is one influence on public policy along with
      1. Interest groups
      2. Political parties
      3. Mass media
      4. Other institutions of government
      5. Ideas of activists and public officials