CHAPTER 8: Public Opinion
8.0 Public Opinion

James Madison believed that popular government—what is today called democratic government—requires an informed public. One of the most widely shared modern beliefs is that democracy requires an informed, educated, and active citizenry in order to work as a good form of government. The belief that knowledge can overcome ignorance and solve problems is at the foundation of many collective human endeavors whether in the world of science or the world of politics: the scientific community and the political community. It is an article of political faith that knowledge is power and popular information makes self-government possible. The importance of information explains why political scientists, government officials, members of political parties, business groups, organized labor, and so many other interest groups pay so much attention to public opinion. This chapter examines public opinion: what it is; how it is formed; how it is measured; and its role in politics, government, and public policy.

The power problem with public opinion is determining whether, to what degree, and how public opinion influences public policy. Democratic theory assumes that public opinion drives the political machine. But political practice (how politics and government actually work) and political science research raise important questions about the theory. The relationship between public opinion and public policy is not a simple “cause” and “effect” relationship as described in Figure 8.1 below. The relationship is complicated by several factors. One complicating factor is the fact that the U.S. is not a pure or direct democracy; it is a constitutional democracy that places limits on majority rule. A second complicating factor concerns the nature of public opinion. Is public opinion a cause (that is, does it determine government action) or an effect (is it the result of something else). Figure 8.1 describes the democratic assumption about public opinion as the cause of government action. But what if public opinion is itself the effect of something? Questions about who or what controls public opinion are central to the power problem with public opinion because they are central to the assumptions of the democratic theory of politics and government. Governments and other political actors try to control public opinion.

Figure 8.1 The Classic Systems Theory
Chapter 8: Public Opinion

8.1 | Definition

Public opinion is defined as the aggregate of public attitudes or beliefs about government or politics. The following description and analysis of public opinion in the U.S. focuses on three main issues. The first issue is the political importance of public opinion in representative systems of government. The second issue is the role of public opinion in two models of democracy—the delegate and trustee models of democracy. The third issue is the nature of public opinion, particularly the formation, measurement, and control of public opinion.

8.2 | Importance

Public opinion is important in democratic political systems because democratic self-government is based on the consent of the governed. Democratic theory requires public policies to more or less reflect public opinion. Democracy assumes that the people are the ultimate source of governing authority. This is what is meant by popular sovereignty: the people are sovereign. Popular sovereignty is one of the basic principles of the U.S. system of representative government. The belief that government authority derives from the people means that public policies are supposed to be based on public opinion. Public opinion is supposed to directly or indirectly cause public policies to be enacted. Responsiveness to public opinion is one measure of a political system’s legitimacy—the belief that a system of government is lawful, right, or just.

8.3 | Two Models of Representation

The following describes two models of representation: the delegate model and the trustee model democracy. The two models describe how public opinion influences public policy in modern democracies and how public opinion should influence public policy.

8.31 | The Delegate Model

According to the delegate model, public opinion is the principal source of government legitimacy because government power is only properly exercised when it is based on public opinion. It describes a strong linkage between public opinion and public policy. Public opinion
Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.

is considered the cause of public policy; public opinion is considered the determinant of public policy. The delegate model of democracy is based on the delegate theory of representation. The delegate theory of representation describes elected government officials as obligated to do the will of the people—to represent the constituents who elect them to office. Government officials are instructed delegates in the sense that they are expected to do what the people want. The strong role of public opinion in the delegate model of democracy makes it a populist form of representative democracy. Populist means “of the people.” A populist is a person, party, or philosophy that advocates for “the people” or “the common person” or “the middle class” as opposed to the elites.

8.32 | THE TRUSTEE MODEL

The trustee model allows government officials more freedom of choice to decide what is in the public interest. Government officials are not expected to act solely upon public opinion. The trustee model of democracy is based on the trustee model of representation, where a government official is not obligated to do what the people want, but can decide what is best. A representative is considered a trustee whose better access to information or good judgment may justify the representative’s beliefs, actions, or votes differ from public opinion at any moment in time. The trustee is not required to do what public opinion polls indicate that the people want. The government officials are held accountable for their decisions in regular elections, but they have considerable freedom to choose courses of action that may in fact differ from the preferences of the public as measured by polls, for example. The trustee model is more elitist in the sense that elected representatives are expected to be the “better sorts” of the community, the leaders who are chosen to make good decisions about public policy without merely following public opinion.

In the “trustee” model (old Scandinavian “trust” or confidence) we chose those who can make good decisions, regardless of our own understanding. These two models are often rather overblown since we seek both.

8.4 | THE FOUNDERS’ INTENTIONS

The Framers did not establish a direct democracy. They created an indirect democracy or republic, whereby the public selects individuals to represent their interests in government decisions. They believe that a republic was a better form of government than a direct democracy because they worried about majority rule. Absolute majority rule would be replacing monarchy—rule by King George—with democracy—rule by King Numbers. They were committed to popular government, but not one where majority rule applied to all aspects of government and politics. These views are described in Madison’s Federalist Papers Number 10 and Number 51.

Federalist Number 51 elaborates on the ways to limit the abuse of government power that is made necessary by human nature. Popular sovereignty is the primary way to limit the abuse of power, and the system of checks and balances (federalism and the separation of powers) is the
secondary (or “auxiliary”) limit on the abuse of power. Madison famously wrote that human nature makes government necessary, and makes it necessary to control government:

In *Federalist Number 10*, Madison explained that the Founders created a representative democracy that was not purely majority rule. They believed that the best form of government was one that was based on limited majority rule. The Constitution placed limits on the power of the people to do whatever they wanted. The constitution protected minorities, landowners, wealthier individuals, white males, from majority rule. This is the concept of a constitutional democracy. It is one which combines two conflicting goals: democracy suggests that the people can do as they will. Democracy suggests pure majority rule. Constitutional suggests limits on the power of a majority to do as it wills. It cannot do whatever it wants. This is one of the tensions in the U.S. system of government. Each generation must strive to achieve “that delicate balance” between granting the majority power to do what it wants and limiting majority rule to protect minorities. The Bill of Rights, for example, places limits on the power of the people as expressed in laws passed by Congress.

### 8.5 The Nature of Public Opinion

#### 8.51 Formation of Public Opinion

One of the most interesting questions about public opinion is how people acquire their beliefs, attitudes, and orientations. Understanding public opinion begins with examining some of the main sources of public opinion, including political socialization, education, life experience, political parties, the media, and the government.

#### 8.52 Socialization

Socialization is all the ways that people acquire attitudes, values, and beliefs. Socialization begins early. The agents of socialization include families, schools, friends, religious institutions, workplace colleagues, and the media. Children begin to form political attitudes very early in life. The family is a strong influence on thinking about government and politics. Children do not always or automatically identify with their parents’ ideology or political party but a person’s party affiliation is causally related to their parents. Socialization also occurs in settings other than the family. Some of the other agents of socialization can limit the influence of the family. For example, the fact that many children are now raised in families where both parents work means that the family’s influence has decreased relative to other sources of socialization such as schools, friends, colleagues, and the media.

#### 8.53 Life Experiences

Not all political attitudes are fixed early in life. A person’s adult experiences, desires, or needs can form new attitudes or change old ones. A change in a person’s health can change attitudes about social welfare programs, for example. A change in a person’s economic status, for better or worse, may affect attitudes. Times of general economic prosperity or an individual’s need may shape a person’s thinking about the appropriate role for government in the
economy. Unemployment due to an economic down turn, or riches from entrepreneurial success, can change a person’s thinking about the fairness of the marketplace as a mechanism for allocating resources.

In American politics, economics is one of the factors that have historically divided conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats. A person’s work experience as a business owner or manager, or an employee, can affect attitudes toward government and politics. Public opinion about economic issues, such as tax policies and spending policies and government regulation of business, is one of the ways we identify individuals as conservatives, liberals, or populists.

8.54 | EDUCATION

Education is also recognized as one of the major sources of socialization. Students acquire information and attitudes in schools. One of the reasons why issues such as school desegregation, school busing, school prayer, mandatory flag salutes or pledges of allegiance, and curriculum issues such as civics, values, tolerance, and evolution have been so controversial is because public schools have an educational mission and a socialization function. The impact of public schools is not just limited to academics. Educational institutions also play an important role in socialization, which is why school curriculum and policies have been considered worth fighting over.

8.55 | GEOGRAPHY

Regional differences have played an important role in some of the country’s most important political experiences. Early in the nation’s history, the geographic divisions were the result of distinctive economic systems in the northeast (manufacturing and shipping), the south (agrarian and plantation), and the interior frontier. By the middle of the 19th Century, the divisions between the industrial, non-slave North and the agricultural, slave-holding South resulted in the Civil War. The urbanization of the 20th Century produced major difference of public opinion in urban and rural areas. Political geography still has an effect on attitudes and policy preferences. Generally, people in the Northeast and the West are more likely to support abortion rights, while those in the Midwest and South are more likely to favor restricting access to abortions. As the figure here shows, these regional trends are echoed in the support for gay marriage.

8.56 | RACE AND ETHNICITY
Ethnic and racial groups have differed in their political values throughout our nation’s history. African Americans, mobilized by the Republican Party (the party of Lincoln) in post-Civil War period, were excluded from the political system in the South until the Civil Rights movements in the 19050s and 1960s and were eventually won over by the Democratic Party’s support for the movement. Currently, African Americans support liberal policies and Democratic candidates.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Europeans from countries like Italy, Ireland, Germany, and Poland immigrated in large numbers to the United States. These groups became a part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal coalition in the 1930 and they continued to be part of the Democratic Great Society coalition in the 1960s. Since then, however, conservatives such as Ronald Reagan have successfully appealed to these European ethnic groups which were identified as “Reagan Democrats.” In recent decades, the political behavior of Hispanics has attracted a great deal of attention because they are the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States. Both the Democratic and Republican parties are interested in securing their political support. But this has been challenging because the term “Hispanic” includes a broad range of people with different backgrounds, experiences, and attitudes. Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, and Puerto Ricans, for example are all considered Hispanic.

8.57 | Gender

A person’s gender can have a major effect on their political attitudes. During the last thirty years, women have been more likely to support liberal issues and the Democratic Party. The gender difference in party identification is the gender gap. Women are more likely to support the Democratic Party and men are more likely to support the Republican Party. Women are also more likely to support affirmative action policies, welfare policies, income assistance, reproductive rights (pro-choice views on abortion), and equal rights for gays and lesbians. Women have voted for the Democratic presidential candidate at a higher rate than men in every presidential election since Jimmy Carter’s 1980 bid against Ronald Reagan. Women also register more frequently as members of the Democratic Party. As the figure below shows, the gender gap in party registration fluctuates with the year, but women remain consistently more likely to register as Democrats.

This book talks about the gender gap but not too much about the other gaps (race, economic, geographic, etc.) in terms of party support. We will talk about these in large and small sections.
8.55 | The Media

The media play a large and growing role in modern American society. In 1997, adult Americans spent around thirty hours a week watching television, and children spent even more time watching television. The general consensus that the media have an impact on public opinion masks debates about the nature of that impact. Take, for example, socialization—the process by which individuals acquire information and form attitudes and values. The media are one important source of socialization in the sense that people acquire information and attitudes from the media. The traditional mass media have played an important in “mediating” between individuals and the government. The figure below described the mediating role.
Chapter 8: Public Opinion

The traditional mass media include the print press (especially newspapers) and the broadcast media (especially the television and radio networks). The role the media play in American politics includes setting the agenda. The term setting the agenda describes how the media decide what issues the public should be thinking about. The media decide what constitutes “news” that is worth reporting. Media coverage of poverty, the rate of inflation, religion, crime, or national security has an impact on what the public thinks is important as well as how the public thinks about the government’s performance. Media influence on the values and attitudes of minors has been especially controversial. The content of programming, particularly concerning sex and indecent language and violence, has been a political issue for some time. The federal government has undertaken a number of efforts to regulate the content on broadcast networks. Congress has passed legislation regulating programming. The Federal Communications Commission has implemented administrative regulations, including fines, which attempt to control indecent programming on the broadcast networks. And the Supreme Court has ruled on the constitutionality of these legislative and administrative restrictions on programs broadcast over the airwaves. More recently, efforts have focused on the Internet.

Not all of the debate is about the media’s role in making sexually explicit or violent material more widely available. Another issue is the ideology. The ideological bias of the mainstream media is one of the recurring themes of commentary about the political role of the media in modern American society. This issue will be examined in greater detail in the section on the media.

8.56 | THE GOVERNMENT

The government is an important source of public opinion and it has a variety of ways to influence public opinion. Public schools, for example, teach civics—which included attitudes toward government politics. The government is also able to instill patriotic attitudes, and the use of controlled information about national security matters, for example, to influence public opinion. Presidents, for instance, benefit from the “rally around the flag” effect when the country faces a threat. The government’s role in socializing is controversial, however, because it seems to reverse the causal order of democratic theory wherein public opinion determines public policy. And government influence on public opinions is often considered propaganda. Propaganda is one of the normative or value-laden terms like democracy, conservative/liberal, bureaucracy, or terrorism. It is often associated with illegitimate or improper government efforts to influence thinking about politics, such as brain-washing or overly emotional appeals that convinces individuals or groups to support a particular strong leader, a party, or an ideology. But the descriptive, dictionary definition of propaganda is that it is using words or speech intended to convince someone of a political position or point of view. In this sense, propaganda is persuasion or advocacy—which seems central to politics.

Some of the earliest discussions of public opinion were by economists who were interested in the workings of the market place. Adam Smith, the classical economist referred to public opinion in his work, The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759). It is not surprising that economists who think about the role of supply and demand in the marketplace would think about public opinion. The English philosopher Jeremy Bentham also applied the concept of public opinion to thinking about the relationship between the government and the people. Bentham is
associated with the utilitarian philosophy that the political and economic calculation of the public good or public interest is the greatest good for the greatest number. This variation of rule by “king numbers” was rejected by the Founders who did not trust the public enough to give the people direct democracy.

8.6 | IS PUBLIC OPINION A CAUSE OR AN EFFECT?

Are attitudes toward government and politics the cause of public policies, or are attitudes (public opinion) the result of other factors? In politics, power is the ability to make another person do what you want. Can political power be used to make a person think what you want? This is an especially important question when the subject is the government.

8.61 | RHETORIC

One important means of public communication is rhetoric. Rhetoric is the art of using language, both public speaking and writing, to communicate, to persuade, or to convince. In the 19th Century rhetoric was taught using collections of memorable political speeches and even “pulpit eloquence” such as The American Orator. The Orator was an influential book that trained individuals in proper public speaking techniques the way that other books trained people in proper etiquette.

8.63 | DYNAMIC OR STATIC

One of the most important things to remember about public opinion is that it is dynamic, not static. It changes—and perhaps more important, it can be changed. Public opinion about the president, for example, is very dynamic and responds to a broad range of factors. Public opinion about congress is more stable, but reflects general public assessments of how congress is performing as a political institution. Public opinion polls such as the Gallup Poll regularly ask people for their opinion about government.

Gallup 2010 Confidence Poll; “Now I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one -- a great deal, quite a lot, some, or a little”

Sixty-nine percent of Americans say they have a great deal or fair amount of confidence in the Supreme Court, compared with 50% for Congress and 43% for the president. Public confidence in
Congress and the president has been trending steadily downward for decades. In contrast, public confidence in the Court has remained very stable.²

Political actors, such as candidates for office, government officials, party leaders, interest group leaders, and community activists are not limited to responding to public opinion. Political actors try to influence, change, and even to control public opinion. In government and politics information is power. Information about how people acquire their attitudes can increase the understanding of socialization.

8.64 | *THE MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS*

Understanding how people acquire their attitudes can make it possible to use that information to control what people think. This is the essence of the power problem with public opinion. Can public opinion (ideas and attitudes) be manufactured the way material products are made? Can ideas about candidates, parties, and issues be sold the way other products are sold to consumers? The marketplace is a familiar and powerful concept in the United States because the U.S. is a capitalist country where people are very familiar with the idea of a marketplace of goods and services. It is not surprising that the logic of the economic marketplace has been applied to politics. The *political marketplace of ideas* refers to the ability to pick and choose from among the competing ideologies and parties the way that consumers are able to pick and choose from among the competing sellers of goods and services.

The application of economic marketplace logic to the political marketplace raises some important questions about the nature of public opinion. One question is about the role of advertising. The conventional economic wisdom is that marketers and advertisers respond to consumer demands for products and services. But modern advertising also creates demand. The ability to create consumer demand, rather than just respond to consumer demands, is one reason why the government regulates the advertising of certain goods and services. Lawyer advertising is regulated by the government. Medical advertising, particularly of drugs, is regulated by the government. Advertising of tobacco products is heavily regulated by the government, particularly advertising campaigns that appeal to minors by using cartoon characters. The *Federal Trade Commission’s mission* includes regulating business practices that are “deceptive or unfair” to consumers. It has a Bureau of Consumer Protection which prevents “fraud,
deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace.” It investigates complaints about advertising.

8.65 | The Government in the Marketplace of Ideas

Of course, the government is also in the business of trying to control public opinion rather than merely responding to it. Governments frequently try to control what people think—about the issues, about candidates, about parties, about government officials, and about the government itself. The pejorative term for these efforts is propaganda; the modern term is public relations. In the 1930s and 1940s the government used newly emerging experts (in public relations, advertising, and film) to influence public opinion. An example of these propaganda programs to produce public opinion is the Roosevelt administration’s New Deal WPA program, “By the People, For the People: Posters from the WPA, 1936-1943.” One archive that includes short films that were produced by the government to build popular support for certain public policies, such as the Cold War or military service, is [http://www.archive.org/details/americanoratorator00cook](http://www.archive.org/details/americanoratorator00cook) The “moving images” preserved here show government programs to shape the following thinking and behavior:

- For appropriate behavior for young people in the 1950s, watch “How to be a teenage in 1950”;
- For messages encouraging patriotism and support for military service, watch the cartoon “Private Snuffy Smith” [http://archive.org/details/private_snuffy_smith](http://archive.org/details/private_snuffy_smith)
- The WWII removal and detention Japanese living in designated areas of the west coast of the U.S.: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiPldKsM5w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiPldKsM5w)

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMrzGauQJdk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMrzGauQJdk)

8.66 | Nature or Nurture?

Are political ideas something that an individual is born with or something that is acquired? Much of public opinion about government and politics is the result of nurture not nature; it is acquired through experience or learned from family, friends, school, and work. This is one reason why it is considered important for a democracy to provide equal access to information, public discourse about current events, and rational debates about political alternatives. Access to information ensures that individuals have an equal right to participate in politics—regardless of whether than right is actually exercises.

Public opinion is subject to manipulation by a variety of elites, governmental and non-governmental. The Declaration of Independence asserted that all men were create equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. This declaration of equality is generally understood to mean that each individual has legal and political equality, or the same rights rather than having rights based on status or power.

8.7 | Democratic Theory and Political Reality

173
The relationship between public opinion and public policy is more complicated than simply “public opinion causes or determines public policy.” In most modern, western-style democracies, there are ongoing debates about the degree to which public opinion matters, the degree to which public opinion determines public policy. Critics of modern democracy argue that a group of elites, either officials in government or those individuals or organizations that are outside government with more money, power, or access to resources, essentially control public opinion and make public policy for their special interests, not the general public. Supporters of modern democracy acknowledge that not everyone has equal resources, and that wealth and power are unequally distributed. But they argue that power is sufficiently spread around so that no single set of elites—the wealthy, powerful, informed, or even government—can control public opinion and dominate the political process. These supporters of modern democracy are generally pluralists. Pluralists maintain that there are many elites and many groups that compete for influence, but which are unable to control public opinion or dominate the political process.

### The Premise of Democratic Theory

The premise (or basic assumption) of democratic theory is that an informed public makes choices about government officials and public policies. In other words, democratic theory assumes that elections determine who governs and what policies will be enacted into law. This is the argument that democratic government is legitimate because its authority is based on the consent of the governed. Is this assumption valid? There is empirical evidence that the assumption of an informed public is mistaken. Public opinion polls indicate that the American public is not well-informed about public affairs, candidates, or issues. Civics knowledge is rather low. The average voter has little information about public affairs, including the names of their representatives in city government, county government, state legislature, or congress. People do not pay much attention to politics. More attention is paid to social and cultural activities such as entertainment and sports than politics. The low levels of information about politics are the result of apathy (disinterest), the belief that participation in politics does not really matter very much (low levels of efficacy), time constraints (being busy with families and work). People have other priorities for allocating their scarce resources (time, effort, and money). It is much easier for professionals—people who have white collar jobs or information-related jobs such as journalism or academia—to keep up with public affairs than people who have blue collar jobs or jobs that do not involve working with information. There are information costs associated with becoming well-informed about public affairs and keeping up with the issues.

### Measuring Public Opinion

#### Polling

Public opinion polling is one of the facts of modern life. Gallup polls are a familiar feature of modern politics. The widespread use of public opinion measurement around the world
is evidence of the belief that public opinion is important for political and other purposes. Governments find surveys to be useful tools for gathering information about what the public thinks, for guiding public information and propaganda campaigns, and for formulating public policies. The US Department of Agriculture was one of the first government agencies to sponsor systematic and large scale surveys. It was followed by many other federal bodies, including the US information agency which has conducted opinion research throughout the world. It is frequently measured using survey sampling.

An opinion poll is a survey of opinion from a particular sample. Opinion polls are usually designed to represent the opinions of a population by asking a small number of people a series of questions and then extrapolating the answers to the larger group within certain confidence intervals.

8.82 | History

The first known example of an opinion poll was a local straw vote conducted by The Harrisburg Pennsylvanian in 1824. It showed Andrew Jackson leading John Quincy Adams by 335 votes to 169 in the contest for the presidency. This straw vote was not scientific. But straw votes became popular in local elections. In 1916, the Literary Digest conducted a national survey as part of an effort to increase circulation. The straw vote correctly predicted Woodrow Wilson’s election as president. The Digest correctly called the following four presidential elections by simply mailing out millions of postcards and counting the returns. In 1936, the Digest’s 2.3 million “voters” constituted a very large sample, but the sample included more affluent Americans who tended to support the Republican Party. This biased the results. The week before the election the Digest reported that Republican Alf Landon was far more popular than Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt. At the same time, George Gallup conducted a much smaller, but more scientifically-based survey. He polled a demographically representative sample, and correctly predicted Roosevelt’s landslide victory in the 1936 presidential election. The Literary Digest soon went out of business. The polling industry gained credibility and public opinion polling began to play a more important role in politics, particularly campaigning.

But public opinion polling has changed. In a 1968 book, The Pulse of Democracy, George Gallup and Saul Rae described public opinion polling as taking the pulse of democracy. By this, they meant that polling used social scientific methods to try to accurately measure what the public was thinking about public affairs. Today, polling is more likely to be conducted for the purpose of making the pulse of democracy, using social scientific methods to make public opinion. This is the argument made by David W. Moore in The Opinion Makers (2008). This change in the way information about how and what people think is used is directly related to the power problem with public opinion.

8.83 | Methods

Nice distinction here between "Taking" the pulse and "Making" it. Sometimes what seem to be opinion polls are actually sophisticated ways of giving you new ways of looking at issues. These are called "push polls" because they favor a particular agenda.
In the early days of public opinion polling, polls were conducted mainly by face-to-face interviews (on the street or in a person’s home). Face-to-face polling is still done, but telephone polls have become more popular because they can be conducted quickly and cheaply. However, response rates for phone surveys have been declining. Some polling organizations, such as YouGov and Zogby use Internet surveys, where a sample is drawn from a large panel of volunteers and the results are weighed to reflect the demographics of the population of interest. This is in contrast to popular web polls that draw on whoever wishes to participate rather than a scientific sample of the population, and are therefore not generally considered accurate.

The wording of a poll question can bias the results. The bias can be unintentional (accidental) or intentional. For instance, the public is more likely to indicate support for a person who is described by the caller as one of the “leading candidates.” Neglecting to mention all the candidates is an even more subtle bias, as is lumping some candidates in an “other” category. Being last on a list affects responses. In fact, this is one reason why election rules provide for listing candidates in alphabetic order or alternating Republican and Democratic candidates. When polling on issues, answers to a question about abortion vary depending on whether a person is asked about a “fetus” or and “unborn baby.”

All polls based on samples are subject to sampling error which reflects the effects of chance in the sampling process. The uncertainty is often expressed as a margin of error. The margin of error does not reflect other sources of error, such as measurement error. A poll with a random sample of 1,000 people has margin of sampling error of 3% for the estimated percentage of the whole population. A 3% margin of error means that 95% of the time the procedure used would give an estimate within 3% of the percentage to be estimated. The margin of error can be reduced by using a larger sample, however if a pollster wishes to reduce the margin of error to 1% they would need a sample of around 10,000 people. In practice pollsters need to balance the cost of a large sample against the reduction in sampling error and a sample size of around 500-1,000 is a typical compromise for political polls.

- **Nonresponse** bias. Some people do not answer calls from strangers, or refuse to respond to polls or poll questions. As a result, a poll sample may not be a representative sample from a population. Because of this selection bias, the characteristics of those who agree to be interviewed may be markedly different from those who decline. That is, the actual sample is a biased version of the universe the pollster wants to analyze. In these cases, bias introduces new errors that are in addition to errors caused by sample size. Error due to bias does not become smaller with larger sample sizes. If the people who refuse to answer, or are never reached, have the same characteristics as the people who do answer, the final results will be unbiased. If the people who do not answer have different opinions then there is bias in the results. In terms of election polls, studies suggest that bias effects are small, but each polling firm has its own formulas on how to adjust weights to minimize selection bias.

- **Response** bias. Survey results may be affected by response bias. Response bias is when a respondent gives answers that do not reflect his or her actual beliefs. This occurs for a variety of reasons. One reason is that a respondent may feel pressure not to give an unpopular answer. For example, respondents might be unwilling to admit to socially unpopular attitudes such as racism, sexism, or they may feel pressure to identify with socially or politically popular attitudes such as patriotism, civic activism, or religious
commitment. For these reasons, a poll might not reflect the true incidence of certain attitudes or behaviors in the population. Response bias can be deliberately engineered by pollsters in order to generate a certain result or please their clients. This is one of the reasons why the term pollster suggests huckster, or a con artist. Even respondents may deliberately try to manipulate the outcome of a poll by advocating a more extreme position than they actually hold in order to support a position that they identify with. Response bias may also be caused by the wording or ordering of questions.

- **Question wording.** The wording of the questions, the order in which questions are asked, and the number and form of alternative answers offered influence results of polls. Thus comparisons between polls often boil down to the wording of the question. For some issues the question wording can produce pronounced differences between surveys. These differences could be caused by respondents with conflicted feelings or the fact that attitudes are evolving. One way in which pollsters attempt to minimize this effect is to ask the same set of questions over time, in order to track changes in opinion. Another common technique is to rotate the order in which questions are asked. One technique is the split-sample, where there are two versions of a question and each version presented to half the respondents.

- **Coverage bias.** Coverage bias is another source of error is the use of samples that are not representative of the population as a consequence of the methodology used, as was the experience of the *Literary Digest* in 1936. For example, telephone sampling has a built-in error because people with telephones have generally been richer than those without phones. Today an increased percentage of the public has only a mobile telephone. In the United States it is illegal to make unsolicited calls to phones where the phone’s owner may be charged simply for taking a call. Because pollsters are not supposed to call mobile phones, individuals who own only a mobile phone will often not be included in the polling sample. If the subset of the population without cell phones differs markedly from the rest of the population, these differences can skew the results of the poll. The relative importance of these factors remains uncertain today because polling organizations have adjusted their methodologies to achieve more accurate election predictions.

### 8.9 Comparative Public Opinion

Many of the issues that political scientists have identified as most important to understanding American government and politics are not unique to the United States. The comparative study of public opinion reveals the similarities and differences in how the peoples of the world think about politics and government.

#### 8.91 The World Values Survey

One source of comparative information about public opinion is the *World Values Survey*. The World Values Survey developed from the European Values Study (EVS) in 1981 which covered only 22 countries worldwide. Ronald Inglehart (The University of Michigan) is a leading figure in the extension of the surveys around the world. The survey was repeated after an interval of about 10 years in then again in a series of “waves” at approximately five year intervals. The
WVS was designed to provide a longitudinal and cross-cultural measurement of variation of values. The European origin of the project made the early waves of the WVS Eurocentric and notable for their especially weak representation in Africa and South-East Asia. In order to overcome this bias by becoming more representative, the WVS opened participation to academic representatives from new countries that met certain minimal survey standards. They could then exchange their data with the WVS in return for the data from the rest of the project. As a result, the WVS expanded to 42 countries in the 2nd wave, 54 in the 3rd wave and 62 in the 4th wave. Today the WVS is an open source database of the WVS available on the Internet. The Secretariat of the WVS is based in Sweden. The official archive of the World Values Survey is located in [ASEP/JDS] (Madrid), Spain.

The global World Values Survey consists of about 250 questions resulting in some 400 to 800 measurable variables. One of the variables measured is Happiness. The comparative “Perceptions of Happiness” are widely quoted in the popular media. Does the U.S. get a smiley face? The popular statistics website Nationmaster also publishes a simplified world happiness scale derived from the WVS data. The WVS website allows a user to get a more sophisticated level of analysis such as comparison of happiness over time or across socio-economic groups. One of the most striking shifts in happiness measured by the WVS was the substantial drop in happiness of Russians and some other Eastern European countries during the 1990s.

8.93 | THE INGLEHART MAP

Another result of the WVS is the Inglehart Map. A number of variables were condensed into two dimensions of cultural variation (known as “traditional v. secular-rational” and “survival v. self-expression”). On this basis, the world's countries could be mapped into specific cultural regions because these two dimensions purportedly explain more than 70 percent of the cross-national variance. The WVS also found that trust and democracy were values that crossed most cultural boundaries.

The subject matter of this graph is actually more complicated than it looks. The vertical axis corresponds to what we dealt with in class regarding tradition and modernity.

8.94 | RELIGION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project has examined the relationship between a country’s wealth and its religiosity. The results show that countries with a high per capita income tend to score low on religiosity.4

The Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project has examined the relationship between a country’s wealth and its religiosity. The results show that countries with a high per capita income tend to score low on religiosity.

8.95 | WEB SOURCES

The U.S. is an exception to this. Perhaps the only way in which the U.S. is not the paragon of liberalism.
One valuable source of information about American public opinion, voting, and political participation is the “American National Election Studies” information available at http://www.electionstudies.org/.

Public speaking continues to be an important influence on public opinion. An electronic source of important public speeches, including the “top 100” American speeches, as well as memorable film speeches, is the Web site http://www.americanrhetoric.com/. This Web site includes audio and video recordings of some of the most important American political speeches. Another resource which has archived some of the most memorable political speeches in the nation’s history is the American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches Web site. See, for example, the famous Goldwater Speech delivered at the Republican Party Convention in 1964. http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barrygoldwater1964rnc.htm

8.96 | IN THE LIBRARY


Chapter 8: Public Opinion

Study Questions

1. How does race and ethnicity influence public opinion?
2. Looking at your own upbringing, in what ways were you socialized? Be sure to discuss specific people and events and how they shaped your political beliefs.
3. Define public opinion and discuss early efforts to measure it.
4. How do we measure public opinion? Be sure to discuss the different methods and their strengths and weaknesses.
5. The authors of the Federalist Papers noted that “all government rests on public opinion.” What did they mean by this claim? Do you agree with them?


Survey Methods: Results are based on telephone interviews with 1,010 national adults, aged 18 and older, conducted Sept. 14-16, 2007. For results based on the total sample of national adults, one can say with 95% confidence that the margin of sampling error is ±3 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

Note that to get 500 complete responses it may be necessary to make thousands of phone calls.

CHAPTER 9: POLITICAL IDEOLOGY
9.0 | What’s in a Name?

Have you ever been in a discussion, debate, or perhaps even a heated argument about government or politics where one person objected to another person’s claim by saying, “That’s not what I mean by conservative (or liberal)? If so, then join the club. People often have to stop in the middle of a good political discussion when it becomes clear that the participants do not agree on the meanings of the terms that are central to the discussion. This can be the case with ideology because people often use familiar terms such as conservative, liberal, or socialist without agreeing on their meanings. This chapter has three main goals. The first goal is to explain the role ideology plays in modern political systems. The second goal is to define the major American ideologies: conservatism, liberalism, and libertarianism. The primary focus is on modern conservatism and liberalism. The third goal is to explain their role in government and politics. Some attention is also paid to other “isms”—belief systems that have some of the attributes of an ideology—that are relevant to modern American politics such as environmentalism, feminism, terrorism, and fundamentalism. The chapter begins with an examination of ideologies in general. It then examines American conservatism, liberalism, and other belief systems relevant to modern American politics and government.

9.1 | What is an ideology?

An ideology is a belief system that consists of a relatively coherent set of ideas, attitudes, or values about government and politics, AND the public policies that are designed to implement the values or achieve the goals. Let’s examine the parts of this definition. First, an ideology is a belief system: it consists of a set of ideas or values on a broad range of issues as
opposed to a single belief about a single issue. These beliefs help people make sense of the world around them. People go through life with “mental images” of “how the world is or should be organized.” These images constitute an ideology—a way to simplify, organize, evaluate and “give meaning to what otherwise would be a very confusing world.” Individuals who are daily bombarded with information can use ideology to help make sense of it. When people read about a terrible crime or crime statistics, ideology can provide a ready-made explanation for the cause of the criminal behavior as well as a predisposition to support a liberal or conservative public policy response to crime. A person who sees video of police officers beating someone on the streets on Los Angeles or elsewhere is apt to use ideology to provide a handy mental image of whether the use of force is justified or a case of police brutality. A person who reads about the latest data on unemployment can use ideology to provide a framework for thinking that the unemployment rate is too high or too low. A person who thinks about taxes is apt to use ideology to conclude that taxes are too high or too low without having to spend a great deal of time learning about economic policy. And finally, individuals who view actual images of bombing or read about the use of military force can use an ideological “mental image” to react to the action based on an ideological bias for or against the use of military force.

Second, an ideology has an action component. An ideology is about ideas and positions on public policies. A public policy is a plan of action to implement ideas or values or achieve specific goals. The commitment to acting on ideas differentiates an ideology from a philosophy. A philosophy is primarily concerned with ideas or values. For example, political philosophy is the study of fundamental questions about the government, politics, liberty, justice, equality, property, rights, law, and what constitutes a good or moral public order. Political philosophers examine questions about the legitimacy of government; the difference between power and authority; the nature of freedom and equality; civic duties and obligations; and the nature and scope of government power to limit individual liberty. The adherents of an ideology are committed to specific sets of values and to acting to achieve them in the realm of politics and government.


An ideology is not just a set of ideas it is a coherent set of ideas. This means that the components of an ideology should be consistent with one another. One idea should not conflict with others. For example, ideologies typically include beliefs about human nature and beliefs about the appropriate role for government. In terms of human nature,
an ideology can describe human nature as basically 1) good or bad; and 2) fixed or flexible. The belief that human nature is basically good means that people are expected to do the right thing because they have a natural sense of right and wrong and will generally do what is right. The belief that human nature is basically bad means that people are by nature self-interested, that evil is part of human nature, and therefore people will often do wrong. The belief that human nature is fixed assumes that an individual’s capacities and abilities are determined at birth: intelligence, aptitudes, and character are a matter of nature. The belief that human nature is flexible means that an individual’s capacities and abilities can be developed by family, religion, culture, tradition, and education: intelligence, aptitudes, and character are a matter of nurture. Beliefs about the determinants of human behavior are of great political importance because they shape beliefs about the best form of government (e.g., whether democracy will work), the

appropriate role of government (e.g., limited or broad), and they shape public policies. For instance, they determine criminal justice policies, particularly whether sentencing policies should emphasize punishment or rehabilitation.

James Madison is remembered as the architect of American government because he designed a form of government with elaborate institutional checks and balances. He believed that people were by nature self-interested and needed to have their ambitions checked. Thomas Jefferson wrote extensively about human nature, specifically about the question whether humans were self-interested egoists (individuals whose actions are based solely on “self-love”) or whether they had a moral sense. He believed people had a natural moral sense. The question was whether it was based on religion, which would justify government support for religion, or a natural sense of moral obligation or conscience. These are some of the most profound political questions. In a June 13, 1814 Letter to Thomas Law, “The Moral Sense,” Jefferson discusses his thoughts on the question.

In his First Inaugural Address (delivered March 4, 1861), President Lincoln spoke about human nature when he closed his Address with the hope that the divisiveness of the Civil War could be ended by appeals to “the better angels of our nature.” Lincoln believed that without such appeals to our good nature, appeals to the worse angels of our nature would result in division, discord, and violence.

An ideology would be inconsistent if it included positive and negative views of human nature, or if it included both fixed and flexible views of human nature. Assessing the consistency of views on the role of government is more complicated. They typically include ideas about the appropriate size and the appropriate use of government power.
Chapter 9: Political Ideology

The size usually refers to small government or big government. The use refers to the purposes of government. With the notable exception of libertarianism, ideologies typically support small government for some purposes and big government for others. For example, modern conservatives believe in big government for national security, morals regulation, and crime. Liberals believe in big government to regulate business and to expand social and economic equality. American politics tends to focus on the size of government—which individual, ideology, or political party supports big government and which supports small government. However, the role of government—what government power is actually being used for—is probably more important than the size of government.

9.13 | The Meaning of Terms

The terms liberal and conservative are commonly to describe American government and politics. One of these two labels is usually attached to individuals, parties, interest groups, media articles and outlets, public policies, and government officials—including judges. But the fact that the terms conservative and liberal are commonly used does not mean that their meanings are clear. In fact, arguments are often about the meaning of words such as freedom, order, and justice—as well as conservative and liberal. The fact that our ordinary political vocabulary includes words whose meanings are not agreed upon explains why so many political arguments pause with the declaration, “That’s not what I mean by liberalism/conservatism/order/justice!” Democracy requires a shared political vocabulary, and it works best when citizens know the meanings of the words they use to describe government and politics. Defining conservatism and liberalism is complicated by the fact that they have changed a great deal over time. Ideologies are dynamic, not static. They change over time. What it means to be a conservative or liberal changes over time, which is one reason why it is sometimes hard to know just what is in a name.

9.14 | The Functions of Ideology

In politics as in economics and sports, organization increases effectiveness. Ideologies organize interests. Ideologies can increase the effectiveness of individuals and ideas by organizing them in order to maximize their impact on public policy. In this respect, ideologies serve a purpose that is similar to political parties and interest groups. But ideologies both unite people and divide them. Ideologies do bring people together to work for shared ideas but they also move people apart by dividing them into opposing camps: believers and non-believers. The fact that ideologies both unite and divide, increase political cooperation and political conflict, is one reason why Americans are so ambivalent about ideology, why they have conflicting feelings about ideology. The ambivalent feelings about ideology can be traced to the earliest days of the republic when the Founders warned against “the mischiefs of faction.” In Federalist Number 9 Hamilton argued that a firm union was a safeguard against “domestic faction.” In Federalist
Chapter 9: Political Ideology

Madison described how to design a political system that “cured” the “mischiefs of faction.” Worries about the harmful effects of factions have not gone away. Today’s worries are about ideologies or parties or special interests divided Americans into competing camps that fight hard for their views rather than working toward the common good. The later chapters describe how organization can increase an individual’s feelings of efficacy, the belief that individual participation in politics matters because it can make a difference. Ideology can play a similar role because it unites and organizes like-minded people to work on behalf of shared ideas.

9.2 | The Major Isms

The range of ideological debates in the U.S. is very limited compared to other democracies. American politics is practically limited to liberalism and conservatism. There are occasional references to other ideologies such as libertarianism, radicalism, socialism, and fascism, but these ideologies are for the most part outside the mainstream of political debate or they are considered the more extreme elements within liberalism or conservatism. The more extremist ideologies of the left and right ends of the political spectrum are not usually part of political discourse. In this sense, the two-ideology system mirrors the two-party system: both present voters with a limited range of political choices.

Liberalism and conservatism have changed a great deal over time. In the early 1800s, the conservative party was the Federalist Party, which advocated a strong federal government, and the liberal party was the Jeffersonian Republicans, which advocated states’ rights. In the 1930s, conservatives supported states’ rights while liberals supported expansion of the federal government. Since the mid-1960s four major issues have consistently divided conservatives and liberals:

- **National Security Policy.** Conservatives have generally been stronger supporters of national defense (anti-communism and anti-terrorism) policies than liberals.
- **Crime Policy.** Conservatives have supported getting tough on crime by strengthening police and advocating punishment. Liberals have generally been considered soft on crime by strengthening due process rights of suspects and advocating rehabilitation.
- **Moral Regulatory Policy.** Conservatives support moral regulatory policy related to abortion, pornography, sexual behavior, and public displays of religion. Liberals support deregulation of morals.
- **Economic Policy.** Conservatives have been more consistently pro-business and anti-tax. Liberals have generally been more pro-labor and more supportive of government regulation of business.
9.30 | Conservatism: Traditional and Modern

This is a conservative era in American politics. Conservatism has been the dominant, but not exclusive, force in national politics since the late 1960s with the notable exception being the reaction to the Watergate scandal in the mid-1970s. However, conservatism is not a monolithic ideology. In fact, wherever two or more conservatives are gathered together the discussion invariably turns to who is the real, true conservative. The following describes the two main strains of conservatism: traditional conservatism (during the period from the 1930s until the mid-1960s) and modern conservatism (from the mid-1960s until today). There are three main differences between traditional and modern conservatism—their views on change, ideology, and the role of government.

9.31 | Views on Change

Traditional conservatism is closest to the original meaning of the word conservative, which is derived from the Latin *conservāre*—meaning to conserve by preserving, keeping, or protecting traditional beliefs, values, customs, or ways of doing things. Traditional conservatives defend the status quo against radical or revolutionary change or the assumption that all change is reform (good change). Edmund Burke (1729-1797), the Irish-British political philosopher, is considered the father of traditional conservatism. He did not oppose change. In fact, he argued that a government without a means of changing lacked the necessary means for its own survival. However, Burke preferred slow or incremental change and opposed radical or revolutionary change.

Modern conservatism is a much stronger advocate for change. In fact, some conservatives call themselves radical conservatives. A radical is someone who advocates basic, even revolutionary change. Radicals can be left-wing or right-wing. When President Reagan called his administration a bunch of radicals he reminded voters that he was a movement conservative, a person who was committed to the cause of overturning liberal social, economic, and defense policies. In contrast to traditional conservatism, which rejected radical or revolutionary change of the right or left, modern conservatism advocates major, even radical or revolutionary change. However, the change is usually described as radical change from the liberal status quo, change that will bring the country back to the basics. This usually means that the solution for many of the contemporary social, economic, and political problems is to return to the Founder’s original understanding of politics, government, and the Constitution. This recurring conservative theme is one of the main points of the Tea Party movement.

Traditional conservatism’s skepticism about change is related to the belief in the importance of order. Traditional conservatives consider order the necessary condition for achieving or maintaining other important values such as individual freedom, private property, and justice—and without good order, these other values and valuables are unlikely to be attained. Traditional conservatives believe that order can be created and maintained by social institutions (family, schools, churches, and civic organization) as well as by government. In this sense, traditional conservatives are not anti-government.
They believe that government has a responsibility to maintain domestic order, to control crime, to preserve traditional values through moral regulatory policies, and to provide national security from foreign threats. But traditional conservatives believe that the primary responsibility for these activities lies with the private sector, the civil society, rather than the public sector (the government). The Burkean emphasis on order, social institutions, and civic responsibility made traditional conservatism less committed to other values such as individualism, individual liberty, and equality. A leading American traditional conservative is Russell Kirk (1918-1994). The Russell Kirk Center provides a good description of traditional conservative principles. They include belief in natural law, hierarchy, the connection between property rights and freedom, faith in custom and tradition, and skepticism of change.

9.32 | Views on Ideology

The second difference between traditional and modern conservatism is that modern conservatism is much more ideological. Today’s conservatives portray conservatism as an ideology that will solve the problems created by liberalism. The term movement conservative refers to those conservatives who consider themselves part of an organized cause to work for conservative ideas. These conservatives are part of a cause. Traditional conservatives were to a certain extent anti-ideological. They considered ideology problematic because it was extremism rather than moderation—and traditional conservatives were in the Aristotelian and Burkean traditions that emphasized conservatism as moderation rather than extremism. The word ideology was originally coined to refer to the scientific study of ideas. It was originally used to describe how the systematic study of ideas could lead to a better understanding of the political world the way that science increased understanding of the natural world. But by the middle of the 20th Century the word ideology was used to describe the ideas that were used to get and use political power. In fact, beginning in the latter 1950s, sociologists including Nan Aron, Seymour M. Lipset, Edward Shils, and Daniel Bell described ideology as assuming the role that religion played in traditional societies. In modern, Western-style secular democracies of the world ideology played the role of religion. They did not mean this as a compliment. They considered ideology at least partly an irrational, unthinking, and therefore unreasonable force in a political world where states had become very powerful, even totalitarian. The criticism of ideology was a reaction against the ideologies of the left and the right during the period from the 1930s to the 1960s. These critics of ideology came to be called neoconservatives, or new conservatives. Prominent neoconservatives were a group of former leftists who rejected ideologies of the left, which produced communism (e.g. The Soviet Union and China), and ideologies of the right, which produced fascism (Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy). They associated ideology with totalitarianism.

9.33 | Views on Role of Government

The third difference between traditional and modern conservatives concerns the role of government. Modern conservative support for change and ideology has changed conservative thinking about the role of government. Conservatives are not antigovernment or even advocates of small government as much as they oppose what
government has been doing. Specifically, conservatives oppose public policies that promote egalitarianism, social welfare, the due process model of justice, and the deregulation of morals. The claim that conservatives are not antigovernment can be supported by examining conservative views on the four major policy areas that have consistently divided conservatives and liberals: national security; crime; economics; and moral regulatory policy. The conservative position is not antigovernment in these four areas. Conservatives are pro-government on national security, crime, regulation of morals, and even, to a lesser extent, economics. There is a libertarian strain within conservatism that is consistently antigovernment but mainstream conservatism does not take the libertarian position on the major policies.

The conservative movement’s support for government is apparent in the principles and positions taken by leading conservative organizations such as The Heritage Foundation, the The American Conservative Party, and The American Conservative Union. The Heritage Foundation, for example, describes itself as a leading voice for conservative ideas such as individual freedom, limited government, traditional values, and strong national defense. It promotes the latter two values by support for “big” government. The American Conservative Party’s principles are more anti-government in the sense that they more consistently advocate limited government. The principles include natural rights and individual liberty, the belief that law should be used to support liberty and mediate disputes where one person has harmed another, and the reminder that “[t]he armed forces and law enforcement exist to bolster private defense, not supplant it.”

Ideologies include a commitment to acting on values. Conservatives use both the government and the private sector to achieve their goals, but they are especially committed to the private sector. The free market plays a central role as a means to achieve conservative goals. In fact, the market model is often presented as an alternative to a statist or government model for organizing society. The English political philosopher Adam Smith developed the marketplace model in Wealth of Nations. This book, which was published in 1776, the same year as the Declaration of Independence, is one of the most influential books ever written. Smith advocated an alternative to mercantilism, the conventional economic model of the day that the government should direct economic activity for the wealth of the empire. Smith described an economic system where the prices of goods were determined by the interactions of buyers and sellers in a competitive marketplace rather than the government. Over time, however, the logic of the marketplace model has been extended beyond economics to other, non-economic areas of society. For example, the economic free marketplace of goods has been expanded to politics where the free market place of ideas is based on the same logic as the economic free market. This is controversial because the marketplace model assumes that goods and services should be available on the basis of the ability to pay—but some things are valuable even though they are not highly valued in the economic marketplace. The philosopher Michael Sandel worries that the logic of the marketplace is now being applied to more and more non-economic settings. Listen to his argument about what money cannot buy and should not buy. Do you agree with him?
9.40 | Liberalism

A standard dictionary definition of a liberal is a person who believes in individual liberty. Therefore liberalism can be defined as an ideology that values individual liberty. This definition is not very helpful because it does not explain very much and because conservatives also believe in individual liberty. And liberals, like conservatives, believe in order. However, liberals and conservatives place different values on individual liberty and order. Liberals tend to value liberty more than order while conservatives tend to value order more than liberty.

Defining liberalism is complicated for some of the same reasons that defining conservatism is complicated: it is a set of ideas—not just one idea; the ideas have changed over time; and like conservatism, liberalism is not monolithic. Two main strains of liberalism are examined here: classical liberalism and modern liberalism.

9.41 | Classical Liberalism

Classical liberalism is rooted in the ideas of the English political philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). Locke’s ideas greatly influenced the thinking of the American founders. His words about the importance of life, liberty, and property found their way into the Declaration of Independence. Locke emphasized the following five ideas:

- **Reason.** Humans should use their reasoning capacity to understand the natural and political world rather than merely relying on faith, custom, or tradition in order to organize society.
- **Individualism.** The importance of the individual as a political actor relative to groups, classes, or institutions included an emphasis on legal equality.
- **Liberty.** Freedom is valued more than order, or relative to obedience to authority.
- **Social Contract Theory of Government.** Individuals decide to leave the state of nature and create government based on the consent of the governed and created by a social contract.
- **Property Rights.** Economic rights (to property and contract) are related to political rights. The shift is toward a private sector economy rather than one run by the government is an aspect of the commitment to limited government.
Classical liberalism originated as a political theory that limited government. During much of the 20th Century classical liberalism was actually considered conservative because it was associated with the defense of property rights and the free market, and opposition to government regulation of the economy and the expansion of the social welfare state.

9.42 | Modern Liberalism

The main difference between classical liberals and modern liberals is that modern liberals abandoned the emphasis on limited government as the best way to protect individual rights. Modern liberals used government to achieve greater equality, liberty, and income security.

- Equality. The various civil rights movements of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries expanded equality for racial and ethnic minorities and women. Most recently, the gay rights movement has advocated for greater legal equality under the law. Egalitarianism became a more important goal for modern liberals. Laws were used to limit discrimination.
- Liberty. Modern liberals also used law to protect civil liberties. Radical political speech. Limits on government censorship. The right to privacy and deregulation of morals.
- Income Security. Modern liberals used government policies to pass social welfare programs (e.g., social security; Medicare; unemployment insurance; workers compensation). These policies were designed to increase income security for the young, the old, and the sick. Support for the creation of the social welfare state explains why modern liberals are called social welfare liberals to differentiate them from classical liberals.

One of the founders of modern liberalism is the 19th Century English political philosopher John Stuart Mill. In *On Liberty and Representative Government*, Mill explained a principle or rule for determining what government should be allowed to do, and what it should not be allowed to do, in a political system based on limited government. The rule has come to be called The Harm Principle. In fact, Mill was merely restating the liberal idea developed by Thomas Jefferson (and John Locke before him):

> “The only purpose for which power can be rightly exercised over a member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.”

> “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty Gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

Here we have it, the Harm principle again.
individual freedom, but he was more supportive of using government power to protect liberty and to promote equality. The origins of social welfare liberalism can be traced to this shift toward greater reliance on government to provide economic and social security. In modern American politics, liberals generally support government regulation to promote equality and economic security—the social welfare state—while conservatives generally support government regulation to promote law and order, national security, and morality—the national security and moral regulatory state.

One indication that this is a conservative era in American politics is the fact that liberalism has become a pejorative term, a negative term. Liberalism has been stigmatized as the “L-word” after being blamed for being soft on crime, for being weak on national defense, for undermining traditional values, and for being unduly critical of capitalism. In fact, the word liberal is so out of political favor today that liberals call themselves progressives. Progressive is a euphemism for liberal and Progressivism is a strain of liberalism.

Think About It!
Why are conservatives happier than liberals?

9.50 | Libertarian

Libertarianism is a simpler ideology than either conservatism or liberalism. Simply stated, libertarians value freedom and believe that individuals and groups can organize life with only minimal government. Libertarians have a positive view of human nature. The belief that government threatens freedom—that more government means less freedom—is reflected in The Libertarian Party motto: “Maximum freedom. Minimal Government.” The familiar slogan, “That government is best which governs least!” is libertarian. Libertarians believe in minimal government; government should be limited to doing what is necessary to protect individuals from being harmed by others. Libertarians value freedom more than order, but they believe that order actually emerges from the competition of the marketplace. This is the basis of libertarian support for laissez faire policies in economic, political, and social affairs. Laissez faire is a French term for “let it be.” In economics, laissez faire means allowing the competition of the marketplace, and the interaction of buyers and sellers, to operate without government intervention,
regulation, or control. Libertarians rely on the private sector to produce order and prosperity. In politics, libertarians oppose using government power to promote values such as equality, patriotism, or morality. They also oppose immigration policies that limit the free movement of people across national borders. This is why libertarians can be conservative on some issues (opposed to using law to promote equality or create social welfare or to regulate business) and liberal on others (opposed to moral regulatory policy and opposed to laws promoting patriotism).

Libertarians take seriously the **harm principle** as a guide for limited government. The harm principle is libertarian insofar as it considers the only legitimate use of government power is preventing individuals from being harmed by others. Harm means physical harm to person or property or interests. The harm principle does not allow paternalistic legislation, using laws to prevent people from harming themselves by smoking, drinking alcohol or using drugs, eating unhealthy food, riding motorcycles without a helmet, or riding in a car without a seatbelt.

### 9.60 Other Isms

#### 9.61 Socialism and Communism

**Socialism** is the belief that economic power is the basis of political power and that economic equality is essential for political equality. The belief that economic inequality causes political inequality provides the socialist justification for using government to actively promote equality through extensive government regulation or even government control of the economy. In order to achieve political equality, the government as redistributes resources through progressive taxation and social welfare program, at a minimum, and government control of the economy (both the means of production and the distribution of goods and services) at a maximum. **Karl Marx** is the most famous figure associated with socialism because he developed a comprehensive, systematic analysis of the relationship between economics and politics, thereby giving earlier socialist thinking an ideology or world view. For an American economist’s critique of the rise and fall of socialism as an economic model read Robert Heilbroner’s analysis.

Like conservatism and liberalism, there are many variations of socialism. In fact, in American politics the term socialist is often used in a generic sense to refer to any “big government” taxing and spending policies. In this sense, government spending as a share of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product is a measure of how socialistic the country is. Socialists do support expansive government. But so do non-socialists. For example, the federal government’s response to the Great Recession included the infamous Troubled Asset Relief Program (or TARP) of 2008 and the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 which provided government bailouts for financial services companies and car manufacturers (GM and Chrysler). These policies were socialistic only in the sense that they increased government intervention in the private sector economy. But the bailouts were not socialistic in the sense that they were not aimed at promoting greater economic equality; critics called them Wall Street bailouts that Main Street would have to pay for. The key to identifying socialist policies that result in big government, as opposed to non-socialist policies that result in big government, is the social policies promote egalitarianism: economic equality.
Communism can be understood as an extreme version of socialism. It takes the socialist ideal of equality, and the government’s responsibility to achieve it in the economic, political, and social sectors to the point where there is no distinction between a private sector and the public sector. Communism is totalitarian in the sense that it advocates total government power over society. Indeed, the word totalitarian means total control with no distinction between the public sector and the private sector. In a totalitarian system, the government is authorized to use its powers and laws to regulate individual behavior, family policy, business and labor, as well as all aspects of social life.

9.62 | Anarchism

In terms of the size of government, anarchism is at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from communism. The key to understanding anarchism is the fact that the Greek origin of the term means “without rulers.” Anarchists oppose all forms of government because governments by definition have the power to coerce individuals to join a community or require obedience to laws. Government use force—even the force of law—to ensure compliance rather than merely allowing individuals to freely, voluntarily join a political community. Anarchists believe that government is not necessary because people can use their capacity for reasoning to decide whether to freely and voluntarily agree to live in orderly and just societies without government requiring them to do so. Anarchists have a basically positive view of human nature which contrasts with Thomas Hobbes who believed that humans were by nature selfish, and the strong would take advantage of the weak. Anarchists believe that people will learn from experience that some rules are necessary for peaceful and prosperous coexistence and therefore will voluntarily accept rules that provide good order and justice without the force of law. Anarchists consider government power to compel individuals to obey the law illegitimate because it violates an individual’s inherent right to be free from coercion by others. In today’s political debate, anarchists are most often depicted as violent radicals who oppose government policies promoting international trade and globalism.

9.63 | Populism

The term populism refers to “of the people.” Populists advocate on behalf of the common person who they depict as being unfairly treated by the rich and powerful or some other privileged elites. In this sense, populist movements tend to be protest movements representing farmers, the average American, or workers. Populism has been a recurring theme throughout American history. President Andrew Jackson was a populist who worked to bring the average person into a political process that was controlled by “the better sorts” of society. In the latter 19th and early 20th Century, agrarian populists defended rural/agrarian interests from the urbanization and industrialization that occurred with the Industrial Revolution. Populism often emerges as a reaction against major social, economic, or cultural changes (e.g., immigration) or economic crises (e.g., panics, depressions, or recessions). The cultural revolution of the 1960s spawned right wing populists such as George Wallace, Governor of Alabama and presidential candidate.
Listen to Wallace’s populist campaign message making fun of northern urban elites (including the Washington press).

Today’s left wing populism includes criticism of Wall Street (e.g., the Occupy Movement) and the growing economic inequality in the country. Today’s right wing populism includes opposition to immigration, or at least the demand that the federal government defend the country’s borders and enforce immigration laws, and opposition to efforts to change the traditional definition of marriage as a union between one man and one woman—for example, the Tea Party Movement’s rallying cry is to “take back the Constitution” from the elites.


9.64 | FEMINISM

Feminism is a social or political movement that strives for equal rights for women. It is multi-faceted movement that has political, economic, social, legal, and cultural components. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines feminism and describes it by paying special attention to its various dimensions. Feminist theory describes and analyzes gender differences (and similarities) in order to better understand gender differences and gender inequality. From the perspective of political science, feminist theory is an attempt to explain relevant facts, include gender behavior, sexuality, and inequality. One relevant fact is the different gender political power relations. Feminism describes and critiques these political power relations. As such, feminist theory often promotes women’s rights. The subjects of study include discrimination, stereotypes, objectification, and patriarchy. Women’s Studies is a multidisciplinary academic field
that includes anthropology, communications, economics, history, philosophy, political science, and sociology.

9.65 \ ENVIRONMENTALISM

Environmentalism is a movement whose members advocate protecting the natural environment. Environmentalism is an example of modern issue politics advanced by individuals—policy entrepreneurs who take up a cause—and organizations (interest groups). The environmental movement began to have an impact on national politics in the 1960s and 1970s when they put the environment on the government’s agenda. Senator Gaylord Nelson founded Earth Day on April 22, 1970. The Environmental Protection Agency also was created in 1970. The EPA is the primary federal government agency responsible for providing clean air and clean water. Why is the environmental movement political? Why is it controversial to provide clean air and clean water? Because doing so involves the allocation of scarce resources. Protecting the environment costs money and entails government regulation of business and consumer behavior. This explains the debate over global warming. Global warming is an example of an environmental issue that has become controversial because addressing it will require governmental regulation.

9.66 \ FUNDAMENTALISM

Fundamentalism is not usually considered an ideology the way conservatism, liberalism, and libertarianism are ideologies. However, fundamentalism is an idea which has an important impact on modern American politics and the politics of other countries. Fundamentalism is usually defined as a movement within a religious denomination—a movement that reacts against modernity by advocating a return to the basics or the fundamentals of a particular faith. Religious fundamentalism is evident in most of the major religions of the world today. Christian, Islamic, and Judaic fundamentalists advocate a return to basic articles of faith, particularly those tenets of faith that are expressed or revealed in sacred texts such as the Bible or Koran.

Fundamentalism is not limited to religious movements. It can be secular as well. From a social science perspective, fundamentalism is a reaction against modernity, particularly science, secularism, and value relativism. Secularism is the belief that government and politics should be separate from religion, that religion is appropriate for the private (social) sphere, not the public (governmental) sphere. In the U.S., secularism is reflected in the idea that there should be a “wall of separation” between church and state. Relativism is the belief that values are subjective and conditional rather than universal and objectively true. Fundamentalists advocate restoring the traditional or fundamental belief that morals and values are universal truths that are not subject to evolving standards of modernity.

In the U.S., political fundamentalists advocate returning to the nation’s founding values, political principles, and founding documents. Legal or constitutional fundamentalists advocate Originalism, the belief that judges should decide cases based on the original intentions of those who wrote the words of the Constitution rather than their interpretation of the words or the modern meanings of the words. Religious fundamentalists and secular fundamentalists tend to be conservative insofar as they work to return to or restore the values of the founding era.
Terrorism is hard to define in a way that is universally accepted or which differentiates between acceptable and unacceptable uses of political violence. The old saying that one person’s freedom fighter is another person’s terrorist still applies to contemporary analyses of political violence. A basic definition of terrorism is the use of violence or the threat of violence to intimidate or coerce a people, principally for political purposes. Terrorism creates a climate of fear in a population in order to achieve a particular political objective.

U.S. law does define terrorism. Title 118 of the U.S. Code defines international terrorism as violent acts that “appear to be intended to” “intimidate or coerce a civilian population;” “to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion,” or to “affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.” It defines domestic terrorism as activities that “involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State;” “appear to be intended” to “intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping...”; and “occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.”

An extremely broad range of individuals, political organizations, and movements have used terrorism: leftist and rightist; conservative and liberal; nationalistic and internationalist movements; religious and secular; defenders of the status quo and revolutionaries; populists and elitists; and even governments (though state institutions such as armies, intelligence services, and the police). Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the government has devoted a great deal of attention to terrorism. In fact, the Federal Bureau of Investigation describes protecting against terrorism its top priority.

Terrorism involves the use of political violence but not all political violence is terrorism. It is important to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate uses of political violence. During the colonial era, mob actions were part of the American
political experience with direct, participatory democracy. The Boston Tea Party in December 1773 was direct action intended to protest against British policies and to intimidate the British. Shays’ Rebellion in the winter of 1786 and 1787 was an armed uprising by citizenry who demanded that the government be more responsive to the economic problems of average Americans who facing mortgage foreclosures.

The Tea Party movement played an important role in the 2010 mid-term elections. Conservatives and Republican candidates for national and state offices did very well. One controversy surrounding the Tea Party movement is the fact that individual members of the movement and Tea Party groups either implied or explicitly stated that the American political tradition includes demanding change through means other than the ballot box and regular elections. These alternative methods include violence and the threat of violence. The references to “Second Amendment” remedies for political problems are a reminder that the American political tradition includes famous examples of when political violence was accepted as a legitimate way to achieve political change or to oppose advocates of political change. Members of the Tea Party movement and advocates of gun rights, such as the National Rifle Association, remind the American public and government officials that the Declaration of Independence explained why individuals or organizations can take up arms when the government is tyrannical, exceeds its authority, or is not responsive to demands.4

9.60 | Why are there only two ideologies in the U.S.?

Individual freedom of choice is a powerful concept in the U.S. In economics, freedom of choice means a preference for free markets. The free marketplace of goods and services where consumers choose based on their preferences is a very familiar part of American culture. In the economic marketplace competition is believed to improve products and services. It is also considered a good thing for economic consumers to have a broad range of options from which to choose when purchasing a car, a house, health care, an insurance plan, or any other good or service. Americans consider economic choice a good thing—and economic consumers certainly have a great variety of goods and services from which to choose. At one time, television viewers had only three networks to watch. Now there is a seemingly endless menu from which to select. At one time, economic consumers had to choose from the big three American automobile manufacturers: Chevrolet, Ford, and Chrysler. Today’s consumers have many more choices. Why then is political choice so limited? Why are American economic consumers presented with such a variety of goods and services but they are practically limited to choosing either a conservative or a liberal, either a Republican or Democrat? Must a person be either a conservative or a liberal? In a nation of 300 million people, is it possible to fit everyone into only two boxes? Are policies either liberal or conservative?

9.61 | What Are You?

The two-dimensional framework for thinking about ideologies and political parties has serious limitations. Must all people be fit into either the conservative or the liberal box? Must all issues be reduced to only two-dimensions? The limitations of the conservative and liberal framework have prompted searches for ways of thinking about ideology that
provide for more than two options. One alternative framework that provides more than two categories is the World’s Smallest Political Quiz. It makes a distinction between views on economic issues and views on personal issues. Take the quiz to see which of four ideological labels best describes you. Do you think the results accurately label you? What do you think of the quiz? Do you think the organization that developed the questions is biased toward a particular ideology?

In recent years American politics has been described in terms of “Red States” and “Blue States.” Red states are conservative Republican and blue states are liberal Democratic. The Pew Research Center developed a “Political Typology” quiz that provides more political colors than red and blue.

9.70 | Is Ideology A Good Influence or A Bad Influence?

It is not easy to provide simple definitions of complex terms such as conservatism and liberalism and describe their role in American government and politics. It is even harder to assess whether their role is positive or negative, whether ideologies are good or bad influences on government and politics. It is hard to objectively—that is, neutrally or without bias—assess an ideology’s role because ideologies are prescriptive rather than descriptive terms. A prescriptive term is a normative or value-laden term. A prescriptive term is one that has a value judgment about its worth, whether it is desirable or undesirable, whether it is good or bad. A descriptive term is not a normative or value-laden term. The following illustrates descriptive and prescriptive statements that are (mostly) familiar to politics.

**Descriptive Statements**

Democracy is government of the people, by the people, and for the people.
Freedom is the right to do what you want.
Equality means treating everyone the same.
Conservatism is an ideology that values social order more than individual liberty.
Liberalism is an ideology that values individual liberty more than social order.
Socialism is an ideology that values equality.
Terrorism is the political use of violence.

**Prescriptive Statements**

Democracy is a good form of government.
Freedom is preferable to slavery.
Chocolate is better than vanilla.
Conservatism is preferable to liberalism.
Liberalism is preferable to conservatism.
Capitalism is a good economic system.
Socialism threatens freedom.
Violence is not a legitimate means to a political end.
Terrorism is unacceptable.
There are too many lawyers and laws in modern American society.

It is hard to objectively assess conservatism and liberalism because ideologies are commonly considered prescriptive rather than descriptive terms. A prescriptive term is a normative or value-laden term. A descriptive term defines or explains value. In American politics and government, people think of conservative or liberal or socialist as good or bad rather than merely as labels that describe different sets of beliefs and programs for acting on them. As a result, candidates for public office, government officials, public policies, and political events are viewed through prescriptive, ideological lenses. Capitalism and democracy are considered good; other economic and political systems are considered bad. Similarly, the Republican and Democratic parties are not merely described, they are assessed as good or bad based on ideological or policy preferences.

Prescriptive terms reflect biases for or against something—which makes it harder to study it objectively. Studying terrorism is complicated because it is a prescriptive term, and its prescription is pejorative (or negative): to call a person a terrorist, or to describe an action as terrorism, is to condemn the person or the action. A descriptive definition of democracy is that it is a political system where people control their government through elections or other means. But democracy is commonly used in a prescriptive sense: “Democracy is a good (or bad) form of government.” To say that democracy is a good form of government is a positive normative statement. To say that democracy is a bad form of government is a negative normative statement. Attaching prescriptive labels to political terms sometimes makes it harder, not easier, to understand what is being described. The fact that the terms liberal and conservative, which are so important for understanding American politics and government, are so often used as prescriptive labels that are attached to individuals, parties, or policies can make it harder to understand American government and politics. When thinking about ideology, it is important to try to separate the descriptive thinking about the terms from the prescriptive or normative assessment of whether the ideology is good or bad. Doing so will increase the likelihood that ideology—the systems of beliefs and policies for acting on them—can increase understanding of government and politics and the public policies that emerge from the process.

Take the 20 question “Political Typology” quiz and then think about it! Are your Red or Blue? http://people-press.org/typology/quiz/
Chapter 9: Study Questions

1. What is the role of religion in ideology?
2. What is ideology?
3. How do liberalism, conservatism, and libertarianism likely influence thinking about stem cell research?
4. Briefly discuss the problems with the conservative and liberal labels.
5. Is ideology good or bad?
6. Describe some of the differences between conservatism and libertarianism.

9.8 Additional Resources

The Center for Voting and Democracy has links to articles related to elections and democracy including voter turnout, links to organizations and ideas related to reforming the electoral system, and analysis of electoral returns. [www.fairvote.org/](http://www.fairvote.org/)

The World’s smallest political quiz uses ten questions to place a person on the economic and social ideological spectrums. [http://www.theadvocates.org/quiz](http://www.theadvocates.org/quiz)

The Gallup Organization provides historical and current information about American public opinion. [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com)

9.9 In the Library


3 http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/uscode18/usc_sup_01_18_10_1_20_118.html