

American Political Ideologies and Beliefs (Unit 4)

4

BIG IDEAS

- METHODS OF POLITICAL ANALYSIS
- COMPETING POLICY-MAKING INTERESTS

This unit explores how American political beliefs are formed by the linkage institutions of elections, interest groups, and the media. What factors influence voting behavior and party identification? How does the media influence public opinion and political discourse?

This unit also explores why people either vote or stay home on Election Day. By looking at the demographics of America, you will be able to understand voter trends. Even though Americans are notorious for their lack of voter participation when compared to other Western democracies, recent elections have provided optimism that voter turnout is on the increase. When you view the constitutional basis of voting and its history, you should see how long it has taken for suffrage to be obtained by all citizens.

In recent elections, public opinion, measured through polls, became a primary barometer of how and why voters behave. Political polls were conducted to gauge the feelings and attitudes of the electorate. We will evaluate how polls are conducted, how candidates rely on polls and the media, and the impact of exit polls and the media.

The role of the media, including its historical development and its impact on public opinion and the political agenda, will be the focus in the last section of the unit. Topics such as the limits placed on the media, bias in the media, whether real or perceived, and the importance of the Internet and social media will be discussed.

The translation of public opinion into public policy takes place when policy makers truly understand opinion trends. This is one of the most difficult aspects of policy makers. They rely on such things as polls, letters, and personal input from constituents. The definitive measure of whether the institutions of government and the components of our political system succeed is the implementation of public policy.

QUESTIONS STUDENTS MUST ANSWER

1. What is the basis of American political behavior, ideology, and beliefs and how have they changed over time?
2. How does political behavior, ideology, and beliefs impact public policy making?

Big Ideas

Methods of Political Analysis utilize various scientific tools to measure political socialization and voter ideology.

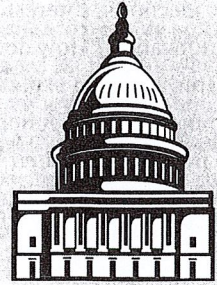
Competing Policy-Making Interests are essential to the development and implementation of public policy.

KEY TERMS STUDENTS MUST KNOW

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|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Conservative ideology | Libertarian ideology |
| Equality of opportunity | Limited government |
| Federal Reserve | Monetary policy |
| Fiscal policy | <i>Planned Parenthood v Casey</i> |
| Focus group | Political culture |
| Free enterprise | Political socialization |
| Globalization | Rule of law |
| Individualism | Scientific polling sample |
| Keynesian economics | Supply-side economics |
| Liberal ideology | Tracking polls |

CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

The trend in reporting public opinion in presidential elections, called aggregate polling (polls that report trends by taking the average of more than one poll of voters representing different polling outlets along with other factors), incorrectly predicted the outcome of the 2016 Electoral College vote.



KEY CONCEPT 4.A: DEMOGRAPHICS AND POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

Demographics, political socialization, and the impetus for social change determine what core beliefs citizens have about government.

The **Big Idea, Competing Policy Making-Interests**, is reflected by this concept.

What are the core values of Americans? How are they formed, and how do they shape the beliefs people have about what government is supposed to do? These are the key questions that impact the relationship that citizens have with the federal government and how citizens interact with each other.

- The first core value of Americans is individualism, the moral stance, political philosophy, ideology, or social outlook that emphasizes a person's moral worth. If you are an individualist, you believe in the exercise of freedom and the ability to achieve goals and desires. You also value independence and self-reliance and advocate that the interests of the individual should take precedence over the state or a social group. Individualists also oppose unwanted interference by society or the government.

Optional Reading That Illustrates Individualism

***Democracy in America*, by Alexis de Tocqueville, Chapters 2 and 3**

Chapter 2: Origin of the Anglo-Americans, and Importance of this Origin in Relation to Their Future Condition

Key Quote:

“These men had, however, certain features in common, and they were all placed in an analogous situation. The tie of language is, perhaps, the strongest and the most durable that can unite mankind. All the emigrants spoke the same language; they were all children of the same people. Born in a country which had been agitated for centuries by the struggles of faction, and in which all parties had been obliged in their turn to place themselves under the protection of the laws, their political education had been perfected in this rude school; and they were more conversant with the notions of right and the principles of true freedom than the greater part of their European contemporaries. At the period of the first emigrations the township system, that fruitful germ of free institutions, was deeply rooted in the habits of the English; and with it the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people had been introduced into the very bosom of the monarchy of the house of Tudor.”

Chapter 3: Social Condition of the Anglo-Americans

Key Quote:

“There is, in fact, a manly and lawful passion for equality that incites men to wish all to be powerful and honored. This passion tends to elevate the humble to the rank of the great; but there exists also in the human heart a depraved taste for equality, which impels the weak to attempt to lower the powerful to their own level and reduces men to prefer equality in slavery to inequality with freedom. Not that those nations whose social condition is democratic naturally despise liberty; on the contrary, they have an instinctive love of it. But liberty is not the chief and constant object of their desires; equality is their idol: they make rapid and sudden efforts to obtain liberty and, if they miss their aim, resign themselves to their disappointment; but nothing can satisfy them without equality, and they would rather perish than lose it.”

- The second American core value is equality of opportunity, which arises out of the belief that every individual should be given the same chance to succeed. If that is hampered by socioeconomic factors, then people who believe in equality of opportunity believe it is the government’s responsibility to provide that opportunity through legislation or court decisions.

Optional Reading That Illustrates Equality of Opportunity

***The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy*, by Suzanne Mettler (2011)**

From the publisher’s description of the book:

“‘Keep your government hands off my Medicare!’ Such comments spotlight a central question animating Suzanne Mettler’s provocative and timely book: Why are many Americans unaware of government social benefits and so hostile to them in principle, even though they receive them? The Obama administration has been roundly criticized for its inability to convey how much it has accomplished for ordinary citizens. Mettler

argues that this difficulty is not merely a failure of communication; rather it is endemic to the formidable presence of the ‘submerged state.’”

This book effectively shows how the government provides many important benefits and programs that provide equality of opportunity, but many people are either unaware of them or hostile to them in principle.

- The third core value is free enterprise, the basis of American capitalism, and advocates of free enterprise believe the government should allow open markets and competition in the marketplace with limited interference. In contemporary terms, a belief in free enterprise would also encompass laissez-faire government policies over regulatory policies.

The other core beliefs that define citizen relationships with government are limited government and rule of law. The federal government and state governments are told they do not have unlimited power. The three branches are limited through the system of checks and balances. Congress is told it cannot deny the writ of habeas corpus or the right of appeal, cannot pass bills of attainder or impose predetermined jail sentences before a trial. There are, however, exceptions to some of these limitations. In times of national emergency, the Supreme Court has determined that the federal government can place major restrictions on the civil liberties of its citizens. During the Civil War, Lincoln suspended the writ of habeas corpus in the border states. During World War II, Roosevelt ordered Japanese-American citizens to internment camps.

Political Socialization Helps Form an Individual’s Political Ideology and Beliefs

Political socialization is the factor that determines voting behavior. There is growing interest in how people actually develop their political orientation, thus making it more likely they will vote. Studies have determined that these attitudes are formed by family, media, and public schools. Party identification, the voter’s evaluation of the candidates, and policy voting—the actual decision to vote for a particular candidate based on these factors—all come into play in evaluating the overall voting process.

What are the factors, then, that influence political socialization? They can be classified under two major categories: sociological and psychological. Sociological factors include:

- income and occupation,
- education,
- sex and age,
- religious and ethnic background,
- region of the country where you live, and
- family makeup.

Psychological factors include:

- party affiliation and identification,
- perception of candidate’s policies and/or image, and
- the belief that your vote will make a statement.

Based on these factors we can state the following about who votes, what party those who vote lean toward, and who does not vote:

- Voters in the lower income brackets and “blue-collar” workers were traditional Democratic voters, but many voted for Donald Trump in 2016 in the swing states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Upper-middle to upper-income voters, many of whom are business

and professional “white-collar” workers, tend to vote Republican. Citizens with higher incomes and greater education vote in greater numbers than those with lower incomes and less education. Education is the number-one factor in determining voter turnout. This pattern held true in the 1976–2016 presidential elections.

- Voting patterns show voters usually do not vote for candidates because he or she is of their own gender. In addition, there is no guarantee that even if a woman ran for national office, she would get the women’s vote. With Geraldine Ferraro on the 1984 Democratic ticket, more women voted for the Reagan–Bush ticket, proving that women did not vote just because there was a woman running for vice president. However, analysts suggest there is a gender gap in national politics, a significant deviation between the way men and women vote. Since 1988 a trend has developed for a greater percentage of women to vote for Democratic candidates than men do. This was particularly true in the 2016 presidential election, when polls showed that white male voters heavily supported Republican candidates, whereas women supported Democratic candidates.
- In 2016, 54 percent of women voted for Hillary Clinton while 42 percent of women voted for Donald Trump. However, when the women’s vote is divided by race, it becomes clear that black women largely drove the so-called gender gap against Trump. Donald Trump’s most enthusiastic supporters were white men, with 54 percent of college educated white men and 72 percent of non-college-educated white men backing him.
- The youth vote is undergoing a major change. Ever since the Twenty-sixth Amendment was passed, political parties have wanted to capture the young voter. Even though they seem to vote more Democratic than Republican (with the exception of youth supporting Reagan and Bush), the fact remains that they have voted in much lower numbers than other groups. From 1976 to 1988, for instance, the turnout among the youngest voters, those 18–20 years old, was less than 40 percent of the eligible voters. From 1992 to 2016, MTV ran a “Choose or Lose” campaign, resulting in increased registration and turnout of young voters. In the 2008 and 2012 elections, 18–24-year-olds voted in large numbers for Barack Obama. In the 2010 and 2014 midterms, the youth voter turnout declined significantly from the presidential-election years of 2008 and 2012. Of the estimated 24 million people under 30 who voted in the 2016 presidential election, a large majority supported Hillary Clinton. However, Clinton received notably less support from young voters (18–29) than Barack Obama did in 2008 and 2012, particularly in the crucial battleground states she lost to Donald Trump.
- Religious and ethnic background highly influences voter choice and voter turnout. Since the late nineteenth century waves of immigration, Catholics and Jews have tended to vote Democratic (Republicans traditionally supported anti-immigration legislation), whereas northern Protestants tend to vote Republican. Strongly affiliated religious groups also tend to vote more often in general elections, compared to those people who do not identify as being closely connected to a religion. Minority groups, although voting heavily for Democratic candidates, do not turn out as much as white voters. Jesse Jackson and his Rainbow Coalition, minority groups of “color” rallying around causes espoused by Jackson, have been attempting to increase minority registration and voter turnout. Minority groups can be a fertile field for campaigning political parties. After the 2000 election, a religious gap became evident. Those who were regular churchgoers tended to vote Republican, while those who did not attend religious services regularly tended to vote Democratic. This trend continued from 2004–2016.
- Historically, geography has dictated a voter preference. The South voted solidly Democratic after the Civil War. However, the “solid South” has become much more Republican since the 1960s, when national Democratic leaders won several key civil rights victories. Comparing

voter turnout: proportionally, northerners vote in greater numbers than southerners. This difference is explained by a large number of southern minority voters who are still not registered. New England and Sunbelt voters tend to vote Republican, whereas the big industrial states, especially in the major cities, lean to the Democrats, although they are considered toss-ups in close presidential elections.

- The 2012 election was characterized by a Democratic coalition of Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, and women. Governor Mitt Romney won almost 60 percent of the white vote, but the white share of the electorate has been falling steadily: 20 years ago, whites were 87 percent of the electorate; in 2012 they were 72 percent. The 2016 election reflected a Democratic coalition that included minorities, women, and youth. However, it could not be called the “Obama coalition” since there was a lower turnout among these groups for Hillary Clinton. The Republican coalition featured white men, non-college-educated women, and evangelicals. The white share of the electorate was 75 percent.
- The impact the world economy has on the United States (globalization) has a profound influence on how affected individuals develop political and social values. For instance, if your job has been eliminated because of globalization, you will react negatively to open trade treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Optional Readings

***Making Globalization Work*, by Joseph Stiglitz (2006)**

From the publisher:

“Joseph E. Stiglitz offers here an agenda of inventive solutions to our most pressing economic, social, and environmental challenges, with each proposal guided by the fundamental insight that economic globalization continues to outpace both the political structures and the moral sensitivity required to ensure a just and sustainable world. As economic interdependence continues to gather the peoples of the world into a single community, it brings with it the need to think and act globally.”

***Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*, by Robert D. Putnam (1995)**

Key Quote:

“The concept of ‘civil society’ has played a central role in the recent global debate about the preconditions for democracy and democratization. In the newer democracies, this phrase has properly focused attention on the need to foster a vibrant civic life in soils traditionally inhospitable to self-government. In the established democracies, ironically, growing numbers of citizens are questioning the effectiveness of their public institutions at the very moment when liberal democracy has swept the battlefield, both ideologically and geopolitically.”

How Class-Based Society Impacts Political Socialization

First, we must define some basic terms. Income distribution refers to the portion of national income that individuals and groups earn. Even though there has not been a significant comparative change in income distribution between the lowest and highest fifth of the American population from 1953 to 2017, since then there has developed over that period of time a wider disparity in levels of income for those groups. Specifically, from 1980 to 2016, the incomes of the wealthiest Americans rose at a much greater level than those of the poorest fifth. The median income in 2016 was a little over \$59,000 compared with \$24,250 for a family of four living below the poverty level.

Income is defined as the specific level of money earned over a specific period of time, whereas wealth is what is actually owned, such as stocks, bonds, property, bank accounts, and cars. Wealth, unlike levels of income, has been even more disproportionate, with the top 1 percent of the country's rich having about 25 percent of the wealth. Taking into account this disparity of the distribution of income and wealth, the U.S. Census Bureau has adopted a poverty line. This line measures what a typical family of four would need to spend to achieve what the bureau calls an "austere" standard of living.

Which groups become part of this culture of poverty? People who are poor because they cannot find work, have broken families, lack adequate housing, and often face a hostile environment. The Census Bureau views families as being above or below the poverty level by using a poverty index developed by the Social Security Administration. According to the bureau, "the Index is based solely on money income and does not reflect the fact that many low-income persons receive non-cash benefits such as food stamps, Medicaid, and public housing." People living below the poverty level include a disproportionate number of minorities living in cities.

Elections Affect Political Socialization

In 2000 the electorate could not make up its mind between George W. Bush, who promised to bring "honor and integrity" back to the Oval Office, and the incumbent vice president, Al Gore, who had to separate himself from Bill Clinton's scandals while still identifying himself with the longest period of prosperity in U.S. history. In the end, Gore narrowly won the popular vote but lost the electoral college in one of the closest and most-disputed elections in history.

Bush campaigned for reelection in 2004 emphasizing that he would "build a safer world and a more hopeful America." His Democratic opponent, Senator John F. Kerry, told the voters that he was the "real deal" and that "America deserves better." The voters decided not to change a commander in chief during a time of war and gave the incumbent both a popular and electoral vote majority.

In the first election since 1952 that did not feature an incumbent president or vice president, Barack Obama, the first African-American nominee of a major political party, campaigned in 2008 using the theme "change we can believe in." His opponent, Arizona senator John McCain, chose "country first," emphasizing his military credentials. The country elected Obama, giving him a majority of the popular vote and more than 350 electoral votes.

In 2012, incumbent president Barack Obama ran for reelection against former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney. Even though the economic climate favored the challenger, President Obama was able to define Governor Romney as the candidate who identified with the wealthiest Americans. Obama was reelected with 332 electoral votes.

In 2016, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton ran against businessman Donald Trump. In what ultimately became a "change election," Trump defeated Clinton in the Electoral College 304-227, while Clinton won the popular vote by almost 2.9 million. There were also seven electors, called "faithless electors," who voted for other candidates, the most in U.S. political history.

All these controversial elections either reinforced or changed political attitudes.

Optional Reading

***Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics,*
by Cathy J. Cohen (2010)**

From the publisher:

"In *Democracy Remixed*, award-winning scholar Cathy J. Cohen offers an authoritative and empirically powerful analysis of the state of black youth in America today. Utilizing