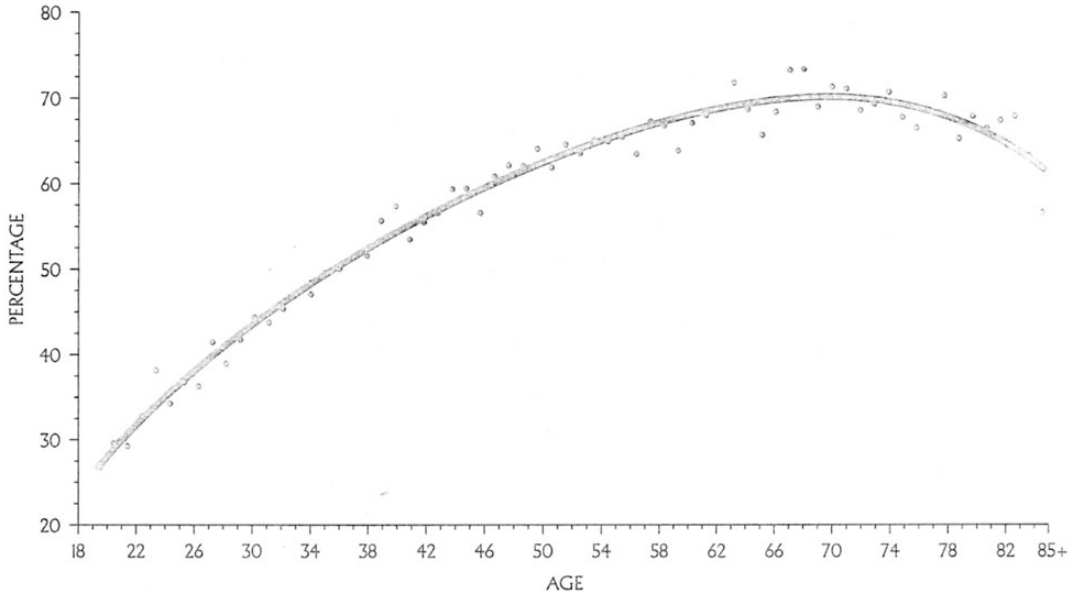
Figure 6.3 Turnout by Age, 2000

This graph shows how turnout in the 2000 presidential election was related to age.



Source: Authors' analysis of 2000 Census Bureau data.

Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information

Before examining the role that public opinion plays in American politics, it is essential to learn about the science of public opinion measurement. How do we really know the approximate answers to questions such as what percentage of young people favor abortion rights, how many Hispanics supported George W. Bush's 2004 campaign, or what percentage of the public favored immediate air strikes against Afghanistan after September 11? Polls provide these answers, but there is much skepticism about polls. Many people wonder how accurately this can be done by only interviewing 1,000 or 1,500 people around the country. This section provides an explanation of how polling works, which will hopefully enable you to become a well-informed consumer of polls.

How Polls Are Conducted

Public opinion polling is a relatively new science. It was first developed by a young man named George Gallup, who initially did some polling for his mother-in-law, a longshot candidate for secretary of state in Iowa in 1932. With the Democratic landslide of that year, she won a stunning victory, thereby further stimulating Gallup's interest in politics. From that little acorn the mighty oak of public opinion polling has grown. The firm that Gallup founded spread throughout the democratic world, and in some languages, *Gallup* is actually the word used for an opinion poll.[14]

sample

A relatively small proportion of people who are chosen in a survey so as to be representative of the whole.

It would be prohibitively expensive and time consuming to ask every citizen his or her opinion on a whole range of issues. Instead, polls rely on a **sample** of the population—a relatively small proportion of people who are chosen to represent the

whole. Herbert Asher draws an analogy to a blood test to illustrate the principle of sampling.[15] Your doctor does not need to drain a gallon of blood from you to determine whether you have mononucleosis, AIDS, or any other disease. Rather, a small sample of blood will reveal its properties.

In public opinion polling, a sample of about 1,000 to 1,500 people can accurately represent the "universe" of potential voters. The key to the accuracy of opinion polls is the technique of **random sampling**, which operates on the principle that everyone should have an equal probability of being selected as part of the sample. Your chance of being asked to be in the poll should therefore be as good as that of anyone else—rich or poor, African American or White, young or old, male or female. If the sample is randomly drawn, about 12 percent of those interviewed will be African American, slightly over 50 percent female, and so forth, matching the population as a whole.

random sampling

The key technique employed by sophisticated survey researchers, which operates on the principle that everyone should have an equal probability of being selected for the sample.

Remember that the science of polling involves estimation; a sample can represent the population with only a certain degree of confidence. The level of confidence is known as the **sampling error**, which depends on the size of the sample. The more people interviewed in a poll, the more confident one can be of the results. A typical poll of about 1,500 to 2,000 respondents has a sampling error of ±3 percent. What this means is that 95 percent of the time the poll results are within 3 percent of what the entire population thinks. If 60 percent of the sample say they approve of the job the president is doing, one can be pretty certain that the true figure is between 57 and 63 percent.

sampling error

The level of confidence in the findings of a public opinion poll. The more people interviewed, the more confident one can be of the results.

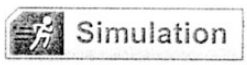
In order to obtain results that will usually be within sampling error, researchers must follow proper sampling techniques. In perhaps the most infamous survey ever, a 1936 *Literary Digest* poll underestimated the vote for President Franklin Roosevelt by 19 percent, erroneously predicting a big victory for Republican Alf Landon. The well-established magazine suddenly became a laughingstock and soon went out of business. Although the number of responses the magazine obtained for its poll was a staggering 2,376,000, its polling methods were badly flawed. Trying to reach as many people as possible, the magazine drew names from the biggest lists they could find: telephone books and motor vehicle records. In the midst of the Great Depression, the people on these lists were above the average income level (only 40 percent of the public had telephones then; fewer still owned cars) and were more likely to vote Republican. The moral of the story is this: Accurate representation, not the number of responses, is the most important feature of a public opinion survey. Indeed, as polling techniques have advanced over the last 60 years, typical sample sizes have been getting smaller, not larger.

The newest computer and telephone technology has made surveying less expensive and more commonplace. In the early days of polling, pollsters needed a national network of interviewers to traipse door-to-door in their localities with a clipboard of questions. Now most polling is done on the telephone with samples selected through **random-digit dialing.** Calls are placed to phone numbers within randomly chosen exchanges (for example, 512–471-xxxx) around the country. In this manner, both listed and unlisted numbers are reached at a cost of about one-fifth that of person-to-person interviewing. There are a couple of disadvantages, however. About 7 percent of the population does not have a phone, and people are somewhat less willing to participate over the telephone than in person—it is easier to hang up than to slam the door in someone's face. These are small trade-offs for political candidates running for minor offices, for whom telephone polls are the only affordable method of gauging public opinion. However, in this era of cell phones, many pollsters are starting to worry whether this methodology will continue to work much longer. For an incisive discussion of this issue, see "Issues of the Times: Does Conducting Surveys by Telephone Still Make Sense?" on pages 190–191.

random-digit dialing

A technique used by pollsters to place telephone calls randomly to both listed and unlisted numbers when conducting a survey.

From its modest beginning with George Gallup's 1932 polls for his mother-in-law in Iowa, polling has become a big business. Public opinion polling is one of those American innovations, like soft drinks and fast food restaurants, that has spread throughout the world. From Manhattan to Moscow, from Tulsa to Tokyo, people want to know what other people think.



You Are a Polling Consultant

Public opinion polls these days are mostly done over the telephone. Interviewers, most of whom are young people (and frequently college students), sit in front of computer terminals and read the questions that appear on the screen to randomly chosen individuals they have reached on the phone. They then enter the appropriate coded responses directly into the computer database. Such efficient procedures make it possible for analysts to get survey results very quickly.

The Role of Polls in American Democracy

Polls help political candidates detect public preferences. Supporters of polling insist that it is a tool for democracy. With it, they say, policymakers can keep in touch with changing opinions on the issues. No longer do politicians have to wait until the next election to see whether the public approves or disapproves of the government's course. If the poll results suddenly turn, then government officials can make corresponding midcourse corrections. Indeed, it was George Gallup's fondest hope that polling could contribute to the democratic process by providing a way for public desires to be heard at times other than elections.

Critics of polling, by contrast, say it makes politicians more concerned with following than leading. Polls might have told the constitutional convention delegates that the Constitution was unpopular or might have told President Thomas Jefferson that people did not want the Louisiana Purchase. Certainly they would have told William Seward not to buy Alaska, a transaction known widely at the time as "Seward's Folly." Polls may thus discourage bold leadership, like that of Winston Churchill, who once said,

> *Nothing is more dangerous than to live in the temperamental atmosphere of a Gallup poll, always taking one's pulse and taking one's temperature. . . . There is only one duty, only one safe course, and that is to try to be right and not to fear to do or say what you believe.*[16]

Recent research by Jacobs and Shapiro argues that the common perception of politicians pandering to the results of public opinion polls may be mistaken. Their examination of major policy debates in the 1990s finds that political leaders "track public opinion not to make policy but rather to determine how to craft their public presentations and win public support for the policies they and their supporters favor."[17] Staff members in both the White House and the Congress repeatedly remarked that their purpose in conducting polls was not to set policies, but rather to find the keywords and phrases with which to "sell" policies. Thus, rather than using polls to identify centrist approaches that will have the broadest popular appeal, Jacobs and Shapiro argue that elites use them to formulate strategies that enable them to avoid compromising on what they want to do.

Polls can also weaken democracy by distorting the election process. They are often accused of creating a *bandwagon effect*. The wagon carrying the band was the centerpiece of nineteenth-century political parades, and enthusiastic supporters would liter-

ally jump on it. Today, the term refers to voters who support a candidate merely because they see that others are doing so. Although only 2 percent of people in a recent CBS/*New York Times* poll said that poll results had influenced them, 26 percent said they thought others had been influenced (showing that Americans feel "It's the other person who's susceptible"). Beyond this, polls play to the media's interest in who's ahead in the race. The issues of recent presidential campaigns have sometimes been drowned out by a steady flood of poll results.

Probably the most widely criticized type of poll is the Election Day **exit poll.** For this type of poll, voting places are randomly selected around the country. Workers are then sent to these places and told to ask every tenth person how they voted. The results are accumulated toward the end of the day, enabling the television networks to project the outcomes of all but very close races before the polls even close. In the presidential elections of 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1996, the networks declared a national winner while millions on the West Coast still had hours to vote. Critics have charged that this practice discourages many people from voting and thereby affects the outcome of some state and local races.

exit poll

Public opinion surveys used by major media pollsters to predict electoral winners with speed and precision.

In 2000, the exit polls received much of the blame for the media's inaccurate calls of the Florida result on election night. But contrary to common perception, the exit polls deserve only a portion of the blame for the networks' fiasco. Because the Florida exit poll showed a small advantage for Gore, the networks could not have called the election based on this information alone. Inaccurate reports and estimates of actual votes threw off the network prognostications most. The early call for Gore was apparently largely caused by underestimating the size of the absentee vote, which favored Bush. Then, near the end of the counting on election night, they estimated that there were only about 180,000 votes left to count when there were actually twice as many. Hence, they prematurely gave the state (and the presidency) to Bush, not realizing how much of a chance there was for Gore to close the gap. The chances of such a comedy of errors recurring is relatively small. Furthermore, the networks have made a number of changes in their procedures for predicting winners that resulted in slower but more reliable predictions in 2004.

Timeline

War, Peace, and Public Opinion

Perhaps the most pervasive criticism of polling is that by altering the wording of a question, pollsters can usually get the results they want. Sometimes subtle changes in question wording can produce dramatic differences. For example, a month before the start of the 1991 Gulf War, the percentage of the public who thought we should go to war was 18 percentage points higher in the ABC/*Washington Post* poll than in the CBS/*New York Times* poll. The former poll asked whether the United States should go to war "at some point after January 15 or not," a relatively vague question; in contrast, the latter poll offered an alternative to war, asking whether the "U.S. should start military actions against Iraq, or should the U.S. wait longer to see if the trade embargo and other economic sanctions work."[18] It is therefore important to evaluate carefully how questions are posed when reading public opinion data.

Polling sounds scientific with its talk of random samples and sampling error; it is easy to take results for solid fact. But being an informed consumer of polls requires more than just a nuts-and-bolts knowledge of how they are conducted. You should think about whether the questions are fair and unbiased before making too much of the results. The good—or the harm—that polls do depends on how well the data are collected and how thoughtfully the data are interpreted.

What Polls Reveal About Americans' Political Information

Abraham Lincoln spoke stirringly of the inherent wisdom of the American people: "It is true that you may fool all of the people some of the time; and you can even fool some of the people all of the time; but you can't fool all of the people all the time." Obviously, Lincoln recognized the complexity of public opinion.

Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton had very different views about the wisdom of common people. Jefferson trusted people's good sense and believed that education would enable them to take the tasks of citizenship ever more seriously. Toward that end, he founded the University of Virginia. Hamilton held a contrasting view. His infamous words "Your people, sir, are a great beast" do not reflect confidence in people's capacity for self-government.

If there had been polling data in the early days of the American republic, Hamilton would probably have delighted in throwing some of the results in Jefferson's face. If public opinion analysts agree about anything, it is that the level of public knowledge about politics is dismally low. As discussed in Chapter 1, this is particularly true for young people, but the overall levels of political knowledge are not particularly encouraging either. For example, in the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania, a national sample of Democrats were asked a set of questions about the Democratic contenders during the ten days prior to the New Hampshire primary. The results were as follows:

- 59 percent knew which candidate had been a general (Clark)
- 42 percent knew which candidate had been a decorated Vietnam veteran (Kerry)
- 33 percent knew which candidate would repeal all the Bush tax cuts (Dean)
- 25 percent knew which candidate had been a trial lawyer (Edwards)

If so many voters did not know these very basic facts about the candidates, then there is little doubt that most were also unaware of the detailed policy platforms they were running on.

Political Knowledge of the Electorate

The average American clearly has less political information than most analysts consider to be desirable. While this level of information is surely adequate to maintain our democracy, survey data plainly show that citizens with above average levels of political knowledge are more likely to vote and to have stable and consistent opinions on poicy issues. If political knowledge were to increase overall, it would in all likelihood be good for American democracy.

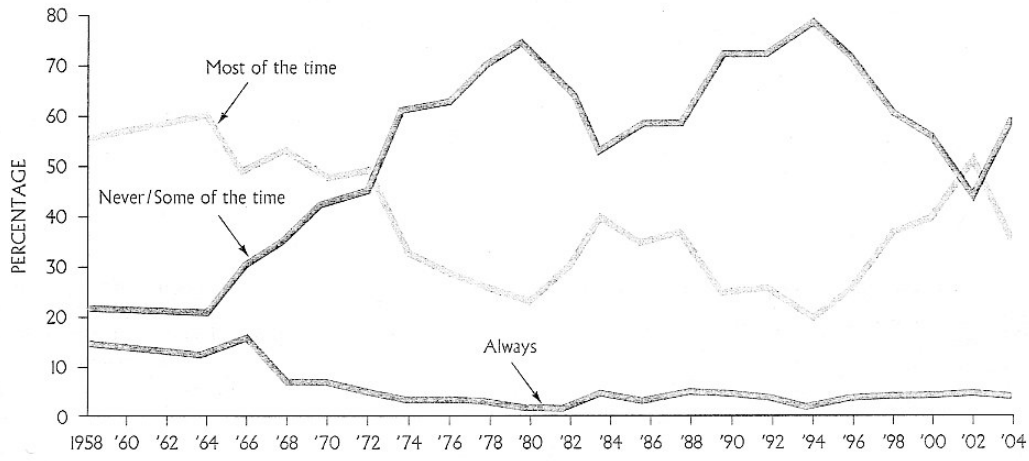
No amount of Jeffersonian faith in the wisdom of the common people can erase the fact that Americans are not well informed about politics. Polls have regularly found that less than half the public can name their representative in the House, much less say how he or she generally votes. Asking most people to explain their opinion on whether trade policy toward China should be liberalized, the proposed "Star Wars" missile defense system, or whether the strategic oil reserve should be tapped when gasoline prices skyrocket often elicits blank looks. When trouble flares in a far-off country, polls regularly find that people have no idea where that country is. In fact, surveys show that citizens around the globe lack a basic awareness of the world around them (see "America in Perspective: Citizens Show Little Knowledge of Geography.")

As Lance Bennett points out, these findings provide "a source of almost bitter humor in light of what the polls tell us about public information on other subjects."[19] He notes that more people know their astrological sign (76 percent) than know the name of their representative in the House. Slogans from TV commercials are better recognized than famous political figures. When people were asked which vegetable President George Bush did not like in the late 1980s, a poll found that 75 percent could identify this as broccoli, but relatively few people knew his stand on a tax cut for capital gains.

How can Americans, who live in the most information-rich society in the world, be so ill-informed about politics? Some blame the schools. E. D. Hirsch, Jr. criticizes schools for a failure to teach "cultural literacy."[20] People, he says, often lack the basic contextual knowledge—for example, where Afghanistan is, what the Vietnam War was about, and so forth—necessary to understand and use the information they receive from the news media or from listening to political candidates. Indeed, it has been found that increased levels of education over the last four decades have scarcely raised public knowledge about politics.[21] Despite the apparent glut of information provided by the media, Americans do not remember much about what they are exposed to through the media. (Of course, there are many critics who say that the media fail to provide much meaningful information, a topic that will be discussed in Chapter 7.)

Figure 6.4 The Decline of Trust in Government, 1958–2004

This graph shows how people have responded over time to the following question: How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?



Source: Authors' analysis of 1958–2002 American National Election Study data; CBS/*New York Times* Poll, July 11–15, 2004.

The Decline of Trust in Government

Sadly, the American public has become increasingly dissatisfied with government over the last four decades, as you can see in Figure 6.4. In the late 1950s and early 1960s about three-quarters of Americans said that they trusted the government in Washington to do the right thing always or mostly. Following the 1964 election, however, researchers started to see a precipitous drop in public trust in government. First Vietnam and then Watergate shook the people's confidence in the federal government. The economic troubles of the Carter years and the Iran hostage crisis helped continue the slide; by 1980, only a quarter of the public thought the government could be trusted most of the time or always. During the Reagan years, public cynicism abated a bit, but by 1994, trust in government had plummeted again to another all-time low. Since 1994, trust in government has improved somewhat, but it seems unlikely that we will see a long-lasting return to the optimistic levels of trust in government of the early 1960s. For a brief time after September 11, media polls showed trust in government had risen to nearly this level, but by the summer of 2004 trust levels were back to where they were in 1998.

Some analysts have noted that a healthy dose of public cynicism helps to keep politicians on their toes. Others, however, note that a democracy is based on the consent of the governed and that a lack of public trust in the government is a reflection of their belief that the system is not serving them well. These more pessimistic analysts have frequently wondered whether such a cynical population would unite behind their government in a national emergency. Although the decrease in political cynicism after September 11 was not too great, the fact that it occurred at all indicates that cynicism will not stop Americans from rallying behind their government in times of national crisis. Widespread political cynicism about government apparently only applies to "normal" times; it has not eroded Americans' fundamental faith in our democracy.