

1. EXPLAINING

Why is public approval such a valuable resource for a president?

2. GIVING EXAMPLES

Underline three major influences on public opinion. Then, identify which of these you think would be most important for a person who is running for public office for the first time. What might be the most important for someone who is voting for the first time?

Public Opinion

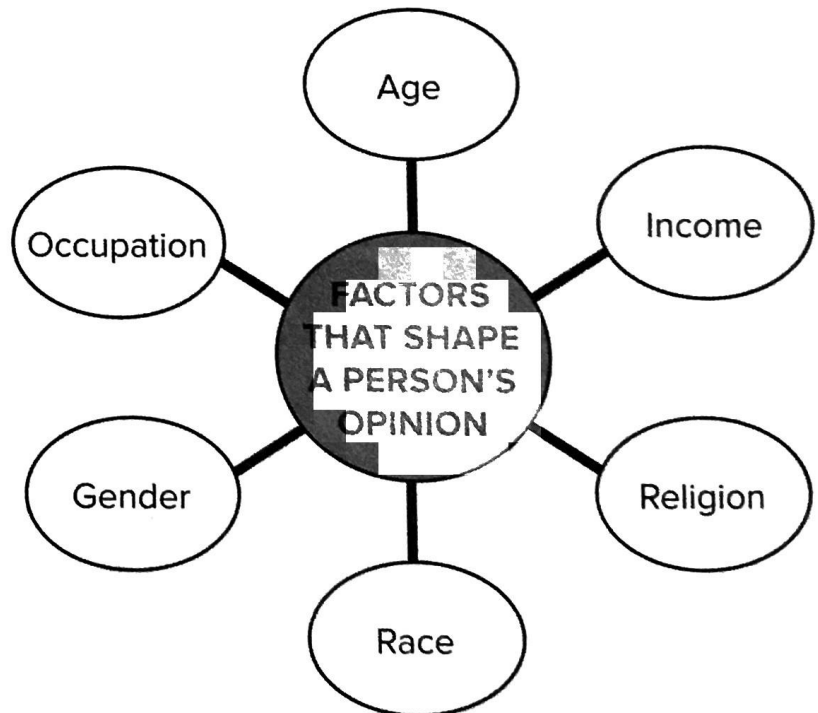
Government leaders often talk about “the public.” In the United States, the public—all the people in our country—is the source of political power. This is why government leaders want to know what the public thinks. The term for the attitudes of all Americans is *public opinion*. **Public opinion** means the ideas and views people have toward various issues or elected officials.

Public opinion is important in a democracy. For one thing, elected officials—including the president—must understand what the people want them to do. When enough people hold an opinion, government officials listen to them. Public opinion can also help determine how successful elected officials can be. Government leaders are more likely to get the political support they need to carry out their programs if their plans are popular with the public.

Sources of Public Opinion

Americans often have different opinions about matters of public policy. Several factors influence their attitudes and viewpoints. These include a person’s background, the mass media, and interest groups.

People’s opinions are shaped by their life experiences. A number of factors work together to influence how each individual thinks. For example, a retired person in a small town will probably have different opinions on education than a working mother who lives in a city.



3. REFLECTING

If you were an elected official, to which would you pay the most attention: the direction, intensity, or stability of your constituents' opinions on issues? Explain.

[illegible]

People often use three factors to describe public opinion: direction, intensity, and stability.

Intensity refers to the strength of a person's or group's opinion. When people feel strongly about an issue, they are often more inclined to pay attention to it. They are also more likely to take action. To do so, they may join an interest group, work on an election campaign, or try to solve a problem with a public action.

Stability tells how firmly people hold their opinions. Opinions based on strong beliefs are usually very stable. For example, most people don't change their views about civil rights, but their opinions about political candidates change more easily.

4. JUDGING RELIABILITY

Do you believe public opinion polls are reliable indicators of Americans' true political beliefs? Why or why not?

Public Opinion Polls

Public opinion can be measured. One way is by examining election results. If voters elect a candidate, they probably agree with many of the candidate's ideas. However, election results give only a general idea of public opinion. Voters support candidates for many reasons. They may not agree with all of the candidate's views. Elections also don't happen often, so they might not provide current results.

Polls Measure Public Opinion

A better way to measure public opinion is to ask people what they think about important issues. A **public opinion poll** is a survey with questions about a particular issue or person. Such polls combine many people's answers to measure the public's opinion. Hundreds of groups conduct public opinion polls. Elected officials use polls to stay in touch with public opinion. They also use them to help win elections.

A person who conducts polls is called a **pollster**. Pollsters have different ways of selecting the people they survey. A valid poll is based on an unbiased sample of people. That means that there should be a variation in the group in age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Often such a sample is a smaller version of the U.S. population. People polled are picked at random. In addition, a certain number of people are needed in order to obtain valid results in any poll. Polls that are based on random sampling are known as scientific polls.

Pollsters must word questions carefully to get accurate responses. The way a question is asked can change the way a person answers it. A good poll uses unbiased questions. Responsible pollsters do not want to influence the answers they receive. Polls that are written to shape a person's answers are called push polls. When looking at poll results, citizens should ask themselves whether the questions were fair and unbiased. The questions asked in push polls are not.

Pros and Cons of Polls

Polls can be taken on any issue. Common topics include crime, education, or a leader's performance. Some people believe that public opinion polls are useful. They believe that polls help elected leaders recognize what citizens want and need, which can guide their decisions. Some polls are broken down by groups, such as working people and retired people. This way leaders can find out how certain groups think.

Others, however, argue that polls cause elected leaders to focus on pleasing the vocal members of the public rather than making wise decisions that benefit everyone. Many also believe that polls unfairly affect election results. For example, if the media report that polls indicate a candidate is a "sure winner," then people might not bother to vote.

5. MAKING GENERALIZATIONS

How do public opinion polls make government more democratic? Less democratic?

REVIEW LESSON 1

1. Public opinion can influence elected officials, and elected officials try to shape public opinion. In the chart below, write *P* next to examples of citizens attempting to influence public policy. Write *E* next to examples of elected officials attempting to influence public opinion.

A senator holds a press conference about a foreign policy issue.	
A voter writes a letter to the newspaper criticizing the president.	
A citizen joins an environmental interest group.	
A mayor answers questions about the city budget at a town hall meeting.	

2.  **MAKING GENERALIZATIONS** Can citizens more effectively impact the actions of elected leaders on an individual basis or on a collective basis? Explain.

ANALYZING VISUALS

1. DESCRIBING

According to the graph, which media format is most popular among people aged 65 and older? Which is least popular?

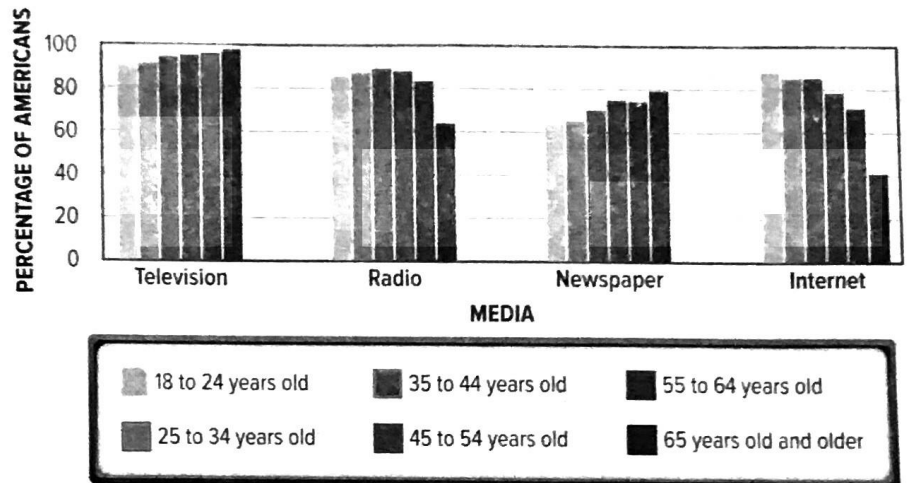
2. EVALUATING

Does the media have too much power over the setting of the public agenda?

The Influence of the Media

In the United States, the mass media play an important role in informing people about issues. They also influence government and connect citizens to their elected officials. There are two types of mass media sources: print (newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and books) and electronic (radio, television, and the Internet). Most media outlets are private businesses, which means they want to make a profit. Often, media managers choose topics that are popular and will allow them to make more money on advertisements. Such selections can shape what the media cover.

AMERICA'S USE OF MASS MEDIA



Source: U.S. Census Bureau; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2009.

Influencing the Public Agenda

The government deals with many problems and issues. Those problems and issues that receive the most time, money, and effort from government leaders make up what is often called the **public agenda**. The media can influence which problems officials consider important. People begin to notice a problem when the media focus on it. Then they often demand action.

Regulating the Media

The federal government controls some aspects of broadcast media. The airwaves available for radio and TV broadcasting are limited, so the government decides who can use them. The government also requires broadcasters to spend part of their airtime covering public affairs. In addition, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) makes rules about what can and cannot be said on TV and radio. It can punish stations that break its rules.

7. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Do you believe the current president would have been elected without the modern media? Why or why not?
