

Public Opinion

What government officials find it prudent to heed. (V.O. Key)

Elements of Public Opinion

- Belief: factual claim about the world
- Attitude: evaluation—a “thing” is “bad”
- Ideology: philosophy (linked attitudes) about government
- Values: things you want (“equality” “liberty” “democracy”, etc).

Beliefs: We are Not Alone

- 9.6% of all Canadians believe they have seen UFOs (Ufology Research of Manitoba 1997)
- 78% of Canadians believe in extraterrestrial life
- 57% believe there is a military or government cover-up of UFOs

Attitudes: Right or Wrong?

Thinking back to the Terri Shiavo case in Florida, do you think removal of Shiavo’s feeding tube was the right thing or the wrong thing to do?

- Right: 64%
- Wrong: 27%
- No Opinion: 8%

Where do these things come from?

- Political Socialization
 - ongoing process
 - not tightly organized in U.S.
- Party identification is typically learned early in life and changes slowly or never
- Family, peer groups, media, dramatic events (Great Depression, WWII, Water Gate, 9/11)

Survey Research

- Sampling (representativeness through randomness)
- “margin of error”
- Closed-ended questions
- Question wording dangers
- Double-barreled questions
- Biased wording
- Framing effects
- Eliciting non-attitudes

How much do Americans know?

- Not much

- --Pick any "major" law. Usually, 40% have not heard of it, 30% have no opinion.
- Issue Publics: little pockets of knowledgeable people who care about specific topics

Ideology: Not Strong

- Ideology definition: coherent, well linked pattern of attitudes
- Most Americans are not strongly ideological—weak "attitude systems"
- Opinions reflect long & short term forces
- People tend to "morselize", fit attitudes together idiosyncratically

Rational Ignorance

- Is information free? NO
- People only spend time learning when
 - They enjoy it (entertainment, knowledge)
 - They benefit from it (materially, socially)
- People could learn, but often choose not to
- Party ID is a "cost-saving information cue"

Search for Coherence

- Core beliefs widely shared
- Attitudes on some topics are "stable"
 - Party identification changes slowly
- Gender, age, race, religion, etc.