Introduction to the American Political Process

Public Opinion

The Importance of Public Opinion
- Democratic systems designed to facilitate participation by the mass public
- America is a representative democracy
  - How much do we really want citizens to make their voice heard?
  - Are they qualified to do so?

What Is Public Opinion?
- Definition:
  - "Those opinions held by private persons which government finds it prudent to heed."
- How Should We Measure Public Opinion?
  - Political participation?
  - Interest Groups?
  - Opinion Polls?

Survey Research I: Random Sampling
- Who to Interview?
- Random Sampling
  - Select respondents at random
  - Sampling error and the confidence band
- What happens when you don’t sample randomly?
  - Bad Things!

Campaigns
- Campaign Effects
- Predictive Models
- Mobilization vs. Conversion

1936 Literary Digest Poll
- 10,000,000 Ballots
- 2,376,523 Returned
  - Predicted Vote for FDR: 41%
  - Actual Vote for FDR: 63%
- Problem: Non-Random Sample
  - (more Republicans)
Vote.com Poll (March 2004)
- Iraq a year later, was it worth it?
  - Yes: 81% (11,500 votes)
- Was The House Budget Committee Right To Endorse Bush’s Push For Further Tax Cuts?
  - Yes: 86% (5,000 votes)

Should We Believe These Results?
- Are Bush’s Campaign Ads with 9/11 Images Distasteful?
  - No: 80% (28,000 votes)
- Is John Kerry's Senate Voting Record A Liability In His Bid For President Of The United States?
  - Yes: 87% (23,000 votes)

Vote.Com February 2000 Poll
- Vote for Keys: 23% - Vote for Gore 10%
- Vote for Giuliani: 91% - Vote for H. Clinton 9%

Survey Research II: Questionnaire Design
- Question Wording
- Question Order

Question Wording
- Not-so-subtle effects
  - 1982 Ohio Governor
    - Do you Support Jerry Springer for Governor?
    - As you may know, in 1974 Jerry Springer, who had gotten married six months earlier, was arrested on a morals charge with three women in a hotel room. Do you support Jerry Springer for Governor?
  - Push Polling

Public Opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Should Federal Spending on Welfare Programs Be...</th>
<th>Should Federal Spending on Assistance to the Poor Be...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kept Same</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decreased</td>
<td>57%</td>
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<td>44%</td>
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<td>33%</td>
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<td>22%</td>
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Question Wording

- Subtle Effects
  - Spending on social programs
- Respondent Options
  - Carter Example
- Important point: Need to pay close attention to just what it is that is being asked in opinion polls

Other Questionnaire Effects

- Question Order
- Communism Question:
  1. Do you think the U.S. should let Communist reporters from other countries come in here and send back to their papers the news as they see it?
  2. Do you think a Communist country should let American newspaper reporters from other countries come in and send back to America the news as they see it?

Citizen Competence

- Questions of competence
  - Public opinion depends on wording of questions
  - Low information?
    - Hastert – 35%
    - Thompson – 14%
  - Rational ignorance?
  - Another Solution: Zaller

Understanding Question Effects

- The “Big Head” Model
  - Why do effects occur?
  - How do we decide on an answer?
- Framing and Priming
  - Framing: How do you look at an issue?
  - Priming: What is important?

Probing Beyond the Surface of Opinion

- Issue Salience and Strength
- The “Mushiness Index”
- Ginsberg

Is Democracy in Trouble

- What Do We Expect from Citizens?
- Public Opinion Constrains Politicians
- Political Participation
Case Study: The Politics of Abortion

- Question Wording Effects
- Strength of Opinion