Public Opinion

Definition: Collective evaluations expressed by people on political issues, policies, institutions and individuals

OR

A collective distribution of individual preferences or evaluation on a given, issue, policy or persons

Types of Public Opinion:

(1) Opinion Intensity: Measures how strongly and intensely people feel about an issue or a politician
  - Some people will feel very strongly; either really for it or really against it
  - Such issues polarize and divide the public

(2) Opinion Saliency: Measures the extent to which issues are important and relevant to people’s lives and values
  - The political environment and economic circumstances will often dictate what issues are important to people
    - Saliency ranks relevant issues in order of priority – public opinion scales
    - Also, saliency will often give a misperception as to which number of people take which side of an issue
    - Example: Even if only a minority of people hold one view on an issue, that minority of people will feel very strongly and very intense about that issue
    - That issue will be more important to the minority than it will be to the majority
    - Thus, this creates the perception that there are more people on a minority side of an issue than there really are
    - Example: Abortion

(3) Opinion Fluidity: Measures the extent to which opinion changes over the course of time
  - Again, political and economic events and conditions (external events) will dictate whether or not there is a change of opinion toward a given issue or Policy
  - Example: Trust in Govt., Vietnam, Iraq War

What are some causes and predictors of public opinion?

(1) Public opinion is not only shaped by particular events and conditions, it is also shaped by what is known as a Political Ethos
Political Ethos: A set of shared values and general ideas held by a broad consensus of the population (aka, Political Creed)

- Political ethos is what helps build and provide unity within the nation and the national/political culture
- Examples of American political ethos: the Constitution, democracy, capitalism and free enterprise

Public opinion is also shaped by political socialization

Political Socialization: The process by which citizens develop political attitudes, beliefs and values

- Socialization lays the foundation and helps determine things such as political party affiliation, ideological beliefs and voting behavior

- “Agents” of political socialization: The means by which people are politically socialized, or politically “raised”

- “Agents” are the causes of how people become socialized
- These “agents” are: (1) Family, (2) School/Education, (3) Church/Religion (4) Mass Media

Public opinion is measured by way of sampling

- Sampling is the way in which public opinion and attitudes are measured and evaluated
- Samples that are accurate and reliable samples are known as probability samples: These samples reflect and are representative of the larger public that is the target of public opinion gauging
- Common Types of Probability Sampling:
  - (A) Simple Random Samples
  - (B) Stratified Samples
  - © Interval Samples

Political Participation and Voting:

- American voting turn out is typically very low: 30–46% for Congressional, mid-term elections; 45–65% turn out for Presidential elections
- What explains the low-voter turn out?
- (A) **Political Fatigue:** Potential voters being “swamped” by political party/campaign/candidate mail ads (direct mail), TV ads and news sound-bytes
- (B) **Demographic Characteristics:** Citizens who have a lower level of formal education and a lower socio-economic/income level typically have low voter turn-outs
- © **Lack of Political Efficacy:** (cause of B) One’s sense of political “self-worth” and “self esteem”
- Two types of political efficacy: **Internal and External efficacy**
- Internal efficacy is one’s views of their own political capabilities, know-how, skills, education, etc.
- External efficacy refers to one’s view or assessment of how the external political world – other people, politicians, govt., elites. etc. – think of that person and their views, solutions or ideas for policy
- Low external efficacy may be a cause of low-voter turnout
- However, high internal efficacy may be a cause as to why American citizens do have high levels of non-voting participation; U.S. ranks first in: campaigning,
  - financial contributions to candidates, political parties, etc.,
  - protesting,
  - political petition signing,
  - attending public meetings