Chapter 11. Public Opinion, Socialization, and the Media: Learning to be Ignorant

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Exit polling is one of the best ways to measure opinions of actual voters—opinions are a product of the many factors in the political socialization process and what voters learn through the media (photo by author of a student administering surveys on election day, 2004).

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I. Getting Personal—Learning to be Ignorant, or How You Learned and Didn’t Learn About Politics

A. Focus on You

Up to this point we have focused on what you do and do not know about American government and politics. One theme that has run throughout this text is that most Americans, including college students, do not know much about their own government. Hopefully, you know a lot more now than you did when you started reading this text.

Now that we are almost at the end, I want to shift the focus a little bit. Rather than what you know, we will shift to how you came to know what you know about American government and politics. How you learned may help explain why you know so little and why some the things you thought you knew turned out to be incorrect.

Did you ever wonder how you came to know and believe the things you do? Part of being an educated person is understanding the forces that influence you. The other part is realizing that you really cannot be in charge of your own life unless understand these things. To be in charge of your life, you must consider the alternatives. You must realize that had you grown up in a different place in a different family and environment, you would probably have very different opinions.

The process of understanding why you see things the way you do is important. You may end up in the same place, but thinking all this through on your own and really considering all the alternatives makes it your place, rather than a place created by others for you.

The way in which people learn about politics and political values and political identities in any society is called “political socialization.” That is the neutral social science term. We could call it “political education” if we wanted to put a positive spin on it. Or we could call it “brainwashing” if we wanted to give it a negative spin. As young people often say, “whatever,” this chapter is about how we learn about politics.

B. The Difficulty of Knowing

Learning what is true and what is not true is in some ways harder today than it once was. The difficulty is not because of a lack of information. We have more information and more points of view available to us than ever in history. A few clicks on any topic and you get thousands of entries. In fact, perhaps we get too much information. We get so much that we are often overwhelmed.
A second problem today is that we should not necessarily believe what we see or hear, even if it looks really good in print with cool graphics and videos. The digital world of computers allows people to alter photos and video clips to distort the truth. So we must be skeptical of what we read, see, and hear. When we cannot rely on the things we find on the web, we are tempted to retreat into the bliss of ignorance.

One of the most famous "lies" on the internet was the fake girlfriend the Notre Dame linebacker Manti Te'owas was lured into forming an emotional on-line relationship with in 2012 (photo by Shotgun Spratling/Neon Tommy, Creative Commons).

C. Anti-Political Culture

We live in a culture that reinforces our temptation to retreat into ignorance about politics. As noted many times in this text, Americans do not like much about politics. We do not like political parties. We see interest groups as dangerous. We do not trust Congress. We think that bureaucracy is mindless and insensitive to our individual needs. We have been disappointed in many recent presidents who do not measure up to high historical standards of greatness. We see political campaigns as overly expensive exercises in mud-throwing and lying. When reformers talk about cleaning up elections by public financing, the typical response is that giving them money will only encourage them. We see parties as corrupt and self-interested and too extreme—especially the party we do not identify with! We are absolutely disgusted with the media
coverage of politics, a topic in this chapter. We equate the word “political” with selfish and unethical. Is there anything we like about politics? Other than being sometimes entertaining and providing raw material for comedians, the short answer is “no.”

Our political culture teaches us to learn to be ignorant about politics—another paradox! And we do a good job at it. College graduates taking a 2012 test were able to correctly identify Lady Gaga as a musical performer (96%), but only one in five (20%) were able to correctly identify James Madison as the father of the Constitution! Some of us even take pride in saying that we do not pay much attention to politics, seemingly thinking that this places us above all the corruption and negativity we associate with politics.

In a way our ignorance makes governing easier for the political leaders. Our ignorance allows them to have a greater range in choice in what they do. If we do not follow politics very closely, then much of the time leaders can ignore us. Sometimes, however, our leaders do things that are impossible to ignore, like getting us bogged down in expensive losing wars with significant numbers of young people getting killed. Or sometimes our leaders follow economic policies that cause significant numbers of people to lose their homes or jobs or savings or opportunities for an education. But if our leaders give us peace and prosperity, we pretty much ignore politics and what leaders do.

While having citizens who do not pay much attention does allow leaders to be creative in policy choices, citizen ignorance carried to an extreme poses dangers. Leaders who make foolish policy choices can create disasters that might have been
avoided had citizens been more aware and demanded change. Our ignorance could allow disasters to happen that might endanger our freedoms, our institutions, and even the survival of our republic. Can you think of times in relatively recent history when this might have happened? Perhaps the biggest danger is that if all good people avoid politics, who does that leave to run our government?

D. Chapter Topics

We shall cover with three major topics in this chapter, all of which relate to how we know about politics. We will begin with public opinion polling. Polls or surveys are not very well understood either by the population or by the media that report survey results. Yet we rely on surveys or polls in many ways. If you want to know what Americans think, you need to be able to evaluate the many surveys in the media. How can you tell a good survey from a bad survey? I will give you some guidelines to help you tell the difference and sort them out.

Next we will move to political socialization. We will look at the forces and institutions that have shaped your political identities, values, and issue positions. Did you arrive at your opinions totally on your own? Would you like to make up your own mind? If you do, the first step is understanding how you got to where you are today.

Then we will move to the news media, another one of the many disliked political institutions in our society. We will take a brief look at the evolution of the media from newsletters through newspapers through the electronic media to the modern digital world. Do the media manipulate us? Are they biased? How can we evaluate what we get from the news media? That is, how can we know what to believe?

After covering these major topics, we will turn away from how we know about politics to some of the policy implications of our political knowledge and awareness. What we know places limits on what leaders feel they can do. Moreover, shifts in public opinion and awareness can also force leaders to consider policies and actions that they might otherwise have ignored. If you remember back to the definition of power at the beginning of the text, you may remember that I said power has two faces. Citizen knowledge and awareness includes both faces of political power, getting leaders to do things they would not otherwise ordinarily do and preventing them from doing things that they otherwise might have done.

President Lincoln was aware of this dynamic in saying that with public support all things were possible, but without it nothing was possible. If enough of you are aware, you are empowered because leaders do take public awareness into account in what they do and do not do.

II. Public Opinion—Learning About How Others Feel

A. Pervasive Polls
Polls or surveys are pervasive. That is, they are everywhere in our society. The media use them to generate headlines, often about what or who is popular at the moment. Politicians use them to see how well they are running, to identify areas of weakness, to gauge their support among important groups, or to try out new themes. Policymakers, officeholders, and interest groups use them to gauge public reaction to policy proposals. Corporations use them to measure consumer awareness, corporate image, and product preferences. And the list goes on.

Unfortunately, many of the surveys we see in the news are not really surveys at all. Rather, they are exercises in self-promotion without much concern for accuracy. Sometimes they are fund-raising exercises disguised as surveys. Sometimes they are designed to distort the truth or create new truths of their own. All these bad surveys harm the reputation of legitimate polls.

Exit poll questionnaire from the 1996 New Hampshire primary used by Voter News Service, a cooperative organization that polled for all major tv networks. VNS was later replaced by other such organizations. Exit polls are one of the most accurate kinds of surveys of voters because it surveys actual voters as opposed to people who just say they will vote and exit polls generally use large samples. While news organizations use exit surveys and telephone tracking polls to project winners in what is called “horse race” coverage of campaigns, the more important role is telling political leaders what voters were thinking (photo by RadioFan, Creative Commons).

B. Judging and Understanding Polls and Surveys

Because of the pervasiveness of surveys and their many uses, citizens need to be armed with a few tools to help them differentiate among surveys that are likely to be representative of how some population thinks, poorly done polls that are unlikely to
represent anything, and promotional tools with a hidden agenda that are disguised as surveys. Here are guidelines to help you evaluate polls and surveys.

1. Who did the survey?

The organization that performed the survey tells you a lot about the likely quality of the survey. If it was performed by a well-known organization (Pew, Harris, Gallup), news organization (tv networks or newspapers) or a university, it was probably pretty well done and probably followed all the standard procedures. It is likely to be representative of the population surveyed. On the other hand, if the survey was performed by a candidate organization, an elected official or a political party or corporate entity, you should ask a lot more questions.

2. How was the sample chosen?

Choosing the sample is critical. Let’s start with the survey population, the group of people in whose opinions you are interested. The population could be adults over 18 in a city, a state, the nation, or even the world (yes—world surveys exist). The population could be those who will presumably vote in some upcoming election. If the population is people who will vote, then the problem is figuring out exactly who really will vote—called “likely voters.” You could just ask people if they will vote. However, many people will give the socially desirable answer and say they’ll vote even when they probably won’t. Most survey organizations use several questions to screen likely voters. This can get quite complex. Some pollsters ask if you voted in the last election, if you are registered, and even if you can tell the interviewer where you go to vote. When you see several surveys done about an upcoming election or primary and they have different percentages of support for a candidate, one of the most important differences in these numbers is how the survey decided who would be a “likely voter.” No perfect scheme exists for predicting who actually will vote.

Once pollsters define the population and find ways to screen non-population members out, the survey needs to devise a method of choosing members of that population so that every member of the population has an equal chance of being chosen. This is called a random sample. If the sampling method tends to choose certain types of people more than other types of people, then the sample is biased rather than random. Biased samples can cause major problems because they are not representative.

The Literary Digest survey in the 1936 presidential campaign is the classic example of a biased sample. The magazine chose millions of citizens from telephone directories and vehicle registration lists and sent them questionnaires along with invitations to subscribe to the magazine. Unfortunately for the magazine, this created a major bias in who was selected. People with higher incomes were far more likely to be on those two lists than people with lower incomes. Remember that this was 1936, when a low percentage of the population had telephones or cars. Moreover, by the 1936
election people with lower incomes were moving to the Democratic Party because of their approval of Roosevelt’s New Deal policies. And the wealthier people were becoming even more Republican, convinced that Roosevelt was moving the nation to a socialistic system that might take their wealth away. Class bias in the sample had not made much difference in the magazine’s correct predictions in the 1920, ’24, ’28 and ’32 presidential elections when the two parties were not so divided along class lines. But in 1936 with an unrepresentative sample of two million people that included far too many of the well-off, the Literary Digest survey predicted that Alfred Landon would beat FDR by a landslide. Landon did win by a landslide among the well-off, but he lost by an even bigger landslide among the more numerous less well-off people. Having an unbiased sample where every member of the population has an equal chance of being chosen is critical for accuracy.

The worst kind of surveys that fail to choose a sample close to a random sample are called straw polls. They use what are called “convenience” samples or “self-selected” samples. The Literary Digest survey was a convenience sample that also had self-selected qualities. They used lists that were convenient to get, not ones that gave
all voters an equal chance of being chosen. And those who felt strongest, usually those hating Roosevelt, were the most likely to select to respond.

When you are invited to email an opinion or call some toll-free number or do an online poll, the sample is self-selected. Sadly, we still see these all too frequently on the Web or on television. The sample represents those who felt strongly enough to respond, or just those who had nothing better to do at the time. Reporters try to cover themselves by saying that this was a “nonscientific” sample, but then go on to talk about the findings as though they really mean something. These samples do not allow any accurate representation of a meaningful larger population. So beware of straw polls because they are not real surveys!

3. How large was the sample?

As we saw from the *Literary Digest* disaster, having a large sample does little to guarantee representative findings if the sample is biased. So a small random sample is better than a large non-random sample, even if that large non-random sample is in the millions. The key word here is “random,” which is more important than size. But if two samples are random, what difference does sample size make? The short answer is a lot of difference. Let me explain.

George Gallup, widely considered to be the father of modern polling. While *Literary Digest* badly missed the 1936 election with two million surveys, Gallup got it right with a quota sample of 50,000. A quota sample attempts to get the correct proportion of significant groups, like different income groups, but it does not guarantee that those within each of the groups are randomly selected. Improved techniques using samples that are more random, meaning that each person in the population of interest has an equal chance of being chosen, can produce quite accurate results with far smaller samples (photo released to the public domain by the Gallup organization).

The expected error due to sampling is called **sampling error**. All surveys should report their sampling error. It is expressed as a plus or minus percentage. For example, consider an exit poll of 1,100 voters. An **exit poll** is a survey done of actual voters as they leave the polls. It is much more accurate than a survey done before an election because you know you have actual voters, not just likely voters. With a sample of 1,100, the sampling error is plus or minus 3%. This means that the percentage who voted for someone in the sample should be within 3% of the actual percentage for everyone who
voted in the population. By the way, the laws of mathematical probability apply here—a one in twenty chance always exists that the error is larger, so any one survey could be wrong. But most will be within their margin of error.

Sample size is far more important than population size. Mathematically speaking, it does not matter whether the population was voters in a state for election of a governor or voters across the nation in a presidential election. As long as the sample was randomly chosen for the state and for the nation, a sample of a given size will have essentially the same sampling error. So 1,100 randomly selected voters in a county or in a state or in the whole nation will have a sampling error of + or – 3%. Population size makes a real difference in accuracy only when the population is quite small, under about 5,000. (By real difference, I mean reducing the sampling error by a percentage point or more.) But most populations are larger than 5,000. So pay attention to sample size more than population size.

### Sample Size and Sampling Error for Random Samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>156</th>
<th>202</th>
<th>277</th>
<th>400</th>
<th>625</th>
<th>1,111</th>
<th>2,500</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sampling Error</td>
<td>+/- 10%</td>
<td>+/- 8%</td>
<td>+/- 7%</td>
<td>+/- 6%</td>
<td>+/- 5%</td>
<td>+/- 4%</td>
<td>+/- 3%</td>
<td>+/- 2%</td>
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</table>

We could use very large samples to get quite accurate. A sample of 10,000 reduces sampling error to + or – 1%. But doing surveys with that big a sample is usually far too expensive. So most national surveys run between 625 (+ or – 4%) and around 1,100 (+ or – 3%) because these sizes are affordable and give reasonably small sampling error.

4. How were questions worded?

Question wording can have a profound effect on the findings in any survey. Many questions have standard wording that has been well tested over time. Reputable firms are most likely to use these questions. But even the best survey organizations can make mistakes, especially when using new questions. So here are some things to look for.

Loaded terms with positive or negative values attached to them bias questions in one direction or another. For example, when surveys ask Americans about programs for “helping the poor” or the “needy,” they find support for such programs. But when they ask about “welfare,” support turns into opposition. Why? The image most people have of the “poor” or “needy” are those who through no fault of their own fall on bad times. “Welfare” evokes images of people too lazy to work.

Attaching the name of a well-known public official to a policy question biases the question. It measures feelings about that official rather than the policy. So a question about whether or not you approve of “President George Bush’s education policy to test
students for learning” will get different results than a question about whether you approve of “a national education policy that tests students for learning.”

The most difficult kinds of questions are those that ask for self-evaluations of some kind. This is because people tend to give the **socially desirable answers**, that is, answers they think will make them look good and avoid answers that make them look bad. Almost no one will say they are a racist or that they oppose civil liberties. But they might say that illegal immigrants are harming American culture and that those who support terrorists should not be allowed to speak in public. People are more likely to say that President Obama should not be president because he has no proof of citizenship (a factual falsehood) than to say that a black should not be president.

When you ask questions that are self-evaluative, you are measuring education as much or more than anything else. This is because educated people are more likely to know that some labels are not socially desirable. More objective questions, like possible harms caused by illegal immigrants or asking if certain groups have too much political power, may partially get at racism. However, they also may be picking up other attitudes that have little to do with racism. That is why completely valid self-evaluative questions are very difficult to construct.

Some unethical organizations use question wording to try and change opinion rather than measure opinion. Campaigns will call potential voters and ask about support for the opposing candidate. Then they reveal something negative about that candidate that may not be true at all or may be only partially true. Then the caller asks whether knowing this fact changes the respondent’s feelings about the candidate. This unethical technique is called a **push poll** because it is designed to push public opinion rather than really measure public opinion.

Campaigns will continue to use push polls until respondents tell them that they resent this tactic. One of my former students told me that she got such a call, and she told the caller that she knew what they were trying to do, and it made her so angry that she was going to volunteer for their opponent! Lots of answers like that would put an end to push polls.

5. When was the survey done?

Surveys are like photographic snapshots. While most are reasonably accurate at the instant they are taken, things can change by the time you actually look at the finished product. So a survey that is only a few days old may not be accurate if events have taken place that changed opinions. The longer the time, the more likely opinions will change. So the media should always report the date that the survey was done. You should take note of how old any survey is and consider anything that might have changed opinions since then.

The classic example of a survey that got it wrong because things were changing quickly was in the 1948 presidential election. Pollsters stopped surveying a week before
the election, when Republican Thomas Dewey probably was ahead of Democrat Harry Truman. But Truman was surging. By the time the election took place, Truman actually won by 3.5 percentage points. Based on the earlier polls, newspapers ran headlines that “Dewey Defeats Truman.” One of the most famous pictures in presidential election history is a grinning Truman holding up one such newspaper headline.

A grinning President Truman on November 3, 1948, holding up the Chicago Tribune front page that prematurely and wrongly pronounced that “Dewey Defeats Truman,” a blunder partially caused by the failure of pollsters to continue polling up until election day and missing the surge in support for Truman in the last few days of the campaign. All polls are snapshots in time—and things may change (public domain).

6. Did the questions filter out those without opinions?

People tend to give answers when questions are asked, even when they know little to nothing about the subject. So a lot of uninformed and thoughtless opinions can get mixed in with opinions that are well considered. The term that pollsters use for these opinions dates back to when a lot of door-to-door surveys were done. They are called door-step opinions because they get created on the door-step and then left there like an abandoned orphan. These thoughtless opinions are highly unstable and could well change the next time the question gets asked. Including these meaningless opinions can have a great impact on the balance of opinion in a survey.

What can pollsters do about this? The standard technique is to try and filter out these opinions. Interviewers ask respondents if they have “thought about” some subject, and if not, the interviewer skips the next question. What you should look for is the
percentage of those who say they have “no opinion” or “don’t know.” The more technical the question—for example a question about details of a plan to provide health insurance to the unemployed or about expanding NATO—the higher that percentage should be. You should be especially skeptical about questions where everyone is reported to have an opinion. If you see a low percentage of “don’t knows,” a lot of door-step opinions are likely to be mixed in with real opinions.

C. The Paradox of American Opinion on Services and Taxes—A Look at the Federal Budget, Deficits, and the National Debt

Most Americans want government to do more to help with a variety of problems: health care, combating global warming, preserving natural areas and wildlife, helping college students pay for the ever increasing costs of higher education, better prepare children to compete in the globalized world economy, keep criminals off the street, inspect foods and drugs for safety, keep bridges from falling down and make roads safer, reduce congestion, help train those out of work so they can find new productive jobs, secure our borders, protect us from terrorism, keep the air traffic control system safe along with the planes in the air, prevent recessions and keep inflation and interest rates low, maintain a viable Social Security system for the retired, protect us from predatory lenders when we buy houses or borrow money for education, and on and on and on. You probably want most of these things as well. You can probably add to the list with your own ideas about what government should do. For example you might want more funding for public libraries or more money for scientific research.

Every one of these things involves spending more money for equipment, training, bureaucracy, personnel costs, office space, transportation, and oversight to make sure the money is not wasted. Nothing in this list is free.

At the same time, virtually every survey on taxes shows that Americans think taxes are too high. How can this be? How can we say we want more and better services from government and also want lower taxes?

Most Americans have no problem in resolving these paradoxical feelings about services and taxes. However, the way Americans do this is based on unrealistic assumptions and ignorance about the federal budget. Let’s start with how most people would resolve these contradictory desires. Do you know what it is? Think a moment before going on to the next paragraph.

Most people say that we can do the things they want by eliminating government waste and programs that are not needed. Let’s look at both parts of this assertion. No doubt waste exists. But finding it costs money. You must have paid investigators to find waste.

In fact we do have investigators who work full time finding waste. These investigators work across the national government under the name Office of Inspector General. These government investigators uncover waste and mismanagement and
their reports lead to corrections. The question is how much more waste would we save by spending more on this kind of activity. Of course we cannot know for sure, but at some point we would spend more than we would save. Finding waste costs money! And if we try to find every dollar that might be wasted, we will waste money trying to find waste! Logically speaking, every dollar spent for investigations that do not find waste is wasted. So we have another you-know-what, that familiar word that starts with a “p!”

The other problem is that waste and unneeded programs are highly subjective. The retired person who worries about her or his Social Security checks might think that helping college students is wasted money. College students would most likely see that differently. A consumer living in a city might think that government help for farmers who lost crops in a flood is waste. I suspect the farmers would have a different perspective. For most of us, waste and unneeded programs are the things that others get, while the services we get are needed. Like so many other things in life, finding and eliminating government waste and unneeded programs is highly subjective and involves political struggle. Like beauty, waste is often in the eye of the beholder.

One program that many people see as wasteful and feel, if eliminated, could provide us with more money for services we want is foreign aid. Unfortunately, regardless of the wisdom of reducing or eliminating foreign aid, this proposal is based on ignorance of the federal budget. Foreign aid is a tiny percentage of the national budget, less than 1%! And it has been falling. Back in the 1960s we spent about 3%. So stopping all foreign aid would have virtually no effect on other programs. The national government already spends about six times as much on education as it does on foreign aid.

### The Paradox of Opinion on Spending and Reducing the Deficit

Most want to reduce domestic spending, but not in popular programs like Social Security or Medicare, and think that the few programs they want to cut, like foreign aid, are big enough to make a real difference in reducing the deficit.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions asked in 2011 national surveys:</th>
<th>Answers:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduce deficit by lowering domestic spending?</td>
<td>Favor: 61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by lowering defense &amp; military spending?</td>
<td>Favor: 49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by reducing or eliminating Social Security?</td>
<td>Favor: 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by reducing or eliminating Medicare?</td>
<td>Favor: 14%</td>
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Where would you save money if you could control the federal budget? To consider this you must understand that the budget is divided into two large categories, discretionary spending and mandatory spending. **Mandatory spending** includes programs where money has to be spent by law because of programs that created governmental obligations. Such programs include Medicare, Medicaid, and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (24% of the budget in 2014), and Social Security (also 24% in 2014), the largest programs run by the national government.

One important and growing category under mandatory spending is paying the interest on our national debt. **National debt** is the amount we owe to those who have loaned us money. The debt has been growing. You can go to any of a number of national debt clocks on the Web to find the latest figures.

Who loans us the money? Mostly we owe ourselves. The government itself owns about 40% of the debt, using Federal Reserve profits and money from the Social Security trust fund to buy the debt. American citizens and foreign entities own a little under a third each, buying treasury notes and savings bonds. China and Japan are the two largest nations owning our debt at about 8% and 6% respectively (figures from 2011 based on U.S. Treasury debt reports). These nations often use some of the dollars we pay for the goods we buy from them to invest in various kinds of U.S. government securities.

The total national debt and the interest we pay on that debt increase each year in which we have a **budget deficit**, which is the amount that we spend over what we receive in taxes in a given year. Interest payments were 7% of the budget in 2014. That too has been growing, but dropped after the Great Recession of 2007-8 as interest rates dropped. Regardless, we must pay the interest every year. We have no choice if we want other countries and our own citizens to continue to loan us money.

**Discretionary spending** includes programs that Congress debates and has some control over each year. Nondefense discretionary spending includes many small areas, such as environment, space, education, veterans’ benefits, foreign aid, and scientific research. All together they added up to about 17% of the budget in 2014. Defense is the biggest single program in discretionary spending, though many people would argue that it is not really discretionary (17% of the budget in 2014). It ran slightly behind Social Security in size until the peak years of the Iraq War, when defense costs,
including the cost of the Iraq War, ran about as much as Social Security. But defense spending has fallen in recent years as the large numbers of American troops in the Iraq and Afghan wars came down.

The problem you would have in changing the national budget is that including defense, discretionary spending only makes up about a third of all federal spending. And I suspect that you would agree with public opinion polls showing that Americans want to keep most of these programs.

You can find numerous breakdowns of the current and recent national budgets on the Web. You might take a look and consider where you would make cuts and additions. You should remember that you would have to do a lot of cutting just to balance the budget, because during the recovery from the Great Recession we were borrowing more than thirty cents of every dollar we spent. That was cut by about half as we recovered. But even if it is about 15%, we would have to eliminate just about ALL nondefense discretionary spending to balance the budget. And if you want to add programs or services, as many citizens say they do in surveys, we would have to increase taxes and/or add more debt.

Resolving the paradox of services and taxes is not easy. Perhaps a first step is for citizens to understand that we can’t have both more services and lower taxes.

III. Political Socialization—Picking Up Identifications and Opinions

Having discussed how to evaluate surveys of other people’s opinions and identifications, let’s move the focus back to you. You might start by thinking about the following things: your party identification, your political ideology, your preference or vote in the last presidential election, how you feel about abortion, in particular under what circumstances you feel it should be allowed, whether teachers should lead their students in prayers in public schools, in particular exactly what kind of prayer, whether you think government should do more about global warming and whether you believe this is a problem, whether evolution should be taught in science classes, whether guns should be registered and licensed or whether certain types of weapons should be banned, whether all Americans should be covered by health insurance, whether capital punishment should continue to be allowed, and whether taxes are too high and who should pay more and who should pay less. The list could go on. These questions are the topics of many public opinion surveys, and you probably have opinions on most of them.

Where did your opinions and identifications on these things come from? Did you figure each one out on your own? Do you know the counterarguments to each of the positions you take on the issues? You must be able to give the counterarguments to your positions on issues if your opinions are to be reasoned opinions. If you cannot do this, then the chances are high that they are thoughtless opinions that came from
others. Do you know how your parents feel about these things? Do you know their identifications? Do you share those opinions and identifications?

I would venture a guess that on many issues and on most identifications you are very close to your parents. And I would also guess that on most questions and identifications, your parents either agree with each other or else one of your parents does not express an opinion. Finally, I would guess that you are least likely to have opinions in the areas in which your parents have never expressed an opinion. If this is mostly true, think about whether you would have different opinions if you had different parents? If so, does this suggest that you don’t think for yourself? That might be a good topic for a class discussion.

My point is that parents play an important role in the political socialization of children. Political socialization is the process by which we learn basic political identities and opinions on issues. But parents are not the only entities that influence your opinions. To use the political science terminology, parents are not the only agents of political socialization. Next we will examine the socialization agents that affect you as you go through life.

A. Early Childhood—Parents

The first authority figures in the lives of most people are parents. Parents tell us what to do and what not to do. Arguably, children blindly obeying parents has survival value, so those children who did not do so had lower chances of surviving—natural selection at work perhaps! So our first view of authority is parental authority.
Parents are the most important source of political identities and many opinions for several reasons: children have no pre-existing opinions, they spend large amounts of time with parents, and they have strong bonds of affection with parents (photo by federal government, public domain).

Usually at a relatively young age we learn that another authority, the police, can tell the seemingly all-powerful parents what to do. So the police are likely to be the first governmental authorities about which we become aware. Whether police are seen as good (parents may say something like “if you get lost, ask a police officer for help”) or bad (where parents see police as “corrupt and prejudiced against people like us”) depends on your family’s demographic group. Minorities and the poor are much less likely to have positive views of police authority. But for most middle class families, parents talk about police in a positive way. However, children clearly pick up that mommy and daddy can be afraid of police when they see the flashing blue and red lights behind the family car!

By the early grammar school years you have learned some other things. You become aware that we have a president, another external authority figure. You probably learned the name of the current president. You also heard about one or more of the great presidents, most likely Washington and Lincoln. Children often give the president the same kinds of powers that the police have, to protect us and tell us what to do.
You are also likely to have learned that your family has a political identity in terms of party. You begin to learn that one party is good and the other is bad. I remember being a little confused about this because my parents said we were in one party, yet they voted for the presidential candidate of the other party for several elections.

One interesting theory on early political socialization by George Lakoff suggests that we adopt a dominant authority style from our family. Later in life this style has a significant influence on our political ideology. We also apply that style to what we look for in political candidates.

One family authority style is the nurturing benevolent leader model. Parents discuss, debate, and explain rather than simply command. The other is the strict leader model. In this model the parents command, saying things like do this “because I said so.” Most families have a mix of these two models, but one usually dominates. You might think about which model was dominant in your own family.

Children assimilate these values in what they seek from leadership and government. Conservatives value strong and decisive leadership that lays down strict codes of behavior while allowing people to sink or swim on their own. Liberals value nurturing compassionate leadership that helps people discover and reach their full potential with a lot of help and encouragement along the way.

The theory is consistent with survey findings. When researchers ask people what they value in leadership and their ideology, self-identified liberals are more likely to value compassion over strength in choosing leaders. Self-identified conservatives are more likely to value strength over compassion in choosing leaders. So even though you may not know anything about ideology at an early age, some of the values that are the foundation of ideology may come from your early experiences with family authority.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Leadership Quality</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helpful, caring, and understanding</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong, independent, and disciplined</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals (n)</td>
<td>100% (148)</td>
<td>100% (106)</td>
<td>100% (358)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preferred styles of leadership that are often learned in early family life carry over into adult life in the choices of political ideology, with liberals being more likely to prefer helpful, caring, and understanding leaders and conservatives being more likely to prefer strong, independent, and disciplined leaders, as shown in this 2012 exit survey of voters in the county where the author teaches.
B. Youth—Schools, Peers, and Group Influence

As you move into the school years, other agents of socialization begin to have some effect. Schools themselves start to teach you about government and politics. But what they teach is very limited and avoids controversy.

You learn a few basics about our government—a very few basics, judging from scores I get from students on their American government tests! You learn some reverence for the symbols of the nation, like the flag. You remember the daily exercise of saluting and saying the pledge in school assemblies—studies show that even the youngest children in school recognize the American flag and say that it is their “favorite.” You learn reverence for the Constitution. Teachers often have students memorize the Preamble (“We the people…”). You learn that you have a duty to vote as good citizens. You learn that good citizens obey laws and feel patriotic.

American schools emphasize learning patriotic symbols and values through many exercises, such as the one pictured here (photo by federal government, public domain).

So schools mostly teach us to feel like Americans and to be compliant law-abiding citizens whose main form of participation involves elections. Most classes avoid controversial topics because such discussions could raise questions about the authority of teachers and could cause parents to complain. If you were lucky, you had one of those rare brave teachers who dared to get you to ask tough questions.

Our experiences with school elections do little beyond this. School elections usually turn into popularity contests, and winning candidates have no power to enact policies that affect the everyday lives of students. This image of popularity-seeking candidates who do not keep promises carries over into adult life.
Your peers, or friends, are another agent of political socialization. But their influence is usually limited as well. Preteens usually only have friends chosen by parents. So they come from “good” families, that is, families with backgrounds and values similar to those of the parents. We often find friends in our own religious groups or our neighborhood. Their families are usually similar to your own family. Parents become concerned if you start socializing with the wrong crowd that might have a “bad influence” on you. When this happens, children may pick up values and ideas contrary to those of their family. Sometimes youthful rebellions do lead to a different set of values that last into adulthood, but usually they are just temporary rebellions.

For children who go to college, a new set of agents has some influence on political socialization. Roughly two-thirds of high school graduates go to college, though only about half of them complete their degrees. Therefore the full influence of the college experience does not affect most Americans. In addition, many students continue to live at home and work while in college, perhaps attending a technical or community college in which they do little more than attend classes. This also limits the possible influence of college and peers in college as agents of political socialization.

Nevertheless, college has some influence. Because college students are more likely to be exposed to people from diverse backgrounds and because tolerance of diversity is part of the culture on most college campuses, college educated people are usually more tolerance of people who are different. However, despite the fact that college professors tend to be liberal in their personal political ideology, most of people who have attended college self-identify as ideological moderates or conservatives. But compared to those with less education, those who have been to college have relatively more self-identified liberals among them. Some self-selection is at play here. Those with liberal views are relatively more likely to choose to go to college.
While college professors may tend to be liberal, they probably have less influence on their students than many would think, because students spend relatively little time with the professors and often do not even pay attention to what the professor says. As shown in this posed picture, while some take careful notes and pay close attention, others sleep, some text (if they can get away with it), some play on their laptops, and some just sit there. College students tend to be more liberal primarily for two reasons: 1) relatively more liberal high school students are more likely to choose to go to college, and 2) college usually exposes students to a much more diverse culture than high school, especially if they live on campus. (photo by author of text, who is grateful to his students for posing—though perhaps posing was more interesting than the class material!)

Those with a graduate degree—about ten percent of the population—are relatively even more liberal. In fact, more people with graduate degrees claim to be liberal than any other ideological identification. While self-selection certainly plays a role, evidence suggests that college has a significant yet modest liberalizing impact on people.

College has a greater impact on your confidence as a citizen. College graduates are more likely to feel they can have an impact on the political system—political efficacy. College grads are more likely to vote and are less likely to feel that all politics is corrupt than those who do not go to college. You might think about all this as you go back home and talk to old high school friends who did not go to college. Do they seem different in their attitudes and political identifications than your new friends in college?
A 2011 survey of over 500 students in the college where the author teaches shows that political efficacy did not change significantly in the first two years of school, but increased significantly the last two years. (The line connects the mean scores and the rectangular boxes show the distribution around each mean for each year.)

By the time you leave college, your basic identifications in terms of party and ideology are pretty much set for life. Studies show relatively little change after college, though sometimes a critical election during a crisis can have an impact.

C. Adulthood—Media and Groups

While most of you do not read printed newspapers, you are likely to get some news from the internet, radio, and television. As you leave school and put down roots in a community, you will pay more attention to the news. You will also join more groups, such as civic and professional groups. You will increase your political knowledge as you begin to see how government affects your home, your children’s education, and your profession. Obviously the media and the groups you are in can have an impact on your political views. But for the most part neither the media nor groups will change your views. Why? The impact of groups is minimal because we tend to join groups with members who are already much like ourselves. The media have minimal impact because we tend to filter out and/or reinterpret news stories with which we disagree, something we will discuss in detail in the next section.

Religious institutions have a significant effect on political activity, party identification, and issue positions. About 80% of all Americans say they attend some religious services at least sometime during the year, according to the 2006 General Social Survey data. Almost 40% say they attend services more than once a month. This number is consistent with a 2011 Pew Center survey in which 40% of all Americans said
they were active in a religious or spiritual organization. That same study found that religiously active people were more likely to participate in politics.

Which particular religious group you join makes a significant difference. We also need to distinguish among racial groups because religious institutions tend to be segregated along racial lines. As Martin Luther King once said, Sunday morning is the most segregated morning of the week. Evangelical white Protestant churches tend to be heavily Republican and conservative on most issues. Black Protestants tend to be Democratic and take economically liberal issue positions. On social issues like prayer in school and gay marriage they tend to be socially conservative, though many black Protestants, like the nation, are moving in a more liberal position on gay marriage. Catholics lean in the Democratic direction but are relatively evenly divided, though Latino Catholics, as well as Jews, are strongly Democratic. All these groups tend to be liberal on a range of issues, though Catholics are somewhat less liberal on some social issues such as abortion.

An important question about the impact of religious groups is the direction of causality. Do people change as they join a religious group, or do they self-select religious groups that fit their own preconceived opinions? Remembering that most people get their religious identifications from parents strongly suggests that a lot of inherited self-selection is going on here. So while religious institutions may take political positions on the issues of the day, their members already have chosen that institution because they share basic values they mostly inherited from their parents. We might conclude that religious institutions, like the media and other groups, generally reinforce existing values and give guidance on specific issues. They usually do not change our orientations.

IV. The Media—Our Windows to the World

Consider where you get information about the world. You may have traveled and seen a number of places, but first-hand experiences do not convey much knowledge beyond your immediate everyday environment. Most of what you know about the world comes in a second-hand way. You learn from acquaintances who share their experiences or from strangers who tell you things through the media. Because we cannot know very much ourselves in a first-hand way or even from personal friends and acquaintances we trust, the news media are our windows to see out into the world. Understanding how the media gather information and knowing how to evaluate that information are critical to your ability to see the world in a realistic way.

Let’s start with a definition. Media, which comes from the word “medium,” refers to something that transmits knowledge or information. So the news media are entities that convey information about recent things that are of public interest.

The first important point relates to proper grammar. Media are plural, not singular. So we have many media. This is truer today than ever in the past, despite the
fact that many large corporations have bought and put together many different forms of media.

We can break the news media down into several categories. The print media include newspapers, magazines, and books. The broadcast media refer to television stations and radio. Broadcast media are sometimes seen as part of a larger group of electronic media, which include not only radio and television, but also motion pictures and the newest member of the media, the internet or the web. The web is creating a media revolution because it includes new forms of media, such as blogs, facebook and twitter. In addition, most all older forms of media are beginning to appear on the web.

So when you hear someone say that “the media tries to manipulate us” or something to that effect, you should immediately think of two things. First, this person considered the media to be a single entity (look carefully at the grammar in that statement), when in fact the media are plural.

Second, even if this person knows that media are plural, he or she thinks that the media all act together in the same direction. This assertion is only true in a narrow sense, although it is an important sense. But before we look at the question of media manipulation, we will look at how the media evolved.

A. Short History of the Media—From Word-of-Mouth to the Web

Imagine yourself living as a typical American in the 1790s. You probably lived on a farm in a rural area. You probably were illiterate. So even if you could get one of the few newsletters or rare newspapers published at the time, you could not read it. Mostly you would have heard rumors and stories from travelers or peddlers who occasionally came by. I have heard it said that a single daily issue of the N.Y. Times today has more political information in it than the average farmer back then got in a lifetime. Even if you had lived in a city and were literate, newspapers were few. Many of those newspapers were highly biased because political parties published them. You would have received most of the news second hand in the form of stories overheard in taverns or places of business.
By the 1830s and 1840s significant changes began to take place. Technology drove the first set of changes. The telegraph allowed transmission of news events around the nation almost instantly. New printing techniques allowed newspapers to be printed quickly and cheaply. Expanded public education created a growing number of potential readers among the public. Finally, a new business model enabled publishers to make money by selling newspapers.

This business model had profound implications for political reporting, implications that are still important today. Publishers did not try to make profits from subscriptions, but rather from advertising. So maximizing the audience was extremely important. The larger the audience, the higher the rates for advertising. This relationship dictated that papers had to publish what sells. We shall return to this point shortly.

By the middle 1800s, newspapers across the nation were following this model. They were called the pencil press because they were sold so cheaply. The idea was to maximize the number of readers. Newspapers flourished in cities and towns across the nation. In Doris Kearns Goodwin’s marvelous book about Lincoln and the powerful politicians he chose for his cabinet, Team of Rivals, she quotes a European tourist’s comments about the importance of newspapers in American political life in the 1850s. “You meet newspaper readers everywhere; and in the evening the whole city knows what lay twenty-four hours ago on the newspapers’ desks...The few who cannot read can hear news discussed or read aloud in ale-and-oyster houses” (p.141).
An 1861 copy of the New York Herald, which put together all the essential elements that defined the penny press in 1835: mass production, the latest news (so people would buy it every day), human interest stories, sensationalism, using reporters to observe and interview, having boys selling the paper on the streets, and making money off advertising. You will note that by 1960 the paper had doubled in price to two cents! (copyright expired, public domain).

In seeking larger and larger audiences, newspapers found stories and styles that made people want to read them. By the late 1800s the dominant style was called “yellow journalism.” This name came from a political comic strip printed in color in two such papers in New York City. In the strip the lead character, “the yellow kid,” made comments on the local political scene of the day. The nickname came from his yellow pajamas. You can find examples of this strip on the web. **Yellow journalism** emphasized sensationalism, sex, scandal (both real and alleged), violence, crime, and anything that the reader would find exciting. Truth was secondary to audience size. Papers were highly biased and did not distinguish editorial opinion from the reporting of news.
This style of journalism was not all bad. More responsible variations of yellow journalism did uncover corruption and exploitation in factories and slums and corporate life. This variation was called **muckraking**, a reference sometimes attributed to Teddy Roosevelt, who praised this kind of journalism. The term refers to the use of rakes to remove manure from stables, that is, to rake muck. Muckraking was really the first form of investigative reporting, which continues today. It sometimes led to a sufficient public outcry to bring about important reforms.
Upton Sinclair was a muckraking journalist who secretly investigated the Chicago meatpacking industry and revealed the inhumane, unsafe, and unsanitary practices that were commonplace at the time. He turned his sensational but factually correct articles into the well-known novel, *The Jungle*. Teddy Roosevelt praised these journalists and compared them to those who raked the muck out of stables—a description that led to the label “muckraking” (Library of Congress, public domain).

By around 1900 some publishers created a new model appealing to more educated audiences who wanted more objective reporting. Journalists were also becoming more professional and saw themselves as seekers of truth rather than promoting political positions. The *N. Y Times* was the first major newspaper to adopt this model. It adopted the slogan “all the news that is fit to print” in 1897, a clear shot at the heavily biased yellow press. Newspapers began to separate editorial page opinions from news reporting. This model spread until it became the dominant model for nearly all newspapers.

But the times were changing. Newly invented technologies began to compete with newspapers, technologies that would reach into rural houses far from cities and towns. Radio began to cover politics in the 1920s. By the 1930s almost every household in the nation had a radio. Newspapers no longer had a monopoly on political coverage.
Technology marched on. By the late 1950s most households had television sets. People could feel they were at events themselves, seeing and hearing all that took place—at least all that the cameras and microphones captured. The networks gave viewers live coverage of presidential nominating conventions. Election night broadcasts turned elections into contests with everyone waiting to hear who would win.

Up until 1960 television treated news purely as a public service. News was a kind of “lost leader” that was not expected to make a profit. The purpose of news was to enhance the network’s reputation. The big three networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS, all covered national and international news in fifteen minute broadcasts each evening.

But then something happened that changed the way television corporate executives looked at news departments. The televised debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy captured a huge national audience. It was so big that executives concluded that they could sell advertising if news had a more dramatic appeal.

The 1960 televised debate between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy was a game changing event in television news coverage. Networks realized that news events shown as contests could attract huge audiences. News was transformed into a profit center rather than simply public service (U.S. Government photo, public domain).

The networks increased the evening news broadcasts to 30 minutes, and devoted another 30 minutes to local news on a local affiliate stations. Competition for audiences increased. By the middle 1960s most Americans were getting most of their information about politics from television. Newspaper readership started to decline, a decline that continues today.

Cable television and then satellite television began to greatly expand audience choice. Some observers say that by the 1990s narrowcasting was replacing broadcasting. Most stations no longer relied on a signal sent from a large tower to
people with antennas within range. Even the networks, which had affiliates in most areas of the nation, began to reach people on cable or by satellite dishes. The old model of assuming that the market would be split three ways, with a little competition from the PBS station that sent poor quality signals from a local university, no longer held. Going after a large audience with broadly appealing shows and news programs began to be replaced by programs that looked for a niche, a smaller audience with particular interests and points of view.

The audiences for the three major network evening news programs began to fall. Between 1980 and the early 2000s the audience dropped an average of about a million viewers each year, cutting total viewers in about half. It was as though an ice cream store with three flavors was now in competition with a store with dozens and even hundreds of flavors.

Television fought back to retain audiences in several ways, none of which serve the ideal of objective factual journalism. Television began to shift from the traditional “hard news” format to “soft news” formats. This new format mixes entertainment with the news, infotainment, and sometimes mixes historical fact with dramatic fiction, docudramas.

The digital revolution of the internet and the World Wide Web only furthered the narrowcasting model. Web pages and blogs with political news began replacing television as the primary source of news for young people, a trend that will increase as the younger generation grows older. Anyone can get the news with almost any slant they want, so people can select a source that fits their own biases. Newspapers, which had been declining in numbers for decades, attempted to survive by adapting themselves to the internet. A few went entirely electronic. With the spread of inexpensive smart phones and other mobile devices, this trend will continue.

In the modern media age, most people still rely more on television for getting political information, but the internet is catching up and has replaced traditional printed newspapers as the second most important source of political information. However, those who still read newspapers either in paper form or on the internet as opposed to just watching television have higher levels of political knowledge (photo by author).
The problem news consumers have today is too many choices rather than too few. In a sense the new world of news via the web is somewhat like living in a city in the days of yellow journalism. While people have a lot of choices, many of the sources are likely to be heavily biased and slanted. The ethics of professionalism that arose in the newspaper industry are not necessarily relevant to many of the web sources out there. Anyone with any background can set up a website or blog and instantly spread their own versions of the truth around the world.

B. Media Bias

We have all heard the charge that the media are biased. People are usually thinking about ideological bias when they level such charges. But another kind of bias might also exist. This bias comes from the economic model upon which the news business rests. A third bias results from the national culture in which the media operate. Let’s look at each possible kind of bias.

1. Ideological and/or Partisan Bias—Psychological Defenses

What is interesting about the charge that the media have an ideological bias is that every ideological perspective sees bias against their own ideology and in favor of other ideologies. Conservatives think that the media have a liberal bias. Liberals think that the media have a conservative bias. Libertarians see a bias against the libertarian view, and so on.

Interestingly, each perspective has some supporting evidence from scholarly studies. More reporters are liberal in their own personal political orientation than any other ideology and vote for Democrats more than Republicans. On the other hand, more newspapers endorse conservative and Republican candidates than Democratic or liberal candidates. Newspapers as well as television networks are sometimes hesitant to criticize the corporations that advertise in them, suggesting a pro-business bias. Libertarians complain that their candidates get practically no coverage in the media.

I have had classes of students collect and analyze all campaign stories on the three major networks and in major newspapers for three months preceding a presidential election to see if the stories were biased in favor of one candidate or the other. We classified each story by type. For example, some stories were about issues, others were about personality, and others, the most numerous, were “horse race” stories. Horse race stories refer to stories that are about who is ahead and who is behind, in effect, how they are running, about campaign tactics and strategy. We also classified each story as favorable, neutral, or unfavorable about whatever candidate was covered in the story.

Horse race stories were consistently the most numerous type. Showing that someone is winning or losing meant that these stories hurt the candidate who was running behind and favored the candidate who was running ahead—regardless of the
media source and regardless of the ideology of the candidate. So we found no ideological bias. Many other studies over many elections have had the same finding.

Other studies show that most citizens feel the media influence other people, but not themselves. The second half of this rather arrogant assertion is correct. Most people immunize themselves from media influence in two ways. First, they filter out stories that do not fit their preconceptions by simply not reading or watching them. You can usually quickly tell from the first few words of a story whether it fits your preconceptions. This tendency, well documented in psychology, is called selective exposure.

Second, if we do pay attention to a story that presents evidence contrary to our opinions, we tend to reinterpret it so that it does fit our preexisting opinions. This is called selective perception. For example, if we disagree with a story that favorably treats a candidate we dislike, we might interpret that story as an example of media bias. Nothing is new about this human tendency. For example, in the famous Nixon-Kennedy televised debates in 1960, Kennedy supporters saw a young energetic man who was not in awe of a sitting vice president. Nixon supporters saw a brash and inexperienced young man who did not show proper respect for a sitting vice president.

Do you think that selective exposure and selective perception apply to you? Do you pick sources for news whose editorial positions fit your own predispositions? Do you tend to skip stories that seem to disagree with your positions? If you do read such stories, how do you go about interpreting it?

2. Structural Bias—Run What Sells

While any ideological bias that exists in news reporting has minimal effects on most people, structural bias, the bias that comes from the business structure of media companies, has a more significant impact. Earlier we noted that the news business is just that, a business, and that revenues are based on audience size that generates advertising revenue. So the name of the game is to maximize audience.

All media choose news stories that they think will appeal to the public, stories that are newsworthy. Newsworthy stories have several characteristics. They need to be dramatic, involve familiar faces and places or be highly unusual, and, of course, be current, that is, new. Dramatic is the key ingredient. Conflict, violence, and an uncertain outcome make stories dramatic. If you consider these factors, you see why campaign stories about the horse race between two desperate candidates trying to do whatever they can to gain advantage are far more newsworthy than stories about the details of policy proposal differences.
I remember some years ago when my son was a participant in an All-County Middle School Band concert. As we arrived we saw a local television news team. I happened to know the reporter and said that I was glad to see them covering the concert. The reporter replied, “What concert?” The news team was there to cover the search for illegal drugs. They had good footage of the dogs sniffing around school lockers. They found no drugs, but it was still a good story. You know why, of course. It involved a familiar local place in an unusual situation—drugs in a middle school. They had good pictures with action in them, a must for a newsworthy television story. I told the reporter that he had an opportunity there to cover something positive, children who had worked hard to achieve musical skills, and that story would have good video as well as sound. They filmed some of the concert. So that night my son eagerly watched the late evening news. Leading story? The drug “non-bust,” of course! He waited and waited for his story. After the sports and weather, in the last minute of the broadcast, the story finally came. It was a good-feelings closer that went something like this. “Oh, by the way, the county held its all-county band concert tonight, and here is a bit of it” as it became background for the credits. My son was shown playing his instrument—for about a half second. He was happy—a moment of fame! But the viewers, if they stayed tuned in that long, probably came away with a different impression of the local schools than did my son.

The result of this structural bias is that we tend to see politics as a competitive game where people do whatever they think necessary to get ahead. Politics becomes reality television. We rarely admire the characters, though we may be impressed by
their cunning and savvy. This gives us a very negative view of politics: politics is almost always dirty, and politicians are desperate to get power by any means possible.

This observation results in one more paradox. The news media effort to attract people to political news causes people to dislike political news. Perhaps we watch and read and listen for the same reasons we consume horror movies, the thrill of being shocked with no real danger to ourselves. Shock value sells, or to use the well-known saying about news stories, “if it bleeds, it leads.”

Who is to blame for this situation? We complain about not having more stories on issues, but we love to watch the dirt. If we really wanted more stories about issues, we would seek out those stories and the news media business would give us more of these stories. Structural bias gives us what sells, so in effect we have only ourselves to blame. Nevertheless, if you really want in-depth coverage of issues, you can certainly find it both on the Web and in such television news shows as Public Broadcasting’s “Evening News Hour” or Public Radio’s “All Things Considered.”

3. Sociocentric Bias

Media tend to select and view news stories through the value framework of the society in which the media operate—sociocentric bias. We recognize this when we look at foreign media, but usually fail to see it in our own nation’s media.

We see much of the foreign press as anti-American because they often present stories in ways that raise questions about American motives. They often view us as hypocritical selfish bullies who throw our military might around killing innocents to protect access to resources so that we can continue to excessively consume, all the while polluting the environment. On the other hand, because American audiences overwhelming have a positive view of their nation, Americans do not recognize that the American media shape stories that portray the nation in positive ways, downplaying failures and mistakes.

For example, in the initial coverage of the Iraq War that began in 2003, American media gave little to no coverage to questions about the evidence leaders used to justify the war, little coverage to Iraqi civilian suffering, and little coverage to the mistreatment of those imprisoned and harshly interrogated. The emphasis was on our brave troops. That is certainly what American audiences wanted to see and hear. The foreign press focused on the just the opposite, and more frequently used terms like “torture” rather than “interrogation,” playing to what their audiences wanted to hear. Even as the invasion was beginning, the European press asked many more questions about the impact on the Iraqi civilian population than did the American press. Why? First, European public opinion did not support the Iraq War. Second, they had a different historical perspective. They had experienced what it was like to be in a place that was invaded during WWII. Even liberators inadvertently hurt and kill noncombatant civilians. We had not experienced this.
An “embedded journalist” taking pictures of the men in the unit he was with in Panama. These journalists were with troops in the invasion of Iraq, and rather naturally identified with the troops they were living with every day. This led to some sociocentric bias—a rather noncritical view of the war that ignored problems that were discovered later and far better covered by the foreign press. But the American public loved this kind of coverage, and the media loved it because it attracted a larger audience (U.S. Government photo, public domain).

A much less serious example would be to compare how the media from different nations cover the Olympics. Each nation’s media give the most coverage to the sports in which their nation’s athletes do well.

Structural bias has an impact on sociocentric bias. The media choose stories and shape them in ways that the audience will find interesting and which fit their values. Failing to do so loses audience.

Considering these tendencies, we might wonder if complete objectivity is possible. At least for a single or even several media outlets in one nation, the answer is clearly no. They cannot possibly cover more than a tiny portion of all events in the world. The media cannot show all the different points of view, each of which may have some element of truth to it. If you really want to seek the truth, you need to recognize sociocentric bias and examine a wide variety of other points of view that have some factual basis. The first step is knowing they exist.

C. Media Impact on Public Opinion

Despite the fact that we are resistant to changing our opinions about issues that are important to us or changing identifications that are products of early socialization, opinion does sometimes change on important matters. The media can and do play a role in this change.
Consider opinions about homosexuality. Prior to the mid 1970s, most Americans saw homosexuality as abnormal, as a disease to be treated. But since then opinions have changed. The change began slowly but accelerated dramatically. The trend is clear. Most Americans see homosexuality as a trait that people are born with and not something to be treated as a disease. News stories now treat stories about gays more as civil rights stories (“gay rights”) and virtually never as disease stories. Young people have changed their views more than the older people. This is because young peoples’ views were not as well-formed when media coverage of “gay issues” began to change. The media have also played a significant role in changes in views about the role of women and the place of minorities in society.

![Media coverage of violent events where innocent people exercising their rights are harmed, such as in the beating of demonstrators in the Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights in 1965, demonstrated to Americans the need for reform. So sometimes the media appetite for conflict can have a positive impact on public opinion (FBI photo, public domain).](image)

1. Agenda Setting—What We Think About

Those who study the media often observe that while the media do not determine what we think, they do determine what we think about—agenda setting. That is, the media bring issues and questions to our attention and these are the things we think about from day to day. If the question endures and catches the public’s imagination, policymakers may begin to pay attention and feel they should address the problem.
The highly covered mishandling of disaster preparation and relief from Hurricane Katrina in 2005 led to the resignation of FEMA head Michael Brown and much criticism of the Bush administration. Here thousands of residents who did not have transportation to leave New Orleans await shelter in the Superdome before the storm hit—the Superdome was not equipped to handle this many people (FEMA photo, public domain).

For example, investigative reporting of how the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) mishandled Hurricane Katrina led policymakers to do their own investigations and make reforms. Some agency leaders lost their jobs. In the 1960s the media gave much coverage to civil rights demonstrations and the violent reaction of local authorities in how they treated peaceful demonstrators in the South. These highly newsworthy stories awakened the nation to the inconsistency between our official value of equal treatment and the actual treatment of African Americans. Media coverage helped get civil rights on the issue agenda.

2. Framing—Context of a Story Influences Our Reaction

The context of the story refers to its framing, or how a story is presented. Framing suggests ways in which we can understand the story. For example, suppose the media present a story on criticisms of a political leader as part of a concerted political attack by partisan opponents to gain advantage. Framed as a partisan attack, citizens are likely to discount the attack and not allow it to influence their evaluations of that political leader. This is one explanation as to why President Clinton’s popularity ratings remained high even when he was defending himself in the impeachment and trial proceedings in 1998.

Politicians understand the importance of framing. So they put a lot of effort into influencing how the media frame stories. Sometimes politicians are successful. For example, in the 2004 presidential campaign, the Bush reelection team was successful in
framing the Iraq War as part of the war on terrorism to keep us from being attacked at home. The Kerry campaign would have preferred to frame the war as a question of whether the Bush administration planned and managed the war competently.

The media tendency to present most campaign stories into the “horse race” mold can be seen as another example of framing and how the structural bias of the media pushes them to frame stories in the most dramatic way. Sadly for voters who want to understand issues and differences, this tendency pushes policy differences into the background.

3. Long-Term Effects—Media Reliance on Elite Opinion

Some of those who study the media have observed that the media are highly dependent on elite opinion in many if not most of their stories. Some of this elite opinion is from government sources, but not all. Any good reporter goes to policy experts outside of government to either verify or contradict what the government is saying. Some of the worst reporting in the history of American journalism can be attributed to relying only on official government sources. Critics charge that this was a problem in the early reporting on the Vietnam War and on the second Iraq War.

Nongovernment experts and what they say have a great impact on how the media frame stories and on the content of the stories. In turn, these stories can have a great impact on public opinion. If elite and expert opinion is in agreement on some issue, the public begins to shift in that direction over time.

Consider changing public opinion on gay rights. Elite opinion made a dramatic change that started a long term popular shift. In 1974 the American Psychological Association issued a statement that homosexuality was not a disease to be treated. Rather, it was a natural predisposition. Virtually all experts agreed. Then the media began to frame stories on homosexuality as civil rights stories rather than disease stories. Gays began to be portrayed in a positive way in popular media. And public opinion began to shift.

On the other hand, if experts disagree, then public opinion does not change very much. Interest groups that have an invested interest will go great lengths to try to create doubt and controversy in expert opinion. Tobacco interests were able to do this for decades by sponsoring their own studies and funding their own experts after the rest of the scientific community had concluded that smoking caused cancer.
How you view efforts to strengthen laws on gun control depends in part on how the question is framed. If framed as a question of protecting children from maniacs who would use assault weapons, like this AR-15 with a ten round ammo clip, one would be more likely to support stronger laws. But if the question is framed as an attack on our Second Amendment right to have sufficient firepower to protect our families, then one would be more likely to oppose stricter regulation (photo released to the public domain by copyright holder).

Who the elites are makes a difference in the impact they have on opinion. Citizens use short-cuts to evaluate elite opinions they hear in the news. Citizens are most likely to adopt positions taken by those they like and respect, or those with whom they share some common characteristic. For example, popular presidents are more likely to be believed than unpopular ones—part of the president’s “power to persuade,” if you remember that idea. Well-known and respected news commentators will have a greater impact on opinions than average reporters. (I would note that with the movement toward narrowcasting and decline of the major networks, no commentators today have anything close to the credibility or status that Walter Cronkite had in the 1960s and 70s.) Celebrities have more influence than average people who sometimes get interviewed. Experts from major research institutions or prominent universities can have significant influence. Whites are more likely to believe statements about race relations coming from white commentators than from African American commentators, and visa versa. Republicans are more likely to be influenced by statements from prominent Republicans, and Democrats by Democrats.

Which citizens are most likely to change their opinions? Those who do not have well-formed opinions are more likely to be influenced. Therefore, young people who are still forming their opinions are more likely to change views than adults who have well-formed opinions. So the young are more likely to embrace racial equality, feminist views on sexism in our society, gay rights, environmental values, and so on.

V. Policy Implications
Our ignorance about politics, our all too often unreasoned opinions, and the sensational superficial media coverage of political news all have profound impacts on public policy in the United States. Because we rarely look beyond immediate headlines and problems, we miss important long-term problems until they reach some crisis. At that point, it may be too late to avoid a disaster.

In addition, how the media cover long-term problems may cause great misperceptions about the problem. This creates public confusion. Many people just throw up their hands and do not even try to form a reasoned opinion about what, if anything, should be done.

Political leaders have little incentive to focus on long-term problems in such an opinion environment. Addressing a long-term problem has no political payoff and a lot of political risk when voters do not understand or care about something that does not yet affect their daily lives.

On the other hand, when the media do cover long-term problems in a concerted and dramatic way, leaders feel they must respond. Wise leaders can exploit the media desire for drama and build on strongly held cultural values to gain popular support for policy proposals.

At the same time, fear of public outrage can have a braking effect on what leaders feel they are able to do. So public opinion plays a paradoxical role in policymaking. It can both empower leaders to act and limit leader actions. To illustrate this paradox, we shall examine two policy areas.

A. Environment and Global Warming

Scientists have been doing research on global warming for many years. By about 2000 the scientific community reached a consensus that global warming was real and that it would likely have profound implications for life on earth.

The public became aware of the reality and size of the problem around 2006 with the widespread publicity of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, a movie that was really a narrated Power Point show. For publicizing the problem, Gore received a Nobel Peace prize in 2007. After denying that this was a problem for most of his presidency, President George W. Bush finally acknowledged the problem in 2007 and announced some token steps to address it, steps that fell far short of what scientists said was necessary. Estimates are that dramatic changes need to take place to even slow the warming trend, changes that not only stop the increase in greenhouse gas emissions, but steps that reduce emissions somewhere in the range of at least half. However, the longer we wait to take action, the more dramatic the necessary changes will become. And at some point we reach a tipping point at which we can do nothing except deal with the consequences. Many scientists argue that we are already at that point.
If you look at media coverage of global warming, even when this text was being written in mid 2008, you might draw a very different conclusion about the problem. The media tend to see objective coverage of the news in terms of balanced coverage, which means giving two sides to almost any question equal coverage.

Scientific research published in peer-reviewed journals, that is, research that was judged to be well done in following the required scientific steps, all support the conclusion of a warming trend related to human carbon emissions. Yet almost every time the media reported on this, they found some skeptic to give a contrary view, even if the view was not based on recognized science. The skeptic was often supported by interest groups with a financial stake in continuing to rely on carbon-based fuels. They funded research for the purpose of raising doubts just as did tobacco companies in funding research to raise doubts about the link between smoking and cancer.
I did a web search on this as I was writing this section, and found many sources that questioned global warming, seeing it as a myth. Some see global warming as part of a conspiracy. Some use the illogical argument of in effect saying, prove there is not a conspiracy—every student of logic knows that one can never prove a negative. The point is that these sources fall short of well-established standards of science, so objectively they should carry very little weight. They merit no more news coverage than those who insist that the moon landing was faked.

The way the media have reported on global warming has certainly increased public awareness that a problem may exist, but has confused the public about the scientific consensus that exists. That confusion gave political leaders a free pass to ignore the problem for a long time or respond to it in symbolic words rather than real actions. In the 2012 Republican presidential primary contest, all of the major Republican presidential nominees—Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum, Herman Cain, Rick Perry, Michele Bachmann—with the single exception of Jon Huntsman, pronounced that the idea was wrong or a hoax or that the human role in climate change was not significant. Two of the candidates, Romney and Gingrich, had clearly shifted their positions as they attempted to win support from conservative Tea Party Republicans, most of whom swallowed public relations campaigns attacking scientific evidence. In 2016 views of Republican candidates was more mixed, but a clear majority either questioned the science or dismissed any efforts to address the problem.

Skeptics and their supporters were able to get enough media coverage of their views to raise public skepticism about the reality of these climate changes in the early 2000’s. But a 2015 Pew study of shifts in public opinion showed that scientific expert opinion was beginning to have an impact. That impact affects public opinion through the media, which was no longer following a simplistic model of balanced coverage. Between 2010 and 2014 belief that global warming was real increased about fifteen percentage points to 72%, a clear majority.

The public seems unaware of how global warming is related to other issues. Take for example energy usage and our reliance on carbon-based fuels like gasoline. The United States produces the greatest amount of greenhouse gas per capita in the world. In total emissions, the U.S. ranks second in the world behind China, which overtook the U.S. in the early 2000’s as it rapidly industrialized. A significant part of this comes from burning gasoline in our automobiles.

We can reduce gasoline consumption by improving gas mileage. But people are unwilling to buy more fuel efficient cars as long as they can afford gasoline. However, when gasoline prices went up, the outcry was not to demand that automakers produce all-electric cars and more really efficient hybrids. Rather, many people demanded that we find more oil and/or lower our gasoline taxes (which are already very low compared to the highly taxed gasoline in most of the rest of the world).

Finding more oil, even if that would decrease reliance on foreign oil, creates three kinds of problems. First extracting it and transporting it around the world inevitably
results in accidents, such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska in 1989 and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Second, while finding new oil might lower the price of gasoline, as it has in recent years, lower prices discourage conservation and movement toward alternative energy sources. Third, if we find oil and turn it into gasoline, someone will burn it. Burning gasoline is precisely what we want to discourage if we want to slow or reverse global warming, not to mention have cleaner air for public health reasons.

If we really want to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and decrease dependence on foreign oil (which ties us to many awful governments in the world that provide us with our “fix” on gasoline), we need higher gasoline taxes, not lower taxes. Taxes could go into the new technologies that will help us lead the world in the transition from a carbon-based energy system to more environmentally friendly systems. If we lead that change as we led the computer revolution of the 1980s and 90s, it could be the economic engine for our economy. Moreover, this change would have the side benefit of ending the drain of American dollars to foreign oil-producing nations. But in the short term such a proposal would be very unpopular and almost certainly political suicide for proponents.

While many of the details of these policy options are subject to debate, the point is that global warming is related to many other issues in ways that most Americans do not perceive. These other issues are critical to our economy, our health, and military security. We cannot even begin that debate until the larger public becomes aware of all
the connections. So, in a very real sense, our ignorance about these things endangers the very future of our republic. This is exactly what Ben Franklin worried about in 1787.

B. Foreign and Defense Policy

What factors explain the foreign policy and defense policy of the United States over history? Certainly many factors have played important roles, and these factors have changed over time. A thorough analysis of all these factors would require years of study. They are the stuff of many different undergraduate and graduate college courses. So what we will do here is necessarily very superficial.

A very good American government text I used for many years attempted to explain much of our foreign and defense policy in terms of a belief that the United States was vulnerable to outside forces (Alan R. Gitelson, Robert L. Dudley, Melvin J. Dubnick, *American Government*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008). Fears of vulnerability to Native Americans, European colonial powers, fascism, Communism, nuclear attack, immigrants, and terrorists have all played important roles in driving our foreign and defense policies.

However, other factors like the desire for economic markets, corporate profits, and idealistic goals for expanding freedom and democracy have also played roles in driving foreign and defense policies. Some people, especially those in other nations, focus on the more selfish factors and see the United States as an imperialist nation driven by corporate greed. Others both here and abroad see the United States as naïve “do-gooders” who think they can transform other nations to little American-style democracies. We end up getting bogged down in long hopeless conflicts when the natives have other ideas. The complex truth involves all these factors and more.

The three subjects of this chapter—public opinion, how we are socialized to think about the United States and the world, and how the media cover our policies—have always played important roles in foreign and defense policy. Of course, in a democratic republic, public perceptions should play an important role. Let's look at how these factors have shaped major trends in our foreign and defense policy.

Public opinion seems to swing in moods, back and forth, supporting involvement with the world and then moving back in the direction of ignoring the world—*isolationism*. For more than the first century of our history, the dominant mood was one of isolationism, tempered only by a strong public sentiment that our nation was destined to expand to the Pacific Ocean, the idea of *manifest destiny*. Heaven help anyone or anything in our way, whether they were buffalo or Native Americans or Mexicans. The Mexican-American War of 1846-8 expanded United States boundaries to include what became the states of California, Arizona, and New Mexico, as well as adding Texas, which had fought its own successful war for independence from Mexico. Those who opposed this war saw it as a naked land grab and as an effort to expand slavery to the west. The U.S. government jailed famous author Henry David Thoreau for refusing to pay taxes to support the war. Thoreau authored his famous essay “Civil Disobedience”
to justify his actions. Despite this, public opinion supported the war on the grounds of manifest destiny.

We occasionally notice markers reminding us of the human cost of our expansion, such as this one at the Cherokee heritage center in Oklahoma (photo by Wolfgang Sauber, Creative Commons).

Many groups suffered because of the belief of European settlers that white Americans were destined to expand the nation to the Pacific Ocean—manifest destiny. We pursued a policy of isolationism mainly with respect to European nations, fearing that involvement in their wars would distract and weaken us during this period of expansion. One of the earliest debates was whether we should side with France in its war with Great Britain in the 1790s. The Federalists won that debate, and we stayed out of that war. George Washington’s farewell address when he left the White House was to warn us to avoid “entangling alliances” with the rest of the world. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 declared that all of the Americas (North, Central, and South) were no longer open to European colonization.

Public support for isolationism was a major barrier to our entry into both of the world wars. President Wilson won re-election in 1916 on the boast that he had kept us out of war. President Franklin Roosevelt’s efforts to come to the aid of Great Britain and France before our entry in the Second World War were opposed by the “America First” movement. This powerful interest group opposed American involvement in WWII because they saw the war as none of our business, as purely a European matter. This view echoed George Washington’s call to stay out of alliances with European powers.
American hero Charles Lindbergh speaking at an American First rally in 1940, urging the nation to stay out of the war with Nazi Germany in Europe. This movement was an expression of a traditional American sentiment of isolationism based on our fear of vulnerability and the hope that two oceans would protect our nation. Such a hope was no longer justified in a world that was shrinking by the technology that Lindbergh himself had helped pioneer—air travel (photo from Charles Lindbergh.com, "no rights reserved").

You already know that Americans are socialized to be very patriotic. When a political leader takes a dramatic action in defense of the United States, all of our socialization moves us to support that action and the leader who was bold enough to act. Those who study public opinion call this the rally-round-the-flag effect. Presidents ordering military actions, the spilling of American blood, and certainly attacks on our citizens, all trigger this effect. Of course the media always give such dramatic events a great deal of coverage because they are “newsworthy.”

The Founding Fathers were also aware of this tendency and feared that a president might use military action to build personal power. In order to limit the ability of presidents to get us into wars, they gave the power to declare war to Congress, not to the president. Nevertheless, presidents have been so successful getting around this restriction that most Americans, including most students, think that the president has the power to declare war. Legally and constitutionally speaking this is wrong, though in a practical sense presidents can start wars that Congress has little choice but to support.

Despite our long-term tendency to be isolationist, presidents down through history have overcome our isolationist tendencies and rallied support for military action, usually after some kind of attack or perceived threat of attack. Wilson was able to get us involved in the First World War after German submarines sunk American ships. Franklin Roosevelt had public opinion behind him following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. President Lyndon Johnson got support for military escalation in Vietnam following claims that two U.S. Navy destroyers were twice attacked in the Tonkin Gulf off the coast of North Vietnam. We now know that the first attack was only after provocation and the second never took place at all. And we know that Johnson
knew this. President George W. Bush gained nearly unanimous support from both the public and Congress immediately following the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001. Once the nation or its armed forces have been attacked, Congress feels great political pressure to give the president either a declaration of war or a resolution short of a declaration that allows the president to take a wide range of military actions to defend the nation and its armed forces. The media, which could play a role in raising questions about sometimes dubious claims and charges, usually play right along with public opinion (an example of sociocentric bias).

President Franklin Roosevelt addressing Congress in December 1941 following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, asking for a declaration of war, the last formally declared war in American history. Despite the fact that only Congress can declare war, presidents have engaged in many military conflicts without any formal declaration, the patriotic public inevitably "rallies-round-the flag" in support of dramatic action to defend the nation or our troops, and Congress goes along, at least as long as the effort is successful (U.S. Government photo, public domain).

Sometimes the media have purposefully aroused public opinion in favor of military action. The most obvious case of this was the Spanish-American War of 1896-8, back in the days of yellow journalism. William Randolph Hearst, publisher of a major New York newspaper, ordered a photographer to go get pictures of the war in Cuba, then a Spanish colony—before it broke out! The photographer told Hearst that there was no war to photograph. Allegedly, Hearst said "You supply the pictures and I will supply the war." The sinking of the American battleship "The Maine" cinched the deal for public opinion. The United States quickly defeated Spanish forces and took over Puerto Rico and Guam, which became United States territories, as well as Cuba and the Philippines, both of which eventually became independent.
Following most of our military actions, the public mood usually shifts back in the direction of isolationism. For example, following the First World War isolationism won out. Isolationism foiled Woodrow Wilson’s best efforts to rally public support for entry into the League of Nations to create an international framework to prevent future wars.

However, the end of the Second World War was different. Our split with our wartime ally the Soviet Union, as it gobbled up land previously held by Nazi Germany and set up puppet governments, ultimately led to the longest war in American history, the **Cold War**. It is called the Cold War because we never had a direct shooting confrontation with the Soviet Union. Rather, we and our allies, organized into the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** (NATO), had a number of smaller wars with smaller states that were supported by the Soviet Union as well as its other major Communist partner and sometimes competitor, the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The Korean War may be the best example of this. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. followed a strategy of containment to prevent further expansion of the Soviet Empire. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Korean War was that President Truman was able to build support for the war without any direct attack on American forces.

The Cold War, lasting from 1947 until 1989 (the year the Berlin wall fell), was fought on many fronts. The economic aspect of the war initially involved the **Marshall Plan**, an effort to help the nations of Europe rebuild after the devastation of the Second World War. The idea was that economic prosperity would prevent people from turning to the false but appealing promises of communism. That part of the policy was very successful. Ultimately the economies of western European democracies became much stronger than any of the nations under Soviet control. This contributed to the breakup of the Soviet Union.
in American history, and the breaking up of the Soviet Union. Though we never had a direct military confrontation with the Soviets, we did fight wars with nations supported by the Soviets and the Chinese (U.S. Government photo, public domain).

The military side of the Cold War was only somewhat successful. We fought to a stalemate in Korea, at a considerable cost in lives and fortune. Vietnam was a rather clear failure for two major reasons. First, we failed to recognize that it involved nationalism more than communism. Second, the pro-American government we supported there had little support from the general population outside the cities. Ultimately, that government was unable to defend itself from Vietnamese revolutionary forces without massive American military help. More than 58,000 American soldiers died in that failed and foolish conflict.

The new military element in the Cold War was nuclear weapons. This new and frightening technology had a profound effect on all aspects of the conflict and remains a major concern in American foreign and defense policy today. For a while after World War Two the United States had a nuclear monopoly. That is, we were the only nation with the weapons, or the only nation with significant numbers of weapons. That enabled us to use nuclear weapons to threaten our enemies, a strategy called massive retaliation. President Eisenhower used that threat to force a cease-fire in Korea.

However, that monopoly began to erode. Following the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, in which we forced the Soviet Union to withdraw nuclear missiles from Cuba because they were badly outgunned in terms of the number of weapons, the Soviets engaged in a massive nuclear arms build-up. We matched that buildup. Both sides built far more weapons than either needed to destroy the other. We could no longer use the weapons to threaten the other side because they had a lot of weapons as well. As a result, the only purpose of the weapons was to deter the other side from using them. Thus our nuclear strategy was transformed from Massive Retaliation to what was called Mutually Assured Destruction, or MAD for short. Public opinion generally supported building these weapons because of fear of the Soviet Union.

But the madness of MAD did begin to have a toll on public opinion. Ultimately, MAD involved an inescapable paradox. The purpose of the weapons was not to use them. If they had to be used, then they had failed.

MAD also led to many difficult questions. How many weapons did we really need? At what cost? Moreover, expensive new technologies (MIRV, Star Wars, and Cruise Missiles, for example—you might look them up on the web) did not seem to make us any safer.

By the 1980s a significant number of Americans, including many experts, began to call for a nuclear freeze, stopping the building of more weapons. Under considerable pressure, President Reagan, who had opposed strategic arms limitations talks (SALT), began to pursue his own negotiations with the Soviets under a different name, the strategic arms reduction talks (START).
Ultimately, under great economic strain, the Soviet Union broke up in 1991. We and Russia (the largest remaining part of the old USSR) reached nuclear arms agreements. This led to significant reductions in weapons. The process of negotiating these agreements continues on to this day, regardless of who is in the White House.

The greatest fears of nuclear weapons today are tied to fears of nuclear proliferation. We are concerned that the spreading of nuclear weapons might allow terrorists to obtain crude weapons or smaller nations to gain weapons and use them against neighbors. A small nuclear war could lead to a big war that would likely end life as we know it on this planet.

Presidents are able to rally the nation around dramatic events behind a policy for only a limited amount of time if that policy does not yield at least some observable success. In this situation, public opinion can have a braking effect on political leaders.

For example, after several years of failed promises of progress in Vietnam, public opinion turned against the war. Once that happened, the press began to ask hard questions and political leaders began to search for a way out. The same thing happened in the second Iraq War, the longest shooting war in American history, a war that was supposed to only last a few months and pay for itself with Iraq’s oil revenue. On the other hand, the public may continue to support a difficult war and make great sacrifices if the president can make the case that national survival is clearly at stake, as was the case in the Civil War and World War Two.

The nation will be faced with crises in the future. Asking tough questions before we rally around some military adventure in an emotional display of patriotism might be wise if we want to preserve our republic. As we learned in Vietnam and Iraq, we do not have unlimited numbers of troops who are willing to die. We do not have an unlimited fortune that we can spend on military actions without eroding our national physical and human infrastructure, including transportation and communication and human services, education, and scientific research investments. Is the cause vital enough to go it alone in unilateral action and risk our health and wealth? Are you willing to die? Are you willing to suffer a lower standard of living?
Whether military actions were wise of foolish, long after the cheering is over and the wars have ended many citizens continue to pay the price. Would it not be better to ask the tough questions before we commit our youth to great risk rather than after (U.S. Navy photo, public domain)?

An educated citizenry should ask these questions. We should want the media to ask these questions to independent nongovernment experts, and we should insist that those running for office answer these questions before we give them our votes. Old Ben Franklin might want us to teach our children to ask these questions as well, not just blindly follow parents, peers, or the political leaders of this democratic republic.

Afterword

A few days after I finished the first draft of this text I visited a museum exhibition at the Columbia, S.C. Museum of Art, “Excavating Egypt: Great Discoveries.” The artifacts were interesting, but the notes on the civilizations from which they came really fascinated me.

These early civilizations, dating as far back as five thousand years or so, lasted for thousands of years. Judging from the rituals the people followed and things they created, including the great burial grounds of stone and pyramids, these ancient
peoples deeply believed that they had achieved lasting greatness. I am sure that they believed as much then as we believe today that their civilization was the pinnacle of human achievement. Yet today all we have to remember them by are ruins and fragments.

Our republic may be the most powerful nation that ever existed. But what will it look like to those who view our fragments in museums thousands of years from now? Will those museum visitors be our descendents living in a continuation of our republic or people of another great civilization? Of course I am assuming that humankind will still be around to look at artifacts. Will we last as long as the great Egyptian civilizations? We have a long way to go to match their longevity, having not yet reached the 250 year mark.

Each generation has the responsibility to help keep the republic that Ben Franklin and the other Founders gave us. Franklin only lived a few years after he told us in 1787 that he and the other Founders had given us a republic. If any generation fails, we will be relegated to be someone’s museum display. Our republic will seem as irrelevant to those who view us in the same way that we view the mummy masks of Egypt. One colossal failure or a series of small failures may lead to irreversible decline. It is as simple as that.

Most texts have some kind of concluding chapter. I gave a great deal of thought to what kind of conclusion this text might have. Honestly, the real conclusion for keeping our republic has little to do with any words I can write. The real conclusion cannot be written, but rather it is how you will live. It is whether you cherish and protect our freedoms when they are under assault. It is whether you really think about political questions and identities or just play follow-the-leader. It is whether you are willing to sacrifice your own narrow present self-interest for the future of those who have no vote because they are not yet alive to vote. It is whether you understand that not everyone wants to be just like us or just assume that we should impose our values and ways of doing things on other civilizations. It is whether we recognize the limits of our power and influence or overextend our finite resources, as have so many other great civilizations that are now gone. It is whether you make sacrifices so that future generations will have their chance to preserve—and improve—our republic.
Many of the basic paradoxes of American government and politics will remain unresolved because they may be impossible to resolve. Understanding these paradoxes will help us as citizens and future leaders to ask the right questions about present and future challenges.

One challenge will remain the same challenge posed by Ben Franklin. The future of our republic is up to the next generation—you. I and my generation will be gone within a few short decades.

**KEY TERMS AND IDEAS**

survey population
random sample
1936 *Literary Digest* survey
straw polls
sampling error
exit poll
socially desirable answers
push poll
door-step opinions
Office of Inspector General
mandatory spending
national debt
budget deficit
discretionary spending
reasoned opinions
political socialization
agents of political socialization
political efficacy
News media
penny press
yellow journalism
muckraking
the 1960 televised debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy
narrowcasting
infotainment
docudramas
horse-race stories
selective exposure
selective perception
structural bias
newsworthy
sociocentric bias
agenda setting
framing
media coverage of global warming
balanced coverage
isolationism
Manifest Destiny
The Monroe Doctrine
The "America First" movement
rally-round-the-flag effect
power to declare war
Cold War
North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)
containment
Marshall Plan
Massive Retaliation
Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)
nuclear proliferation

Possible Internet Exercises

1. Search the web for some political public opinion survey results. Evaluate the quality of a survey. What was the sample size and how was it selected? Do you see anything in
the question wording that suggests wording bias? Did the answers exclude those who did not have opinions?

2. Locate the Office of Inspector General on the web. Use your own words to describe what this office does.

3. Find the major spending categories in the national budget for the last fiscal year. How would you change spending if you could?

4. Look at a current newspaper on the web and evaluate two stories in term of the qualities that make them “newsworthy.” What are their characteristics? Why do some get better placement than others?

5. Look at a current news story from some web source and describe how it is “framed.”