

Public Opinion and the Media

Vocabulary

public opinion The sum of many individual opinions, beliefs, or attitudes about a public person or issue.

political socialization The process by which people form their political values and attitudes. This process starts in childhood and continues through adulthood.

opinion poll A method of measuring public opinion. This is done by asking questions of a random sample of people and using their answers to represent the views of the broader population.

margin of error A measure of the accuracy of an opinion poll. The smaller the margin of error, the more confidence one can have in the results of a poll. The margin of error usually decreases as the number of people surveyed increases.

mass media Means of communication that reach a large audience. Today the mass media include newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet.

spin The deliberate shading of information about a person or an event in an attempt to influence public opinion.

media bias Real or imagined prejudice that is thought to affect what stories journalists cover and how they report those stories.

negative campaigning Trying to win an advantage in a campaign by emphasizing negative aspects of an opponent or policy. In the past, this type of campaigning was called mudslinging.

Every four years, Americans express their views on how this country should be led when they cast their ballots for president. In the months leading up to the election, voters are bombarded with television ads aimed at influencing **public opinion** about the candidates. Vast sums of money are spent on these campaign ads in the hope of persuading voters to support one candidate over another. Is this the way to choose the leader of the free world? Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic candidate for president in 1952, didn't think so. When asked about running ads on television, Stevenson said, "I think the American people will be shocked by such contempt for their intelligence. This isn't Ivory Soap versus Palmolive." The 1952 presidential campaign was the first to use the new medium of television extensively to reach voters. Rather than try to sell himself like soap, Stevenson opted to buy time for 18 half-hour speeches airing from 10:30 to 11:00 two nights a week. Stevenson hoped this use of television would help him build a national following. However, both the lateness of the hour and the dull "talking head" format of his speeches limited the audience. Most of those who tuned in were already Stevenson supporters.

In contrast, Dwight Eisenhower, Stevenson's Republican opponent, embraced the use of 20- to 30-second "spot" ads in 1952. The idea came from advertising executive Rosser Reeves. Reeves convinced Eisenhower that he could reach more viewers with less money by running short ads during popular prime time programs. Titled "Eisenhower Answers America," each spot featured the candidate answering a question posed by an ordinary citizen. The ads showed "Ike" as a plain speaker responding to real people's concerns. Not only did more viewers see Ike's ads; they also seemed to like what they saw.

Eisenhower swept to victory with more than 55 percent

of the votes cast. Stevenson's loss in 1952 didn't change his low opinion of television advertising. But when he ran against Eisenhower again in 1956, Stevenson agreed to replace his speeches with five-minute spots. The power of television to shape public opinion was just too hard, even for Stevenson, to resist.

The Formation of Public Opinion

Adlai Stevenson had a low opinion of political advertising on television. But did Stevenson's personal views about TV ads match public opinion as a whole? The answer, seemingly, is no, since Eisenhower's advertising strategy apparently worked so well. From the election results, one might conclude that the public's view of using televised ads to "sell" candidates was generally positive in 1952. In reality, however, figuring out just what "the public" thinks is not so easy. The American public today consists of more than 300 million individuals, each with his or her own personal beliefs, values, attitudes, and opinions.

How Do Individuals Form Their Political Opinions?

The opinions you may have on political issues tend to be shaped by deeply held political beliefs and values. The formation of these beliefs and values begins early in life and continues throughout adulthood. Political scientists call this process **political socialization**. To "socialize" an individual means to teach that person to be a fit member of society. Political socialization involves learning about the values, beliefs, and processes that underlie a political system in order to

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participate in it effectively. The process of political socialization is important. No democracy could survive if its citizens did not share some fundamental beliefs about how their government should operate. However, this process does not produce 300 million people who think exactly alike. Political socialization involves all of the experiences that lead us to view political issues the way we do. And those experiences are never the same from one person to the next. Many agents, or forces, play a part in political socialization. They include family, schools, religion, friends, and the mass media. The diagram on the facing page illustrates these **agents of socialization**.

Historical events are another important factor. Children growing up in the affluent 1950s, for example, tended to have a positive view of government. Those growing up in the 1960s—a time marked by political assassinations, urban riots, and the Vietnam War—were more likely to view government with considerable distrust.

What Is Public Opinion and How Is It Shaped?

Public opinion is commonly defined as the sum of many individual opinions about a public person or issue. This definition assumes that we can find out what public opinion on a given issue is by asking a large number of people what they think and adding up their responses. With so many opinions floating around among so many Americans, how does public opinion come to be shaped? Political scientists who study this question have come up with several answers. Here are three to consider.

Public opinion is shaped by special interest groups.

Some scholars believe that public opinion is less about what individuals think and more about what the special interest groups they belong to advocate. Because many such groups represent large numbers of people, they are listened to when they speak out on issues.

Public opinion is shaped by journalists, politicians, and other opinion makers.

Scholars who support this view observe that most of us don't have time to become informed on every issue. Instead we look to influential **opinion makers** for information and advice. These opinion makers may be journalists, public officials, business leaders, or activists. Because they have access to the media, "their" opinions often become "our" opinions.

Public opinion is shaped by what politicians say it is.

This last view recognizes that politicians often talk about "what the people think" without evidence to back up their claims. They may sincerely believe that they have their fingers on "the pulse of the public." Or they may hope that by claiming that the public agrees with them loudly enough, they will convince the American people that it must be true. However public opinion takes shape, it is seldom a single view held by all Americans. Our country is simply too large and diverse for that to be true. Instead, it is more likely to be a range of views held by many different "publics."

Public Opinion as Guide, Guard, and Glue

Public opinion serves our democratic system of government in three key ways. First, it guides leaders as they make decisions about public policy. Whether conveyed through opinion polls, town hall meetings, letters, or e-mails, public opinion helps politicians know what their constituents are thinking. Politicians who ignore what the people care about do so at their own peril. When the next election rolls around, they risk being voted out of office. Public opinion also serves as guard against hasty or poorly understood decisions. President Bill Clinton found this out when he proposed a complex restructuring of the national health care system in 1993. As public confusion about his proposed reforms mounted, the plan lost steam. Without public support, it never even made it to the floor of Congress for debate. Lastly, public opinion serves as a kind of glue in a diverse society like ours. Widespread agreement on basic political beliefs holds our society together, even in times of intense partisan conflict.

Measuring Public Opinion

In 1936, in the depths of the Great Depression, *Literary Digest* announced that Alfred Landon would decisively defeat Franklin Roosevelt in the upcoming presidential election. Based on his own surveys, a young pollster named George Gallup disagreed with that prediction. Not only did Gallup choose Roosevelt as the winner, he publicly challenged newspapers and magazines to show the two polls side by side. The result was a triumph for Gallup, with Roosevelt winning by a landslide. For *Literary Digest*, the most widely circulated magazine in the country, the embarrassment of wrongly calling the election proved disastrous. Its credibility destroyed, the magazine soon slid into bankruptcy.

From Straw Polls to Scientific Sampling: The Evolution of Opinion Polling

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After the 1936 election, many wondered how *Literary Digest* had blundered so badly. The magazine had a record of predicting presidential elections accurately since 1916 using **straw polls**. A straw poll is an informal survey of opinion conducted by a show of hands or some other means of counting preferences. So confident was the *Digest* of this method of predicting elections that it boasted of its “uncanny accuracy.” The magazine conducted its 1936 straw poll by mailing out more than 10 million ballots for people to mark with their choices for president. It predicted the winner based on the over 2 million ballots that were returned. What the *Digest* editors did not take into account was that their sample was biased. Most of the ballots went to people with telephones or registered automobiles. During the depths of the Depression, people wealthy enough to have phones and cars tended to be Republicans who favored Landon. The secret of Gallup’s success was his careful use of **scientific sampling**. Sampling is the process of selecting a small group of people who are representative of the whole population. Rather than mailing out surveys blindly, Gallup interviewed a sample of voters selected to mirror the entire electorate. His survey results underestimated Roosevelt’s popularity on Election Day, but he did predict the winner correctly. His success marked the birth of the modern **opinion poll**.

The Polling Process: Sample, Survey, and Sum Up

Professional polling organizations today follow much the same methods pioneered by Gallup and other early pollsters, though with a few improvements. The first step is to identify the population to be surveyed. The target population might be all adults, members of a political party, a specific age group, or people living in one community. Most polling today is done by telephone. Phoning people randomly ensures that pollsters interview a representative sample of people. In most **random samples**, every individual has a chance of being selected. The number of people surveyed usually ranges from 500 to 1,500. Internet surveys are also widely used. The opinions gathered in the survey are summed up and reported in terms of the percent choosing each response. Most polls also report a margin of error stated as plus or minus (\pm) some number of percentage points. The **margin of error** indicates how accurately the sample surveyed reflects the views of the target population. If the margin of error is small, you can assume that the results reported are close to the opinions of the population as a whole.

The Use of Polling to Measure Public Sentiment

George Gallup saw public opinion polls as the modern equivalent of the old-fashioned New England town meeting. Politicians, he said, should view poll results as a mandate from the people. No longer could public officials ignore voter sentiment, he argued, by claiming that public opinion was unknowable. Today, opinion polls are widely used as means of gathering information about public sentiment. Businesses use polls to measure consumers’ attitudes about their products. Groups of all sorts use polls to find out what their members are concerned about. News organizations commission polls to measure the views of the American people on major issues of the day. One regularly repeated opinion poll, for example, asks people to respond to this open-ended question: *What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?* As you might expect, the results change over time as new issues arise and capture the interest of the public. Other news media polls ask very specific public policy questions. CNN, for example, conducted a poll early in 2007 to gauge public opinion on the issue of global warming. The poll asked, *Do you think the government should or should not put new restrictions on emissions from cars and industrial facilities such as power plants and factories in an attempt to reduce the effects of global warming?* Seventy-five percent of the 500 adults surveyed answered that the government should impose new restrictions. Whether such a result would change the mind of a lawmaker opposed to added restrictions is hard to know. But a legislator who agreed with the majority view might have been encouraged by this poll to press harder for new emission controls. Presidents and other public officials use polls to measure how well they are doing in the eyes of the voters. They use the results to help them develop policies that they hope the public will support. In addition, the news media report regularly on the rise and fall of presidential approval ratings. During the 1980s, Ronald Reagan came to be known as the “Teflon president” because bad news never seemed to stick long enough to seriously damage his popularity.

The Use of Polling in Political Campaigns

Three special kinds of polls are widely used during elections. A long and detailed **benchmark poll** is

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often used by prospective candidates to “test the waters” before beginning a campaign. Candidates use information from such polls to identify which messages to emphasize in their campaigns and which to avoid.

Tracking polls are conducted during a campaign to measure support for a candidate on day-by-day basis. Pollsters survey groups of likely voters each night to find out how their views have been affected by the political events of that day. While each day’s poll is just a snapshot of the electorate’s views, taken together, tracking polls can reveal trends and shifts in attitudes over time. **Exit polls** are used by campaigns and the news media to predict the winners on Election Day long before the polls close. An exit poll is a survey of voters taken at polling places just after they have cast their ballots. Because ballots are cast in secret, exit polling is the only way we have of finding out how different age or ethnic groups of people voted and why. The use of exit polls by television networks led to controversy in 1980 when newscasters predicted that Ronald Reagan had won the presidency long

before polls closed in the West. Critics charged that announcing the winner so early discouraged western voters from going to the polls. As a result, television networks are more careful now not to predict the winner in the presidential race until the polls have closed everywhere in the country. In 2004, an exit poll based on interviews with voters in 49 states appeared on the Internet early on Election Day. The poll showed John Kerry leading George W. Bush, prompting Kerry’s aides to start polishing his victory speech. This false prediction raised serious questions about the accuracy of exit polls. “They are not perfect and they have never been perfect and we have never taken them to be perfect,” says a CBS News senior vice president, Linda Mason.

The Misuse of Polling to Influence Public Opinion

At times polls are used more to shape than to measure public opinion. Elected officials and special interest groups sometimes claim to be assessing public opinion by sending out mail surveys. The questions in these surveys are often rigged to generate highly favorable results for the sponsor of the poll. Former congressman John Dowdy of Texas, for example, once sent a newsletter survey to his constituents with this question: *A drive has recently been announced to destroy the independence of Congress by purging Congressmen who refuse to be rubber stamps for the executive arm of government. Would you want your representative in Congress to surrender to the purgethreat and become a rubber-stamped Congressman?* It is hard to imagine anyone answering yes to such a highly charged question. Thus, not only are mail-in straw polls highly unreliable, as the *Literary Digest* editors discovered. The results can also be skewed. Television and radio shows also use call-in and Internet straw polls to report public opinion. In 1992, news anchor Connie Chung reported on the basis of a call-in poll that 53 percent of Americans reported being “worse off than four years ago.” She went on to say, “This does not bode well for President Bush.” A scientific poll conducted at the same time, but not released until later, showed that only 32 percent of the population felt “worse off” than four years before. By then, however, it was too late to repair whatever damage might have been done to George H. W. Bush’s approval rating. Despite criticism from scientific pollsters, some news shows continue to promote call-in or Internet polls and report the results. One public opinion textbook recommends viewing such polls as the expression of “bored people with strong feelings on some subjects [who] are willing to pay a long-distance charge to register their views.” The 1990s saw the appearance of a highly suspect form of polling called the **push poll**. These are phone surveys, usually made close to Election Day, on behalf of a candidate. The pollsters sound like they want your views on the election. But their real purpose is to “push” you away from voting for their candidate’s opponent by spreading damaging information. A typical push poll begins by asking for whom you plan to vote on Election Day. Should you answer that you plan to vote for the opposing candidate, the next question might be, Would you support that candidate if you knew that she wants to cut spending for schools? The purpose of the question is not to give you useful information, but rather to raise last minute doubts. The American Association for Public Opinion Research has declared push polls to be “an unethical campaign practice.”

The Impact of the Mass Media on Public Opinion

Our opinions are shaped, in part, by the information we receive about the world. And never before in human history has so much information been made available to us through the **mass media**. By 2000, Americans were buying nearly 60 million copies of daily newspapers and 10 thousand copies of weekly or monthly magazines. They listened to nearly 9,000 radio stations and watched an average of six hours of television a day. Add to that the wealth of information made available through the Internet and you can begin to see why many people complained of information overload.

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Where Do Americans Get Their News?

A century ago, this would have been an easy question to answer. Americans got their news from the **print media**—mainly newspapers and magazines. A half-century ago, the answer would have been less simple. By the 1950s, the **broadcast media**—mainly radio and television—had become major sources of news. Where once the broadcast media limited their news offerings to short news summaries and nightly newscasts, we now have 24-hour news programming available on both radio and cable television stations. To make matters still more complex, a growing number of people now get instant news on demand using the **electronic media**—computers, cell phones, and other communication devices that connect via the Internet to the **World Wide Web**. The Web makes billions of documents stored in computers all over the world accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. As the graph on the opposite page shows, the rise of each new medium has changed the public's news-consumption habits.

The News Versus the “New” Media

A generation ago, most Americans looked to trusted **news media**—newspapers, news magazines, and broadcast news shows—for information on politics and public affairs. The news media rely on a small army of reporters, fact-checkers, and editors to research and report stories in an accurate, unbiased manner. Beginning in the late 1980s, new ways to communicate with the public about politics began to appear. These “new” media include talk radio, television talk shows, television news magazines, televised town hall meetings, and cable comedy shows spoofing the news of the day. While running for president in 1992, Bill Clinton became a master at using the new media to talk directly to voters. He even appeared on MTV, playing his saxophone and fielding questions from young people. More recently, news-oriented Web logs, or **blogs**, have emerged as another new medium. A blog is a journal or newsletter posted on the World Wide Web. Because the Web is essentially free, anyone can create a blog to distribute his or her opinions on the news of the day. Blogs are the most democratic and unregulated of all the news and new media. At times, these citizen-journalists have scooped the news media by reporting stories first. The scandal that eventually led to President Bill Clinton's impeachment was first reported by Matt Drudge in 1998 in his blog, *The Drudge Report*. Because bloggers do not have to follow the same standards for accuracy as professional journalists, their reports should be read with caution. Some of what passes for news on blogs may be gossip, false rumor, or opinion. This lack of standards prompted blogger Mark Coffey to wonder, “Have we entered an era where our lives can be destroyed by a pack of wolves hacking at their keyboards with no oversight, no editors, no accountability?”

The Role of a Free Press in a Democracy

The news media—old and new—have three essential roles in a democracy. The first is serving as a “watchdog” over the government. The second is setting the public agenda. The third is supporting the free exchange of ideas, information, and opinions. One of the greatest concerns of our nation's founders was the potential for government officials to abuse their power. They saw a free press as a guard against corruption and the misuse of power. For more than two centuries, the media have fulfilled this watchdog role by exposing everything from the corruption of the Grant administration to the efforts of President Nixon to cover up the Watergate scandal. Far too much happens in the world for the press to report on everything, however. News editors and producers have to choose what to cover and what to leave out. These decisions help determine what issues get placed on the public agenda. Politicians and activists try to harness this **agenda-setting power** of the media to focus attention on issues they care about. Finally, the news media serve as a marketplace of ideas and opinions. The airwaves today are filled with **opinion journalism**—the chatter of “talking heads” eager to share their views with the world. Most people who tune into these electronic debates do so not to receive objective analysis, but rather because they share the talk show host's political point of view.

Influencing the Media: Staging, Spinning, and Leaking

Public officials at all levels of government work hard to both attract and shape media coverage. The most common way to do this is by staging an event and inviting the press. Presidential press conferences are an example of **staged events**. In 2007, Senator Barack Obama launched his presidential campaign by staging an event at Illinois' Old State Capitol, the place where Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous “House divided” speech against slavery in 1858. As hoped, the event attracted thousands of supporters and widespread press coverage. Politicians also try to influence the press by granting

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interviews to reporters. Often they set ground rules that indicate what information reporters can use and how they can identify their source. If it is an **on-the-record conversation**, the report can quote the public official by name. If it is an **off-the-record conversation**, the reporter can use the information but may not reveal the source. When speaking on the record, politicians usually

put their own **spin** on issues. Their goal is to convince both reporters and the public that their view of events is the correct one. They also try to include colorful **sound bites** that capture their main points in just a few words. They know that short sound bites are more likely to be run in news stories than are long speeches. Public officials sometimes use off-the-record conversations to float **trial balloons**. A trial balloon is a proposal that is shared with the press to test public reaction to it. If the reaction is negative, the official can let the proposal die without ever having his or her name attached to it. Off-the-record conversations are also used to **leak** information to the press. A leak is the unofficial release of confidential information to the media. Public officials leak information for many reasons. They may want to expose wrongdoing, stir up support for or opposition to a proposal, spin the way

an event is covered, or curry favor with reporters. In 2000, President Clinton vetoed a bill that would have made it easier to prosecute government officials for leaking secret information to the press. Former Justice Department official John L. Martin said of the anti-leak bill: *The biggest leakers are White House aides, Cabinet secretaries, generals and admirals, and members of Congress. If this were enacted, enforced and upheld by the courts, you could relocate the capital from Washington to [the federal penitentiary at] Lewisburg, PA.*

Are the Media Biased?

Many Americans believe that the media have a liberal or conservative bias. Nevertheless, most professional journalists strive to be fair and unbiased in their reporting. In its code of ethics, the Society of Professional Journalists calls on its members to be "honest, fair and courageous." It cautions that "deliberate distortion is never permissible." What critics see as **media bias** may, in reality, be a reflection of how news organizations work. Most news media outlets are businesses. They need to attract readers, listeners, or viewers to survive. With limited space or time to fill, their reporters, editors, and producers have to make choices about what stories to cover. These decisions are less likely to be motivated by political ideology than by what they think will attract and hold an audience. Journalists look at many factors in choosing what stories to cover. One is impact. Will the story touch people in some way, even if only to make them mad or sad? A second is conflict, preferably mixed with violence. Does the story involve a crime, a fight, a scandal, or a disaster? A third factor is novelty. Is the story about a "hot topic" or a breaking news event? A fourth is familiarity. Does the story involve people we all know and find interesting? These factors influence what you see and hear as news. Because reporters like novelty, you won't see many stories about ongoing issues or social problems. Because they want conflict, you won't see much coverage of compromise in the making of public policy. And because they are looking for impact, bad news almost always wins out over good. As an old saying in journalism goes, "If it bleeds, it leads."

The Influence of the Media in Political Campaigns

In 1960, Richard Nixon and John Kennedy participated in the first televised debate between two presidential candidates. Nixon, weakened by a bout of the flu, appeared nervous, awkward, and uneasy. His face looked pale and sweaty, all the more so because he did not allow the television producers to improve his appearance with makeup. Kennedy, in contrast, appeared confident, relaxed, and appealing. Those who watched the debate on television concluded that Kennedy had "won." Those who listened on the radio considered Nixon the winner. The difference reflected not what the two candidates said about the issues, but rather the images they projected. This outcome underscored the growing importance of image over issues in political campaigns.

Image Making and the Role of Media Consultants

Kennedy's television triumph in 1960 contributed to the rise of new players in political campaigns: media consultants. Their job is to advise candidates on how to present a positive image to voters. They make sure, for example, that their candidates wear flattering colors that will show up well on television. They coach candidates on how to speak to the press and how to respond to voters' questions. Media consultants also help candidates plan their media campaigns. They work with the news media to get free coverage of the campaign in newspapers

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and newscasts. However, most media coverage comes from paid political advertising. Media consultants help decide what ads should say and where and when they should appear. Advertising is expensive. Candidates may spend up to 80 percent of their “war chests,” or campaign funds, on paid ads. Media consultants use opinion polls to make sure that money is spent effectively. They also work with **focus groups** to test the appeal of campaign messages. A focus group is a small group of people who are brought together to discuss their opinions on a topic of concern. Before the public sees a campaign ad, it has probably been discussed and tweaked by a focus group.

Types of Campaign Ads: Issue Versus Image

Political advertisements usually fall into two broad groups. The first group deals with issues, the second with images. Ads in either group can be positive or negative. Positive ads are aimed at making you like or respect a candidate, while negative ads are designed to make you dislike or fear his or her opponent. Both types of ads use persuasive techniques well known to advertisers. Some of those techniques are explained on the previous two pages. Positive issue ads promote a candidate’s position on topics calculated to appeal to voters. A positive issue ad might highlight the candidate’s determination to improve funding for schools or to hold the line on taxes. Negative issue ads, on the other hand, criticize the opponent’s stand on issues of importance to voters. An opponent who opposes the death penalty, for example, might be criticized in a negative issue ad for being “soft on crime.” A positive image ad might show the candidate as a selfless public servant, a strong leader, or someone who cares about ordinary people. The candidate might be portrayed as a hero or as just “plain folk.” In contrast, a negative image ad might portray the opponent as weak, inexperienced, or lacking in integrity. Often negative ads include unflattering photographs of the opposition candidate. The desired effect is to convince voters that this person is somehow unfit for public office.

Attracting Media Coverage: Photo Ops and Streamlined Conventions

For all they spend on advertising, candidates and their media consultants work hard to attract news coverage as well. Almost all aspects of a campaign are designed to generate as much free publicity as possible. Often this is done by creating a **photo op**—short for photo opportunity—for the candidate. A photo op is a carefully staged event designed to produce memorable photographs and video images. One of the most famous photo ops in recent years occurred in 2003 when President Bush, wearing a flight suit, landed on the deck of the aircraft carrier USS *Lincoln* to announce the end of “major combat operations” in Iraq. Clearly visible in the background was a banner stating “Mission Accomplished.” Images of President Bush being cheered by the *Lincoln*’s crew appeared in newscasts and newspapers across the nation. National nominating conventions are also staged to attract maximum media coverage. In the past, conventions were dominated by long-winded speeches and debates over the nominees and platform that bored television viewers. As a result, the broadcast media drastically cut their coverage of these events. In response, parties have streamlined their conventions. Most serious business is completed off camera. Prime time speeches and events are designed mainly to promote the party’s ideas and candidates to the viewing public.

Media Coverage of Elections: Horse Races and Soap Operas

Studies of election news coverage show that most reporting falls into two distinct patterns. The first pattern, **horse race coverage**, treats an election as a sporting event. Horse race stories focus on who is winning and why. Issues are discussed only in terms of whether they will help or hurt the candidate’s chances. Opinion polls, often sponsored by a news organization, are used to track who is ahead or behind. The results of the polls are then covered by the media as campaign news. The second pattern of coverage, **soap opera stories**, focuses on the ups and downs of candidates and their campaigns. Soap opera stories thrive on gossip, scandals, and personality. Questions of “character” are more important than issues. During the 2004 election, for example, stories about Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry often dealt more with his “flipflops” on issues than with the issues themselves. In their hunger for soap opera stories, reporters sometimes practice what has become known as **“gotcha” journalism**. The aim of gotcha journalism is to catch the candidate making a mistake or looking foolish. An example of gotcha journalism occurred during the 2000 presidential primaries when a reporter gave then-governor George W. Bush a “pop quiz,” asking him to name the leaders of Chechnya, Taiwan, India, and Pakistan. When Bush could name only one leader correctly, reporters ran stories with headlines like “Bush gets an F in foreign affairs.”

Why Campaigns “Go Negative”

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At some point during a campaign, media consultants may advise a candidate to “go negative.” This means switching from a positive, upbeat campaign to **negative campaigning**, also known as **mudslinging**. The decision to go negative is not taken lightly. Polls show that the public dislikes attack ads. Going negative also leaves the candidate open to criticism for running a mean-spirited campaign. As Adlai Stevenson warned in 1954, “He who slings mud generally loses ground.” Why then take the risk? Cathy Allen, an experienced media consultant, advises clients to consider negative campaigning only when the candidate has absolute proof that the opponent has done something wrong or when the candidate is facing an uphill battle and has little to lose. In the end, campaigns go negative because it works. Some scholars argue that negative ads work by discouraging voters who might have supported a candidate under attack from going to the polls. Others contend, however, that negative campaigning actually stimulates voter interest. They argue that going negative works not by discouraging voting, but instead by causing more voters to go to the polls and choose a different candidate on Election Day. Like it or hate it, negative campaigning is part of our political tradition. How well it works depends on how you and voters like you react to what you see and hear during each election season.

Answer the following questions from the reading.

1. List six forces that shape political socialization. Rank them in order from 1 (most influence on my political socialization) to 6 (least influence). For the top two items on your list, briefly explain why they have influenced your political socialization.
2. Create a simple diagram or illustration to represent each of the three ways that public opinion is shaped. Label each illustration.
3. Why is public opinion important in a democracy?
4. Explain the difference between straw polls and the scientific sampling process.
5. Create a symbol to represent each of these types of polls: *benchmark polls*, *tracking polls*, *exit polls*, and *push polls*. Then write one or two sentences explaining whether you think each type of poll should be used in political campaigns.
6. Create a simple T-chart. In the first column, list at least three traditional media sources. In the second column, list at least five forms of “new” media. Check off all the forms of media that you have seen or used. Below your chart, identify at least two pros and one con of the new media.
7. What is the role of a free press in a democracy?
8. Describe two ways in which public officials can attract and shape media coverage.
9. Are the media biased? Explain your answer.
10. How important do you think a candidate’s image is during a political campaign?

Write a paragraph for each of the following two questions.

1. Are campaign commercials a good source of information about candidates? Why or why not?
2. How much influence do you think political advertising has on voters during elections? Why?