Protestors against President Obama’s health care reforms react in front of the Supreme Court after the Court upheld its constitutionality in June 2012. The general public was less interested in this case than were these protestors. A week after this historic ruling, the Pew Research Center found that only 55 percent of Americans knew which way the Court had ruled.

In a democracy, public opinion is supposed to guide public policy. America is an unusually diverse nation and public opinion varies widely. In this chapter we will look at the demographics of the American public and how demographic trends will affect politics. We'll learn how political opinions are formed and how they're measured.

We'll also explore the role of ideology in shaping political opinion. Next we'll examine forms of political participation and, finally, we'll consider how public opinion shapes public policy.

The U.S. government spends billions of dollars on counting how many people live in the country. It isn't just a whim. The Constitution requires that a population Census be taken every ten years. The most recent Census was taken in 2010, when the Census Bureau sent forms to all 134 million U.S. households.

Responding to the Census is mandatory but, in typical American fashion, only 72% of households responded, which required the federal government to hire hundreds of thousands of people to go door-to-door to follow up with the non-responders. The government wouldn't have to spend so much on the Census if people would return their forms. It's an expense that could be avoided easily.

Why is the Census so important? The demography of the U.S. determines representation in the House of Representatives and how federal money is allocated.

In an attempt to get more people to fill out their Census forms, the Census Bureau advertised heavily in 2010. One controversial allocation of money was $1.2 million to sponsor NASCAR driver Greg Biffle. Critics said this was a ridiculous use of taxpayer money. In response, Census director Robert Groves argued that millions of Americans followed NASCAR races and that an increase in the initial response to the Census of just 0.1 percent could cut the cost of conducting the Census by $8.5 million. Do you think this was a good idea or a waste of taxpayer money?

The U.S. is often called a nation of immigrants. All Americans except for Native Americans are descended from immigrants. Approximately one million legal immigrants and 500,000 illegal immigrants are still arriving every year. About 12% of the current population is foreign-born.

Historically, immigrants have come in waves from different regions. The first wave, from colonial times through the mid-nineteenth century, came from the British Isles, Germany, and Scandinavia. The second wave, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, came from southern and eastern Europe. Hispanic immigration began to rise in the 1960s, and was followed by a wave of Asian immigrants.

At first the U.S. had an open door policy. Anyone could immigrate from anywhere. But in 1875, Congress began to pass laws limiting undesirable immigrants. At first, criminals, prostitutes, lunatics, and those with diseases were prohibited from entering the country. In 1882, the first ban on immigration by a specific race or ethnicity was passed with the Chinese Exclusion Act.

By 1924, the frontier had long since closed and cities were full of densely populated slums. Alarmed by the number of southern and eastern Europeans who continued to arrive at Ellis Island, Congress established quotas based on national origin.

In 1965, quotas were scrapped in favor of a policy of family integration. Although this seemed like a fair system at the time, today some people think that the emphasis should be put on the individual immigrant's special talents or skills rather than on family connections. What do you think?

America is often called a melting pot because of the way immigrants from all over the world assimilate into American culture. But the new term policymakers use is "minority majority."

As of 2010, whites made up only 63% of the population. Hispanics make up 16%, but they're the fastest growing minority group. By 2050, whites will make up only 48% of the population, less than half.

Based on current birthrates and immigration rates, the Census Bureau estimates that the demographics of the United States should change as shown in the accompanying graph. As of 2012, the census estimated that minority groups should be in the majority for the nation as a whole sometime between 2040 and 2045. Of course, should rates of birth and immigration change, so would these estimates.

Hispanics have succeeded African Americans, who make up 17% of the population, as the largest minority. African Americans are the only immigrant group who were brought here against their will. Over a quarter of African Americans still live in poverty, a legacy of the racism and discrimination they have faced. But the political power of African Americans is increasing, as evidenced by the presidency of Barack Obama.

Illegal immigration is an ongoing political problem. The 1986 Simpson-Mazzoli Act forbids employers from knowingly employing illegal immigrants but it has not proven to be an effective deterrent because of both weak enforcement and the difficulty of proving that an employer knew that a worker's documents were fake.

As of 2012, the Department of Homeland Security estimated that the number of illegal immigrants in the United States stood at 11.5 million, 59 percent of whom were from Mexico. Here, a border patrol car (at the upper right) patrols along the fence between Nogales, Arizona, and Mexico.

Historically, most immigrant groups have adopted the values that make up American political culture within a few generations. There's always concern that new groups will not assimilate. This concern has been unfounded in the past, but it remains a persistent fear that leads to negative attitudes toward immigrants.

By the time this little Chinese-American girl (born in China but now an American citizen) graduates from college, Asian Americans will represent 8 percent of the U.S. population. As the most highly educated segment of the coming “minority majority,” it is likely that they will be exercising a good deal of political power by then.

The Northeast has historically been the most populous region of the country, but westward and southward migration has increased since World War II. Internal migration is heaviest into the so-called Sun Belt states, especially Arizona, Texas, and Florida.

A state's political power ebbs and flows with its population because of reapportionment, which is the practice of reallocating House seats after each census.

In recent decades, states in the Southwest have gained seats and states in the Northeast have lost them.

The population of the United States is aging. People over 65 are the fastest growing age group, as longevity increases and fertility rates fall. This demographic shift has critical implications for the Social Security program, which is dependent on the contributions of current workers to pay out benefits to current retirees. As the ratio of workers to retirees shifts, there will be fewer workers paying into the system to support an increasing number of retirees.

But citizens over 65 are a politically active group, and it has proven to be political suicide for a candidate to threaten to cut Social Security benefits. Candidates must think very long term when they make plans to revise the system, assuring people over the age of 55 or so that any changes will not affect them

How do Americans acquire their political viewpoints? The process of developing one's political orientation is called political socialization. It starts when we are very young and continues throughout our lifetimes.

In authoritarian regimes, political socialization can take the form of rigid indoctrination, but the process is much more informal in the U.S. Political socialization starts at home, with your family.

**Activity:** Ask students to think about the role of political symbols in society. In particular, ask students to list these symbols and where they're most often seen. These symbols include the flag, the Constitution, Uncle Sam, etc. Discuss the Pledge of Allegiance as a socializing agent for young children, as well as activities during Fourth of July celebrations, which are often used to reinforce public values of nationalism, patriotism, and reverence for the Constitution.

This exercise provides an unintimidating yet thoughtful way of emphasizing just how political socialization has been used to instill principles, values, and beliefs in citizens.

The civics and U.S. history classes that you take in school are only the tip of the iceberg as far as political socialization goes. The most influential learning is informal, through attitudes you pick up and absorb.

The family plays the central role in political socialization. Although everyone likes to think of him- or herself as an independent political thinker, the strongest predictor of your political party preference is that of your parents. You spend more time with them and have more of an emotional investment in their worldview than you do with other agents of political socialization, such as your school.

Many young people are getting political socialization from the mass media, especially television. However, despite the increasing media saturation of young people's lives, they are not watching the news. The median age of news program viewership is 63. This explains why increasing media exposure has led to more political ignorance rather than less.

The only formal involvement that the government has in political socialization is through the public school system, in which students are educated to have a positive view of the U.S. political system, and to value free enterprise and democracy. The more educated citizens are, the more likely they are to vote and to be tolerant of opposing opinions Political socialization is most pronounced in our childhood and young adult years but it continues throughout our lives. Political participation increases dramatically with age, and party identification solidifies. Political behavior is learned behavior, and this learning slows down but never stops.

In the 2010 congressional elections, the relationship between age and turnout was particularly pronounced. Because young adults tend to be more liberal than older voters, political analysts concluded that the low turnout rate of young people cost the Democrats a substantial number of seats in the House and Senate in 2010.

Which age group has the highest turnout rate? Which has the lowest? Can you explain why this is the case?

Family is the most important agent of political socialization because we spend the most time with family, from the earliest age, and have the greatest emotional commitment to family members.

We have just discussed how Americans form their political opinions. We have also established that public opinion is supposed to guide public policy in a democracy. But how do we know what the public's opinion is on political issues? How do we even know which political issues are important to the public?

Voting, of course, is one measure of public opinion, but it is not very precise. We mainly measure public opinion through polls that take a random sample of the population and extrapolate their views to the entire population. This section explains how that is done.

It would be extremely expensive and time-consuming to poll every American, so polls use a small sample of the population instead. In order for the views of the sample to accurately reflect the views of the population as a whole, the sample must be completely random. That is, everyone must have an equal chance of being polled. When the opinions of a random sample of 1,500 Americans are polled, researchers can be reasonably confident that their views represent the views of the whole population, and their degree of confidence can be quantified.

Most polls aim to have a large enough sample to give a 95% confidence level that the results are accurate to plus or minus 3%. In other words, if 90% of the population says they disapprove of the job Congress is doing, the actual percentage of the population that holds this view is between 87% and 93%.

The key to an accurate sample is its randomness. A biased sample will be misleading. Modern communications technology has made it easier and cheaper to obtain random samples. Most polling is done over the telephone, via random digit dialing. This is cheaper than in-person polling, but has a lower response rate.

As more Americans switch from landlines to cell phones, the cost of polling is increasing. It's illegal to use autodial technology to call cell phones, so the polling organization must employ an actual human to dial the numbers. People are also more reluctant to respond to surveys on their cell phones.

Polling may be conducted mainly over the Internet in the future. Some polling organizations are just beginning to find ways to overcome sampling issues associated with using the Internet for polls.

Polling enables political candidates to learn what promises to make and what policies to support or distance themselves from. More importantly, polling enables elected officials to gauge public opinion between elections. Polls showing public support, or lack thereof, for a bill can determine how legislators will vote on it. Polling increases the role of public opinion in democratic government, but critics charge that it causes politicians to follow rather than lead.

But does it really? Politicians maintain that they don't use polls in order to craft policy to match public opinion. On the contrary, they use polls to strategize how to shape public opinion to support the policies they want to impose. They find key words and phrases that help them to spin their policy proposals to obtain popular support.

There's also potential for a bandwagon effect, in which people support a popular candidate simply because polls have shown that he's popular.

Exit polls are a type of poll that is actually dangerous because they do more than measure public opinion. They can determine electoral outcomes. In part due to time differences, polls that show which candidate is ahead in an electoral race can discourage voters from bothering to go to the polls.

How a question is worded is important because it can affect how a respondent answers. Pollsters need to strive for neutral wording and avoid leading questions.

Americans are grossly uninformed about politics and about the world around them in general. Jefferson's supposed faith in the wisdom of the common people was unfounded. He was correct that education gives them better capacity as citizens, but education alone is not enough to create an informed electorate.

Why are Americans so poorly informed about politics? Some say it's the fault of the schools. Others blame the media. What do you think?

Given the lack of political knowledge, how does our system function? Some people are one-issue voters, choosing a candidate based on his view on a single issue, such as abortion or gun control, that is important to them. Other voters belong to groups that they trust to pick like-minded candidates, such as environmental organizations or their church. And some voters simply vote for the party in power when times are good, and vote for the other party when times are bad.

**Activity:** Have students identify several reasons that may account for American citizens being so poorly informed about politics. What are ways in which lack of information can be successfully dealt with?

Should Americans be concerned with this situation?

What proposals might be developed to remedy this situation?

Can you identify all of these countries? In 2002, a major study sponsored by *National Geographic* interviewed a representative sample of 18- to 24-year-old Americans to test their knowledge of world geography. The average respondent got 46 percent of the questions right. Believe it or not, 11 percent of young Americans could not even find their own country on the map. Despite the American military campaign in Afghanistan after September 11, only 17 percent could correctly identify that country on the map.

At the midpoint of the twentieth century, nearly three-quarters of Americans trusted the government to do the right thing. Thirty years later, in 1980, that figure was only 25%. What caused this decline in trust? The Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the economic and hostage crises of the 1970s all took a massive toll on public trust in government. There was a brief uptick in public trust after 9/11, but overall this decline seems to be permanent.

Is public cynicism good or bad for democracy? On the one hand, it keeps politicians on their toes. But on the other, it shows that most people don't believe that the government is serving their interests—which, after all, is its purpose in a democracy.

One result of public distrust is a lack of support for programs that aid the poor. In order for taxpayers to pay into a government program from which they don't receive direct benefits, they need to trust that the program will serve the public interest. The major effect of declining trust in government has been a sharp decline in belief that the government can solve problems. Republicans exploit this cynicism to push free enterprise and cut both taxes and government spending, ignoring the fact that the private sector's profit motive makes it ill-suited to address some societal needs.

This graph shows how people have responded over time to the following question: how much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time? When this question was written in 1958, survey researchers could not imagine that anyone would respond "never," so the traditional wording of the trust in government question omits this option. In 2012, about 5 percent of respondents volunteered that they never trusted the government. Some pollsters have experimented with including the option of "never" and have found that as much as 10 percent of their sample will choose it.

A political ideology is a coherent set of values and beliefs about public policy. The two main political ideologies in the U.S. are liberal and conservative. Most Americans aren't ideologically consistent, and hold some liberal and some conservative views.

Liberal and conservative —these labels are thrown around in American politics as though everyone knows what they mean. Here are some of the political beliefs likely to be preferred by liberals and conservatives. This table, to be sure, is oversimplified.

 More Americans identify themselves as conservative than liberal, which partly explains the restrained scope of government compared to other wealthy democracies. Younger people tend to be less conservative than their elders but they also vote less, which partly explains why conservative views are overrepresented in public policy.

Minorities tend to be less conservative than whites because they have had to look to the government to help solve problems of poverty and discrimination that they've faced.

The wealthy tend to be more conservative; they favor less government and lower taxes because they feel that they are doing just fine on their own.

Although women make up a majority of the population, they've been a disadvantaged group, and they tend to vote Democratic more than men.

The more religious someone is, the more conservative they tend to be. This is true regardless of race, gender, or social class, and regardless of which religion they subscribe to.

A classic study of voting habits, called *The American Voter*, divided voters into four types. "Ideologues" make a connection between their beliefs and a candidates' policy positions, such as voting for Republicans because they favor lower taxes or smaller government, or voting for Democrats because they favor stronger regulations or liberal social policies.

"Group benefits" voters pick a party based on group identification, such as considering the Republicans the party that supports small business owners or the Democrats as the party of the working man.

"Nature of the times" voters tend to vote for the party in power in good times and vote for the other party when times are tough.

Around a quarter of voters use no issue content to make their voting decisions, picking the party they routinely vote for or the candidate whose personality appeals to them.

Follow-up surveys have found fewer than a quarter of voters using purely ideological criteria for voting. Since voters aren't ideologically consistent, a victory by one party or the other isn't a mandate for the ideological agenda of that party.

Some commentators feel that America is in the midst of a culture war. Others disagree, saying that societal attitudes have warmed toward gays and lesbians over the past 25 years. Why do you think there is increasing acceptance of homosexuality in the U.S.?

When you think of political participation, voting is probably the first activity that leaps to mind. But it's far from the only form of political participation open to Americans. Citizens can participate in political caucuses, write to their legislative representatives, file lawsuits, and stage marches, rallies, and demonstrations.

Only around half of eligible voters vote in presidential elections, and even fewer vote in midterm and local elections, yet more than 80% express satisfaction with the way democracy works in the U.S.

Voting is the most common form of political participation, and the only one to have experienced a decline in recent years. Other conventional forms of political participation include running for office, working on and donating to campaigns, signing petitions, and contacting government officials. Americans have become increasingly involved in these other forms of conventional political participation.

Protesting is a more dramatic means of achieving policy change than casting a ballot or writing to your Congressman. Protests attract the attention of the media, the public, and politicians. Protesters want their policy issue to be impossible to ignore. Protests are rare compared to more conventional forms of political participation, such as contacting government officials.

Civil disobedience is the act of breaking laws that you consider to be unjust. The sit-ins by civil rights activists at whites-only lunch counters are an example of civil disobedience.

Most protests and acts of civil disobedience are peaceful, but violence sometimes breaks out. Protesters can resort to violence themselves or, more commonly, they can remain peaceful but be met with violence from police or the military.

Nonviolent civil disobedience was one of the most effective techniques of the civil rights movement in the American South. Young African Americans and white supporters sat at "whites only" lunch counters to protest segregation. Photos such as this drew national attention to the injustice of racial discrimination.