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# Measuring and Influencing Public Opinion

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The First Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees the right of freedom of the press and freedom of speech. These important liberties allow individuals in our country to receive information and develop opinions about topics of importance. Once an individual has a basic set of beliefs, they usually find there are others who share the same views. When a large group of people shares the same belief on a political topic, it is called **public opinion**. The government wants to know how people feel about many different subjects. So do interest groups, political parties, candidates for office, and the media. They gather this information through polls.

A **poll** is a set of questions about a certain subject. Polls must be properly worded, ordered, and timed to be accurate. It is very easy to word and order questions to influence the person being polled. Because there have been problems in the past, there are **independent** groups that now set the standards for polls. They help to make sure questions are specific and detailed so that precise results are obtained. In addition, public opinion can change rapidly, especially on new issues that arise. Therefore, polls must be timed appropriately. When an issue first arises, it is usually best to allow some time to pass before taking a poll. This gives people the time to process information about the issue before expressing their opinion. When properly formatted and conducted, polls give people a way to express their opinions in order for beliefs to be measured. Using mathematics and **statistics**, pollsters can determine how to gather accurate information. However, polls are never one hundred percent accurate. All include a scientifically calculated margin of error.

A **randomly** selected group of people takes part in a poll. The sample of people chosen must reflect the larger picture. For example, the government might want to know what senior citizens think about their health care. The poll would include questions related to how people over sixty-five feel about the care they receive. It may also include what kind of care they receive on a regular basis and general questions such as income and gender. The sample should include enough people to represent the senior population at large.

Polls can be conducted by personal interviews, telephone interviews, random surveys in public places, or through the mail. Today, most polls are conducted through telephone interviews. This method is a quick, inexpensive, and **efficient** way of obtaining information. Once the poll is completed, the information is thoroughly analyzed and reported.

The media (television, radio, magazines, and newspapers) reports the results of polls to the public. In addition, the media gathers, compiles, and reports information the public is entitled to receive. By doing this, the media helps to shape public opinion. The media also acts as a **regulator** to keep an eye on what is happening in our government. Through investigating and reporting abuses of power, the media keeps the people informed.

The amount of information that is gathered by the media every day is tremendous. Their job is to sift through it and report the most important stories to the public. By doing this, they act as a **filter** of information. Although most of what we hear is negative, the term "no news is good news" applies. If it is good news, it is not really news. The media is supposed to be **unbiased** in their reporting, however, this is a nearly impossible task. People who have opinions run the media. These beliefs are going to show up in the information being reported. Their personal opinions form how information is reported and which information is reported.

In our free society, people are entitled to their own opinions. In addition, they are free to voice these thoughts without fear of **reprisal** from the government. The freedom of the press helps to keep the public informed. The information provided assists the public in forming the opinions they hold. When properly measured, public opinions inform the government of the will of the people.

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### Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The freedoms of speech and the press help the public to receive information and develop opinions.
- A. false  
B. true

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. When a large group of people shares the same belief on a political topic, this is called:
- A. public freedom
  - B. public offering
  - C. public opinion
  - D. public ideology
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. A set of questions about a particular subject asked to a randomly selected group of people is called a:
- A. opinion
  - B. ideology
  - C. pole
  - D. poll
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Polls can be one hundred percent accurate by carefully using scientific calculations.
- A. false
  - B. true
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. How are most polls conducted?
- A. telephone interview
  - B. random survey in a public place
  - C. personal interview
  - D. mail survey
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Why is it nearly impossible for the media to be completely unbiased?
- A. The people who run the media don't want to be.
  - B. People who have opinions run the media.
  - C. They have to sway public opinion.
  - D. It's their job to be biased.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. How does the media act as a filter of information?
- A. by sorting through the large amounts of information available each day
  - B. by reporting the most important stories each day
  - C. deciding what the public needs to know
  - D. all of the above

- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Polls give the public a way to express their beliefs and opinions so that the government knows how they feel on certain issues.
- A. false
  - B. true