

Guide to Reading

Big Idea

A democratic society requires the active participation of its citizens.

Content Vocabulary

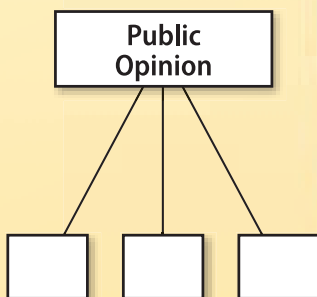
- public opinion (p. 319)
- mass media (p. 320)
- interest group (p. 321)
- public opinion poll (p. 323)
- pollster (p. 323)

Academic Vocabulary

- uniform (p. 319)
- gender (p. 319)
- survey (p. 323)

Reading Strategy

Identifying As you read, complete a graphic organizer like the one below by identifying the three features of public opinion.



Section

1



Section Audio



Spotlight Video

Forming Public Opinion

Real World Civics Have you heard about all the opinion polls that roll out during election time? Internet blogs are everywhere. In politics, voter opinion is constantly monitored. Students are often part of these polls, as during the Kerry-Bush debates in their 2004 race for president. Pollsters gathered information in pre-debate polls and then in post-debate polls to evaluate shifts in opinion as a result of the debate. Overnight approval ratings of the candidates can rise or drop dramatically because of these polls.

▼ **Students in Pennsylvania post online opinions following 2004 presidential debates**



Public Opinion

Main Idea Public opinion, the ideas and attitudes most people hold, plays a vital role in our democracy.

Civics & You How often have you heard that a president's popularity is up or down? Whose opinion does this represent? Read to find out how public opinion is created and how it, in turn, shapes the way our country is governed.

Public opinion is a term that refers to the ideas and attitudes that most people hold about a particular issue or person. Public opinion plays a key role in a democracy.

Role of Public Opinion For example, public opinion helps shape the decisions of every president. Presidents know they need the support of the public to carry out presidential programs. They also need the support of Congress. Presidents are more likely to have this support if their popularity with the public is high.

Understanding public opinion can also help presidents make effective, timely decisions. Successful presidents have a good sense of when the public is ready for a new idea and when it is not. Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed this idea when he said, "I cannot go any faster than the people will let me."

Diversity Public opinion is not **uniform**, or alike, however. In fact, most Americans agree on very few issues. On any given issue, different groups of the "public" often hold different viewpoints. For example, some Americans support increasing the nation's military forces, while others strongly disagree and wish to minimize military spending. Between these two positions are many shades of opinions. Enough people must hold a particular opinion, however, to make government officials listen to them.



Protecting Animals Activist Tony Madsen protests the treatment of animals by the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. **Analyzing** How might a person's age or residence have an effect on his or her opinions?

Sources of Public Opinion

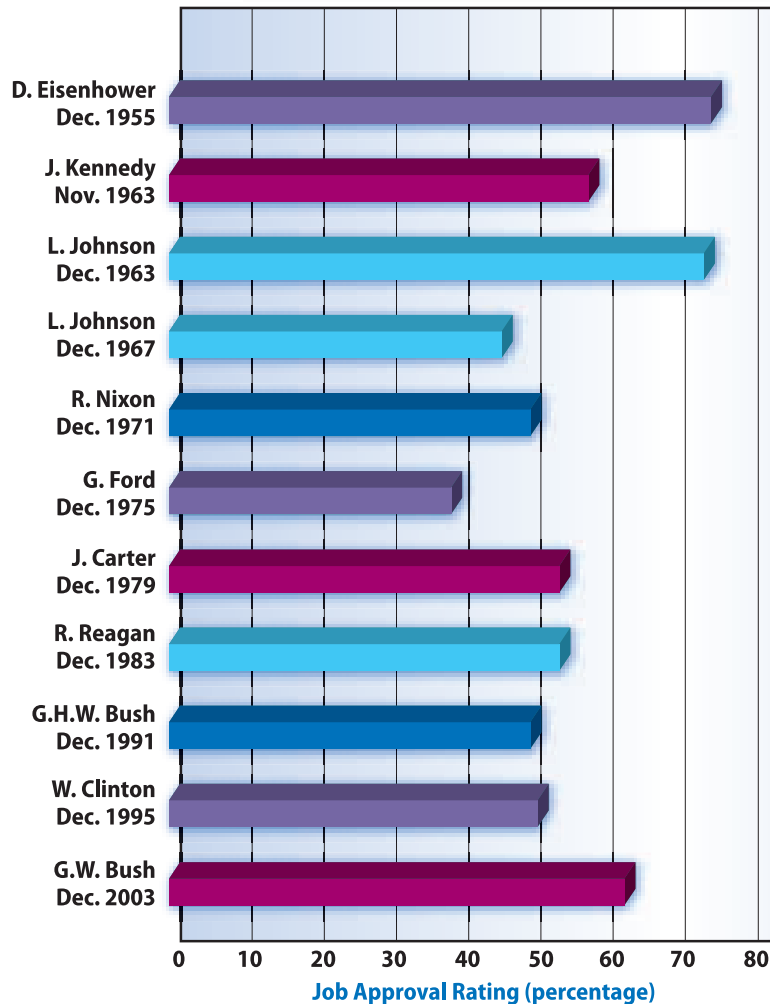
Where does public opinion come from? Why do people often hold widely differing opinions about a particular issue or government action? Among the factors that influence public opinion are a person's background, the mass media, public officials, and interest groups.

Personal Background People's lives and experiences have a major influence on their opinions. Age, **gender**, income, race, religion, occupation, and place of residence play important roles. For example, a wealthy young person who lives in a big city may have very different opinions about the government's role in providing social services than might a poor elderly person who lives in a small town or rural area.

Pre-Election Approval Ratings, 1955–2003

Graphs in Motion

See StudentWorks™ Plus or glencoe.com.



RESULTS

Eisenhower

reelected in 1956

Kennedy

assassinated Nov. 22, 1963

Johnson

elected in 1964

Johnson

did not run

Nixon

reelected in 1972

Ford

lost election in 1976

Carter

lost election in 1980

Reagan

reelected in 1984

G.H.W. Bush

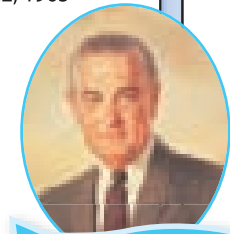
lost election in 1992

Clinton

reelected in 1996

G.W. Bush

reelected in 2004



Lyndon Johnson



Ronald Reagan

Sources: Gallup; USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Polls.

Analyzing Graphs

Analyzing The poll asked the question “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [the president] is handling his job as president?” Most presidents who ended their third year in office with a job approval rating above 50 percent and ran for another term were reelected. Who was not? What presidents had approval ratings of more than 70 percent? Were they reelected?

The Mass Media A medium is a means of communication. (The plural form of the word is *media*.) A letter you send to a friend, for example, is a private medium of communication between the two of you. Television,

radio, newspapers, magazines, recordings, movies, Internet Web sites, and books are called the **mass media** because they communicate broadly to masses of people.

Public Officials Political leaders and government officials can influence public opinion. When voters elect people to office, they are indicating that they trust those officials and rely on their opinions. When public officials state their views, they hope to persuade as many people as possible to support their positions.

Interest Groups Individuals who share a point of view about an issue sometimes unite to promote their beliefs. They form what is called an **interest group**. Interest groups work at influencing public opinion by trying to persuade people—including public officials—toward their point of view. Interest groups are sometimes called pressure groups. This refers to their attempts at putting pressure on government to act in their interests.

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Direction One important question is whether public opinion on any given topic is positive or negative. For example, are people for or against spending more money on national defense? Do people support or oppose a cut in taxes? On most topics, public opinion is mixed, with some people expressing positive opinions and other people holding negative opinions.

Features of Public Opinion

Public opinion is often described in terms of three features: *direction*, *intensity*, and *stability*. These terms are discussed in the following paragraphs.

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Intensity Intensity refers to the strength of an opinion on a given issue. When Americans do have strong feelings, many are often willing to act upon them by voting for or against a candidate, working in an election campaign, or even participating in demonstrations.

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Powerful Photos Images shown in the media are often meant to catch attention or change people's opinions about an issue. The baseball player needs funding for a better ballpark. This duck is covered in oil. **Explaining** What interest group would want to publicize this image of the duck?



American Biography

Ethel Percy Andrus (1884–1967)

Ethel Percy Andrus spent her life as an educator, becoming the first female principal of a California high school at age 32. When she retired at age 60 in 1944, Andrus volunteered to direct California's Retired Teachers Association. What she discovered troubled her. Many retired teachers struggled to survive on small

pensions, often with no health insurance.

Andrus decided to form retired teachers into an alliance that would force lawmakers to listen to them. In 1947 she founded the National Retired Teachers Association.



In 1956 the organization won the first health insurance program for educators over age 65. Two years later, Andrus founded the American Association for Retired Persons, now known as the AARP.

Under the direction of Andrus, the AARP became a powerful lobby, focused on meeting the needs of all Americans over age 50. Today the AARP has more than 34 million members. The AARP advises the government on age-related issues and protects programs like Social Security. Staffed mostly by volunteers, the AARP tries to fulfill the motto given to it by Andrus: "To Serve; Not to be Served!"

Making a Difference

CITIZENSHIP

Ethel Andrus was active in education her whole life. **Identifying** What contributions did Andrus make that benefited older Americans?

Stability The stability of public opinion—meaning how firmly people hold to their views—may differ greatly from issue to issue. People's opinions are less likely to change when they have a firm belief. For example, most people's opinions about civil rights are more stable than their opinions about political candidates. Evidence suggests that most Americans hold the strongest convictions about issues that directly affect their lives. It is one thing to support more aid to the poor if you are poor. It is quite another if you are extremely well off. In some campaigns, voters change their minds many times before Election Day. Thus, public opinion on candidates is relatively unstable.

Reading Check **Describing** Why is public opinion of interest to government officials?

Measuring Public Opinion

Main Idea The most common way of measuring public opinion is with public opinion polls.

Civics & You Have you ever taken part in an opinion poll? Did you think about why the poll was being taken? Read to find out the role of opinion polls in measuring public attitudes.

If public opinion is to affect public policy, then political leaders must be made aware of it. One way to measure public opinion is by looking at election results. If voters elect a candidate, presumably many of them agree with most of the candidate's ideas.