

What's Your Opinion?

Article



WASHINGTON, D.C. Should there be stricter gun laws? Should health care be free? Should teachers be paid more? These are just *some* of the hot topics we hear about on the news and then debate around the dinner table. After all, we all have opinions.

Sometimes, our own opinion matches the public opinion. This is the view that a majority of the public has about an issue. Public opinion is measured by polls or surveys that ask a sampling of people what they think. Whenever you hear things like "Two-thirds of Americans oppose..." or "A majority of Americans believe...", you are probably hearing the results of public opinion polls.



Photo credit: PeopleImages/E+/Getty
Students raise hands to voice their opinions.

Public opinion polls can help the government decide which laws to make. After all, our government is made up of people who represent us. If polls show most Americans are in favor of a particular bill, Congress might feel bold enough to pass it into law.

Interest Groups

Interest groups try to influence public opinion, as well as the views and actions of lawmakers. These groups gather resources and people who share the same view on an issue. They then work to persuade the public and lawmakers to support government actions that help their own interests. They may hire lobbyists to meet with members of the government and discuss the groups' issues and concerns. There are hundreds of interest groups in the United States. Most can be divided into five different categories.

Public-interest groups: Focus on topics that affect the general public like education, the environment, and politics

Economic-interest groups: Promote the economic interests of business, labor, and trade organizations

Professional groups: Advocate for people in particular professions, such as doctors, lawyers, or teachers

Ideological groups: Promote policies based on a set of core political or religious beliefs

Single-issue groups: Focus on one narrow topic, such as immigration or drunk driving

Interest groups use several strategies to influence government. These strategies include endorsing candidates and raising money to help them get elected. But there are rules in place to stop groups from "buying" a candidate's loyalty to their cause.

Mass Media

In addition to interest groups, public opinion is influenced by another powerful factor: the mass media. Mass media includes newspapers, radio, magazines, social media, and television. They are largely responsible for deciding which issues society cares about. Think about it. An issue won't get on the public agenda (a to-do list of issues) if nobody has heard about it.

Politicians are aware of the power of mass media. In recent years, many have used social media to promote their political goals. One popular platform used to influence public opinion is Twitter, where politicians can sum up their views about an issue using just a few words at a time. When it's time to have a more in-depth discussion about the issue, politicians go on television in order to reach millions of homes around the country.

It's not surprising that mass media plays a role in election results. Spreading the ideas of each candidate helps people decide whom they should vote for on Election Day.

Propaganda

While they are receiving mass media content from politicians and the government, some citizens are careful about weeding out propaganda. Propaganda is media that uses carefully crafted messages to manipulate people's actions and beliefs. There are many propaganda techniques. For example, one-sided messages can appeal to people's feelings instead of their judgment and reasoning.

Another method is name-calling. Name-calling is exactly what it sounds like: using negative words and bad names to create fear and dislike for people, ideas, or institutions. Name-calling can be verbal or visual. When done visually, it shows a person or thing in an unpleasant way. You can find both techniques in political cartoons, political attack ads, and talk shows.

Public opinion can be shaped in many ways, so it's important to look critically at the messages we come across each day.

Portions of this reading were created by iCivics, Inc. and are used with their permission.

Dictionary

advocate (*verb*) to speak or write in favor of something

endorse (*verb*) to publicly support

lobbyist (*noun*) someone who tries to influence public officials for or against a specific cause

manipulate (*verb*) to change something so that you can get what you want

policy (*noun*) a plan that is made and put in place by a leader or group of leaders

Main Idea Chart

Topic:

Main Idea:

Details

Details

Details

Examples/Facts/Quotes

Examples/Facts/Quotes

Examples/Facts/Quotes

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO PRINT OUT-

Main Idea Chart

Read through "What's Your Opinion?" article completely. Then read it again, paying attention to:

Topic:

1 point Relevant and describes article

Main Idea:

2 points

One main idea that accurately describes the article - do not just write 1 or 2 words

Details

You may use bullet points here:

- phrases that have accurate details
- supports main idea

2 points

Details

- neatly written
- makes sense
- logical

2 points

Details

- at least 2 details in each section
- these are facts in your own words

2 points

Examples/Facts/Quotes

- must match detail
- accuracy counts!

2 points

Examples/Facts/Quotes

- bullet points
- makes sense

2 points

Examples/Facts/Quotes

- prove this article makes sense
- NEATNESS counts!

2 points

RUBRIC 15 POINTS