



# Public Opinion and Government Responsiveness Part II

How confident are we that the power to drive and determine public opinion will always reside in responsible hands?

Carl Sagan



# How We Form Political Opinions

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- ▶ **socialization:** Many people's political opinions start with what they learned from their parents and surrounding culture. For example, there is a high correlation between one's party identification and the liberal-conservative ideology of their parents.
- ▶ **events:** People can revise their opinions in response to what happens to them and in the world around them.
- ▶ **group identity:** Groups such as gender, race or education level may influence an individual's opinion in three ways: (1) We learn about politics from the people around us. (2) We may rely on others who are like us as a source of opinions. (3) Candidates and political consultants often formulate their campaign strategies in terms of groups.
- ▶ **politicians and other political actors:** influence opinions and changes in opinion because of their presumed expertise ... also work to
- ▶ shape public opinion in order to win support for their proposals

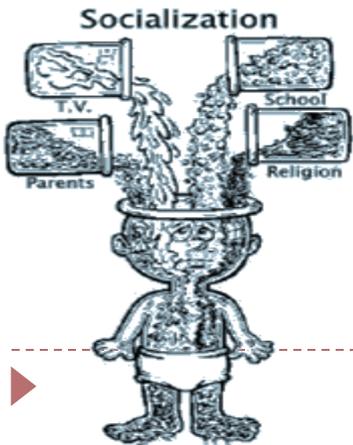


# Political Socialization

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...the process, most notably in families and schools, by which we develop our political attitudes, values and beliefs ... continues throughout our lifetimes

for example, **nationalism**: “As soon as we are born, in most places on this earth, we acquire a nationality, a membership in a community ... a royal doll, a flag to wave in a parade, coins with their engraved messages, these are sources of instruction and connect a young person to a country.” (Robert Coles)



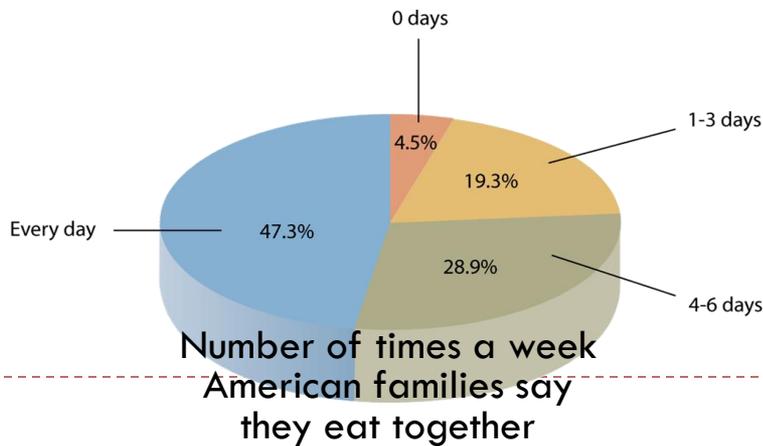


# Agents of Political Socialization

- ▶ family
- ▶ school: teach an idealized view of the nation's slogans and symbols
- ▶ popular culture
- ▶ major events
- ▶ college education
- ▶ job, career
- ▶ socioeconomic status
- ▶ media: over  $\frac{2}{3}$  of Americans report that they receive all or most of their news from television
- ▶ religion: those raised in religious households tend to be socialized to contribute to society and get involved in their communities



- ▶ marriage
- ▶ retirement
- ▶ age / stage of life
- ▶ life experiences

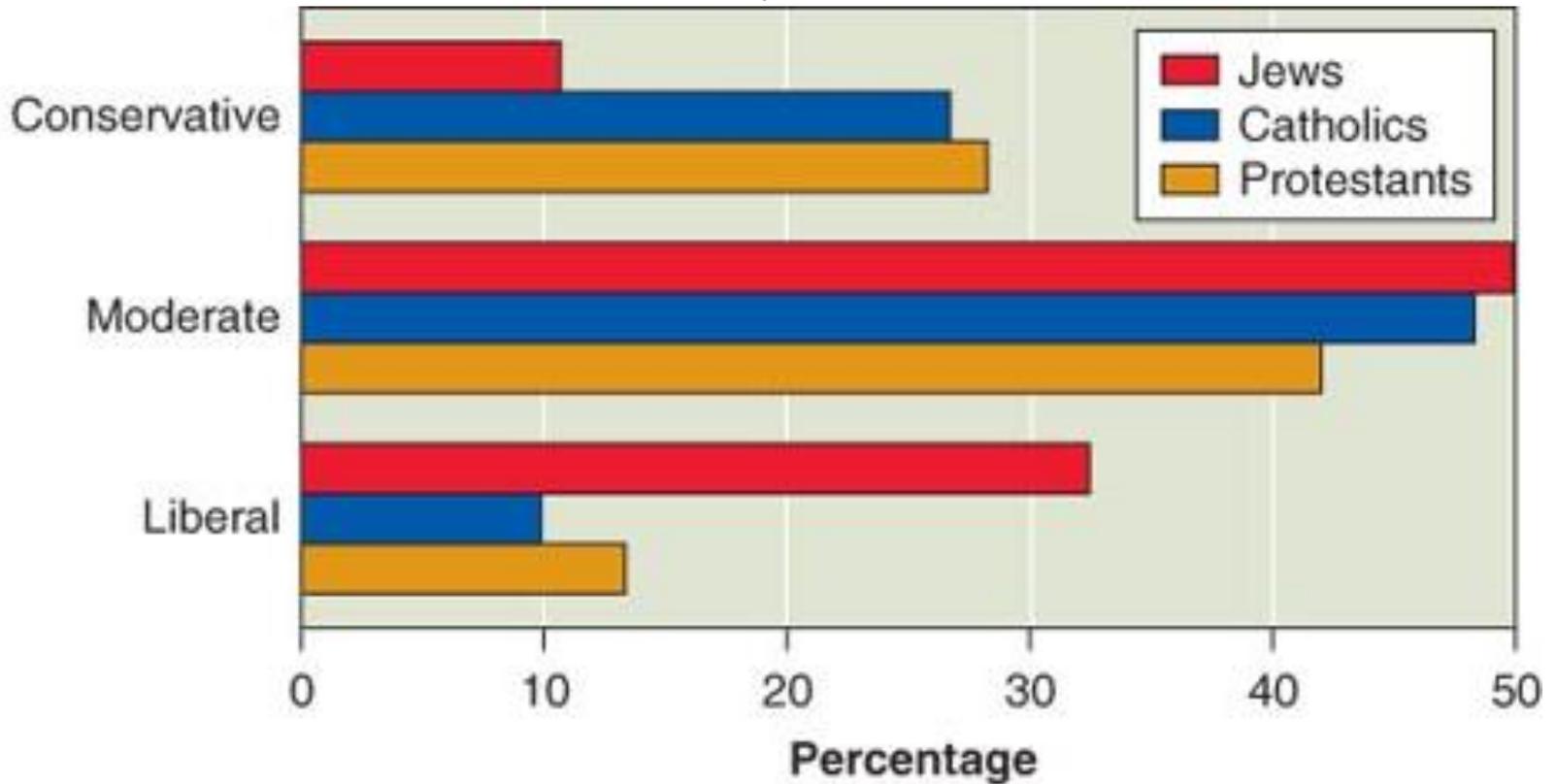




# Religion and Socialization

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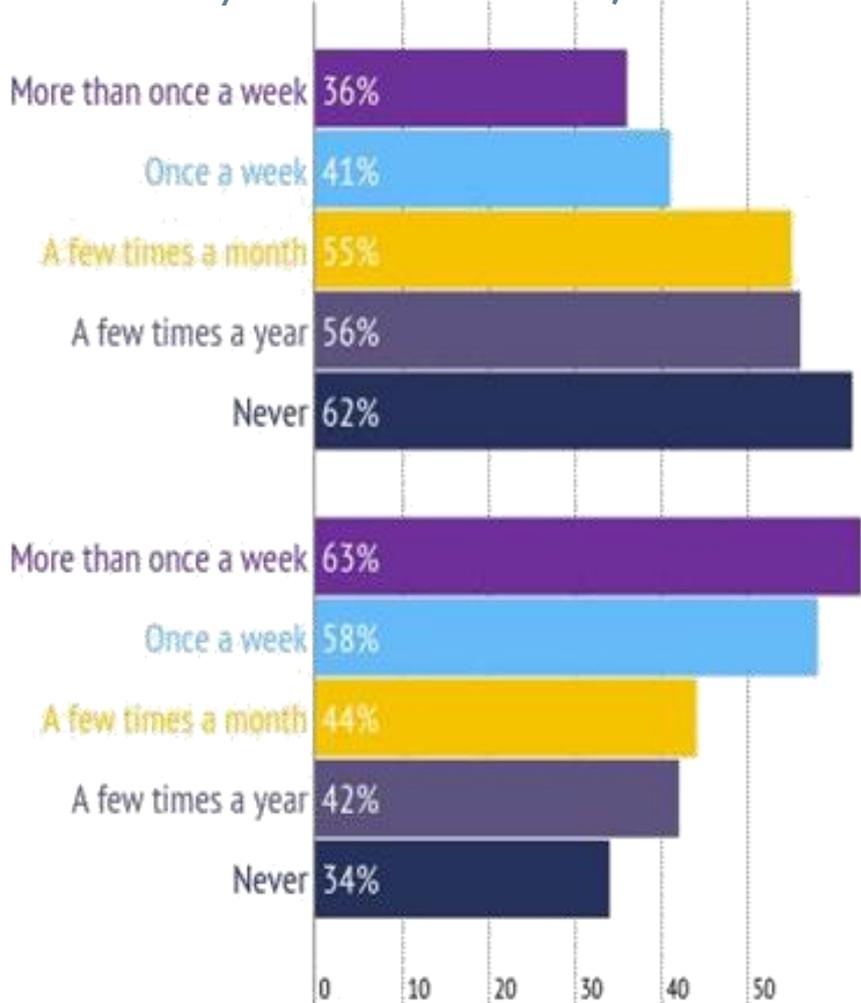
The Ideological Self-Identification of Protestants, Catholics and Jews



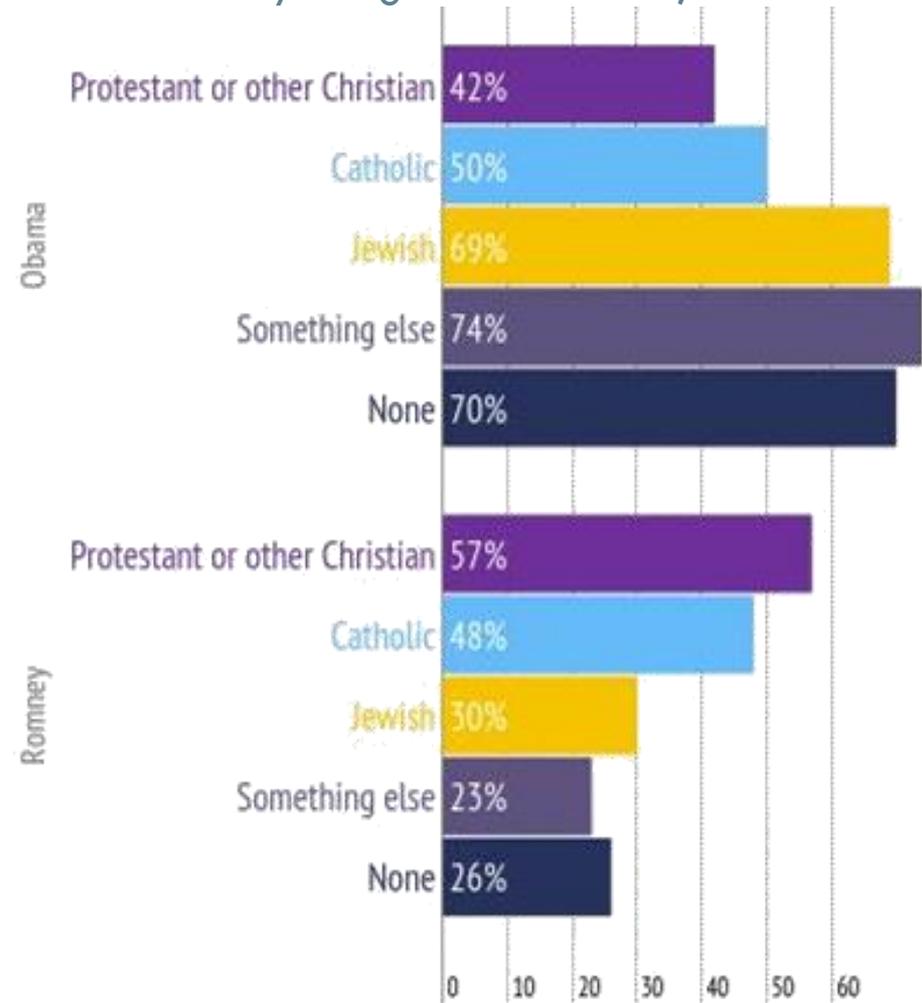


# Religion and Socialization

## Vote by Church Attendance, 2012

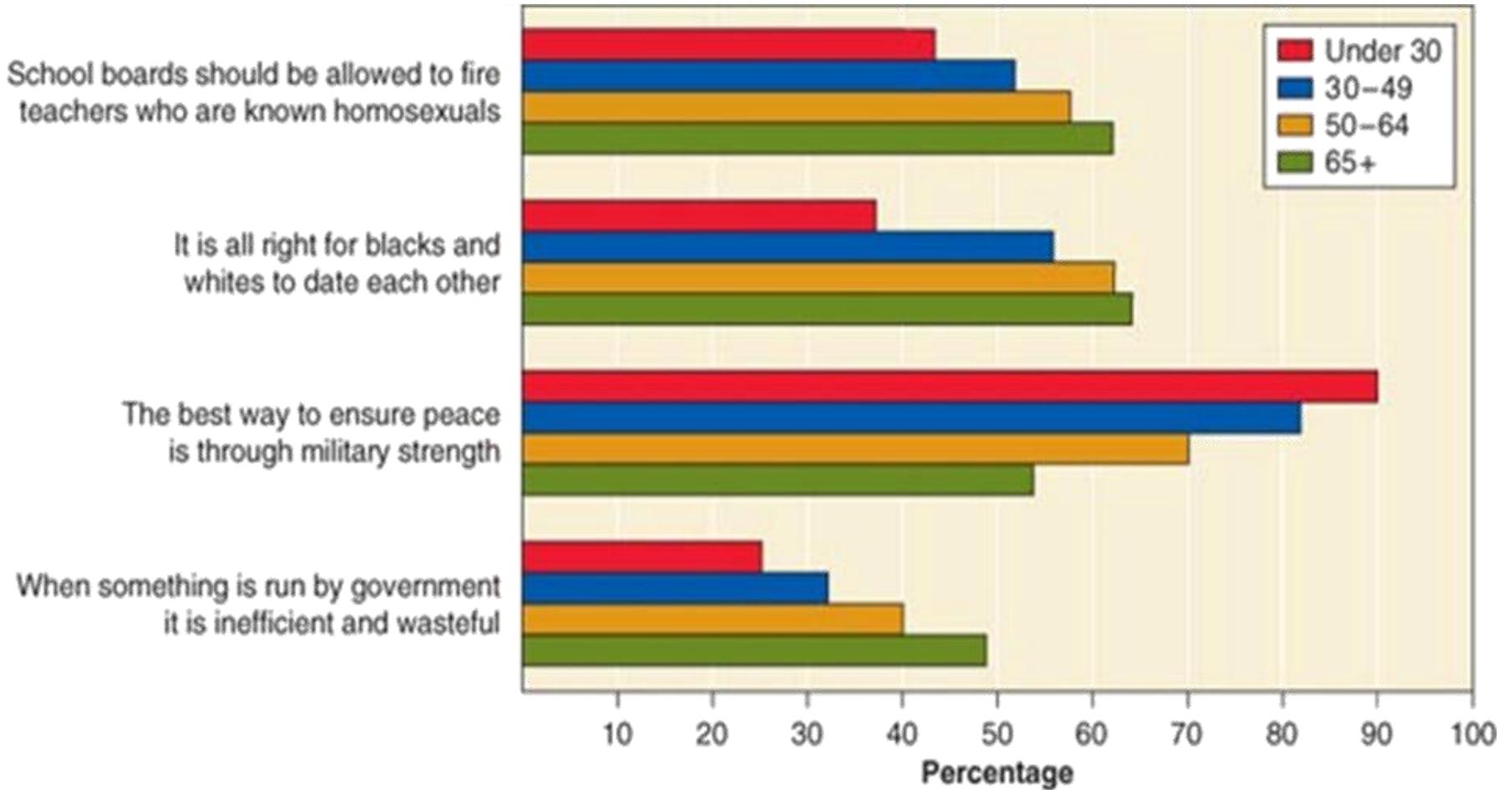


## Vote by Religious Affiliation, 2012





# Stage of Life and Socialization

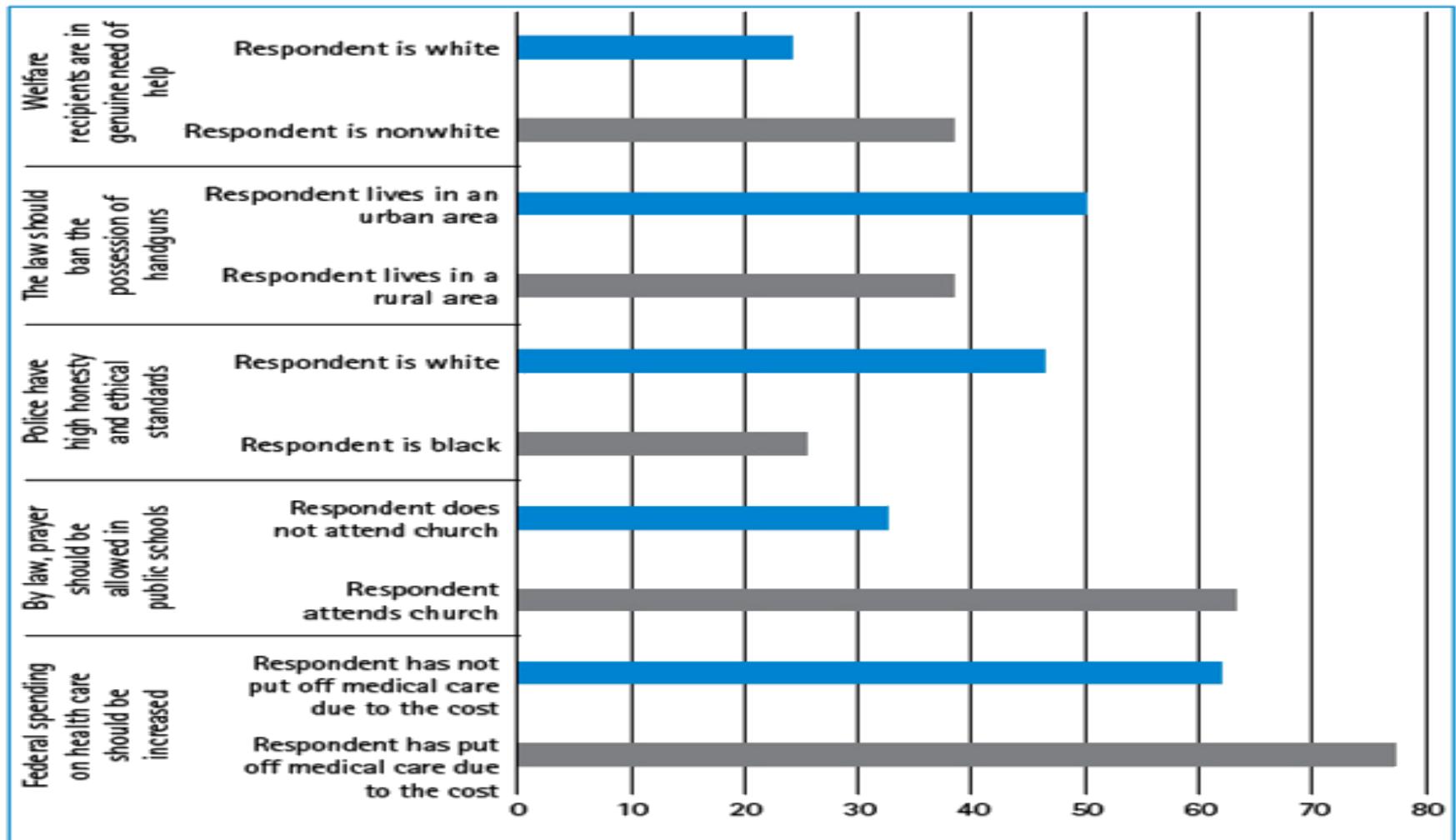


Comparing Four Age Cohorts on Issues:

A person's age / stage of life can have a profound effect on how he/she views government and political issues.



# Life Experiences and Socialization



Because their socialization has been different, people with different life experiences (marriage, children, religion, career, etc) hold different views about politics.



# Major Events and Public Opinion

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- ▶ Key events play a very important role in a person's socialization. Events in late adolescence and early adulthood (ages 16-25) are incredibly influential.
- ▶ **generational effects:** events that affect younger generation in such a way that their belief system becomes very distinct from that of the prior generation and possibly later generation
  - ▶ Great Depression: move to the Democratic Party
  - ▶ Vietnam: growing skepticism toward government
  - ▶ Nixon's resignation in 1974: belief that government not always right or honest
- ▶ **period effects:** events that have the same effect on all generations (9/11, environmental movement)



# Groups and Public Opinion

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- ▶ Many of the agents of socialization occur within a group setting ... family, education, job, religion, etc.
- ▶ **social group**: people who interact with one another, share similar characteristics and collectively have a sense of unity ... A **primary group** is a small social group whose members share personal and lasting relationships (family). **Secondary groups** are larger groups involving formal and institutional relationships (college, workplace).
- ▶ **reference group**: group to which an individual or another group is compared ... any group that individuals use as a standard for evaluating themselves and their own behavior ... point of reference in making evaluations and decisions
- ▶ **group effects**: characteristics that allow persons to be lumped into categories ... also affect development of political beliefs and opinions ... religion, race and ethnicity, gender, age, region, etc

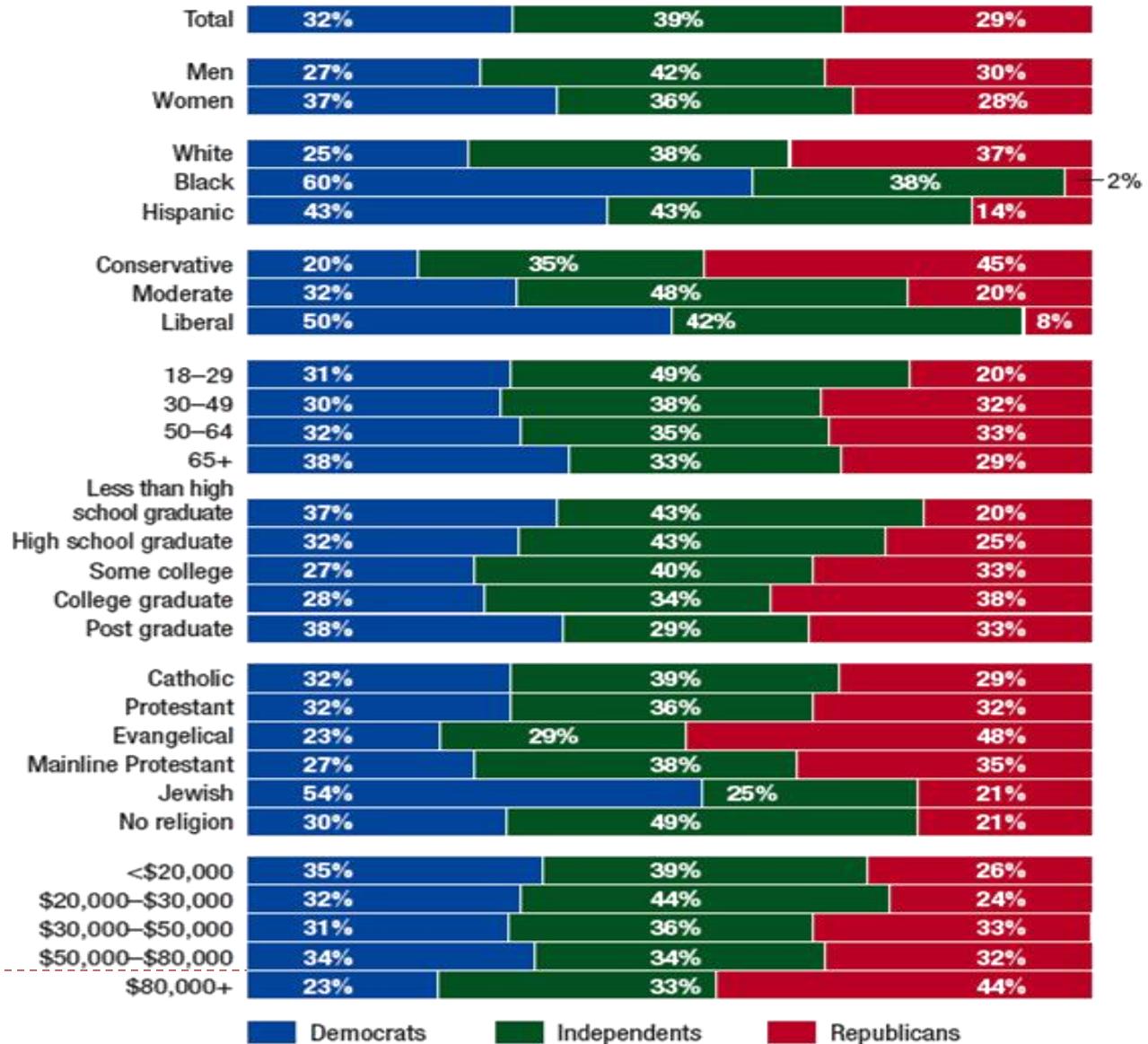




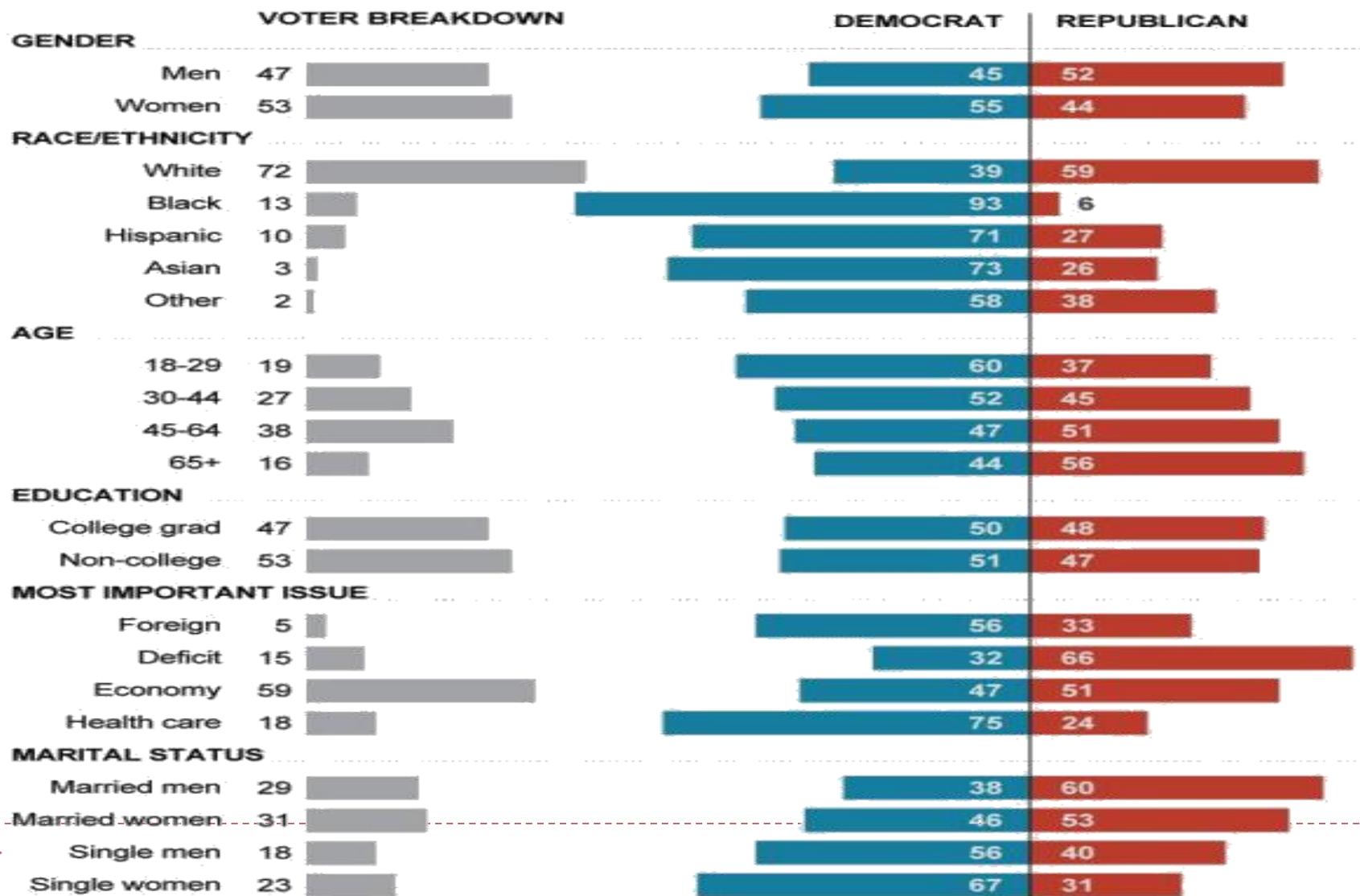
# Party Loyalties Among Social Groups

Blacks, city dwellers, women and people of lower income and educational levels tend to be Democrats.

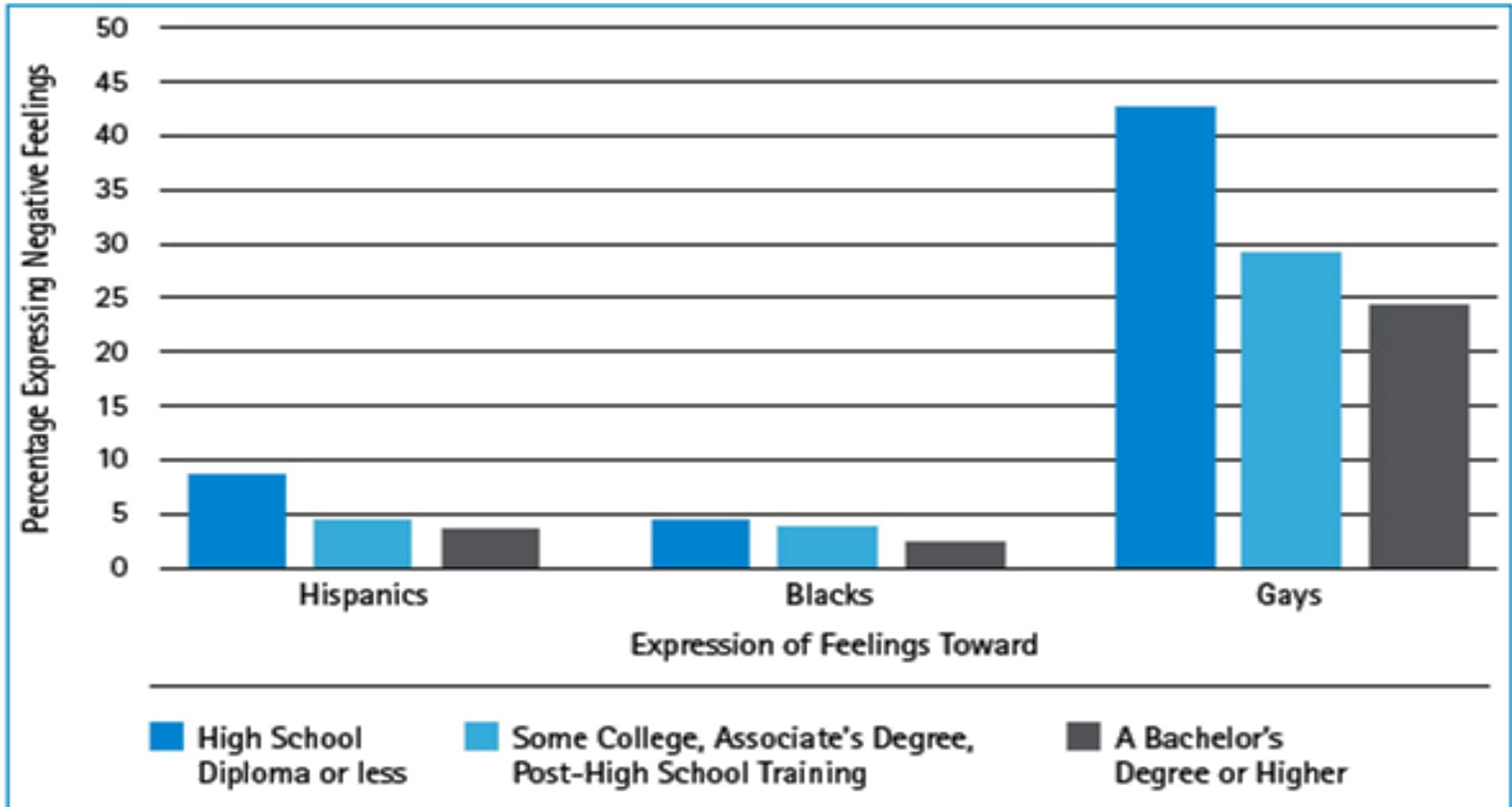
Whites, suburbanites, men, college-educated, religious conservatives and people with high incomes tend to be Republicans.



# Group Voting Patterns, 2012 Presidential Election

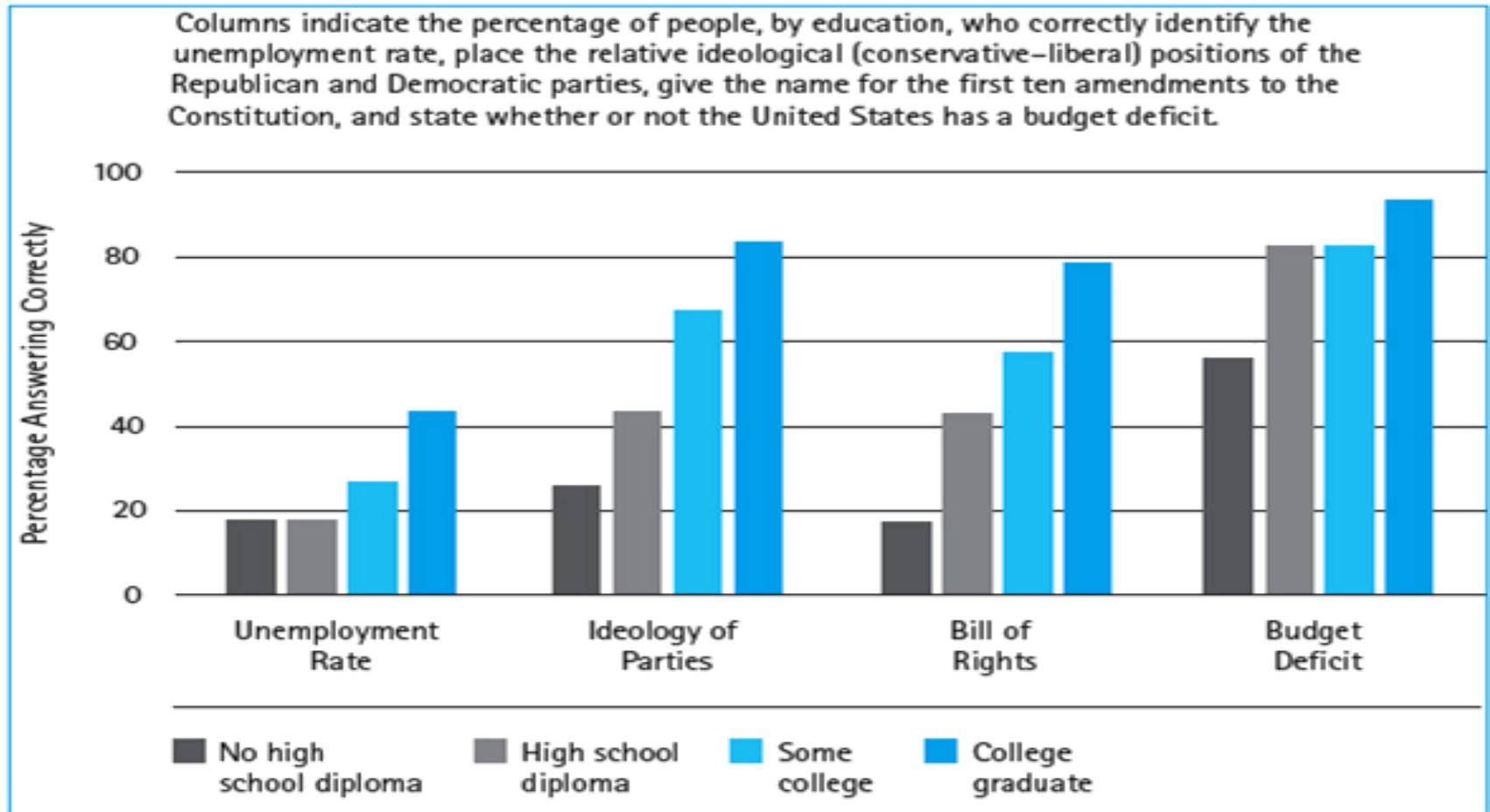


# Education-Level Groups and Public Opinion



Higher education is associated with a greater **tolerance of diversity** (including tolerance of other points of view) and a greater likelihood of voting.

# Education-Level Groups and Public Opinion



Higher education is strongly associated with greater knowledge of politics and government and a greater sense of political efficacy (belief that you can understand and influence political affairs).



# Collective Knowledge and Stability

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- ▶ Americans' collective policy preferences are very **stable** over a long period of time.
- ▶ Recent research indicates that Americans' collective policy preferences react fairly **sensibly** to events.



# America's Collective Memory

- ▶ The memories that are shared by large majorities of Americans are largely of **American events** and often **very recent** ones. Memories of significant events that did not include the US are less clear.
- ▶ Only the events of the 1990s and 2000s serve as shared collective memories for strong majorities of Americans today.
- ▶ The 1963 **assassination of John F. Kennedy** is the earliest memory that a majority of Americans share: 53% say that they know what they were doing the moment they heard the news of his assassination.

## Early Events Fading

<i>Percent of public who remember hearing the news of ...</i>	<i>%</i>
Princess Diana's death	87
Oklahoma City bombing	86
Challenger explosion	78
Beginning of Gulf War	75
Reagan shot by Hinckley	67
Fall of Berlin Wall	59
Armstrong walking on moon	54
John F. Kennedy's assassination	53
Nixon's resignation	53
Martin Luther King assassination	43
Tiananmen Square massacre	41
End of World War II	21
Attack on Pearl Harbor	18
Franklin Roosevelt's death	17
N. Korea invading S. Korea	15
Paris falling to the Nazis	7
1929 Stock market crash	4

## Kennedy Assassination Most Compelling

<i>Percent who remember what they were doing when they heard the news of... *</i>	<i>%</i>
John F. Kennedy's assassination	90
Princess Diana's death	87
Oklahoma City bombing	86
Attack on Pearl Harbor	85
Challenger explosion	82
Armstrong walking on moon	80
End of World War II	79
Beginning of Gulf War	76
Reagan shot by Hindkley	72
Franklin Roosevelt's death	71
Nixon's resignation	67
Martin Luther King assassination	67
Fall of Berlin Wall	60
N. Korea invading S. Korea	43
Tiananmen Square massacre	42
Paris falling to the Nazis	38
1929 Stock market crash	38

\* Based on those who are old enough to remember.



# Are the People Fit to Rule?

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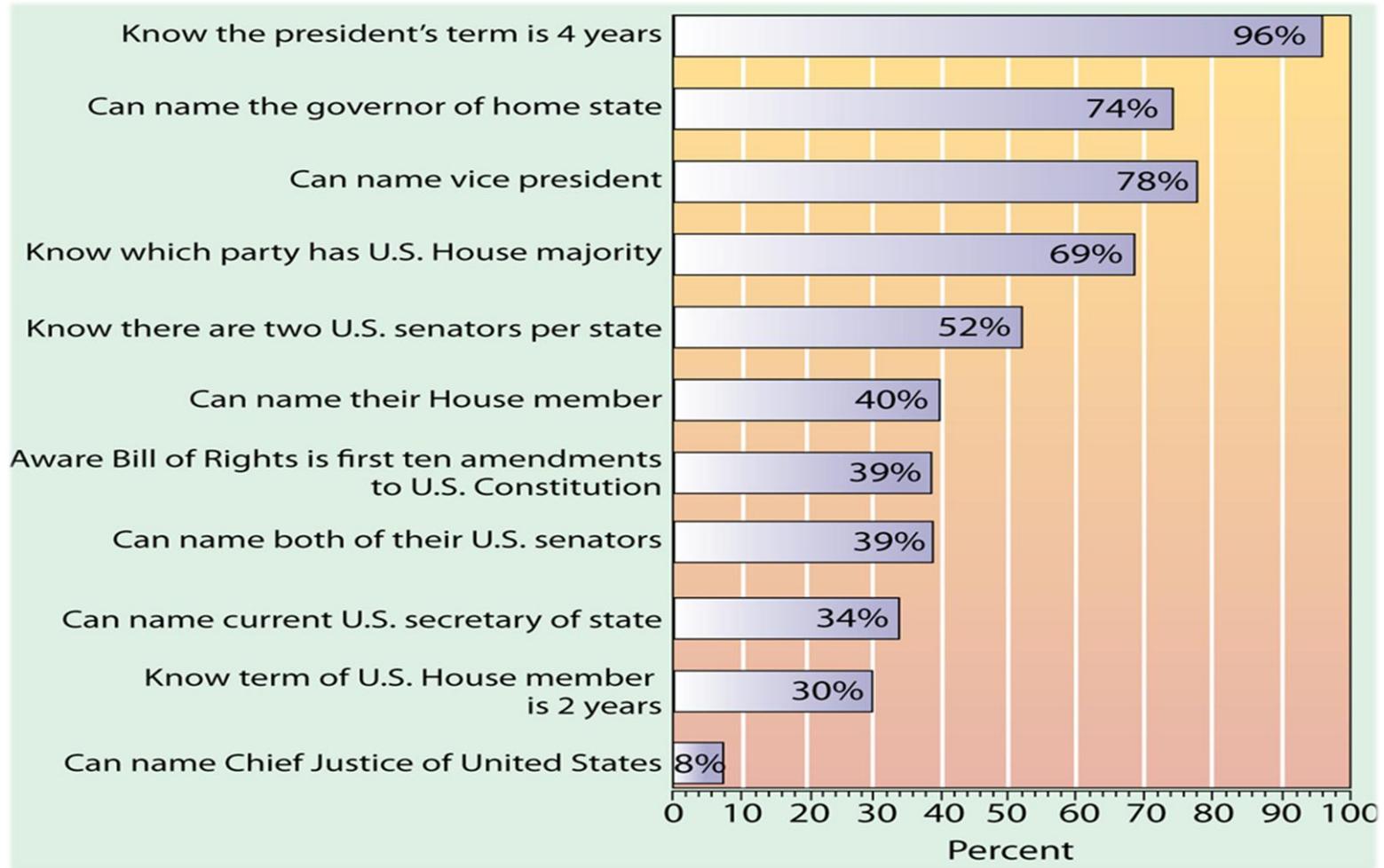
- ▶ Most Americans do not know or care about politics.
- ▶ Americans have little specific knowledge about government and politics.
- ▶ What most Americans don't know may not be vital.
- ▶ Lack of detailed knowledge or ideology does not mean that public opinion is unstable or irrelevant.

- ▶ Politics and the New Machine





# Awareness and Interest



**knowledge levels:** Politics is not the major interest of most Americans and, as a result, knowledge about the political system is limited.

# The Content of Collective Public Opinion



- ▶ The governmental system in general:
  - ▶ significant level of public confidence in the system
  - ▶ However, despite some surges, long-term trust in the national government is much lower than it was in the 1950s-1960s.





# Trust in Government, 1958-2014



Source: Pew Research Center, A.N.E.S., Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times and CNN.

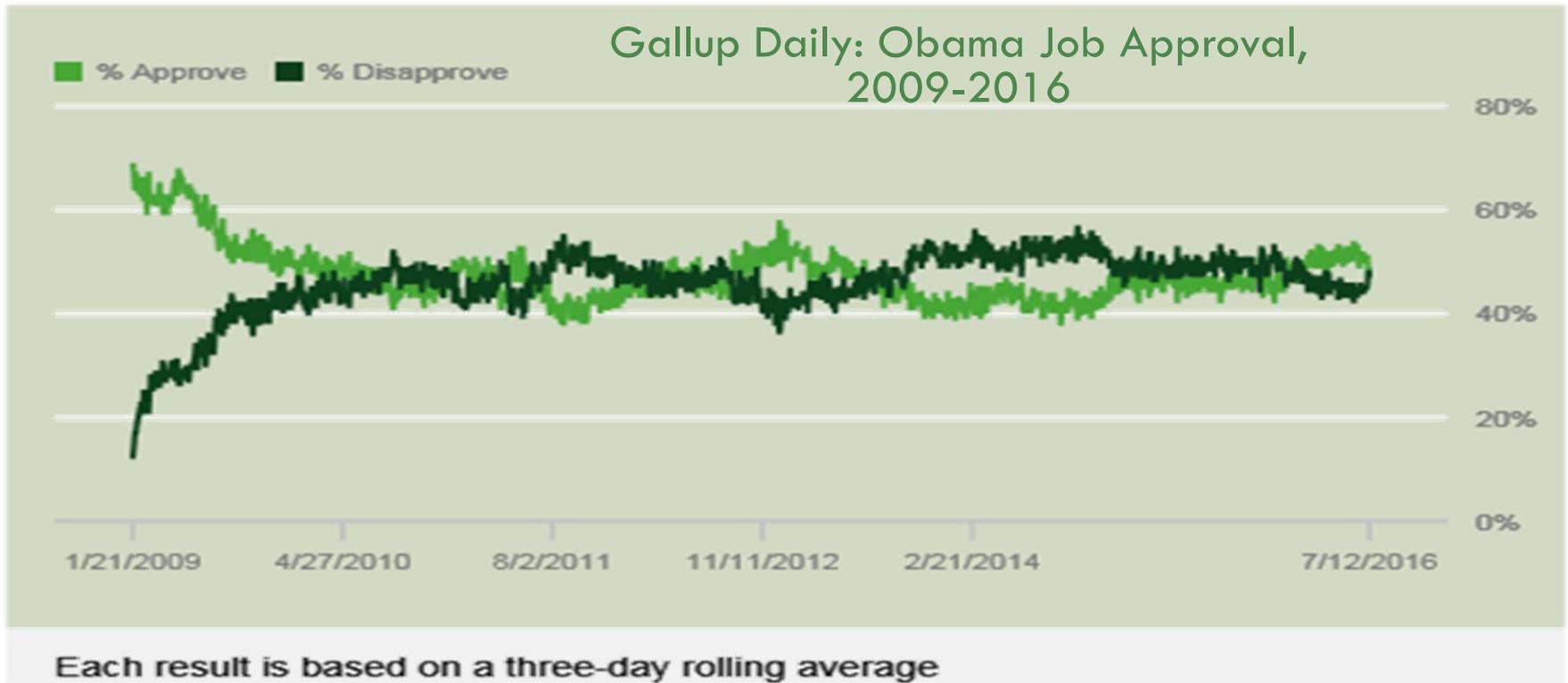
The graph shows the percentage of Americans who say they trust the national government to do the right thing almost always or most of the time. Trust in government today is much lower than it was in the 1950s and 1960s. Surges of trust happened during the Reagan and Clinton presidencies and in the period immediately following the 9/11 attacks on the US.

► [The Long Decline of Trust in Government](#)

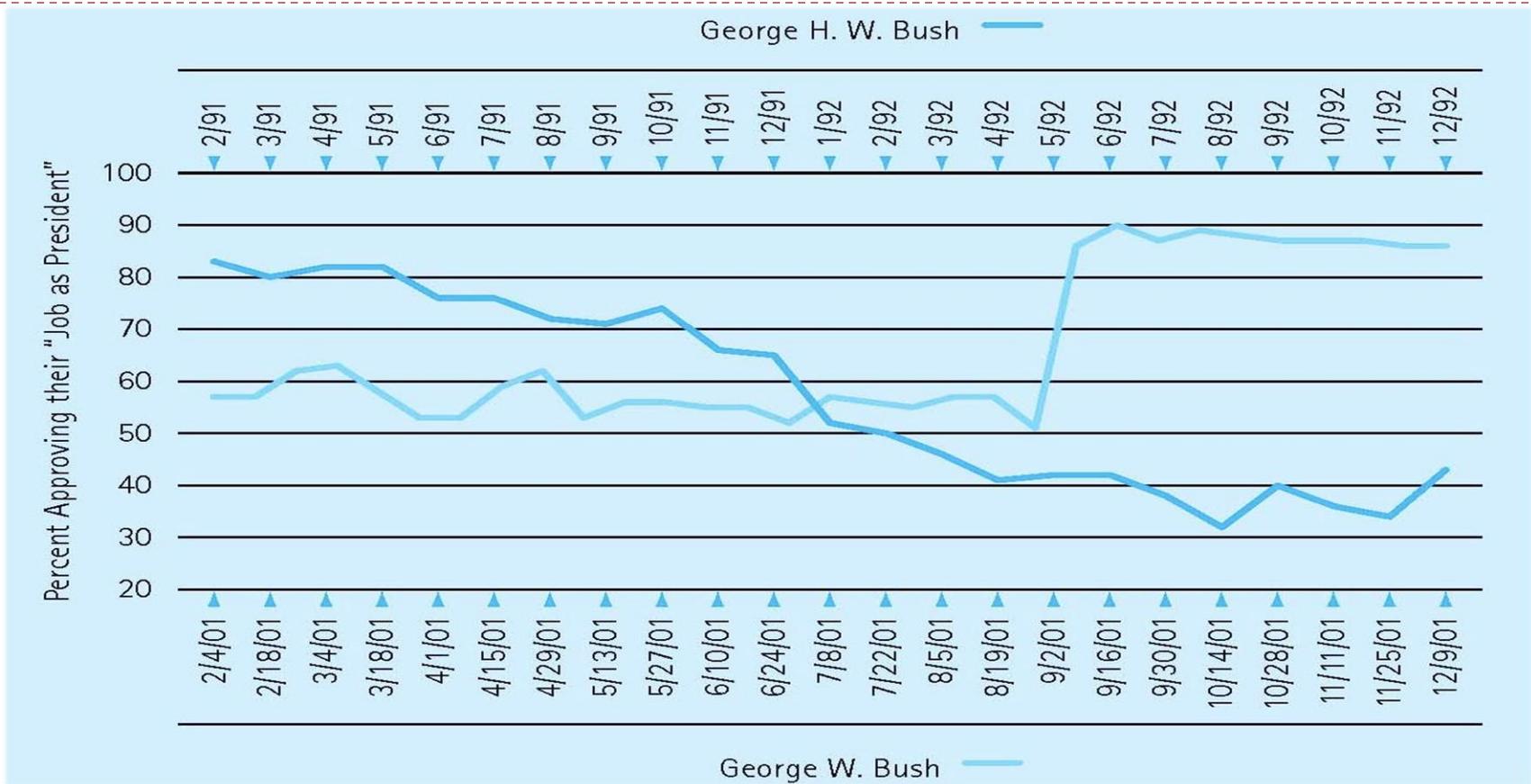


# Government Performance

- ▶ Presidential approval ratings
  - ▶ tend to **fluctuate** in response to particular events
  - ▶ state of the **economy** is especially important



# Government Performance



George HW Bush's extraordinarily high approval rating declined steadily after the media shifted its focus to the economy rather than Desert Storm. His son, George W Bush, saw an enormous jump in approval rating after 9/11. It subsequently eroded, but not before the 2002 elections, when the Republicans gained in both the House and the Senate.



# Americans' Policy Preferences

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- ▶ Theoretically, in a democracy, government does what its citizens want it to do, following citizens' policy preferences. That's difficult to do when what citizens want is divided or changes.
- ▶ **spending programs**: distinct difference in level of support for public spending between Democrats and Republicans ... Americans in general support public spending at much lower levels than do Europeans.
- ▶ **social issues**: Democrats and Republicans take very different positions on most ... abortion, civil liberties protections for women and minorities
- ▶ **foreign policy**: Americans' preferred foreign policy stance has changed over the years with the changing global situation ... **isolationism** (policy of remaining apart from the affairs of other countries), **unilateralism** (one-sided action regardless of the involvement of other countries), **multilateralism** (require participation of several countries rather than going-it-alone)

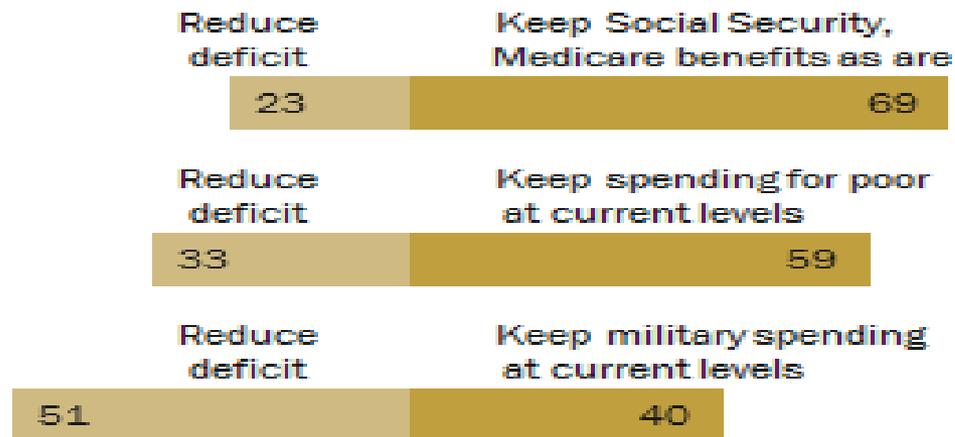




# Support for Public Spending

## Spending for Entitlements, Aid to Poor Favored over Deficit Reduction

*% who say it is more important to ...*



Survey conducted Dec. 3-8, 2013.

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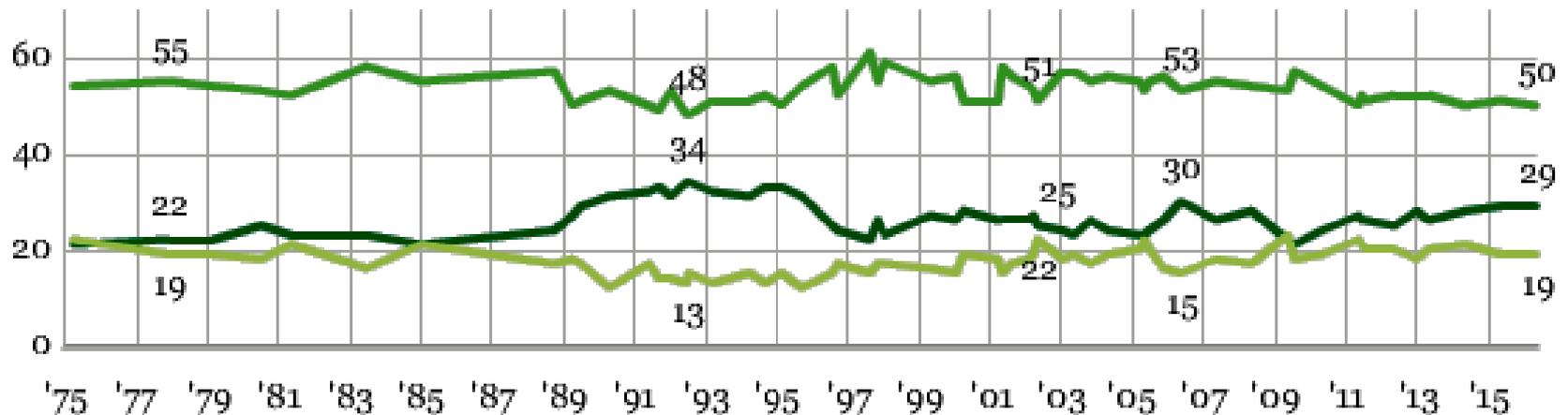
Despite citizens' policy preferences, representatives and senators generally vote based on their own personal party affiliation and political ideology, with the justification that voters can always elect someone else if they want. Unfortunately, voters seldom know how their representative and senators vote on spending.



# Support on Social Issues

*Do you think abortions should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances?*

- % Legal under any circumstances
- % Legal only under certain circumstances
- % Illegal in all circumstances



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Only a minority of Americans supports or rejects abortion under any and all circumstances. American support for legal abortions under certain circumstances is long-term and stable ... although there is disagreement on what the circumstances should be.

# Government is responsive to public opinion.

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“Yes, government is responsive to public opinion.”

When it comes to issues that Americans really care about – ending the Vietnam War, passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 – government listens and responds accordingly.

A variety of studies show that policy coincides with public opinion most of the time.



# Government is not responsive to public opinion.

“No, government is not responsive to public opinion.”

Public opinion sometimes *coincides* with policy, but it does not actually *cause* policy because government usually ignores public opinion and does what it wants to do.

In fact, to justify its actions, it may be that just the opposite is true – that government shapes public opinion – through outright **manipulation** (like it did in the Tonkin Gulf incident) or through **public relations** efforts (like it did by creating the Committee on Public Information in WWI).



# How does public opinion influence government?



- ▶ Past studies of the influence of public opinion on public policy generally made and accepted a **majoritarian** argument ... some variation of the idea that in a democracy the majority rules and public opinion is the voice of the majority.
- ▶ If that was true of public opinion in the past, it doesn't appear to be true today.
- ▶ There are a few general statements that seem to still hold.
  - ▶ In the aggregate, public opinion can be very **stable**.
  - ▶ Page and Shapiro's *The Rational Public*: collective policy preferences of the American public are predominantly **rational**, in the sense that they are real, coherent and that when they change, they do so in predictable ways
  - ▶ Influence of public opinion may **vary** depending on issue and context.
  - ▶ The public does not always get what it wants.



# How does public opinion influence government?



- ▶ general statements about public opinion that seem to still hold
  - ▶ **Salience** (an issue's importance to a person or the public in general) appears to affect the impact of public opinion on policy.



Small, vocal and influential **groups** can sway congressional action.

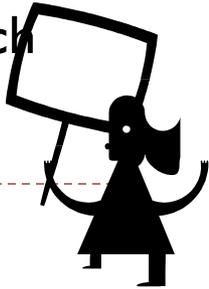
- ▶ Because opinions change, it can be difficult to establish a clear **connection** between political outcomes and public opinion.
- ▶ Some evidence that government responsiveness to public opinion may have begun to **decline** around the mid-1970s.
- ▶ Due to the growing **economic inequality gap**, there have been a number of new studies in recent years. (See, for example, [Gilens and Page](#).) The findings of those studies relating to the impact of public opinion are disturbing. I've listed some of those findings on the next three slides.



# Findings of New Studies of Public Opinion



- ▶ When a majority of citizens – lower class and middle class – disagrees with economic elites (top 10%) and/or with organized business interests, the majority has **near-zero impact** on public policy. (Pay attention to the next slide.)
- ▶ Regardless of whether a small minority or a large majority of American citizens support a policy, the **probability of policy change** is nearly the same ... approximately 30%.
- ▶ A proposed policy change with **low support** among economically elite Americans is adopted only about 18% of the time.
- ▶ Ordinary citizens often get the policies they favor, but only because those policies happen to **coincide** with those of the economically-elite citizens who wield the actual influence.
- ▶ The elite hold tremendous sway, not only over policy **outcomes** but also over which **problems** government pays attention to and which **solutions** it considers.



# Findings of New Studies of Public Opinion



<b>Policy</b>	<b>% Wealthy in Favor</b>	<b>% General Public in Favor</b>
Government must see that no one is without food, clothing or shelter	43%	68%
Minimum wage high enough so that no family with a full-time worker falls below official poverty line	40%	78%
The government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed	23%	50%
The government in Washington ought to see to it that everyone who wants to work can find a job	19%	68%
The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) should be increased rather than decreased or kept the same	13%	49%
The federal government should provide jobs for everyone able and willing to work who cannot find a job in private employment	8%	53%



# Findings of New Studies of Public Opinion



- ▶ Over the past generation, the views of American **foreign policy** elites diverged sharply from those of the broader mass public whose views were generally ignored.
- ▶ Presidents actually have **incentives** under a number of conditions *not* to follow mass opinion, though they also have an incentive not to publicize too heavily that they're doing so.
- ▶ Overall, **business-oriented groups** have almost twice the influence of **mass-based groups**.
- ▶ Organizations with mass appeal *can* matter, but not many exist that **represent the interests** of the average American.
- ▶ Existing interest groups do not tend to favor the same policies as average citizens. In fact, some groups' positions are **negatively correlated** with the opinion of the average American, as in the case of gun owners.



# Findings of New Studies of Public Opinion



- ▶ Today's powerful interest groups contribute record sums of **money** to reelection campaigns.
- ▶ The current **Supreme Court**'s relentless defense of unlimited spending in the political system by the wealthiest Americans (as freedom of speech) will exacerbate the situation.
- ▶ Because of the strong **status quo bias** built into the US political system, even when large majorities of Americans favor policy change, they generally do not get it.
- ▶ Findings hold true for both Democrat and Republican office-holders.
- ▶ Tendencies toward **inequality** and the shift of **resources from labor to capital** are endemic in today's capitalism, and may very well get worse.
- ▶ If policymaking is dominated by the elite (powerful business interests and a small number of affluent Americans), then America's claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened.

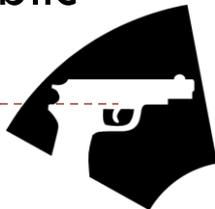




# Governing by Public Opinion

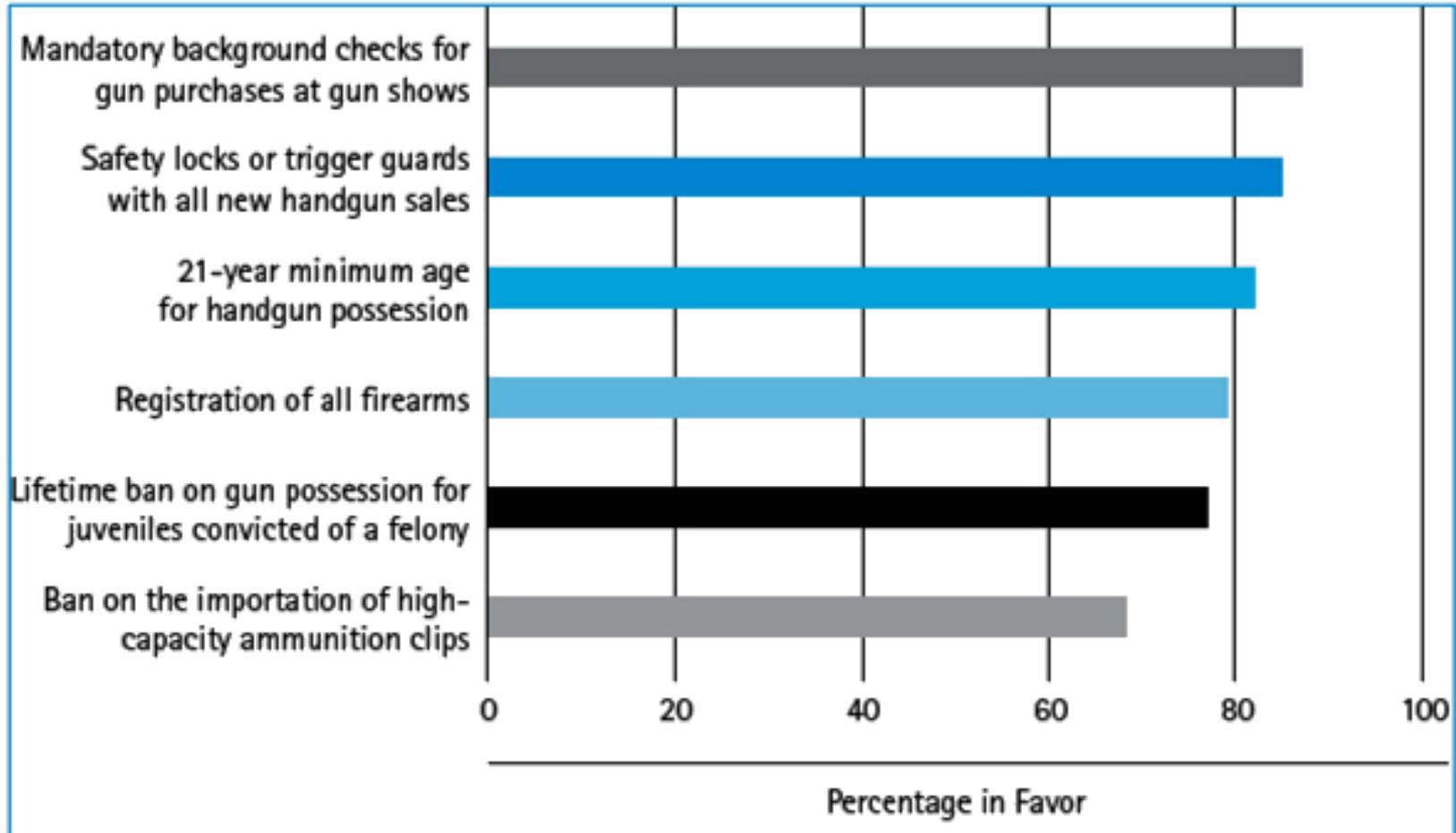
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- ▶ Example: Congressional hesitation to approve gun control policies
  - ▶ National Rifle Association opposition vs. a public majority that favors limits on guns
  - ▶ theories:
    - ▶ Public opinion in their voting districts matter most to individual Congressmen and they believe their districts are against gun control.
    - ▶ Gun control is not a highly salient public opinion issue ... Americans may want gun control but it's not that important to them.
    - ▶ anti-gun lobby not as intense/passionate as pro-gun lobby
    - ▶ The oil and gas industry brings big money to the table to help NRA stop gun safety efforts and, in return, industry gets a powerful ally to battle against protections for public lands and wildlife in energy-producing regions.





# Governing by Public Opinion



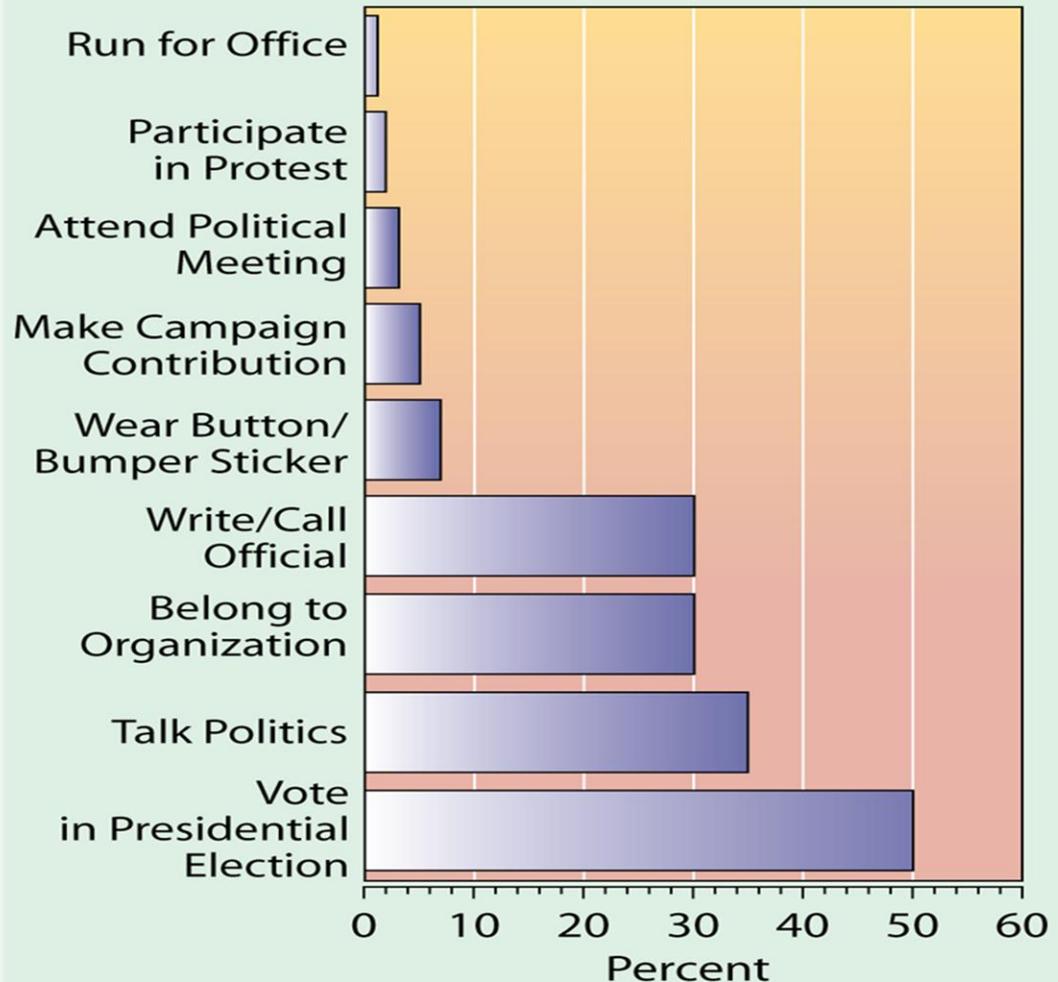
Most average Americans support gun control proposals.





# Participation: Opinions into Action

Only a small percentage of the American people are actively engaged in the political process, yet they receive most of the media attention.



The End

