1. Describe the challenges involved in measuring public opinion.
2. Explain why scientific opinion polls are the best way to measure public opinion.
3. Identify the five steps in the polling process.
4. Understand the problems in evaluating polls.
5. Recognize the limits on the impact of public opinion in a democracy.
Key Terms

- **mandate**: the instructions a constituency gives its elected officials
- **interest group**: a private group that works to shape the making of public policy
- **public opinion poll**: a tool used to collect information by asking people questions
- **straw vote**: a nonscientific poll that asks many people the same question
• **universe**: the whole population that a poll aims to measure
• **sample**: a representative slice of the total universe
• **random sample**: a polling group of randomly selected people
• **quota sample**: a polling group constructed to reflect the major characteristics of a given universe
Introduction

- How is public opinion measured and used?
  
  - Public opinion is measured by election results, personal contacts, media reporting, and especially by polls.
  
  - The most common polls are straw polls, while the most accurate measures of public opinion are scientific polls.
  
  - Officials use public opinion to guide their public policy decisions.
• Election results reflect public opinion to some degree, but often express voters’ views only on a few broad issues.

• The people also express their opinions in e-mails, letters, phone calls, or public meetings.

• The media both mirrors and helps shape public opinion.

• Interest groups share the views of their members in hopes of influencing policy.
• Public officials get feedback on public opinion from their many contacts with the public, in the form of mail, phone calls, public meetings, and personal visits with constituents.

NOTE TO TEACHERS: The above image depicts a candidate for office shaking hands with a voter.
Political Question Answer: The cartoonist is implying that political pollsters are no better at accurately predicting events than are fortune tellers.
Straw Polls

- Straw polls try to measure public opinion by asking many people the same questions, often by phone, email, or mail.

- This method is very unreliable, as there is no guarantee that the people who respond represent an accurate cross-section of the population.

- For example, a straw poll during the Great Depression picked the wrong presidential winner because it overlooked the large number of poor people who voted.
Scientific Polls

- Scientific polls are more accurate.
- There are hundreds of polling organizations in the U.S. today. Gallup and Pew are two of the best known.
- Scientific polls have five basic steps:
  - Define the universe to be surveyed
  - Construct a sample
  - Prepare valid questions
  - Select and control how the poll is taken
  - Analyze and report the results
• The universe is the group whose opinions the poll tries to discover.

• For large groups, pollsters create a sample, or representative slice.

• A random sample is made of randomly selected people. Most national polls use random samples of 1,500 people to represent the U.S. population.

• The law of probability says that a proper random sample can be quite accurate.
• A typical margin of error in a scientific poll is plus or minus 3 percent.

• A quota sample is less complicated but less accurate.

• Pollsters try to create a quota sample so that it reflects the major characteristics of a given universe, such as race or gender.

• People often belong to more than one category, making it hard to create an accurate sample.
Interviewing and Analyzing

- How pollsters interact with people can affect poll accuracy.
- Most polls today are telephone surveys.
- Pollsters use computers to analyze and publish polling data.

NOTE TO TEACHERS: In the above image, a NBC News pollster conducts an election exit poll.
Evaluating Polls

- When evaluating the **intent** of a poll, ask yourself the following questions:

  - *Who is responsible for the poll?* Polls sponsored by political campaigns may try to mislead voters.

  - *Why is the poll being conducted?* Polls meant to boost a candidate’s approval ratings are not reliable.
• When evaluating a poll’s methods, ask yourself the following questions:

  – *What is the poll’s universe?* Ask if the sample is truly representative.

  – *How was the sample chosen?* Samples should be selected randomly.

  – *How were questions written and asked?* Leading questions can alter results.

  – *When was the data collected?* Opinions change quickly during elections.
Checkpoint Answer: Polls have difficulty measuring intensity, stability, and relevance, or how strongly someone holds an opinion, how likely they are to change it, and how much it matters to them.
• Democracy is more than measuring public opinion, and polls are not substitutes for elections.

• Minority interests must be protected against the excesses of majority views and actions.

• Polls are best at focusing attention on public questions and stimulating discussion of them.
Now that you have learned about how public opinion is measured and used, go back and answer the Chapter Essential Question.

– What is the place of the media and public opinion in a democracy?