

traditional wisdom. Although the number varies, at least two-thirds to three-fourths of Americans are the mass public for most issues. Members of the mass public tend to have little interest in national and international affairs. Only those issues that make it to the front page of the newspaper and receive considerable media play gain the attention of the mass public, and then usually only briefly. Therefore, the mass public tends to be poorly informed about national and international affairs. Because the mass public includes most Americans, there is obviously tremendous variation in the level of interest and information within this segment of the population. Some Americans, as many as twenty percent, have virtually no interest in public affairs or limited access to information, and have been labeled "chronic know-nothings." Other members of the mass public may be more attentive and better informed about foreign policy issues. Within this broad range are most Americans who generally demonstrate little interest, but acquire some information about national and international affairs through upbringing, education, and watching the news.¹¹

What accounts for the differing levels of interest and information about national and international affairs between the elite and the mass publics? Two key characteristics stand out: level of education and socioeconomic class.¹² The more educated an individual, the more likely that he or she will be interested in, and informed about, national and international affairs. There is no simple educational threshold beyond which a member of the mass public becomes a member of the elite public, for membership of these publics varies with the times and the individual. Sixty years ago a high school education (as well as experience in life) was likely to provide a stronger base of information than an undergraduate degree from college today. Nowadays members of the elite public are likely to have acquired a graduate university degree or have been among the better undergraduate students, particularly if they attended a higher-quality educational institution and majored in the humanities, social sciences, or the arts.

The second important factor in differentiating among types of publics is socioeconomic class. Although Americans commonly think they are all members of one large middle-class, definite differences exist within American society in wealth, occupation, and status. Individuals raised in upper-middle-class or upper-class families and environments are the people most likely to become interested and informed about national and international affairs. Clearly, level of socioeconomic class and education are closely related. The higher the class background, the more likely one will go to college and pursue a graduate degree; moreover, the higher the level of education achieved, the more likely one will acquire more wealth, a professional occupation, and higher status within society. High levels of socioeconomic status and education not only reinforce each other and produce individuals with high levels of interest and information about national and international affairs, they are also consequential in providing the analytical and communication skills that tend to separate the elite public from the mass public.

Major Patterns in Public Opinion

Public opinion refers to the attitudes held by Americans generally toward specific issues and topics, expressed primarily through polls and, periodically, through

voting. Hence, we are concerned predominantly with the role of the mass public. Public opinion includes views held by the elite public as well, but they represent no more than a small minority of Americans. Three major patterns characterize American public opinion. Generally, public opinion tends to be:

1. Inattentive;
2. Uninformed;
3. Erratic.

These traits support the traditional understanding of the nature of public opinion. However, this fact does not foreclose public opinion from influencing domestic politics and the policymaking process.¹³

First, public opinion represents views expressed by Americans who, for the most part, have little interest in national and international affairs. Most Americans are exposed to a great deal of information about national and international affairs through the mass media; and, if they go beyond the mass media and visit a local library or bookstore, they would find that an incredible amount of information is readily available. However, few Americans take advantage of the available information because they are uninterested. This is illustrated simply if one examines the circulation of the leading magazines in the country (see table 11.1). Only three of the forty best-selling magazines—*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*—emphasize national and/or international affairs. Clearly, most Americans who try to acquire information beyond television, radio, and the local newspaper by subscribing to magazines are interested in things other than politics: entertainment, travel, household, fashion, sex, sports and recreation, mechanics, family matters, and more.

This slight interest in national and international affairs produces and reinforces the second major pattern: most Americans are poorly informed about national and international affairs. The mass public acquires little information about the political world and much of the information it does acquire tends to be simplistic and often inaccurate. For example, a poll was taken in 1964 to determine the level of information that Americans had about major events in Asia during a time when the United States had roughly 20,000 troops in Vietnam and the Vietnam War was beginning to receive considerable media coverage. The poll revealed that 25 percent of all Americans had never heard of the war in Vietnam; 28 percent did not know that mainland China was communist; 29 percent were unaware that another Chinese government existed on the island of Taiwan; and 54 percent had never heard of Mao Tse-Tung, chairman of the Communist Party of the People's Republic of China. During the height of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, barely over half of Americans could describe the meaning of the "cold war" in a reasonably correct fashion. Surveys of American geographical knowledge at the time demonstrated that only 65 percent of people could point out England on a map of Europe and only 60 percent could show Brazil's position in South America, while most other countries were located correctly by less than one-third of the respondents.¹⁴

Over twenty years later, little appears to have changed in terms of public information about international affairs. A survey in 1988 found that with regard to