

of political interest is only natural. Second, although the mass public tends to be poorly informed overall, Americans today are exposed to more information and are likely to have less simplistic images of the United States and the world than they held during periods such as the cold war. Much of this is due to rising enrollments in higher education over the last three decades and improved news coverage in the mass media.<sup>19</sup> The final trend is that the size of the elite public has grown over time as a result of increases in higher education since the 1960s.

Low levels of attention and information produce a third pattern in public opinion—a tendency to fluctuate dramatically over time. Since most Americans are uninterested and ill-informed, their opinions about national and international issues tend to be very “soft” and open to change. Most Americans give little thought to most issues and are not committed to particular positions. Still, they have opinions and readily offer them when solicited by a public opinion poll. Secretary of State Dean Acheson once observed that most Americans do not feel it necessary to become informed before expressing an opinion. Not surprisingly, as an issue gets more media coverage, public attention increases for a while, members of the mass public acquire more information, and individual opinions change. Hence, public opinion fluctuates over time and a poll is no more than a general “snapshot” of public opinion at that brief moment of time.

Such dramatic fluctuations in public opinion can be readily observed for most major events, such as the 1988 Democratic presidential primaries. The public opinion polls taken in January placed Gary Hart, one of the few candidates with great visibility, far ahead of other contenders for the Democratic nomination for president. However, once the story of Hart’s marital infidelity broke, this high level of attention and information resulted in a decline in Hart’s public opinion ratings and ended any hope he had of becoming president. A similar shift in public opinion occurred during the 1988 presidential election. By the end of summer, polls indicated that Michael Dukakis, the Democratic party nominee, had much greater public support for president than George Bush, the Republican candidate. During the next three months, however, public opinion changed dramatically to favor Bush. This change was a function of the Bush campaign’s ability, in comparison to the Dukakis campaign, to present persuasively its images and views of the candidates to the American public. Thus, as Americans acquired new information and new images of Bush and Dukakis, their opinions changed greatly in a very brief time. Ultimately, the public’s opinion of the candidates throughout the election process, however erratic, was instrumental in determining who became president of the United States.

#### **Consequences for Domestic Politics and Policymaking**

These three public opinion patterns—inattentiveness, low levels of information, and the constancy of change—present problems for American democracy. Democratic theorists have argued that democracy requires an involved and informed citizenry. However, most Americans do not participate politically, as will be seen in chapters 12 and 13 and better understood in chapter 14, and are poorly informed about political affairs. These patterns mean that the general public not only is open to being educated, but is vulnerable to manipulation by individuals

and groups throughout society and the government—an important topic of chapter 15. Overall, the potential for manipulation has major implications for determining both the type of democracy the United States will have and the extent to which it exists, the focus of chapter 16.

How does public opinion influence domestic politics and the policymaking process? In terms of “immediate and direct” impact on policymakers within the government, there are two contradictory consequences. The most obvious is that inattentive, uninformed, and erratic public opinion gives policymakers great leeway in acting on most issues. There are three explanations for this pattern. First, the content of public opinion serves as a poor guide for policymakers, especially given its fluctuating nature. Second, political leaders are often able to “lead” public opinion—that is educate and manipulate the public—to support and follow their policies. Finally, during crisis periods, such as when troops are deployed abroad, the public tends to “rally around the flag” by supporting the president and his policies. As the traditional wisdom argues, public opinion rarely influences the government and the policymaking process in a direct and immediate way. In fact, public opinion often reinforces and strengthens presidential power because the president is the most visible and legitimate political figure in the United States, especially with respect to foreign policy. This is because the president and members of his administration are often successful in setting the agenda, that is, determining which issues are before the public and how they are discussed.

A second consequence, usually ignored by those who hold to the traditional wisdom, is that for some issues, especially those that are most salient, public opinion may act as an immediate and direct constraint on political officials in the policymaking process.<sup>20</sup> A number of factors account for this pattern. First, elected officials are particularly sensitive to public opinion. No matter how inattentive, uninformed, and erratic public opinion is, the public votes political leaders in and out of office. As discussed in chapter 9, members of Congress, especially in the House of Representatives, are extremely sensitive to public opinion—at least within their own districts—because of their preoccupation with reelection. The same situation holds for the president. Within the White House, it is not uncommon to hear people say that “compared with analysts, Presidents and potential Presidents themselves see a close link between stands in foreign policy and the outcomes of presidential elections.”<sup>21</sup> As we observed in our chapter 2 discussion on presidential leadership, public prestige—that is, the perception of the president held by the general public—is an important element in exercising power. Whether a president tries to lead the public, to respond to public opinion, or to ignore public opinion—whatever the particular situation—he is likely to be greatly concerned with his overall level of public approval.

Second, if public feeling does become intense concerning an issue, it severely constrains the choices available within the policymaking process. During the late 1940s and early 1950s following World War II, for example, most Americans had to be convinced that the U.S. government should play an active internationalist role. Once the public was educated and led on the issue of anticommunism, however, American leaders began to feel constrained by public opinion, as cold war lessons—for instance, that the U.S. should never appease aggressors—were inter-