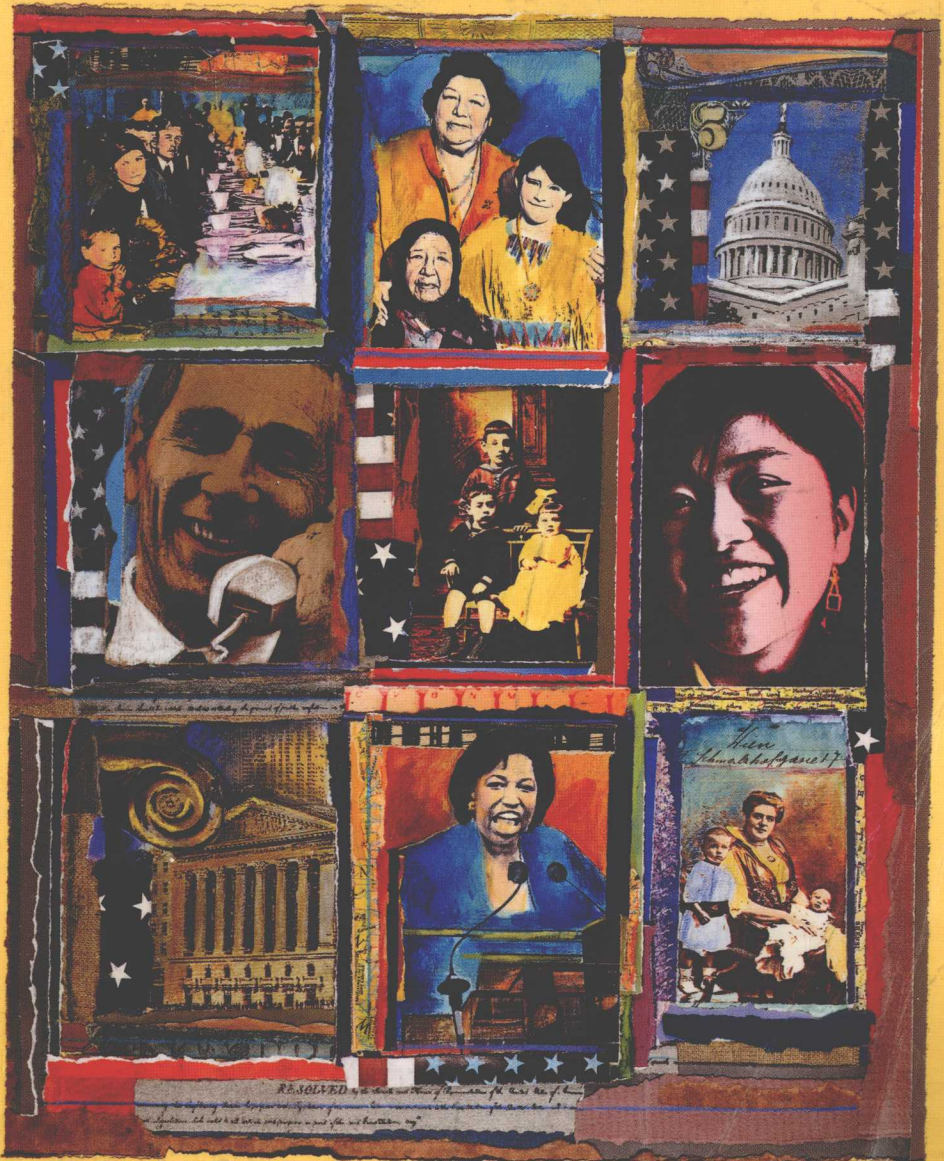


# American Public Opinion

*Sixth Edition*



Robert S. Erikson

Kent L. Tedin

# American Public Opinion

Its Origins, Content,  
and Impact

Sixth Edition

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# Preface

In this sixth edition of *American Public Opinion*, we present an accounting of the role of public opinion in the democratic politics of the United States. As in previous editions, we base our analysis on the most recent data available. Our discussion draws on public opinion data from 2000 and earlier, and our analysis of public opinion and elections draws on data from the 1996 and 1998 American National Election Studies.

The book provides an in-depth analysis of public opinion beginning with its origins in political socialization, the impact of the media, its relevance for democratic values, political trust and social capital, and the role of public opinion for elections, political parties and interest groups. The book provides the most recent data and analysis of opinion on such contemporary issues as abortion, gun control, race relations, and health care. *American Public Opinion* is unique in that it goes beyond a simple presentation of data, and includes a critical analysis of the role of public opinion in American democracy. As in previous editions, the sixth edition examines the relationship between public opinion and policy. The analysis is updated throughout to incorporate the most recent literature.

In the sixth edition, there is an expanded analysis of the history of public opinion, and an expanded chapter on the science of public opinion polling, including sampling, question wording, and response rate. New to the sixth edition is a comprehensive list of public opinion websites broken into three categories: websites for contemporary opinion data, websites to locate data archives, and websites for professional organizations in the field of public opinion.

Like previous editions, the sixth includes many examples from the National Election studies that pertain to presidential elections. For the sixth edition, these examples are updated from the 1992 presidential election to the 1996 presidential election.

As this book has evolved through six editions over 25 years, so too has the list of authors. The first edition (1973) was authored by Robert S. Erikson and Norman Luttbeg. With the second edition, Kent L. Tedin joined the team as the third author. That triumvirate held through three editions. When time came to produce the fifth edition, Luttbeg decided to pursue new scholarly challenges. The last two editions of *American Public Opinion* again had two authors, but Luttbeg's intellectual contribution to the book remains, most notably in the five linkage models of public opinion which he originated.

Because the data and literature are always changing, the chapters are often extensively rewritten and rearranged. In the fifth edition, we made major changes in the structure of the book and the organization of the chapters. In the sixth edition, the structure remains intact from the previous edition, with updates to the literature and data. The most important change since the publication of the fifth edition has been the Internet revolution and the availability of public opinion data online. In Chapter 1 we present a list of the useful web sites for finding information on and about public opinion. This information will be kept up-to-date at the APO web site at [crystal.polsci.uh.edu/uhdps](http://crystal.polsci.uh.edu/uhdps).

The preparation of this volume relies heavily on the survey data of the National Election Studies, conducted by the University of Michigan, supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, and made by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. We also relied extensively on the General Social Survey (also funded by the National Science Foundation) and the data available online from the Roper Center Data Archive at the University of Connecticut. These organizations bear no responsibility for the analysis of interpretations presented here. We are greatly indebted to them for making their data available to us, and to other scholars upon whose research we depend. We also owe thanks to the following individuals whose review feedback guided this revision: John W. Books of the University of North Texas, Robert E. Botsch of the University of South Carolina, Aiken, and Terri Susan Fine of the University of Central Florida. Finally, we benefited from the assistance provided by colleagues, students and staff at Columbia University and the University of Houston, as well as by our editor, Eric Stano.

Robert S. Erikson  
Kent L. Tedin

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# CHAPTER 1

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## Public Opinion in Democratic Societies

Few Americans in the twenty-first century can remember a time when public opinion polls—like television, shopping malls, and eight-lane freeways—were not part of the popular landscape. Polls tell us which television shows are the most popular, how frequently people attend church, what person Americans most admire, plus a myriad of opinions on political topics currently in the news. We shall see, however, that the study of public opinion is much broader than simply gauging popular reaction to recent events. It is, for example, also concerned with how people learn about government, their trust in existing political institutions, their support for the political “rules of the game,” the interrelationships among their opinions, or their beliefs about the effectiveness of political participation. The list could go on. But more than anything else, the study of public opinion is justified by the simple notion that democratic institutions should result in government decisions that reflect the views of everyday people. It is this presumption, and its implications, that guides the systematic analysis of mass opinion.

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### 1-1 PUBLIC OPINION AND GOVERNMENT

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Rousseau, in 1744, was among the first to use the term “public opinion” (*l’opinion publique*), meaning the customs and manners of all members of society (as opposed to some elite). By 1780 French writers were using the term