

## 4.5 Measuring Public Opinion

### **Describe the elements of a scientific poll.**

The vitality of any democratic system is measured by its political efficacy. To what extent are its citizens involved? And to what extent does the government represent the wishes of its constituents? High levels of political efficacy usually result in high levels of political participation. When participation lags, governments must ask themselves: "Are we adequately representing the people?" To answer this question and others like them it becomes readily apparent that measuring public opinion is of vital importance to a healthy democracy. Various mediums are responsible for collecting and reporting public opinion but not all are created equal.

In a representative democracy it is essential to know what the people are thinking. In a political system where sovereignty resides in the people elected officials must determine public opinion before enacting public policy. **Public opinion is measured through scientific polling, and the results of public opinion polls influence government.** A liberal democracy, like ours, demands nothing less. But can public opinion polls be trusted? Which polls should elected officials rely upon to influence public policy?

Public opinion polls can take on many different forms. Opinion polls track what "we the people" are thinking. Via exit polls, they measure how and why we have voted. Measuring who and what we "like" permeates everything we now do.

Political data is culled from scientifically collected public opinion polls. Public opinion polls measure what "we the people" think at any given point. Yet not all polls are accurate measurements of public opinion. There are certain cautionary steps we should take before accepting the validity of a public opinion poll. Accurate polls are unbiased. Poll samples need to be random. A sufficient sample size is also required. Perhaps most important is the margin of error. What is the range of results one could expect if an infinite number were included in the poll? A +/- 4 margin of error is considered acceptable. The way questions are worded in a poll is also important. Not unlike ideological labels public opinion polls provide the political process an important short cut. They can be used improperly. Push polls, for instance, do not measure opinion but rather attempt to shape opinion. Push polls are considered unethical.