

Take a Closer Look

The emergence of a growing number of public opinion research firms means that citizens, the media, and political leaders know more than ever before about how voters perceive political issues and candidates. This information may be useful for promoting a more democratic and representative government. But, it may also be notoriously mercurial, marked by dramatic fluctuations from week to week or even day to day, as illustrated in the political cartoon below.

Public opinion polls may fluctuate dramatically from day to day. Especially during the election season, tracking these fluctuations is a form of political sport.



The seesaw metaphor is a useful comparison when thinking about how the media, in particular, discusses the political horse race.

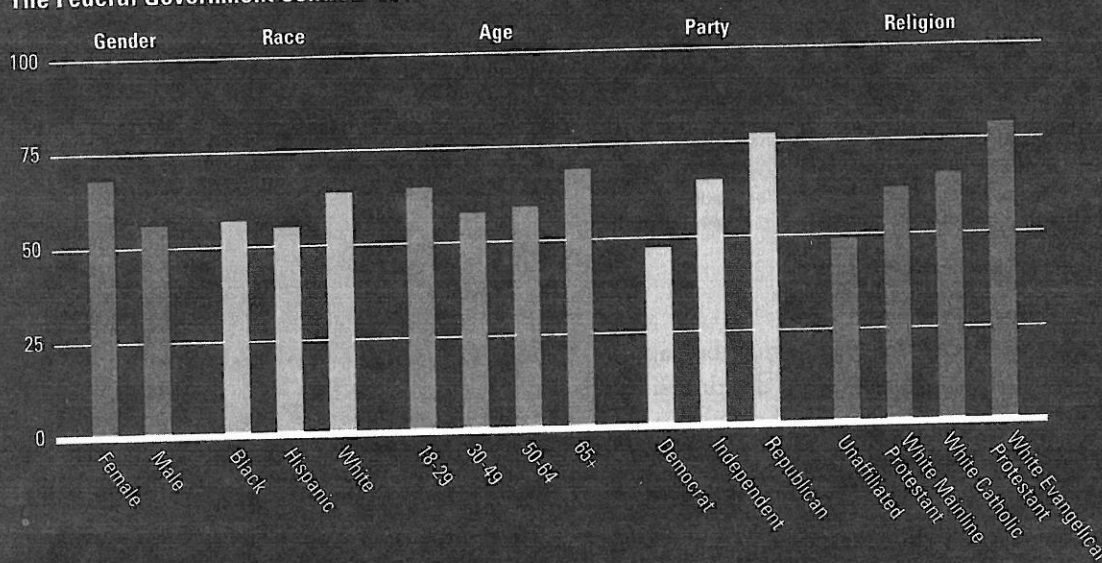
CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Why do so many agencies and organizations want to collect public opinion data? How do the data help them advocate for their cause?
2. How might frequent fluctuations in the results of public opinion polls both help and hurt candidates?
3. Is there too much public opinion data in modern politics? Why or why not?

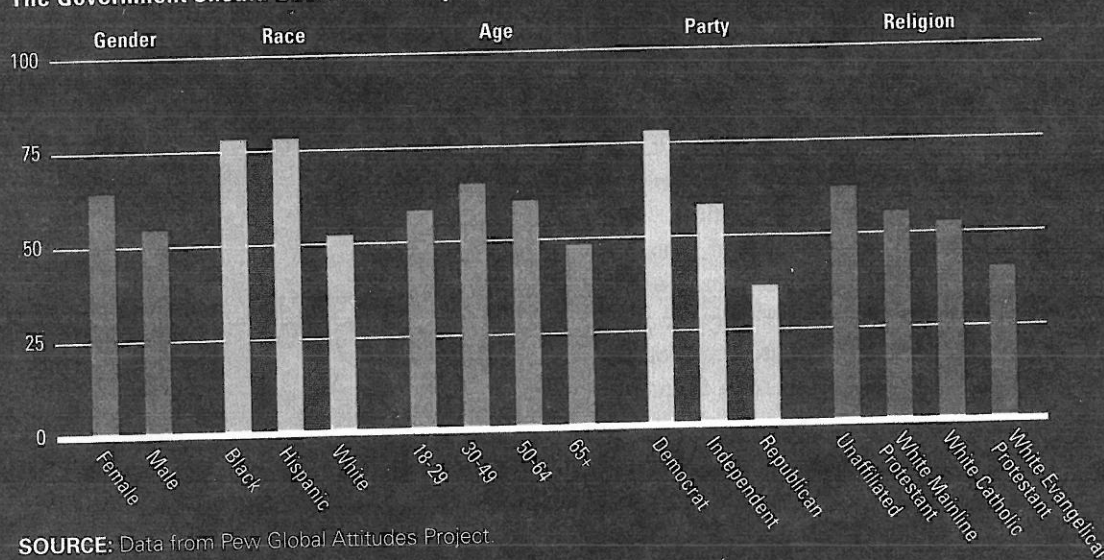
How Do Demographic Characteristics Affect Public Opinion?

Demographic characteristics, as discussed in the text, have a powerful impact on the way citizens view government, political leaders, and public policies. These gaps may be the result of gender, race, age, party, and religion, among other factors. They endure as a result of cultural norms, socialization, and differing value systems. Examine the variations in the attitudes of each of these groups on the questions asked below.

The Federal Government Controls Too Much of Our Daily Lives



The Government Should Guarantee Every Citizen Enough to Eat and a Place to Sleep



SOURCE: Data from Pew Global Attitudes Project.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Which gaps are largest? Smallest? Why do you think these differences exist?
2. Why do you think Republicans are more likely than Democrats and Independents to believe that government controls too much of our daily lives?
3. How might citizens' views on these questions differ as a result of other demographic characteristics, such as income and education?