*The Logic of American Politics*, 7th Edition

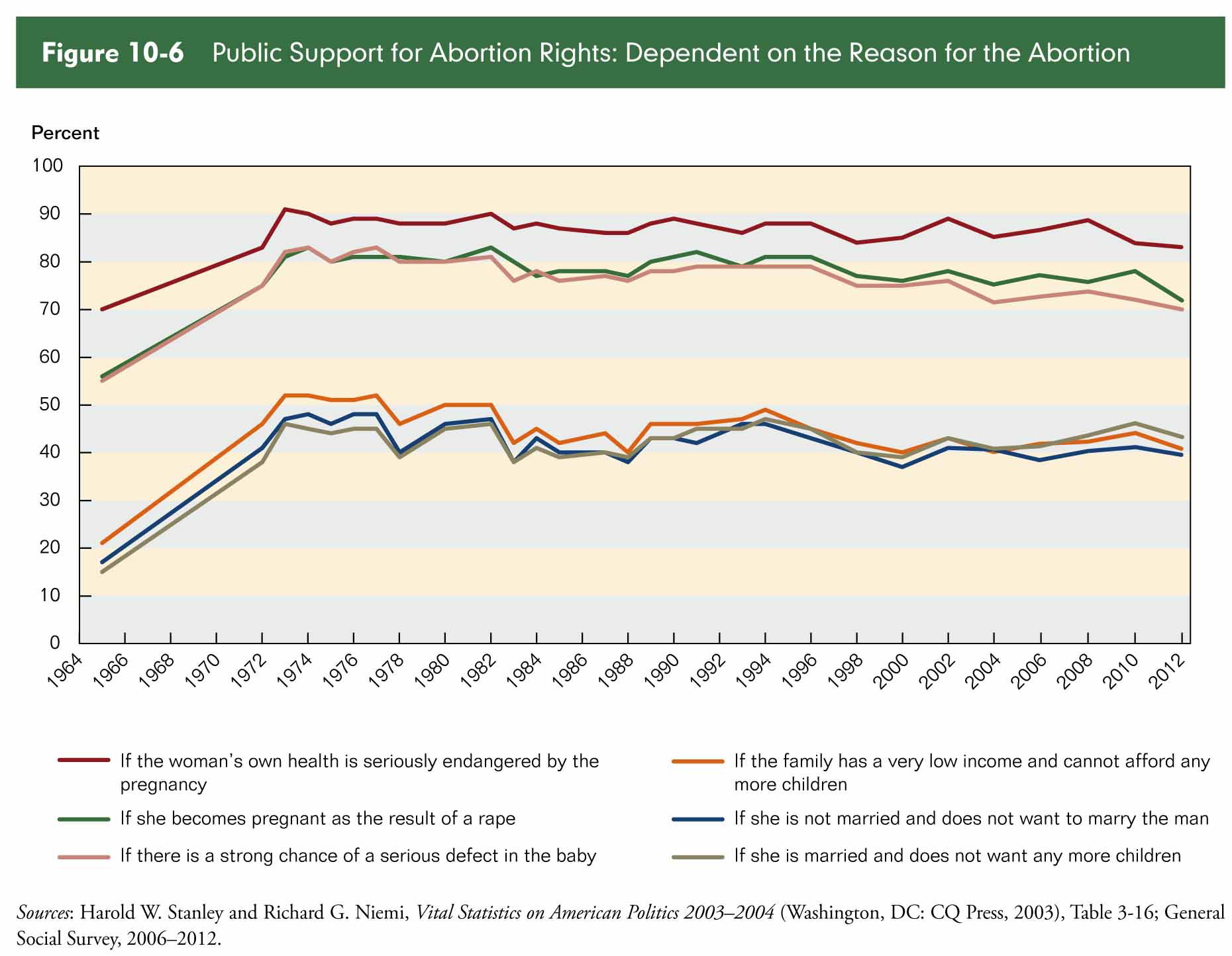
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Data Literacy Exercises: Chapter 10

**Learning objectives:** 10.1 Define public opinion. 10.2 Describe the ways that public opinion can be measured. 10.3 Explain six elements that contribute to the forming of opinion. 10.4 Discuss to what extent public opinion is meaningful.

Before we can truly gauge the true opinion of the public, we need to review some potential problems with how public opinion is not only measured but also how it is presented.

Figure 10-6

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**Framing (1):**

Figure 10-6 is a clear representation of how question wording can influence the public’s response to an issue. Since the 1970s, regardless of wording, public opinion on abortion rights has been fairly stable, but can vary by as much as 50% approval based upon wording. As long as the wording is made clear to the reader, then this does not present a full-blown example of framing. Approval of abortion for life threatening circumstances (“if the woman’s own health is seriously endangered”) is quite different from approval for convenience (“if she is married and doesn’t want any more children”). Yet, quite often, different candidates, parties and organizations can back up their own views about abortion rights by choosing the survey question that gives them the response they need without referencing the exact words. One can argue with these data that a majority of Americans both support and oppose “abortion rights.”

A clearer example of framing, unintentional or not, is presented in the table found on p. 429 (“Public Opinion and welfare Reform”). As the authors mention, asking about “aid to poor people” elicits different responses than asking about “welfare” even though the two are fairly synonymous.

A recent and clear example of framing occurs when individuals are asked their view about heath care. Figure 10-2 indicates that, for over 40 years, Americans have felt that we spend “too little” on improving the nation’s health. But consider what happens when an issue is framed not only in terms of its substance, but also how one is drawn to an answer based upon attaching that issue to a prominent political figure. In September of 2013, a CNBC Poll asked a sample of citizens whether or not they supported or opposed the “Affordable Care Act.” Only 37% were outright opposed. When the same sample of individuals was asked about “Obamacare,” opposition rose to 46%--even though the two terms are the same. Interestingly, a higher proportion supported “Obamacare” than the “ACA” (29% to 22%), with a much higher proportion indicating unfamiliarity with the ACA (30% to 12%). Obviously, framing the health care debate with President Obama’s name not only picks up more responses (partially due to individuals responding to how they generally view the president, not health care), but seemingly increases polarization on the issue.

Source: “Poll: 'Obamacare' vs. 'Affordable Care Act'” <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2013/09/27/poll-obamacare-vs-affordable-care-act/>

**Framing (2):**

The press and politicians, intentionally or not, can claim that the public can has “different” views based on how survey categories are combined. Again, let’s look at the Affordable Care Act.

During the final heated debate on the House floor over the impending ACA vote, Minority Leader John Boehner shouted a resounding, emotional “no” to his question of whether Congress should pass a bill opposed by the American people. Others, however, insisted that majority of Americans wanted government to take a more active role in providing health care. Who was right? Well, the answer is both, and depends on how a third, overlooked response category was incorporated. A CNN/ORC Poll released before the vote shows the reason behind this seeming paradox. When asked about the ACA, respondents were given the chance to answer “favor,” “oppose as too liberal” and “oppose as *not liberal enough*.” The results were as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Favor | 39% |
| Oppose-Too Liberal | 43% |
| Oppose-Not Liberal Enough | 13% |
| Don’t Know | 5% |

The two different answers to the question rests on what happens with the thirds category. Those who oppose the bill as not liberal enough obviously were in opposition, and soon to be Speaker John Boehner was correct in his assessment. But the take was that a majority of the public feared federal intrusion into the health care system, which was not the case. Both those who favored the passage of the ACA and opposed it as not liberal enough favored increased federal intervention, as the following graphs demonstrate:

Source: CNN/ORC POLL: <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2014/images/07/22/rel7c.pdf>

One more pint needs to be made. Often, especially if an issue is being hotly debated in the press, individuals are hesitant to admit that they “don’t know” about the issue and give a random response or get pulled to a certain answer based upon how it is framed. A simple addition of a response such as “I haven’t really made up my mind about this issue” often decreases the proportion who otherwise state an opinion. Given a more face-saving exit option, we may actually find that a majority on some issues has no opinion at all, and that the debate is being driven by politicians and a smaller than expected segment of the public.

**SAMPLING PROBLEMS:**

**Learning objective:** 10.2 Describe the ways that public opinion can be measured.

When drawing a sample from a broader population, we need to get as close as possible to what we call a random or equi-probable sample. Every individual in the target population to which we wish to generalize must have an equal ability to be brought into the sample. Purely random samples, as the text mentions, are rarely if ever possible. National directories or central voting registration lists are not available, a random national sample if don face-to-face can be prohibitively expensive, and, even if randomness can be obtained, certain individuals are more likely to respond to surveys than others.

Just about every student of the social sciences is familiar with the infamous 1936 *Literary Digest* Poll that, in spite of its massive sample size, made a colossal error in predicting that Kansas Governor Alf Landon would handily beat the incumbent president, Franklin Roosevelt (see box on “Straw Polls”). As the section on polling suggests, polls like the *Literary Digest* have a severe sampling problem as they tend to oversample wealthier individuals who not only are more reliably Republican, but more likely to respond to this type of mail in survey (Squire, 1988). Yet unrepresentative samples do not always present incorrect findings, at least in terms of winners and losers. While we are quick to chastise the sampling methods of the 1936 *Literary Digest* Poll, we tend to forget that the *Digest*, in spite of its sampling bias towards Republicans, was correct in its presidential predictions from 1920 to 1932. The reason for its accuracy in the 1920s is the fact that, before the New Deal realignment, a majority of voters were Republican. Even in 1932, enough Republican voters, upset with Republican President Hoover’s inability or lack of desire to address the growing economic depression, temporarily cast a protest vote in favor of Roosevelt or possibly stayed home. By 1936, however, when it became clear that the New Deal would lead to major changes in the federal government’s intervention in the economy, most of these protesting Republicans returned to their partisan home.

Additionally, turnout by those from lower socio-economic strata increased their turnout and support of Democratic candidacies. In spite of its lack of random sampling, the *Literary Digest* had, until 1936, polled individuals who roughly approximated the views of most voters. In 1936 it fell far short of that mark. Similarly, imagine a late 2008 poll that was also biased in favor of Republican identifiers. Approval of George Bush’s performance would have most likely shown a majority not approving (see Figure 10-1) as even Republican approval dropped to slightly over 60%. If a poll that overwhelmingly oversampled Republicans showed less than majority support, then we can be assured that, in the population as a whole, a true majority disapproved. What if, for example, a Fox News poll indicated support for one of President Obama’s policies or an MSNBC poll indicated opposition? Although we would have a hard time estimating the true population support for that policy, we could be fairly sure, given their pro-Republican and pro-Democratic viewer biases, that support and opposition would be even greater than reported.

Source: Peverill Squire, “Why the Literary Digest Poll failed,” *The Public Opinion* Quarterly,Vol. 52, No. 1 pp. 125-133

**What Exactly Is a Gap?**

**Learning Objective:** 10.6 Relate the role that group differences such as gender and race can have on public opinion.

Political consultants, academics and pundits constantly refer to partisan preference and voting “gaps” in our culture. A “race gap” indicates that black Americans are much more likely to vote Democratic than are whites. A “marriage gap” demonstrates that married couples are more likely to prefer Republicans than those who are unmarried, particularly single women with children. The most consistently mentioned, if less pronounced, gap is one based on gender with women being more likely than men to identify with the Democratic Party and support their candidates, at least starting in the 1960s. It is important to note, however, that the gender gap does not necessarily imply that a majority of women and a majority of men are on different sides of the partisan preference aisle. When this gap first appeared, both men and women were demonstrating an increased Republican preference, but men were defecting from the Democratic Party faster than were women, thereby increasing the distance or “gap” between them (see Wirls, 1986).

Source: Daniel Wirls, “Reinterpreting the gender gap,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 50, pp. 316-330

The following graph shows that, at certain times, men and women demonstrated the same majority partisan voting preferences, but a gap between them still existed. With few exceptions, both a majority of men and a majority of women exhibited similar partisan preferences (with women being even more likely to vote for the Republican presidential candidate prior to the 1960s. In the 1960s, both (most likely mainly Southern) men and women gravitated away from the Democratic column, but men did so more dramatically. The same was true between 1976 and 1980. During the 1980s, both genders gravitated towards the Democratic candidate, but still maintained a pro-Republican majority stance. It was only since the 1990s that men and women generally chose, by majority, a different partisan choice.

Source: American National election Studies. 2012 results used only web interviews.

**Partisan Differences in Opinions:**

**Learning objective:** 10.6 Relate the role that group differences such as gender and race can have on public opinion.

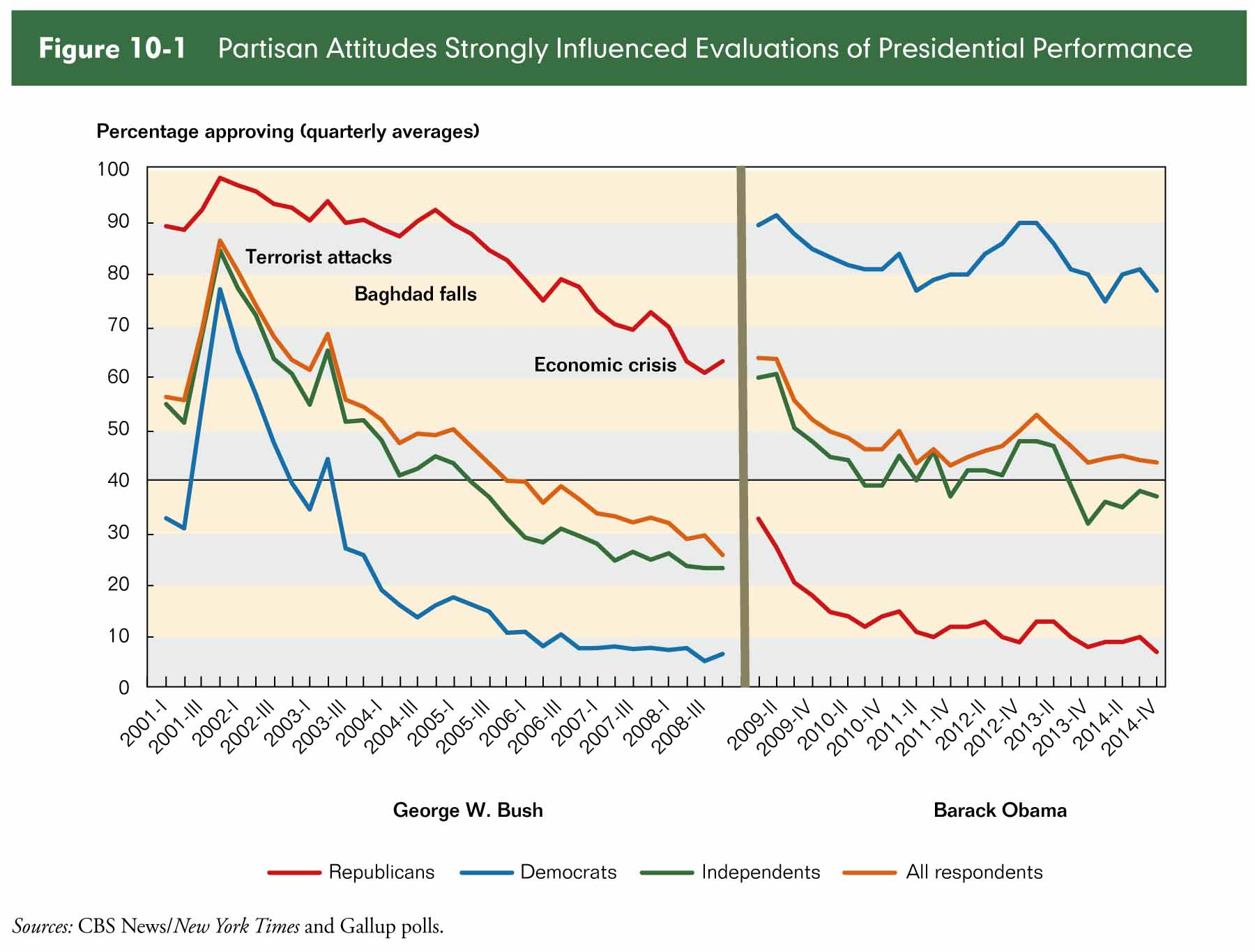


Figure 10-1 demonstrates that presidential approval ratings tend to move in the same direction regardless of partisan preference, generally increasing or decreasing with national events but with a general decrease across time (see also Figure 7-6). Yet a gap still exists among partisans at any given point in time (a dramatic exception, of course, exists in the period immediately following the events of September 11, 2001 when public approval of President Bush was high and close among all partisan subsets). The overall gap between the parties has, on average, also increased throughout the last two decades (7-6), a sign of increasing polarization between the parties. Part of this, of course, has to do with how partisans, increasingly more ideological, view events. What is preferred by members of one party may not be preferred by the opposition, and that certainly impacts presidential approval ratings. Part, however, has to do with how events, speeches, controversies are viewed by members of each party.

The data for Figure 10-1 has been recategorize to demonstrate more clearly how the approval ratings of the president vary between members of his party and the opposition by comparing the group rating (percentage approving) of each party against what can be considered a control group, independents. The bars represent the difference between the percentage of Republicans and Democrats who approve minus the percentage of Independents who approve. Absolute values have been calculated for the opposition party (Dems before 2009, Reps 2009 and after) in order to make comparisons easier.

One can easily see the following:

* With one small exception (that can be attributed to random sampling error), the president’s partisans tend to differ more than the opposition from independent views especially as a president’s time in office increases.
* The difference seems to be greater during the Bush administration than during Obama’s.

Perhaps approval ratings relative to that of independents is mathematically constrained by how well the president’s approval rating is doing overall. By the end of the Bush administration, independent approval ratings were so low (less than 25%) that Democrats could not be much lower. The graph has been adjusted not to show differences but ratios by dividing the approval rating for each party by the approval rating for independents, partially if not completely factoring out the effects of the independent “starting point”. A number greater than 1 indicates greater approval (the president’s party), below one, lesser approval (the opposition).

Although relative (to independents) Republican approval of Bush is still greater than relative Democratic approval of Obama, the differences are not as stark as in the previous chart. What is clear, however, is the rather (9/11 exception) consistent decrease in opposition approval, with a general increase among members of the president’s party.

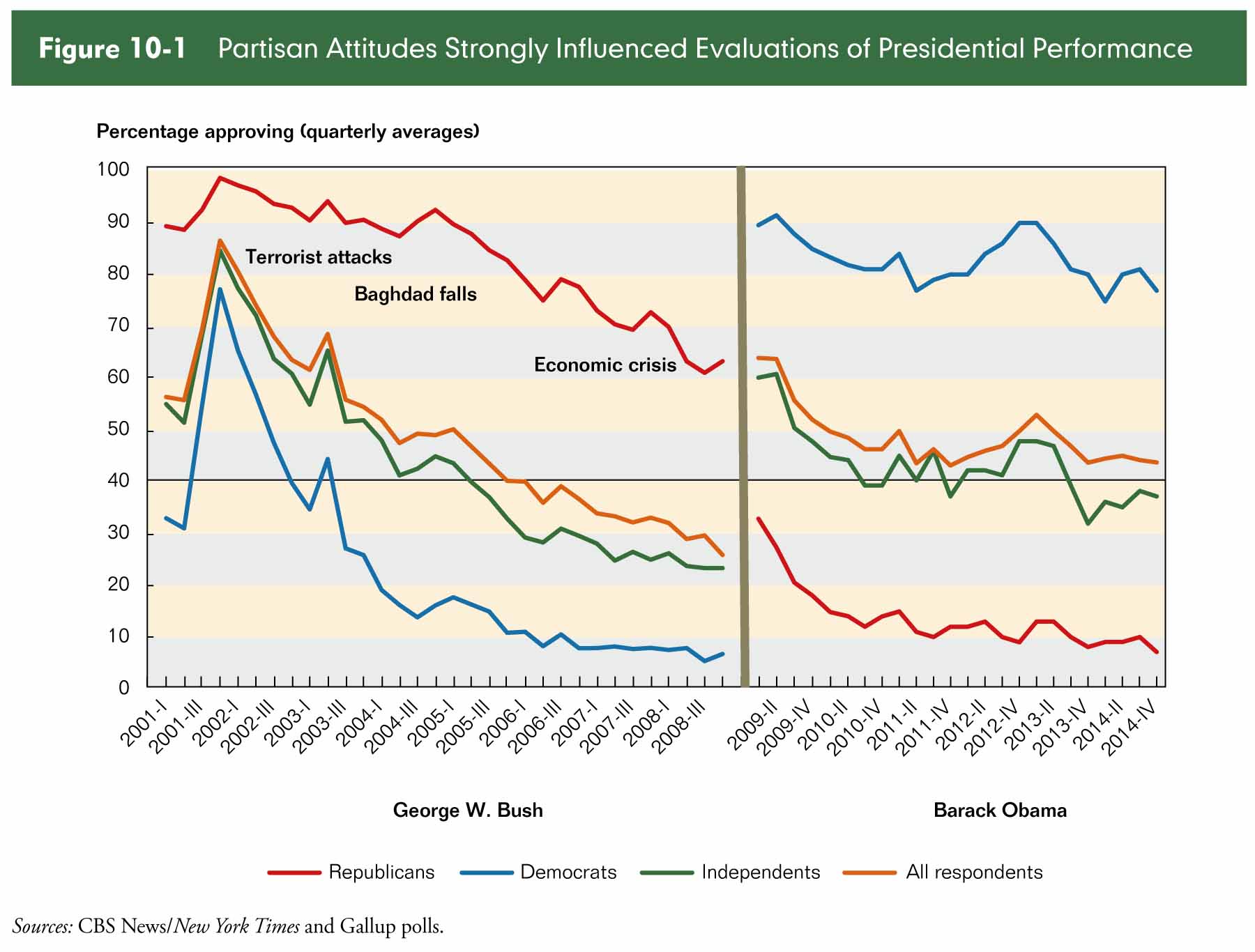
**Consistency of Public Opinion:**

**Learning objective:** 10.5 Summarize the role of consensus in politics and policy issues.

The charts and figures in this chapter indicate that public opinion has been fairly stable on some issues (Health Care-Figure 10-2, Abortion Rights however framed after 1970-Figure 10-6), moving consistently in the same direction on others (presidential performance-Figure 10-1, acceptance of women and minorities as presidential candidates—Figure 10-3) and swinging sometimes radically on some (Cynicism-Figure 10-5, especially defense spending-Figure 10-4). Opinion swings are not evidence of a fickle, but rather rational public, shifting with the presence or absence of international threats and violence.\*

\*A student of Peter Galderisi, Lauren Demos, discovered a fairly reasonable correlation between how one views the state of the economy and preferences for changes in defense spending as well as cohort effects (Lauren Demos: “The Price of Power: Determinants of Public Opinion on Defense Spending from 1980-2014, paper presented to satisfy the requirements of the local internship program research seminar, UCSD, June 13, 2014).

Figure 10-1:



**Questions to Consider:**

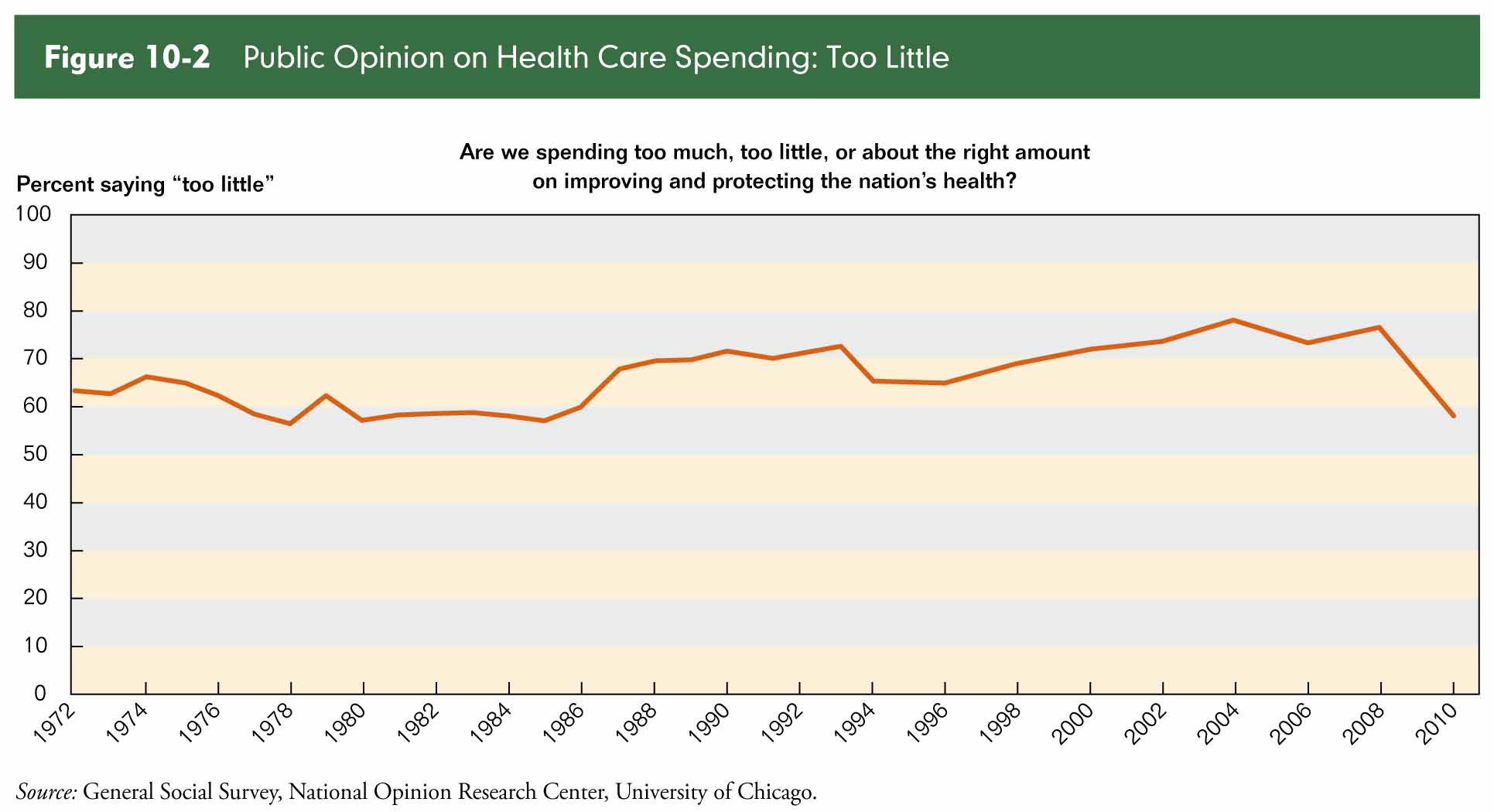
1. According to Figure 10-1, evaluations of presidential performance by Republicans, independents, and Democrats seem to change (move up and down) in a fairly consistent fashion, with the approval ratings of the members of the president’s party always being highest.

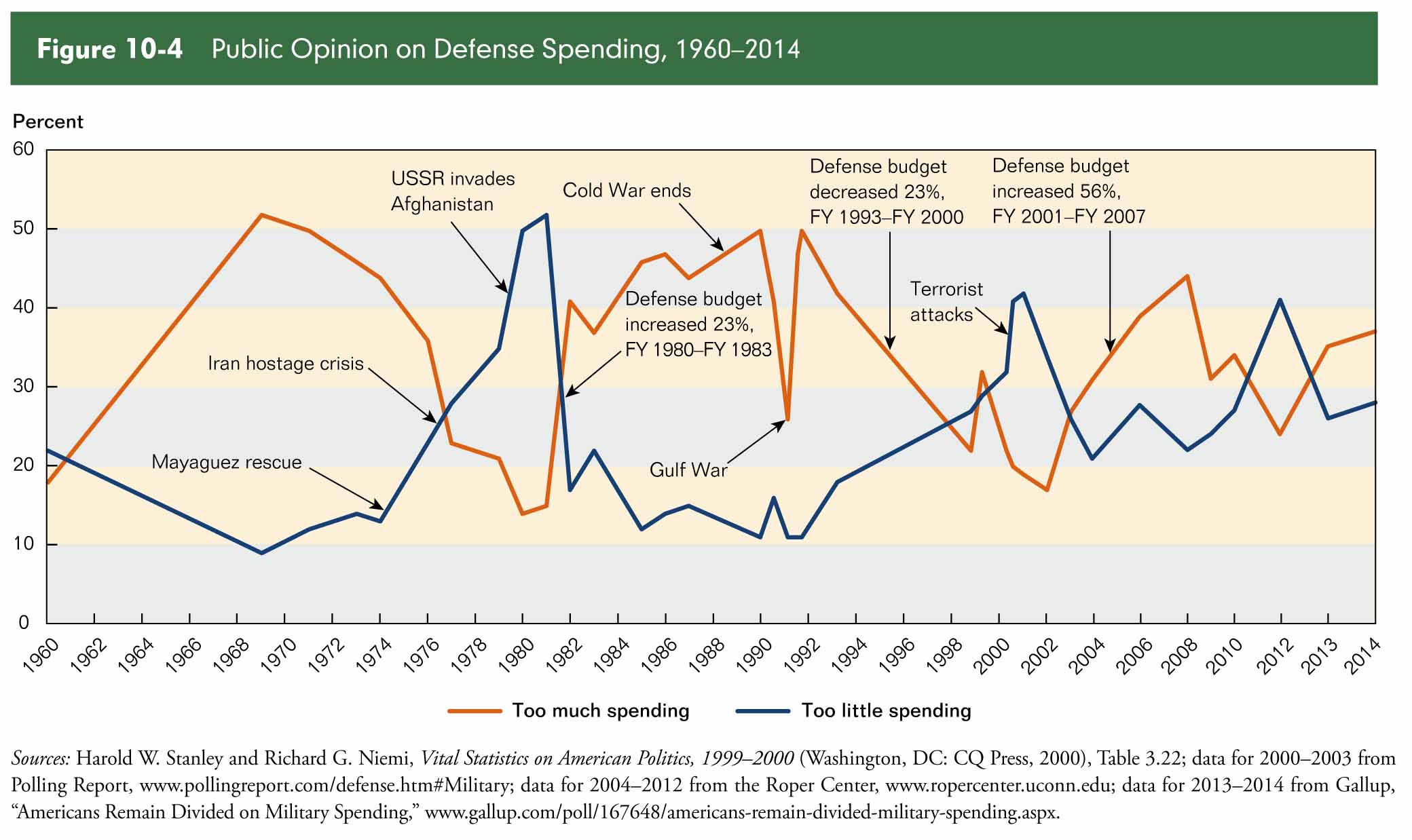
\*a. True

b. False

@ Feedback: The most dramatic shift came after 9/11, with approval ratings of independents and even Democrats reaching near that of Republicans. With that exception, the gaps among different types of partisans seem fairly consistent.

Figures 10-2, 10-4:





**Questions to Consider:**

1. Which of the following statements is most true?

a. Public opinion on both health care and defense spending have been fairly stable across time.

b. Public opinion on both health varied and defense spending have both varied widely across time.

\*c. Over time, public opinion on health care has been fairly stable, but opinion on defense spending has varied widely.

d. Over time, public opinion on defense spending has been fairly stable, but opinion on health care has varied widely.

@ Feedback: Opinion on defense spending has varied widely based upon military crises and concerns about national security.

2. According to the “Public Opinion and Welfare Reform” table on p. 429:

a. a majority have supported increases in both “welfare” and “aid to poor people.”

b. a majority have not supported increases in “welfare” and “aid to poor people.”

c. a majority have supported an increase in “welfare” but not “aid to the poor.”

\*d. a majority have supported an increase in “aid to the poor” but not “welfare.”

@ Feedback: Although, as the text mentions, “aid to the poor” is pretty much the same as “welfare,” using different terms sets a different framing reference for respondents. Another component of ”welfare,” “solving problems of the homeless” also has a majority in support of increases. One can also surmise that the different responses for “food stamps” and “nutritional aid," although neither had majority support for an increase, could also be a result of “framing.”

3. Although the data in Figure 10-6 may not exactly demonstrate the effects of framing (the issues as listed offer radically different options), it does demonstrate that, on issues like abortion, how the choices are listed can produce dramatically different results.

\*a. True

b. False

@ Feedback: What is perhaps of greater interest is that, regardless of the options listed, views about abortion have been fairly stable over time.

4. Given the discussion about health care reform (based upon the 2013 CNBC poll), framing an issue by attaching a political leaders name to it:

a. changes overall opinion

b. reduces uncertainty (those who respond “Don’t Know”)

\*c. both A and B

d. neither A nor B

@ Feedback: When “Obamacare” was substituted for the “ACA,” both positive and negative responses increased. Views about President Obama most likely had a separate or reinforcing effect on attitudes about health care.

5. According to the discussion and pie graphs on health care opinion, a majority of respondents opposed the Affordable Care Act but otherwise supported greater federal intervention in health care.

\*a. True

b. False

@ Feedback: Some who opposed felt that the legislation did not go far enough. Figure 10-2 demonstrates that a majority of citizens have consistently felt that too little was being spent.

6. Since the 1960s, a gender gap has generally existed. Which of the following best describes the nature of that gap?

a. A majority of women have supported the Democratic presidential candidate while a majority of men have not.

b. A majority of both men and women have supported candidates of the same party.

\*c. Women have been more likely than men to support the Democratic candidate but, at times, a majority of both have supported the Republican.

@ Feedback: A “gap” just indicates different percentages or probabilities of voting, affiliating, or thinking a certain way. Majorities may be different or the same.

7. Looking at the two graphs that recategorize Figure 10-1, affiliates of the sitting president’s party tend to have collective views about presidential approval more proximate to the views of independents than do members of the opposition party.

a. True

\*b. False

@ Feedback: With one exception, the president’s partisans tend to differ more than the opposition from independent views.