

## Discussion Questions for 17.317, U.S. Social Policy

### **Part II: Preferences, Participation, and Representation**

- This section of the course focuses on the mass public – what does the public want, who participates in politics, and whose preferences get expressed in public policy. We begin by looking at political participation, which is a key way in which citizens voice their preferences.

### **Public Opinion and Preference Formation: The Case of Universal vs. Targeted Programs**

- Describe the two major views of the nature of public opinion – that the public doesn't know much about politics at all, and alternatively that the public knows enough to be meaningful democratic actors. What kinds of evidence to those who hold each view present?
- How does knowledge about specific policy areas compare to general political knowledge? Do those who know a lot about the political system generally know about policy areas as well?
- How does knowledge/ignorance vary across issue areas? Why? Why might people know about the deficit and unemployment but not about the environment or foreign aid? What are the roles played by the media, personal experience, elite cues?
- What are the factors that lead someone to have high levels of general political knowledge? Policy-specific knowledge?
- What experiments does Gilens perform? Does having correct political information about a policy area lead to different opinions? What about among those with a lot of general political information to begin with?
- What view of public opinion do Page and Shapiro express? Why might aggregate public opinion appear more rational and coherent than individuals' opinions? Given how little people know about politics, how can this be the case?
- Now we turn to public opinion about social policy, about universal vs. targeted programs specifically
- Regarding the Gilens book chapter:
  - Why are economic rights more controversial in the U.S. than civil rights?
  - Why did Gilens analyze photographs in poverty-related stories in newsmagazines rather than the stories themselves?
  - What is the relationship between media coverage of poverty and the racial portrayal of poverty and the actual racial composition of the poor? How does this vary over time? When does poverty coverage get racialized?
  - What is the effect of media coverage on attitudes toward welfare?
- Regarding the Cook and Barrett book chapter:
  - What programs are most and least supported by the public?
  - What is the role of notions of “deservingness”?
  - What is the role of different target populations or different kinds of programs (giving cash vs. in-kind goods) on public opinion toward programs?
  - What about opinion among Congressmen – how does it differ from that of the public, and why?