

The Public Sphere

Time Needed: One class period

Materials Needed:

Student worksheets

Copy Instructions:

Reading (2 pages; class set)

Worksheets (2 pages; class set)

Learning Objectives. Students will be able to:

- Define the following terms: public sphere, public agenda, public opinion, public policy.
- Identify the relationships among the public sphere, the public agenda, public opinion, and public policy.
- Describe the effect of the news on the public agenda.
- Evaluate different ways of reporting poll results.

STEP BY STEP

- ANTICIPATE** by asking students to think of two words that come to mind when they hear the word “public.” Call on students to share their words.
- DISTRIBUTE** the reading pages to the class.
- READ** the material with the class, pausing to discuss as appropriate.
- CHECK** for understanding by doing the yes/no Active Participation Review with the class.
- DISTRIBUTE** the review worksheet pages to the class.
- REVIEW** the instructions for the activities. For the “Levels of the Public Sphere” activity, you may want to help students think about what issues they’ve heard people talking about lately or what they’ve heard or read in the news.
- ASSIGN** students to complete the worksheet.
- REVIEW** the answers if you wish.
- CLOSE** by asking students to consider this question: Would it be possible to have a world *without* the public sphere? If so, what would it be like?
- EXTEND** the lesson by tracking headlines with the class for the next week to look for issues that are on the public agenda. Either pull up a news website and project it to look at together, or assign students to track headlines on their own. Are the issues you find global, national, or local? Have students heard these issues being discussed in the public sphere? (On television, at home, or even among their peers?)

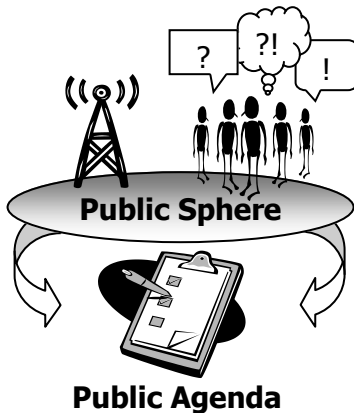
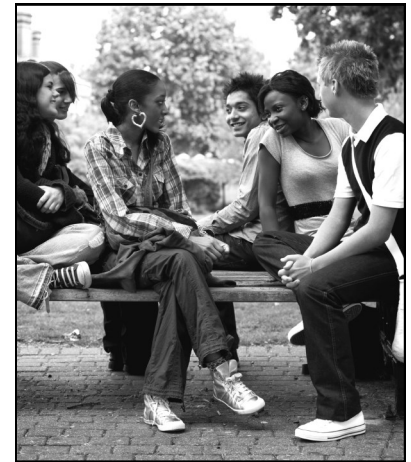


What is the Public Sphere?

Imagine a stage where actors are performing a play. Now imagine that everyone in society is watching this same play. Afterward, everyone in society can have similar discussions: Was the play any good? Did they cast the right actor in the lead role? Wasn't the second scene in the third act hilarious? There is a whole stage that we are all watching. There are topics we all pay attention to, issues we all have opinions about, and policies that affect all our lives. The **public sphere** is a place where society discusses the issues that affect everyone. It links us all together as one large community.

Where is the Public Sphere?

Discussions in the public sphere exist at the local, national, and global levels all at the same time. On any given day, you might talk to a friend about the new skate park in your town, to your teacher about whether the state will change the graduation requirements next year, to your uncle about whether the U.S. should drill for oil off its coasts, or to a neighbor about the war against terrorism. All these issues exist in the public sphere, but on different levels. Someone who lives on the other side of the country probably isn't talking about your new skate park, but they are talking about how the U.S. can gain energy independence. People in England probably aren't talking about where the U.S. should drill for oil, but they're probably worried about terrorism.



The Public Agenda

Discussions that take place in the public sphere give rise to the public agenda. An *agenda* is like a to-do list. Your personal agenda might include things like find a summer job, study for a test, or bring your "C" in history up to an "A." The **public agenda** is a to-do list of issues that much of the public agrees are a priority. The public agenda might include things like clean up after a major natural disaster, solve the problems with our health care system, or decide who should be the next president.

Who Sets the Public Agenda?

The issues on the public agenda depend on what is being discussed in the public sphere. But who decides what the public will discuss? Sometimes nobody decides, as with events like elections that occur on a regular schedule. Everyone knows when the election is going to happen, so people start talking about it. Similarly, large disasters don't need any help getting attention. When planes slam into high-rise buildings in New York or a tsunami kills thousands of people in Japan, word spreads around the globe almost immediately. Issues people face in everyday life, such as drug abuse or expensive health care, also end up in the public sphere simply because so many people are personally affected by the problem.



The Public Sphere

Name: _____

(continued from last page)

But other issues are too distant or too specialized to get attention on their own. People starving in a far-off country, a new law that affects certain types of businesses, a species quietly going extinct in a disappearing ecosystem... Many important issues like these would never reach the public sphere if people did not hear about them in the news.



Public Spotlight

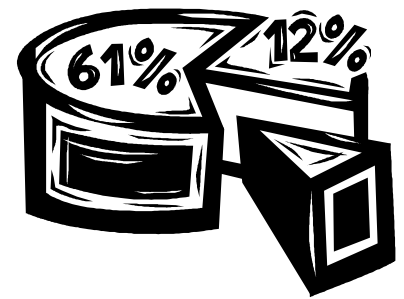
Sometimes public attention focuses on a person or event that does not require public action. When a celebrity marries or a team wins the Super Bowl, everyone may be talking about it, but there's nothing to put on the public agenda. The celebrity or team is simply in the **public spotlight**. Even so, the public spotlight can call attention to issues. A celebrity who dies of a drug overdose may focus attention on the issue of drug abuse, which is always on the public agenda. Celebrities also use their fame to bring public attention to specialized issues that they care about.



Singer Beyoncé uses her celebrity to call attention to hunger in America

Public Opinion

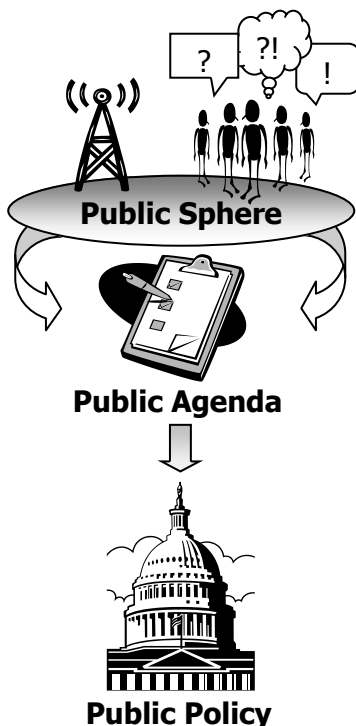
Once people start paying attention to issues, they usually start forming an opinion about them. **Public opinion** is the view that a significant part of the public has about an issue. Public opinion is measured by **polls**, which are surveys that ask people what they think. When you hear things like "Two-thirds of Americans oppose..." or "A majority of Americans believe..." you are hearing the results of public opinion polls. It is important to remember that no poll actually surveys every single person in America. Polls take a **sample**, anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand people, who are "representative" of the nation as a whole.



Public Policy and the Public Sphere

Public policy is the stand the government takes on an issue. The government's stand on an issue affects the laws it passes and the actions it takes. But how does the government decide where to stand? One influence is the public agenda. If a huge proportion of society is talking about an issue, the government is likely to pay attention and do something about that issue.

What, exactly, will the government do? That depends partly on public opinion. Remember that our government is made up of people who represent us. Those people, your senators and representatives, listen to what the public thinks. If a senator learns that three quarters of the voters in her district are against something, the senator will probably work against it on their behalf. If polls show most Americans favor something, Congress may feel bold enough to pass a law favoring that thing, or the president may take action to promote it. This does not mean the government is a slave to public opinion polls. Public policy is influenced by many factors, but in a country where voters decide who gets to be in government and who doesn't, the public sphere can have a big impact on government.



Active Participation Review — Yes/No

Directions: Read each question out loud. Have the class answer YES or NO as a chorus, or have them show you “thumbs up” for yes or “thumbs down” for no. Briefly discuss the reasons for each answer.

1) Do people in Maine have the exact same public agenda as people in California?

NO—state and local issues would be different

2) Are some issues on the public agenda in both Maine and California?

YES—national and global issues would be the same

3) Would “pass my math test” be on the public agenda?

NO—this is a private or personal “to-do,” not a public one

4) Is “texting while driving” an issue on the public agenda?

YES—you probably hear people talking about this issue quite often

5) Do all important issues reach the public sphere?

NO—some important issues never make it on the news or get public attention

6) Could a celebrity’s new haircut be discussed in the public sphere?

YES—it might be shown in magazines or on TV, and people might talk about it

7) Would a terrorist attack be discussed in the global public sphere?

YES—terrorist attacks affect the whole world

8) Would there be a public policy about keeping your room clean?

NO—the government is not going to take a stand on your messy room!

9) Does a public opinion poll survey every single American?

NO—opinion polls survey a sample of random people

10) Does public opinion influence public policy?

YES—government policymakers pay attention to public opinion about issues

11) Do discussions in the public sphere influence public policy?

YES—issues discussed in the public sphere may end up on the public agenda, and the government may end up doing something about those issues.

12) Can celebrities influence the public sphere?

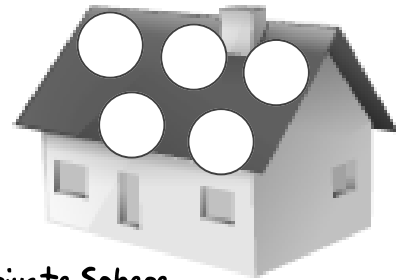
YES—celebrities can use their fame to bring attention to issues

The Public Sphere

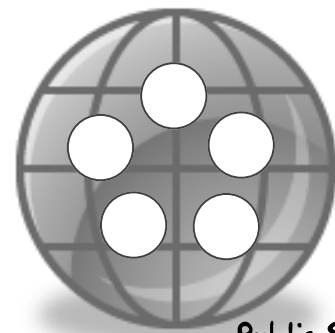
Name: _____

Public Sphere or Private Sphere? The private sphere is exactly what it sounds like: a place where we discuss issues and concerns that deal with our everyday lives and are not made public. Connect each topic of conversation to the correct sphere.

- A. Who should be the next state governor?
- B. Why are the polar ice caps melting so fast?
- C. Should Grandma move to a nursing home?
- D. Where are the 10 most wanted terrorists hiding?
- E. When do Fido's obedience classes take place?
- F. Why did the ice maker in the freezer door quit working?
- G. How does the shelter find homes for older pets?
- H. Who will babysit the kids this weekend?
- I. Where can I look for a new job?
- J. Should the government pay for health care?

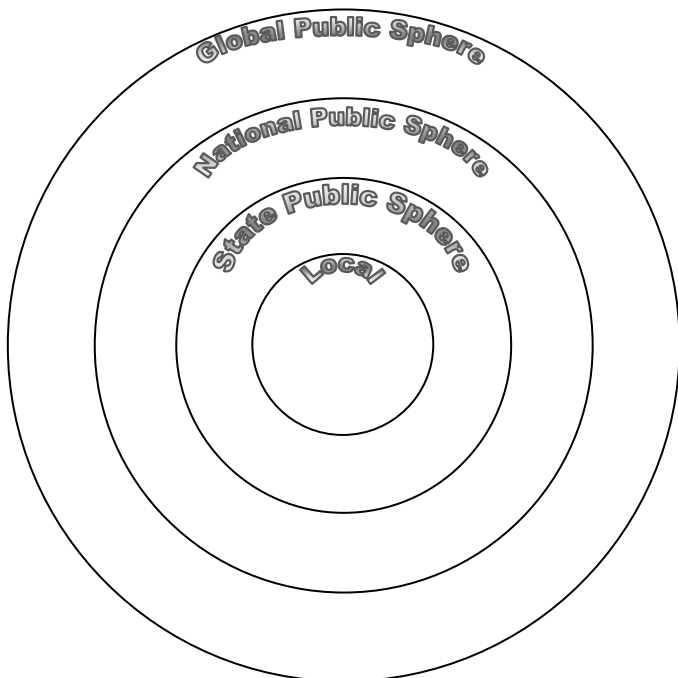


Private Sphere







Public Sphere

Levels of the Public Sphere. Think of one issue that the public is discussing *right now* for each level of the public sphere. Write them in the circles.



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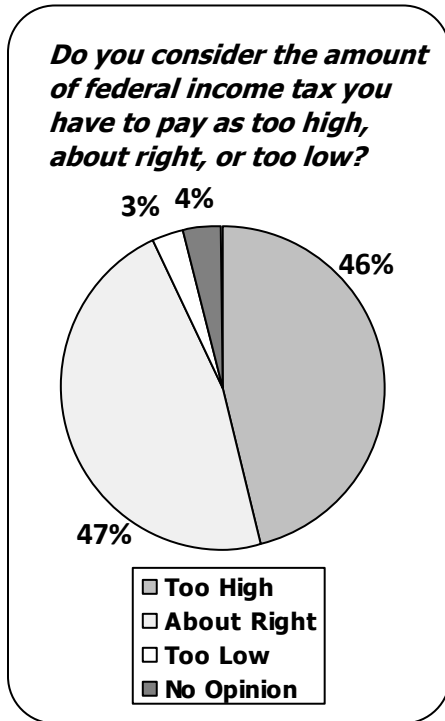
Policy Sphere Agenda Opinion

<p>1)  <u>Public</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government • Actions • Laws 	<p>2)  <u>Public</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority • Sample • Poll
<p>3)  <u>Public</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solutions • Priorities • List 	<p>4)  <u>Public</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community • Discussion • Stage

The Public Sphere

Name: _____

Public Opinion Poll. Analyze the polling information and the four headlines reporting the results. Then write the letter of the correct headline next to each question.



Source: www.gallup.com

- (A) Americans Split on Taxes (B) Under Half Say Taxes Too High
 (C) More Say Tax Rate is OK (D) Nearly Half Say Taxes Too High

Which headline is trying to...

- ___ 1. Make it sound like a lot of people think their taxes are too high?
- ___ 2. Show that about the same number of people think their taxes are too high as think their taxes are about right?
- ___ 3. Emphasize that more people think their taxes are about right than think their taxes are too high?
- ___ 4. Make it sound like not many people think their taxes are too high?

Which headline(s) might be used by...

- ___ 5. A politician who does not want to lower taxes?
- ___ 6. A group that believes taxes should be cut?
- ___ 7. A newspaper that is trying to present the issue fairly?

News and the Public Agenda. Study these real-life headlines, then answer the questions to decide how each event would have influenced the public agenda.

A) **HUNDRED AND FIFTY PERISH IN FACTORY FIRE; WOMEN AND GIRLS, TRAPPED IN TEN STORY BUILDING, LOST IN FLAMES OR HURL THEMSELVES TO DEATH**

Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, 1911

B) **ELVIS. KING OF ROCK. DIES AT 42**

Death of Elvis Presley, 1977

C) **TERRORISTS ATTACK NEW YORK, PENTAGON**
 Thousands Dead, Injured as Hijacked U.S. Airliners Ram Targets; World Trade Towers Brought Down

September 11 terrorist attacks, 2001

D) **8 Killed as Volcano Blows — Ash Spreads to Montana**

Eruption of Mt. St. Helens, 1980

Which headline would have put *this* on the public agenda?

- ___ 1) Learn how to predict volcano eruptions
- ___ 2) (no public agenda item)
- ___ 3) Pass workplace safety laws
- ___ 4) Make the world safe from terrorists

Choose one headline. Think of one more "to-do" that might have been added to the public agenda as a result of this event.

Headline letter _____

This "to-do" might have been added to the public agenda:

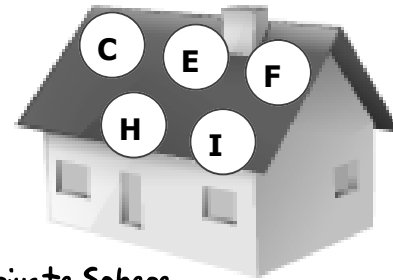
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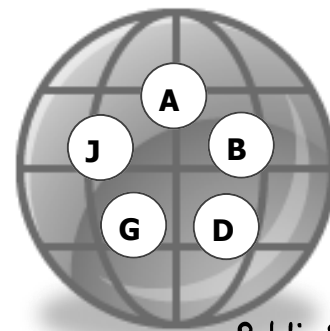
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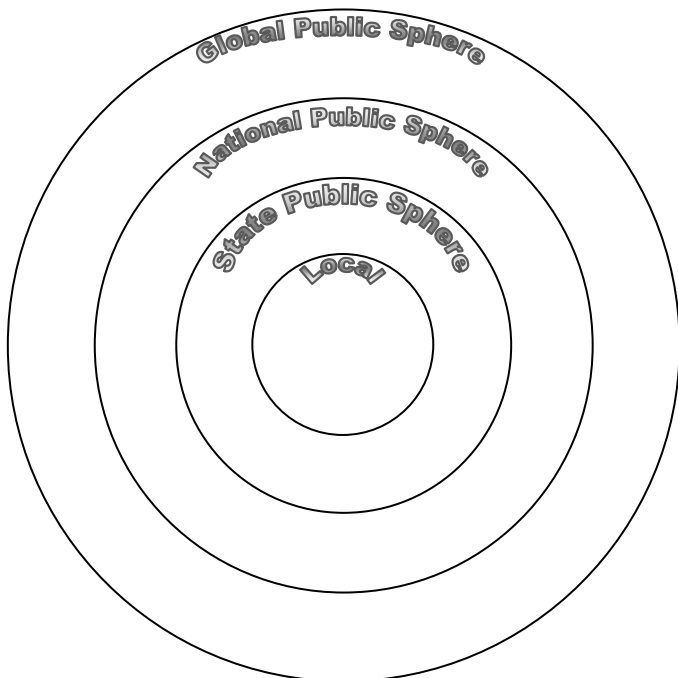


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Public Sphere





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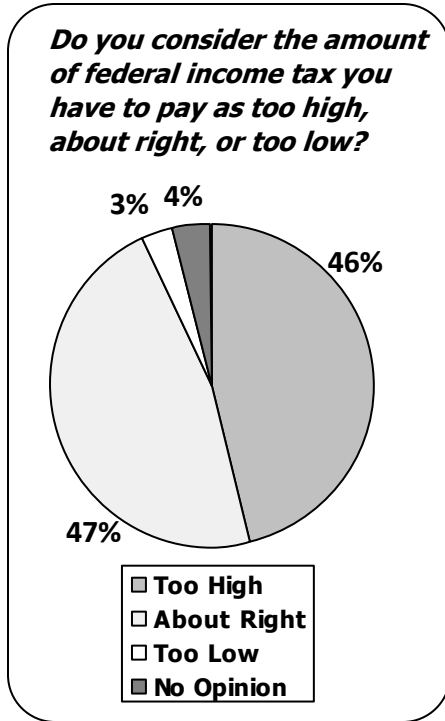
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