

The background of the slide is a blurred image of the United States flag, showing the stars and stripes in soft focus.

PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

In this chapter we will cover...

- **What is Public Opinion?**
- **Early Efforts to Influence and Measure Public Opinion**
- **Political Socialization and Other Factors That Influence Opinion Formation**
- **How We Form Political Opinions**
- **How We Measure Public Opinion**

What is Public Opinion?

Public opinion is 'what the people think about an issue or set of issues at any given point in time' and opinions are normally measured by opinion polls.

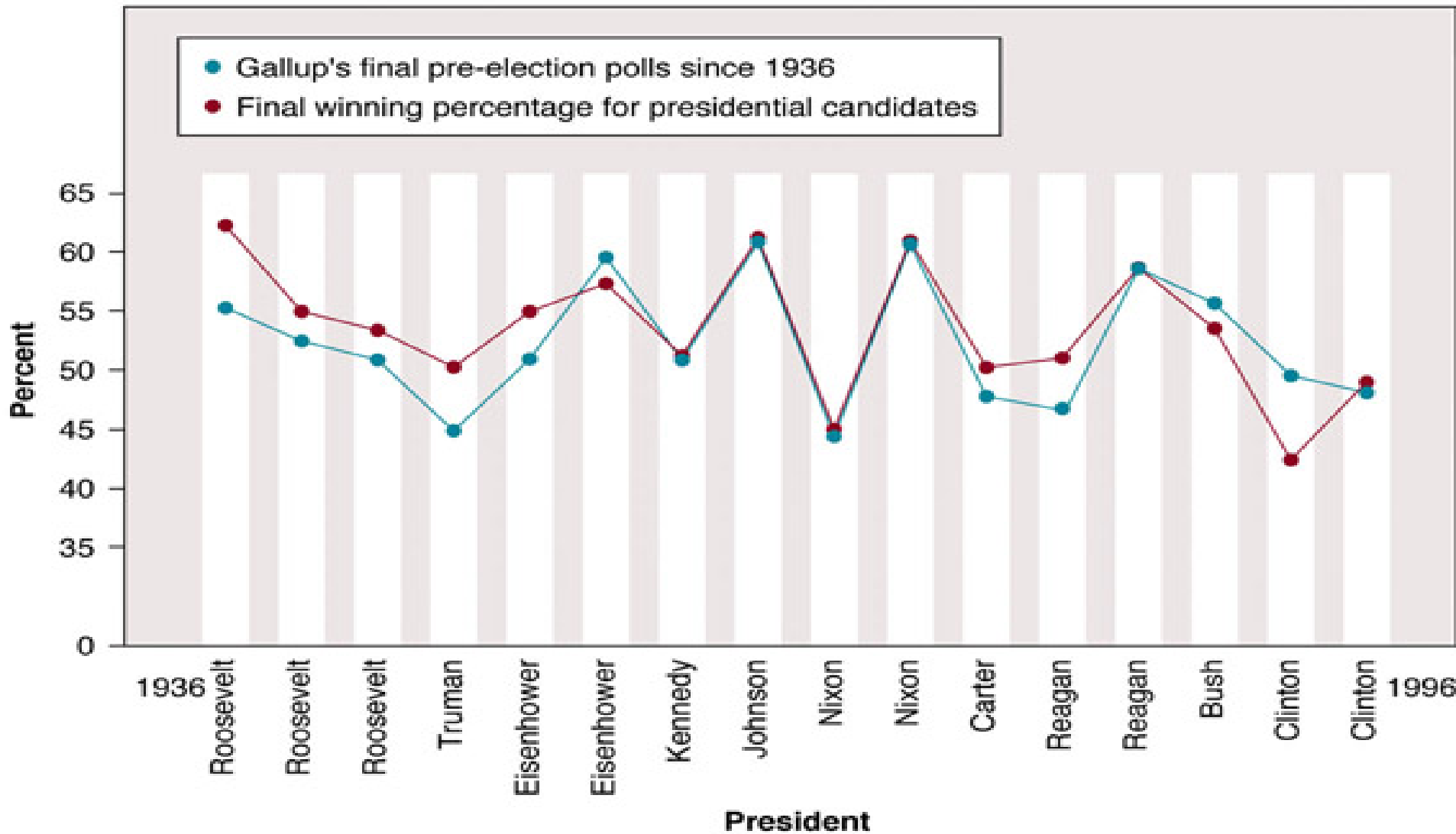
Opinion Polls

Polls are interviews or surveys of a sample of citizens used to estimate how the public feels about an issue or set of issues.

Early Efforts to Influence and Measure Public Opinion

- Public opinion polling as we know it today developed in the 1930s.
- As early as 1824, newspapers have tried to predict election winners using polls.
- *Literary Digest* used straw polls that are now seen as highly problematic.
- *The American Voter* was published in 1960 and continues to influence the way we think of mass attitudes and behavior.
 - This book studied the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections and discussed how class coalitions led to party affiliation.

Figure 11.1 The Success of the Gallup Poll □
in Presidential Elections, 1936-1996



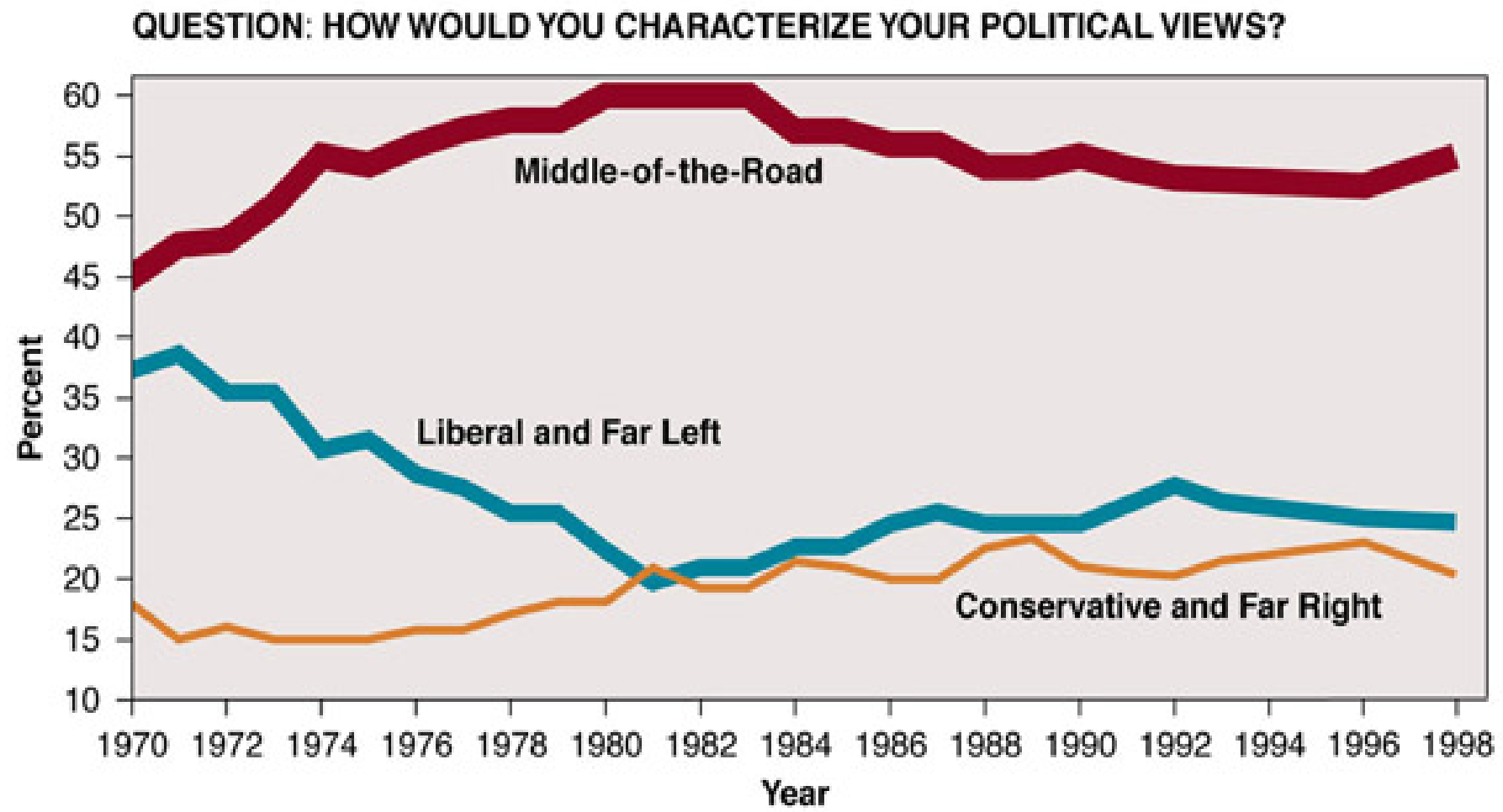
Gallup's average error: 1936-48, 4.3% 1952-63, 2.0% 1972-88, 1.6% 1992, 6.0% 1996, 1.0%

SOURCE: Marty Baumann, "How One Polling Firm Stacks Up," *USA Today* (October 27, 1992): 13A. 1996 data from Mike Mokrzycki, "Pre-election Polls' Accuracy Varied," *The Atlanta Journal/The Atlanta Constitution* (November 8, 1996): A12.

Political Socialization and Other Factors That Influence Opinion Formation

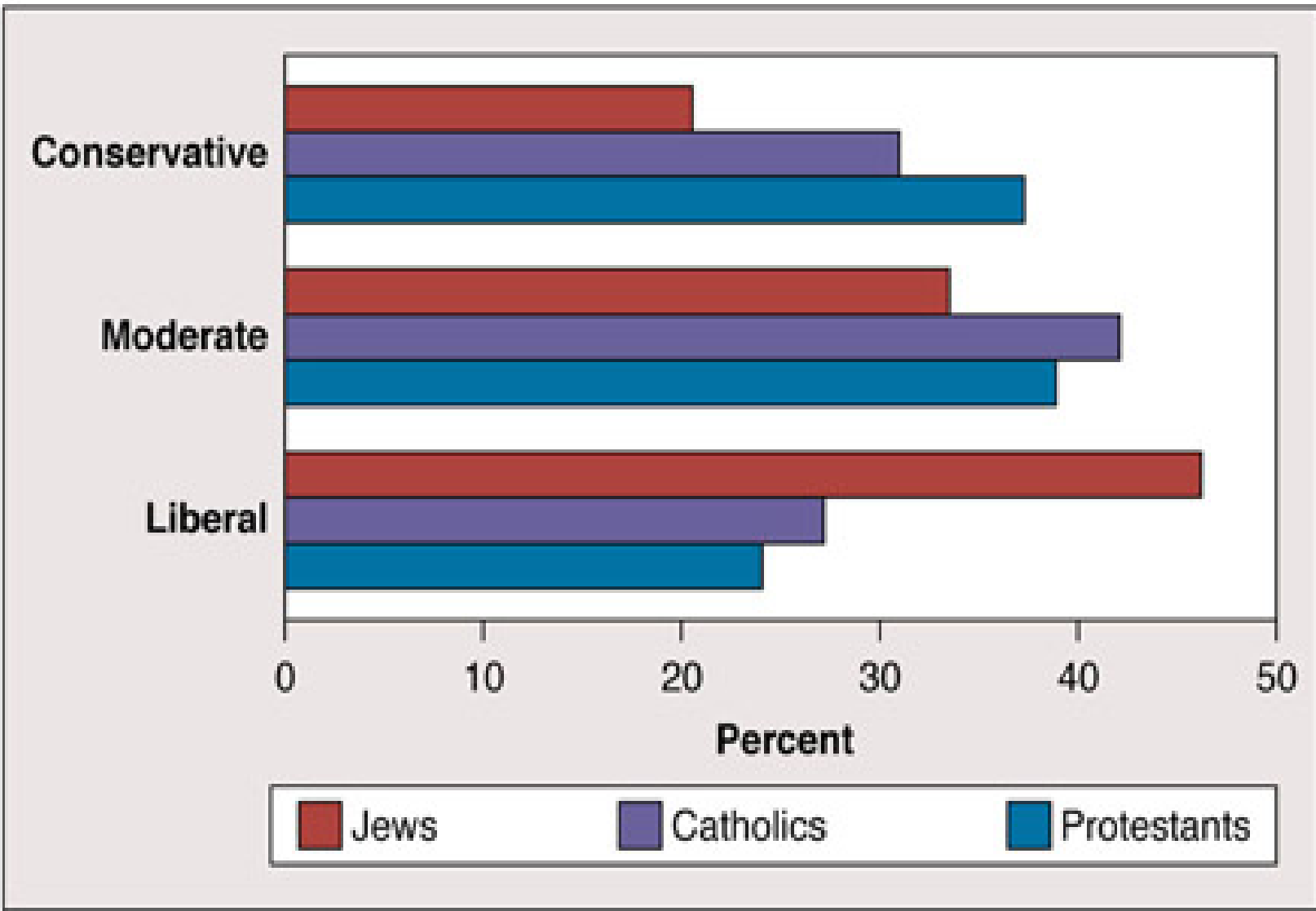
- Political attitudes are grounded in values. We learn our values by a process known as political socialization.
- Many factors influence opinion formation.
 - **The Family**
 - **The Mass Media**
 - **School and Peers**
 - **The Impact of Events**
 - **Social Groups**
 - **Religion**
 - **Race**
 - **Gender**
 - **Region**

Figure 11.2 Ideological Self-Identification of First Year College Students, 1970-1998



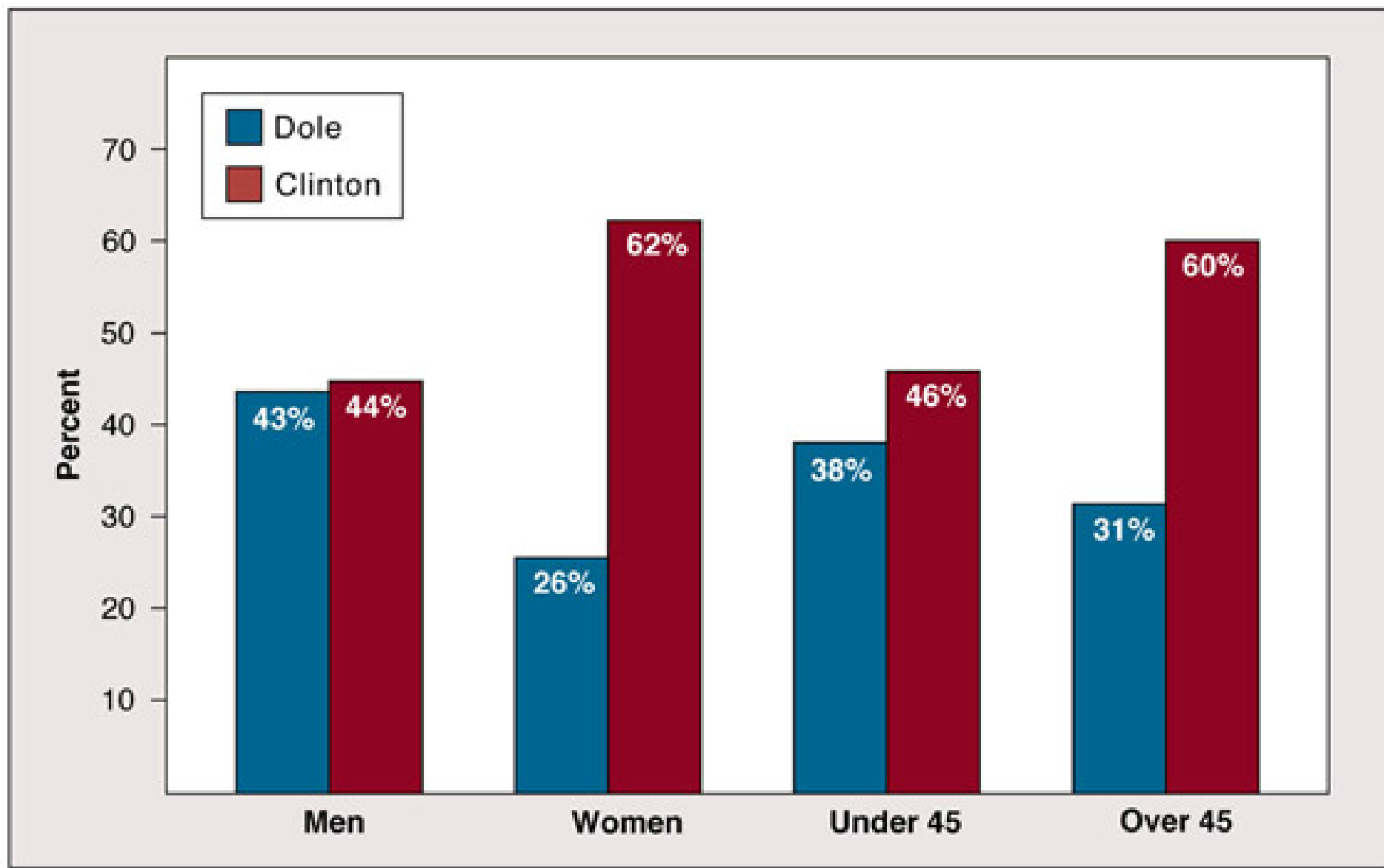
SOURCES: Eric Dey, Alexander Astin, and William Korn, *The American Freshman: Twenty-five Year Trends* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991); *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1991* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991); *Fall 1992* (1992); *Fall 1993* (1993); *Fall 1994* (1994); *Fall 1995* (1995); *Fall 1996* (1996). Reprinted from: Howard W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics, 1997-1998* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1998), 113.

Figure 11.3 The Ideological Self-Identification of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews



SOURCE: Data compiled by Sarah Brewer from the General Social Survey Cumulative File, 1999.

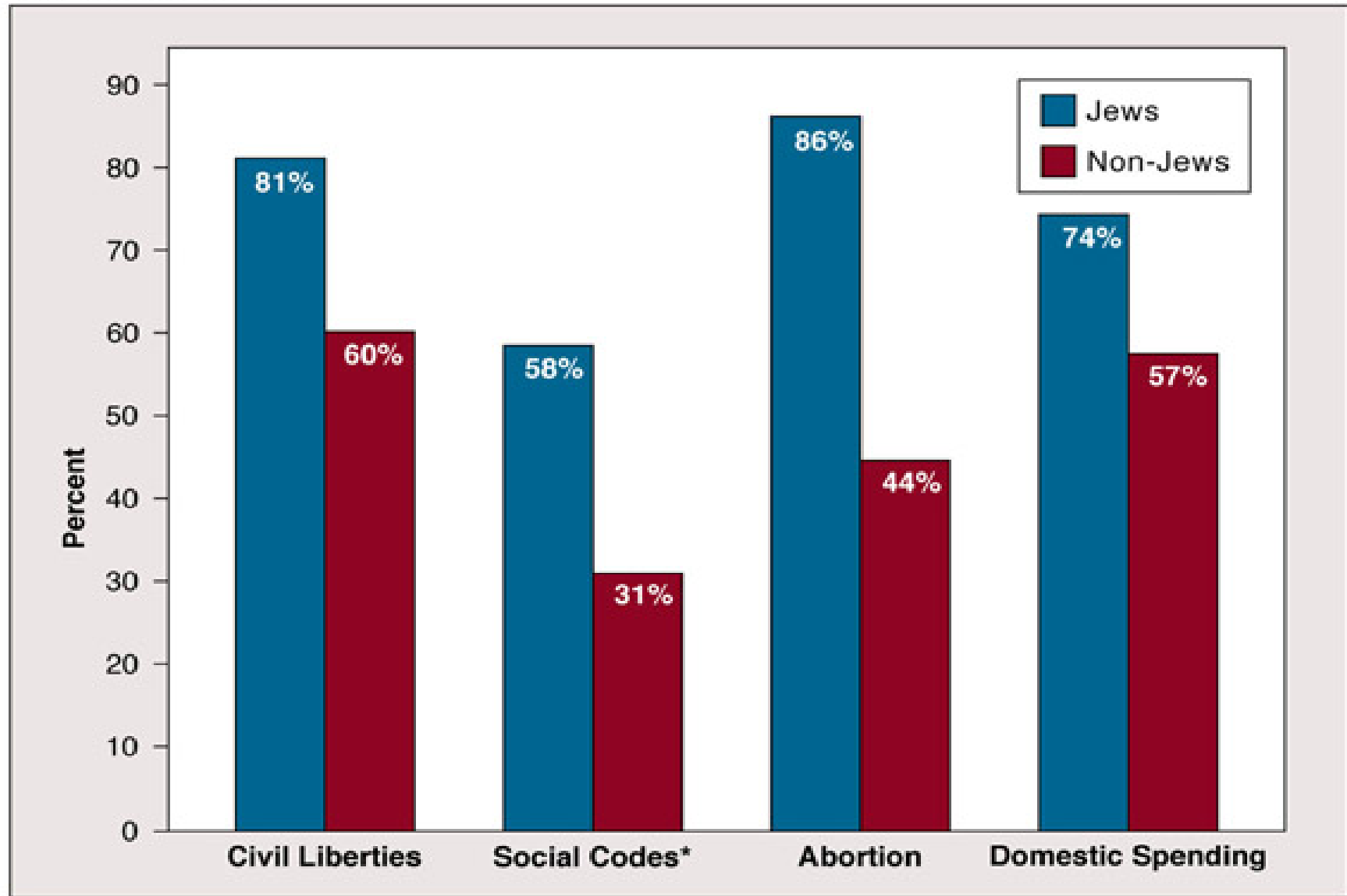
Figure 11.4 Whom Catholics Said They Would Vote For, 1996



NOTE: Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

SOURCES: Pew Center for the People and the Press, NBC/Wall Street Journal poll. *Washington Post* (October 20, 1996): A18.

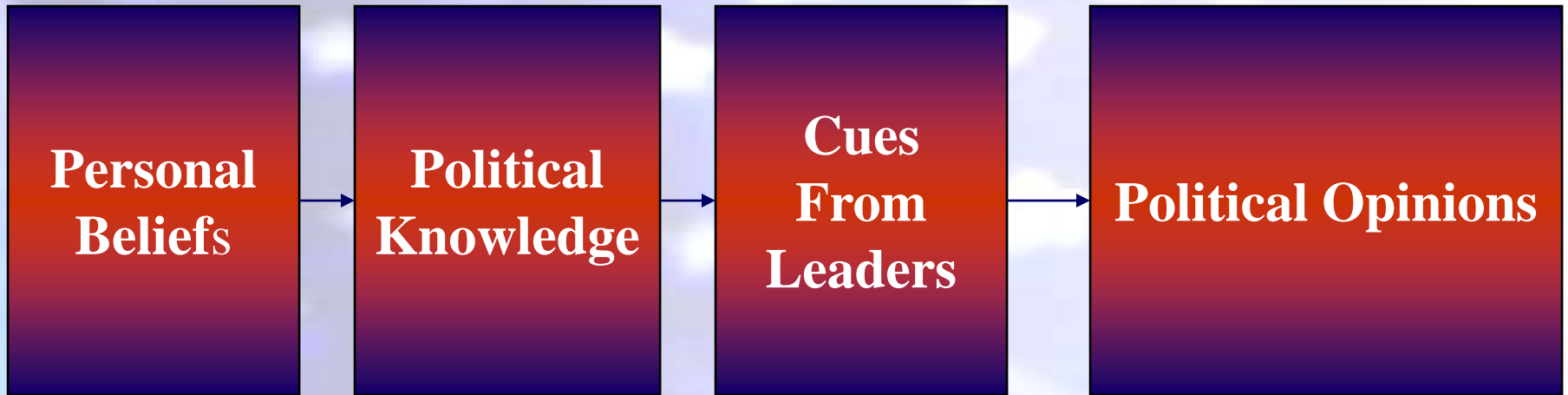
Figure 11.5 Percent with Liberal Attitudes on Specific Issues Among Jews and Non-Jews



*Social codes include support for liberal divorce laws, homosexual marriage, and premarital sex.

SOURCE: Adapted from Steven M. Cohen and Charles S. Liebman, "American Jewish Liberalism: Unraveling the Strands," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61 (1997): 417.

How We Form Political Opinions



How We Measure Public Opinion

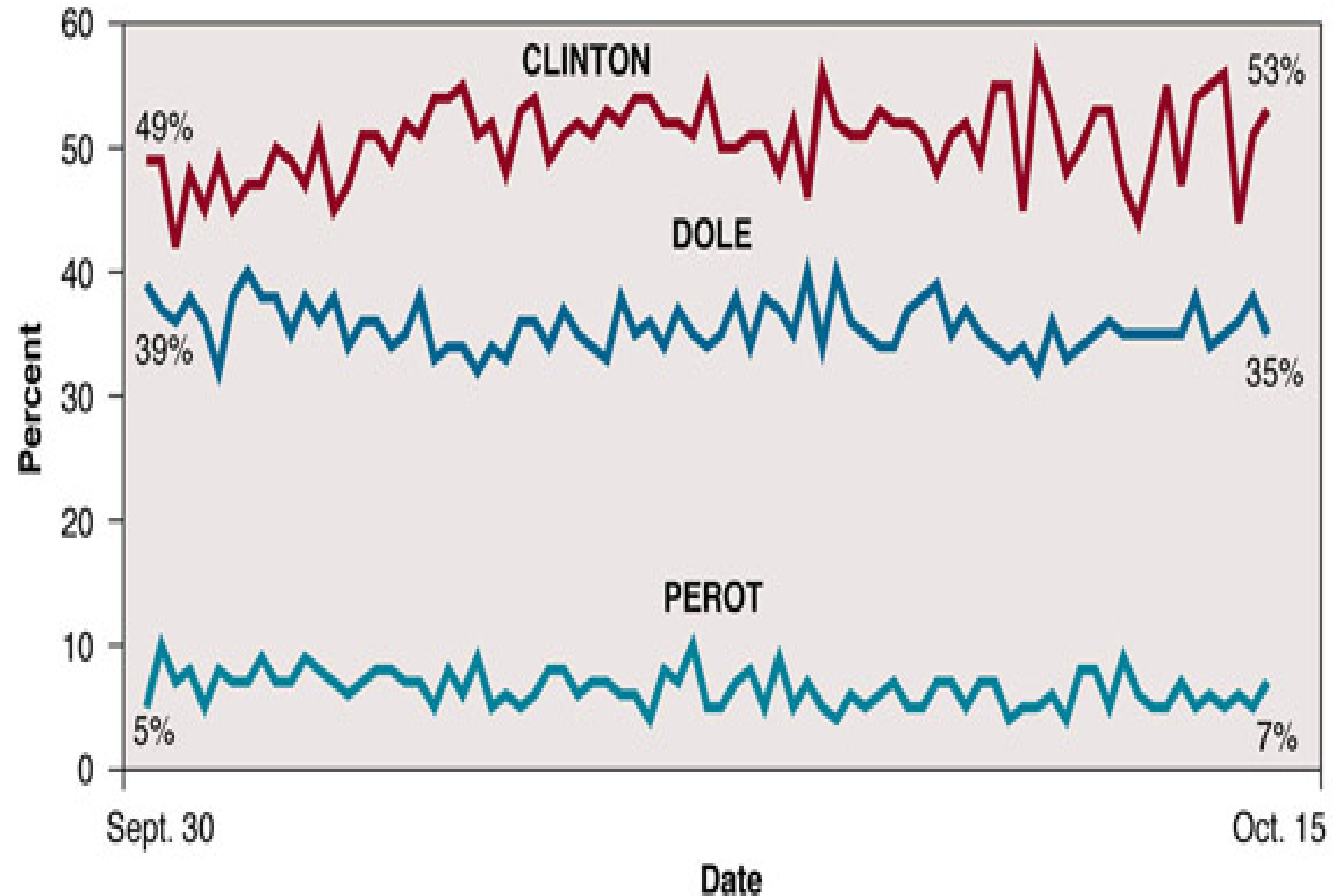
In order for a poll to be reliable, it must have:

- **Proper question wording**
- **An accurate sample**
 - **contacting respondents** – Since 95% of Americans have phones, random phone calling would be a valid method.

How We Measure Public Opinion

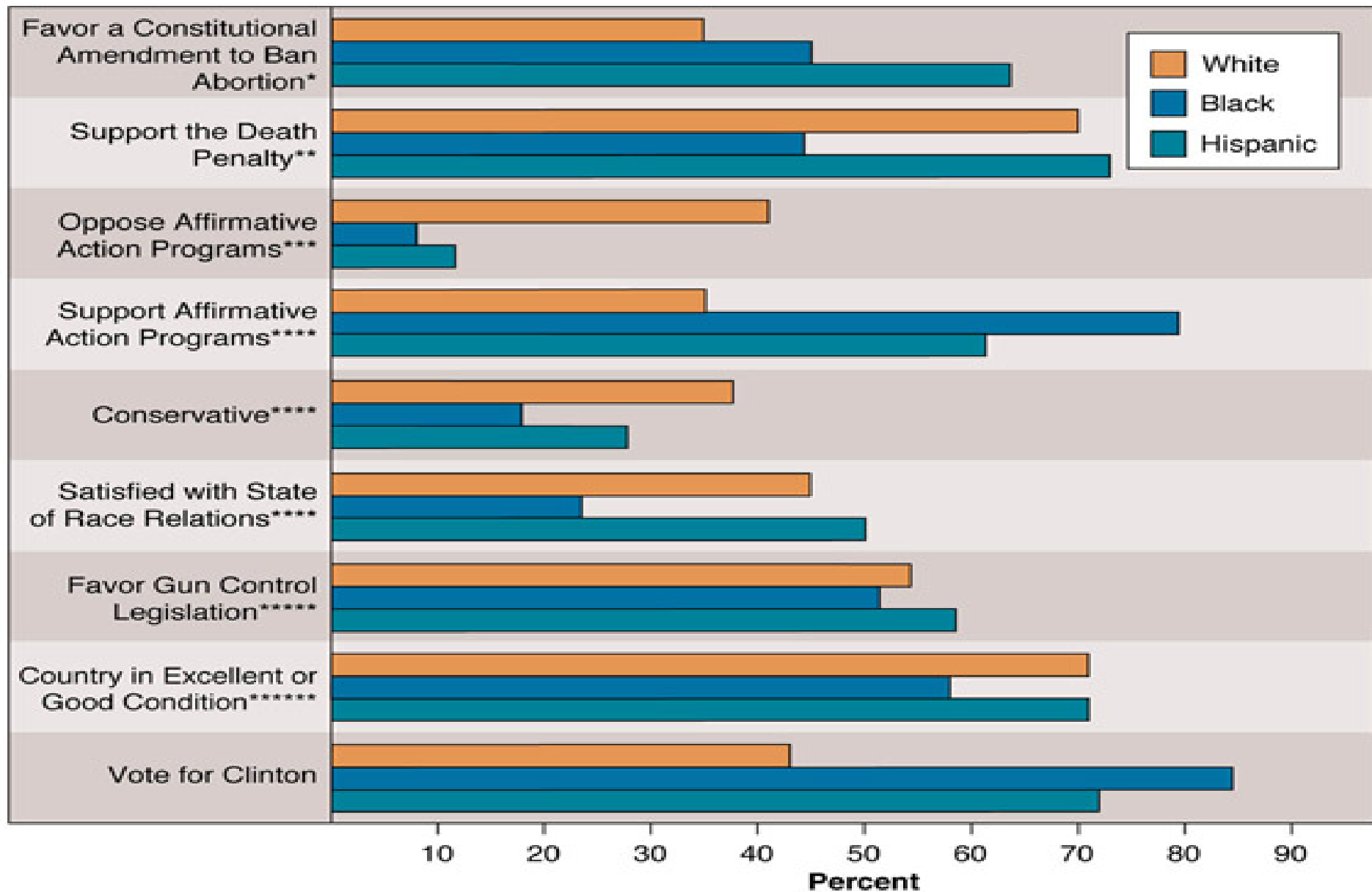
- In general, do not trust a poll that does not tell you the question wording, the sampling method, and the ways in which respondents were contacted.
- Reputable pollsters will also tell you the number of respondents (the 'n') and the error rate (+ or - 5%).
- Any poll that tells you to call 555-5554 for yes and 555-5555 for no is unscientific and unreliable. This is not a random sample at all!

Tracking Poll of the 1996 Presidential Election



SOURCE: Copyright 1996, USA Today. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 11.6 Racial Attitudes on Selected Issues



SOURCE: Compiled by authors from 1988 National Election Study.

Questions from the Roper Center, Public Opinion Online.

* December 1996

** August 1997

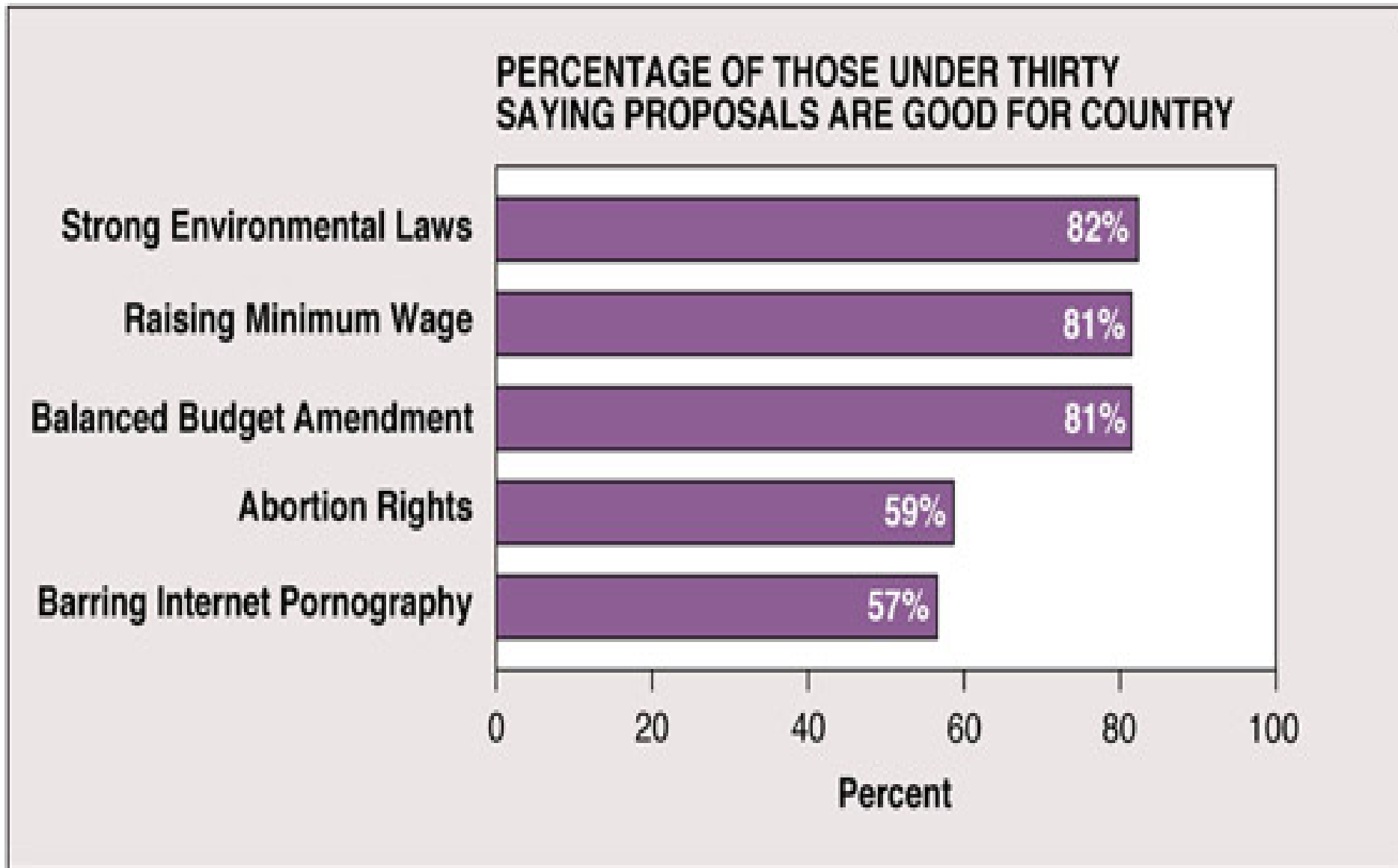
*** March 1998

**** April 1998

***** December 1998

***** January 1999

Figure 11.7 Generation X on Political Issues



SOURCE: Paul Leavitt, "In Some States It's Beginning to Look A lot Like Election Day," *USA Today*, (October 16, 1996): 7A.

Types of Polls

- **Tracking polls**--continuous surveys that enable a campaign to chart its daily rise and fall in popularity. These may be a decent measure of trends.
- **Exit polls**--polls conducted at polling places on election day.
- **Deliberative polls**--a new kind of poll first tried in 1996. A relatively large scientific sample of Americans (600) were selected for intensive briefings, discussions, and presentations about issue clusters including foreign affairs, the family, and the economy.
- A **deliberative poll** attempts to measure what the public would think if they had better opportunities to thoughtfully consider the issues first.