

A decorative header featuring a dark blue horizontal bar with white stars. Below the bar, various numbers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9) and percentage symbols (%) are scattered in a light gray font, some overlapping the main title.

Data in the Service of Liberty

By Ben Wattenberg

As a social scientist Everett Carll Ladd was in love with data; as an American he was in love with liberty. His central theme was to use the former to bolster the latter. The way the game is played these days, that often means counter-punching combat.

As I believe Everett understood it, the original perpetrators in the data wars were typically of a liberal persuasion, usually looking for governmental solutions, too often mis-casting the numbers, creating an atmosphere of crisis, which they hoped would yield governmental action. Everett saw his role in two ways. He would try to keep the game honest, presenting data un-spun. Secondly, these data typically had the effect of lending support to his view of liberty, which looked more toward private than governmental solutions.

As an influential scholar and writer Everett did what he did with skill, passion, originality and precision. But his legacy goes beyond individual achievement.

In the late 1970s, when the idea that grew into *Public Opinion* magazine was under discussion at the American Enterprise Institute, I asked Irving Kristol what he thought of the idea. He said, Kristolesquely, "What do we need a magazine about public opinion for? Every time I want to know something about public opinion I just call Marty." Of course, not everyone had access to Seymour Martin Lipset, or to Everett Carll Ladd.

Everett was the man who energized the Roper Center so that most everyone anywhere could (functionally) "Call Everett," or "Call Marty." Now, much of the Center's information is available on the 'net. Is this a huge advance toward sanity in the data wars? Let's call it a big baby step. Alas, what Everett wrote in 1995 remains mostly true: "There comes a point... where the degree of error either in the measures themselves or the way they are used becomes so large as to constitute an unacceptable barrier to modern-day citizenship," and, "If we're given wrong readings on social performance, our opportunity to set the direction of public policy is effectively curbed."

So Everett's work remains a work in progress.

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I was one of those who used to "Call Everett." We shared a love of data. I'm working now on a PBS television project called "The First Measured Century." It is an attempt to express what happened in 20th century America through the lens of data, not anecdote.

My theme, put briefly, "It's liberty, stupid." Think of what has animated the American experience in modern times:

Immigration. For 130 years America was a country with "open immigration." People came here who yearned to breathe free, although they were not always politely welcomed. Now our surveys show that we think it's just terrific that Irish, Jews, Italians and Poles came to America. And the process goes on, yielding the first universal nation.

Suburbanization was spurred by loose, often nonexistent, zoning laws, very un-European. Loose mortgage requirements for single-family homes, called "freestanding," allowed everyday Americans to pursue the dream that "a man's home is his castle." Some Europeans, whose castles belong to royals, and some Americans who confuse spaciousness with sterility, criticize American sprawl. But how often do you hear someone say "a man's apartment is his castle"?

Public opinion polling. My colleague, Richard Scammon, has called it one of the great American contributions to democracy. For all its flaws, survey research is a liberty machine. The opinion poll lets Americans sound off, in a full scale of tones that reverberate most everywhere. The first Gallup poll question, in 1935, showed that a preponderance of Americans thought government was getting way too big. Shortly thereafter another Gallup question showed that by an even larger margin Americans strongly supported federally funded pensions for the elderly. Sound familiar?

I looked forward to interviewing Everett for the program. Now, alas, I'll only be able to quote him and use the data that he so carefully tended.

I expect to be one of many who will use Everett Ladd's ideas and materials. As the years roll on, battalions of Ph.D. candidates will be on his case and many will sign onto his cause. Through a great hard drive in the sky, I hope he will be able to log on and see his scholarship continue to work its wonders. ●