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# Public Leadership

## *Presidents and opinion polls*

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*By David Gergen*

**A**fter devoting much of his professional life to the study of public opinion, Everett Carl Ladd reached a conclusion that should be a wake up call for every politician in the land: a nation's values are a far more important guide for political leadership than its polls. Values are enduring, shape the identity of a people and give coherence to a society. They can provide a source of strength in the exercise of power and just as importantly, a set of boundaries.

While daily polls have their own value and deserve serious attention, they are not as reliable a measure of what steps a nation should take next. Historically, our best political leaders have been those who have given voice and meaning to our values; some of our worst have been prisoners of daily polls.

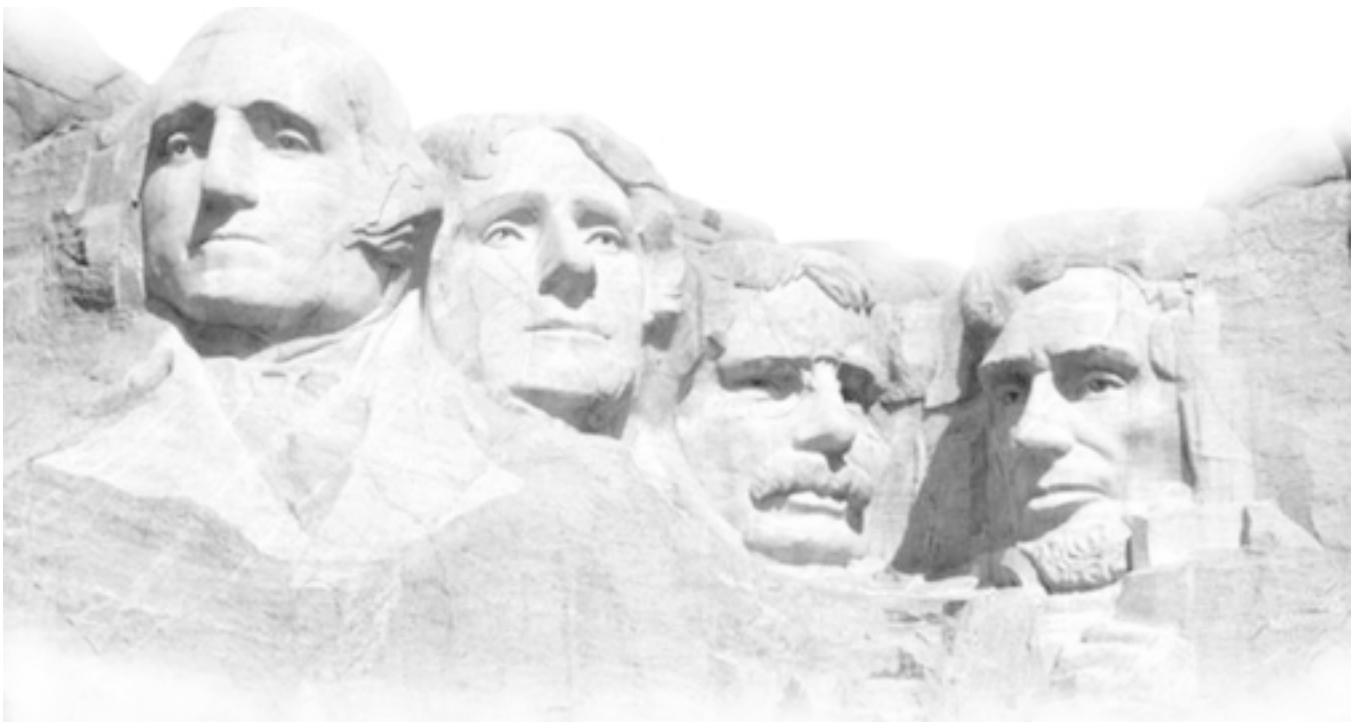
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In an article entitled, "In Search of Presidential Greatness," published shortly before his death, Everett wrote that a key to leadership is having "perfect pitch" on national values:

We expect any president to espouse the political values that comprise the American ideological tradition: individualism, democracy, freedom and equality. Most, certainly, have known how to recite the words. But only a few have deeply felt the music—have been able to tap the enormous political energy that inheres to our sense of national purpose. Washington, Lincoln and both Roosevelts, Teddy and Franklin, had the music just right. Reagan drew on this as well.

Those national values are best captured in the Declaration of Independence. It is our national mission statement. Early in the 20th century, after visiting these shores, British writer and philosopher G.K. Chesterton wrote that the United States "is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed... set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence."



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Our greatest leaders have always repaired to the Declaration for guidance. On the way to his inauguration, Lincoln stopped in Philadelphia, where he said, “I have never had a feeling, politically, that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.” Contrary to many of his countrymen, Lincoln believed the Declaration applied to blacks as well as whites, and he made his comeback in politics to ensure that slavery would eventually die out. Teddy Roosevelt tried to extend the promise of the Declaration to women. Franklin Roosevelt built the Jefferson Memorial, and while he tried to use Hamiltonian means, he wanted to achieve Jeffersonian ends. To tell Americans of the dream he had, Martin Luther King, Jr., went to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and spoke of the Declaration.

As Everett has written, “When he represents these founding ideals and links them persuasively to a current course of action, the president can draw upon an enormous resource for leadership. The most successful presidents have been those who understood this keenly.”

**G**eorge Washington may have been Everett’s favorite political leader. In his writings, he repeatedly pointed to Washington as a president who gave life to the nation’s values through both word and deed. “George Washington was perhaps the most successful public figure of modern times,” Everett once wrote. Unlike politicians today, Washington was not a man who made many speeches. He presided over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia and was the single greatest influence over the drafting of Article II, but history suggests he spoke only twice from the chair. He told friends he wanted his actions to speak for him.

The central question in America’s founding, as Everett said ten years ago, was whether its leaders would adhere to the ethical values and conduct required to sustain representative government. Would its leaders have sufficient republican virtues? “George Washington was especially engaged by this large question of political ethics,” Everett wrote,

Indeed his teaching and example in this area were in many ways his greatest contribution to America’s founding. Washington saw, of course, that the US needed new political institutions.... But he put even greater emphasis on establishing the requisite ethical norms and standards. This was clearly understood and appreciated by his contemporaries, at home and abroad. They saw him as a great teacher of democratic ethics and thereby the leader in establishing the first representative democracy on this planet.

Washington set the example of treating political office as a burden to be borne temporarily for the public good and then given up gratefully. He perfected the art of resignation, as

Garry Wills wrote in his biography. Wills argues that in voluntarily giving up power, first from the army and later from the presidency, Washington did more than anyone else to implant the notion of a representative democracy.

Everett would agree. And he bewailed some of the changes we see today: “the loss of that intense commitment to elevated political ethics which Washington and many of his contemporaries exemplified is striking and unfortunate, and nowhere more so than with regard to how power should be seen and used.” From Capitol Hill to the White House, too many grasp for office by dubious means and, once there, turn their offices into perpetual campaign machines designed to hold onto power by every available means. “We should expect leaders to tell us where they stand and not dissemble,” Everett wrote, “to use their authority as a public trust, and to fully accept the strict limits on their power and tenure which our democratic system requires.”

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Continual public polling by candidates and incumbent officials has become, of course, a central means of reaching and holding onto political office. Bill Clinton is often held up as an example of a president who has gone completely overboard in living by the polls. It is inconceivable to think of leaders of the past—Eisenhower, for example—taking a poll to determine where to take a vacation, much less whether to tell the truth.

Yet one should not assume that great past presidents ignored polls. Franklin Roosevelt devoured every survey he could get his hands on. The Reagan team developed one of the most sophisticated polling operations in history.

**W**here, then, do polls fit into leadership, and how do they relate to deeply held values? What I learned from Everett, and have seen first hand, is that polls do provide valuable insights into the public mind. A leader must engage in a continual dialogue with the public, listening intently to what is on people’s minds, even as she or he tries to set a direction. Empathic listening is as important as soaring speeches. Polls can be an important channel for hearing the public voice.

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But a leader must also understand what is behind the numbers. Question wording, sample size, how the sample is weighted, how well the public understands the issue—all these and more are obvious considerations that a politician must take into account. It would be helpful if the press would also pay serious attention in its reporting of poll results, long a concern of the survey community.

More than that is the importance of recognizing that public opinion is malleable. Dan Yankelovich has written about the “mushiness” factor in surveys, especially those on foreign policy. The public may have heard of Bosnia for the first time three months ago. How can one assume that it has reached a firm understanding of what the United States should do there militarily? A leader’s responsibility is not only to listen to the public voice, but also to help shape it so that the nation will pursue its highest interests.

That is why dialogue is important; it’s a two-way street. A Harry Truman who was intimidated by the Gallup poll would never have sought passage of the Marshall Plan in 1947, especially from a Republican Congress. Early polls showed the plan had only tiny support publicly. But Truman and Marshall had courage. They reached out to Republicans like Senator Arthur Vandenberg, and, with a grassroots campaign helped along by Dean Acheson, created a bipartisan coalition that enacted the plan in Congress. Truman didn’t give much of a hoot about polls. “I wonder how far Moses would have gone,” he once said, “if he’d taken a poll in Egypt.”

**M**any of the finest hours in presidential history have come when the man at the center had the courage to stand up for what was right in a controversial cause and then persuaded others to follow—Lincoln in signing the Emancipation Proclamation, Franklin Roosevelt in preparing the nation for war, Lyndon Johnson in pressing for civil rights bills. Each of these presidents had an exquisite sense of the public mood and placed great store by it. A president had no power, Lincoln believed, unless he had the public behind him. But none of them let the public’s initial judgments dictate their course; rather they set out to help the public work through the issue and arrive at a final judgment that was more favorable. Principles came first, not the latest polls.

FDR was both lion and fox. He gave voice to the highest values of the nation, even as he worked craftily behind the scenes to line up votes. Recent histories have shown that in the days leading up to World War II, he also practiced a good deal of public deception. But the United States would not have become an arsenal for Great Britain, nor would it have been so well prepared to fight after Pearl Harbor, had not Roosevelt

so masterfully shaped public opinion behind the highest needs of the country.

Leadership is tougher today than in Roosevelt’s time, when the press was not as nosy or cynical and Congress was less fractured. Even so, we have seen instances when presidents have lifted a banner in an unpopular cause and, through effective leadership, have built popular support. Ronald Reagan was in the political wilderness for twenty years before he brought the country around to many of his views. Jimmy Carter convinced a skeptical public that the Panama Canal treaty was a good idea; George Bush rallied a reluctant public behind war in the Persian Gulf; Bill Clinton reversed the polls on NAFTA.

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The problem is that we are not seeing enough of that kind of leadership these days. And the few examples we do have are typically less rooted in enduring national values. A year before he died, Everett wrote a piece that summed up the point well:

The increasingly manipulative cast in elections frustrates Americans. We want less vacuous sloganeering and finger-to-the-wind posturing, greater emphasis on the deep substance of leadership and policy.... Americans have said plainly that they want their political leaders, their presidents in particular, to honor established national values and represent them effectively, and to conduct themselves with integrity. The next presidential candidates cannot be sure that a campaign thus designed and directed will bring them victory, but they have reason to be confident about its soundness. The old verities are still likely to be the best politics in the new century.

Indeed, what Everett Ladd expressed so forcefully has growing relevance today as we search for inspiring new leaders in American politics. With his passing, America has lost one of her finest teachers. ●