

September 12, 2016 | By Nancy Murphy

The 2016 election is in some ways unique, but the fundamentals of leadership for candidates and presidents have not changed, explains a Stanford communications expert.



This is an installment of **Wide Angle: Election 2016**, a Stanford media series that offers scholarly, non-partisan perspectives on the forces shaping the election.

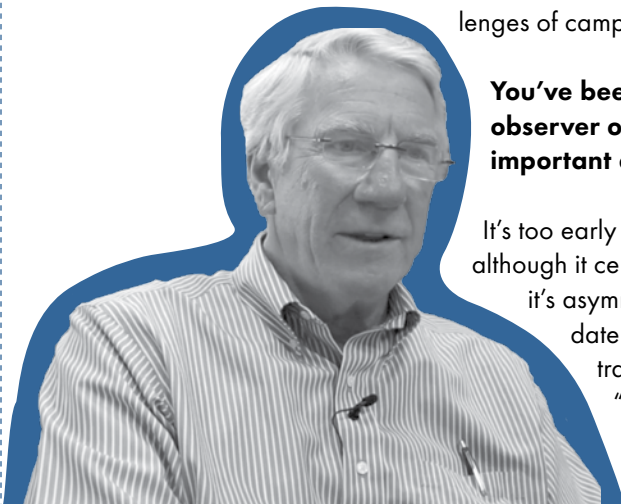
An interview with Stanford's Vice President of Public Affairs David Demarest

Has the hype and hyperbole of the 2016 election overwhelmed more important questions about what it takes to be an effective president? David Demarest, Stanford's Vice President of Public Affairs, draws on his early political career to examine the leadership qualities and capabilities that voters should expect from the candidates and the next president.

David Demarest, Vice President of Public Affairs for Stanford University, has seen presidential campaigns and administrations first hand. His early political career included serving as communications director for the presidential campaign of Vice President George H. W. Bush and then as President Bush's White House communications director. Before coming to Stanford 10 years ago, Demarest ran communications for Bank of America and Visa. He also teaches the course Political Communications: How Leaders Become Leaders at Stanford's Graduate School of Business. Worldview Stanford interviewed Demarest for insights into the distinctiveness of the 2016 campaign, and the leadership qualities required to meet the challenges of campaigning and governing.

You've been directly involved in presidential campaigns and a keen observer of subsequent political races. What makes this election important and unique?

It's too early to tell whether it's a watershed moment in American politics, although it certainly has the makings of a very different kind of election. First, it's asymmetric: you're dealing with a seasoned politician versus a candidate who has virtually no political background and did not follow the traditional path. Even Dwight Eisenhower, who was technically an "outsider," had a political persona because of his military history. If this turns out to be a competitive race, it may inspire other non-politicians to seek the presidency.





Second, both candidates have record-shattering unfavorable ratings, well above 50%. I cannot think of another campaign with such high unfavorables. Finally, you have an incredibly angry cohort in the American electorate that played a significant, and I think unprecedented, role in both of the primary contests. I think there are a number of reasons for that, including a stagnant level of real income, probably dating from 2000, and the country's changing demographics. You are seeing increasing xenophobia, driven in part by the state of world affairs and the prominence of terrorism. This leads people to fear the "others" whom they don't understand and are often new to the U.S.

How does anger play out tactically in campaigns? Often, elections are a competition between either anger or fear, and hope. Usually candidates try to strike a balance between talking about the future they will create while also instilling some fear of what would happen if their opponent became president. They tap into anger to do that. In these primaries, however, the traditional ground rules didn't apply and we've seen a campaign based on capturing and fanning anger. Whether that same strategy is effective in a general election remains to be seen.

There are risks. Go back to the 2008 election, which was basically predicated on hope. There was a significant fall-off in support when President Obama could not deliver on public expectations. Similarly, if you have an election that is predicated on anger and the candidate is not able to deliver the results that the angry electorate wants, you'll have widespread disillusionment.

Every president faces huge challenges. Based on your experience in both presidential campaigns and administrations, what enables a leader to navigate political crises successfully?

Weathering crises in a political campaign or as president requires many of the same characteristics. First, you've got to know the difference between a crisis and a problem. Second, you have to be able to be a leader in a crisis. That often means taking very difficult decisions. Those decisions might involve an apology or firing somebody that's close to you or owning up to a need to change your strategy. Those are huge decisions that you can navigate properly only if you can take the long view and have the ability to understand the contextual environment of the crisis.

That's especially difficult to do with presidential campaigns, which are fast moving and often require seizing the moment. And in today's world, everything is accelerated because of the Internet and social media. Campaign staffs will want the candidate to always be part of the conversation, but that conversation may be not the conversation that you should be engaging in.

There are also rules of the game with crisis management. If you're faced with an accusation that contains some truth, you have to own it. You've got to establish that you know what the accusation is about and then get the worst information out first so the story has a descending trajectory instead of an ascending trajectory. A lot of the people around you will be shrieking, but it's the candidate or the leader that has to bring measured thinking to what is often a chaotic environment.



The kinds of people that surround a candidate or a president in the middle of a crisis are absolutely critical. They fulfill different roles. You don't need somebody that amps up the crisis and acts as if disaster is imminent. But at the same time, you need people that can speak truth to authority. Too often, leaders surround themselves with people that pat them on the back and say that everything's going to be okay and boy, are you brilliant.

When I think about who I surround myself with, it's people that are thoughtful, that are going to tell me the truth, that understand context, understand history, can reflect back and say, "You know, I remember when such and such faced a similar situation as we are facing today and the way they navigated it was X, Y, Z and it seemed to work. Or, the way they navigated it was A, B, C and it didn't work. Let's not go down that path again. What's similar to that situation? What's not analogous to that situation?"

When it comes to electing a president, what are the key elements of leadership that we should be looking for?

Every leader has to understand what problem solving and strategy is all about, how to navigate from point A to point B to point C to get to a desirable outcome. Second, they have to understand that, as Ronald Reagan used to say, there is no "I" in team. Things happen because you've assembled a group of people that act in common purpose. Selecting good, smart people—and defining the roles they're going to play—is absolutely essential. Third is communication. Do you have the capacity to communicate in a way that captures what you're trying to accomplish? Do you talk to people in ways that they can understand? So: strategy, people, communication.

Then, drop down to human qualities that I think real leaders need to embody. It's everything from a sense of humor to not taking themselves too seriously, to not having too thin of a skin, to taking the long view, not the short view, to having a level of humility that says, "I don't have every single answer and I need other people to inform me, to help me understand particular issues." Also knowledge of the issues—you can't be a blank slate and expect to have on-the-job training for everything.

Of course, it's important for a president to command authority in public, to demonstrate decisiveness. But behind the door of the Oval Office, a president is navigating very complex issues that require walking in another country's shoes, and understanding what political pressures are being exerted upon some other foreign leader. Those are really valuable skills. You're not going to be on the world stage and be a dictator to the rest of the world.

Toxic leadership qualities are the obverse of some of the positives. It's arrogance. It's being dishonest with your own team. Once a leader crosses that line, it's very hard to recover. Being so thin-skinned that you are radioactive in the midst of criticism. If anybody gets to the presidency and thinks that they aren't going to be subject to criticism from a whole lot of quarters, they're crazy. Our system is based on being able to have a free press, to have free expression. People are going to criticize you whether you do A or whether you do B. A president that overreacts or takes it so personally that he or she can't see beyond that — that's a real problem.

Finally, in terms of temperament, be positive. There are a lot of burdens to the Office of the President and it would be easy for him or her to feel, "Oh, woe is me." You can't manage very well if the glass is always half-empty. The best presidents have had a positive outlook about life. That's infectious when you're managing a team and inspiring a country.

We have two unusual candidates in this election. But what has not changed? What remains fundamental to presidential elections and the choice we will make in November?

Electing a president is a really serious matter. Always has been, always will be. The president has to be the champion of what America stands for. That's challenging in an America that is polarized and heavily partisan. I think the president has to get back to the core values of what this country stands for and get people rallying around those.

Domestically, the president has to galvanize Congress and the electorate to get behind his or her key initiatives. But in the foreign policy realm, the president really is the United States and represents the U.S. on the world stage. Being principled and decisive and understanding the political realities around the world, taking difficult actions when necessary, being measured when necessary, those are very important roles for the president.

Politics is the art of the possible, not the art of the impossible. What we've seen in recent years has been the impossible: gridlock, things not getting done, people retreating to their own camps. The candidates have to say that the other party is not the enemy. Yes, there are going to be conflicts around policy issues, but we have to be able to look beyond those differences and forge compromises, forge a way forward. That's their biggest challenge.

We have to take the long view of what's best for the country. There's a lot of distraction in any election. Yes, we have an unusual pair of candidates this time. We are also in a media landscape that's in transition, which is making this election even more anomalous. But fundamentally, I think people will get back to what matters when the candidates talk about real issues, the real concerns that the American people have.

My advice to the electorate is to take a step back. Take a deep breath. Don't get confused by all of the glitz and craziness of the campaign. Ask yourself who is going to be able to fulfill the Office of the President, who is best suited to manage all of the difficult and challenging issues that surround it. Ask yourself that question in a quiet moment and I think you'll come up with the right answer. The American public usually does. ✨

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