"Independent" Americans and the Presidency, 1952 and 1996

Commentary by Everett C. Ladd

The Americans, Tocqueville wrote more than a century and a half ago, are "engaged in infinitely varying the consequences of known principles...rather than in seeking for new principles." Modern polling has certainly confirmed this great insight, and its implications can be seen in the views and values we bring to electing a president. Today, it is an essential starting point for understanding why Bill Clinton remains weak for all his political strengths, why Bob Dole's candidacy is failing, why Phil Gramm's has failed to get started at the general public level, and why when Newt Gingrich's name was raised on the presidential flag pole it did not fly. What's more, it helps us see why Colin Powell's as-yet-unannounced candidacy is surging—and why it is likely to have "legs."

A One-Of-A-Kind Standard For An Exceptional Office

The presidency is even more important to Americans symbolically than in its practical power. This is why matters of character and personality have loomed large in the public's assessment of candidates for the office. While we often haven't found the desired mix, we've consistently sought presidents to be exemplars—both of things we value in personal terms and of the nation itself as a large moral enterprise. From George Washington on, we've reserved the judgment of greatness for those seen to have met this test.

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Where We Are Today

This basic principle tells us a lot about why we are where we are in the 1996 presidential race. The incumbent gets considerable credit for his political skills and energy, but he continues to get sub-par grades in the test of national leadership. Through his 32 months in office, Bill Clinton has only rarely elevated his presidential approval percentages out of the mediocre 40s.

On the Republican side, none of the announced candidates is anywhere. This is true even of Bob Dole, though he is still mentioned far more often than any other as the preferred choice for the Republican nomination. The Majority Leader is not only the best known contender but is as well respected for his many accomplishments. This is why 46% of Republicans and those leaning Republican polled by Gallup September 22-24 made Senator Dole their first choice among the declared candidates.

But only a tiny fraction of this 46% is clear, unambiguous support for Bob Dole as the next president. Politics watchers would generally be better off ignoring the early polling trial heats altogether until some means is found of measuring depth as well as breadth. Dole's support is the proverbial "mile wide and inch deep." His overall weakness with the electorate is shown by his trailing Clinton in every recent two-way trial heat—even though the President hasn't enlarged his base of support from the 43% backing him in November 1992.

Dole's weakness among the electorate at large is surpassed by Gramm's and Gingrich's. The inability of any of these three heavyweights to gain broad presidential backing as inclusive leaders able to set a moral tone for the country has created a kind of vacuum, which politics as much as nature abhors. Enter Colin Powell.

1952 Revisited

History never repeats, but in America it often does a remarkable imitation. The parallels between what happened in the Republican presidential nomination contest of 1951-52 and what's happened thus far this year are, I believe, instructive.

When the 1952 contest began, Senator Bob Taft's partisan credentials were unmatched by those of any rival. A Gallup survey of 1740 GOP county chair-

men in the fall of 1951 found 59% endorsing the Ohio senator ("Mr. Republican"). Taft's ability and integrity were widely admired. Nonetheless, when Gallup asked the public about their preferences in early November, not only did Eisenhower best Taft by a large margin among independents, he led narrowly among rank-and-file Republican identifiers as well.

Party machinery had vastly more influence over presidential nominations in the Fifties than it has had since 1968, and Bob Taft's candidacy remained a formidable one right through the GOP convention. Eisenhower had his own strong organizational base, of course. Its cause was aided immeasurably by the fact that the polls showed Ike leading Taft among Republican adherents at every stage in the campaign. What's more, while Taft looked weak in trial heats with Democrats, Eisenhower looked strong. Two-way trial heats of late 1951, for example, put Ike way ahead of Harry Truman, but showed the President beating Taft—much as polls today have Clinton ahead of Dole but trailing Powell.

It may be objected that Eisenhower's strength reflected a unique experience—the exceptional renown he earned for leading the victorious Allied military effort in Europe. This objection misses the mark. Another US General came out of World War II with a fame that rivaled Ike's. Asked in August 1945 who they thought might make a good president, 26% named Douglas MacArthur, 24% Dwight Eisenhower—with no one else in the running. MacArthur's prestige did not fade. A Gallup poll of December 1951, asking what man "do you admire most," found MacArthur first, Eisenhower second.

MacArthur and his friends thought this regard might translate into the GOP nomination. In fact, the earliest polls showed this General way behind both Eisenhower and Taft, and from this weak starting point MacArthur faded fast. He was much admired—but not for the presidency. In the context of this office his "negatives" were far too high. Americans saw a rigidity that would stand in the way of broad, unifying national political leadership.

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Eisenhower's fame as a general got him into the game, but other things put him over the top. Americans didn't know just where he fitted politically. In 1947 roughly the same proportion of the public regarded him as a Democrat as thought him a Republican. In 1948 he had more general public support among Democrats than among Republicans. In January of that year, Gallup found him ahead of Truman among heavily Democratic labor union members. In January 1950, only 40% of those interviewed by Gallup thought that Eisenhower was on the conservative side, whereas 60% saw him a liberal!

But that was just fine. "I like Ike." We like our presidents to be somehow "independent," above the narrowness of the partisan fray. Ronald Reagan, who did have sharp edges ideologically, understood the danger in this to presidential leadership. He compensated through personal warmth and geniality. Equally important, he appealed to a large, unifying idea of America as a "city upon a hill." Different though they were in many ways, Eisenhower and Reagan both carried the country on personality and character.

And this is much where Colin Powell is today. Though we don't yet know much about him in political terms, what we do know we like—it seems balanced and sensible. What's most important, we like what we see in him as a person and what he symbolizes in national aspirations. Like Ike he seems "independent," above the narrower dimensions of partisanship which have never appealed to us when we've considered the requirements of the country's one great national office.

There remains the ever-present issue of race. At this point, white Americans say they are ready to support Colin Powell. Indeed, September 1995 polls showed him besting Bill Clinton among whites in a two-way race, while trailing the President among blacks (p. 50). If a candidate, Colin Powell is likely to tap further the views and values that Dwight Eisenhower drew on so successfully.