with that of other modern presidents. Nicaragua became a very bad resonator indeed. Bush’s popularity in the Gulf War exacted high costs on his political fortunes by the end of the year. As this book will show, there are constraints facing all presidents, in their juggling of popularity with the demands of government, that might surpass even Mr. Wirthlin’s expertise.

Equally as dangerous for democracy is the lack of information about what public popularity means. The standard poll question, originally posed by Gallup and subsequently picked up by other polling organizations, asks if people “approve of the job President __________ is doing as president.” While other questions are asked from time to time, this particular one, raised monthly by Gallup since the Truman years, is usually taken as the standard and the best overall evaluation. The New York Times–CBS News and the Washington Post–ABC News polls typically use this question as the basis for stories on the polls.

Some people apparently answer in terms of the individual in office: They do or do not like George Bush or whomever is president at the time. Human sympathy also affects these responses. Hence, a family tragedy in the White House, a surgical operation, or an attempted assassination prompts some people to be kinder in their responses. Other people answer by attempting to evaluate the president’s performance on issues important to them. However, a large number of people, evidently taking the president to symbolize the nation, evaluate his performance by how well they think the nation is doing. If the nation has economic problems, for example, then they feel that somehow the president is not doing a good job.

All these ideas are mixed in the poll results, which vary with circumstances. Since people’s opinions tend to be stable, the polls also will be stable, fluctuating only with the most dramatic circumstances or with how commentators interpret the circumstances. But because many events are beyond White House control, presidents will be praised or blamed for things not of their own making. A president in office during bad economic times will have lower poll ratings than one in office during stable or prosperous times. Moreover, media commentary on how popular presidents are influences future popularity. Although Ronald
Reagan and Jimmy Carter, as we will see, had very similar poll standings through much of their first four years in office, one was said to be more popular than the other. Stories of declining popularity themselves influence that popularity.

The lack of information goes further. Stories about the polls do not separate the built-in constraints on the presidency from external and chance events. One president is said to be more or less popular than another, without carefully comparing him with other presidents or controlling for chance circumstances. Imagine what would happen if people were compared for how well they managed the resources of their households or businesses, without considering their inheritance or the good and bad fortune that came their way. Some people would seem to do a better job financially than others, simply because they had better luck. This happens, however, when reporters compare the presidents' popularity at some chance point in time or compare the first one hundred days of their terms. The result is a misleading news story that combines very different circumstances and past events.

Today, we find that presidents and their advisers have become increasingly obsessed with popularity, or are encouraged in this direction by media expectations. (Some presidents might not need much encouragement.) Precedents build for the future, and short-term goals get shorter. Government becomes a ratings race, with the loser being the public in whose name all this is carried out. Meanwhile, the polls that are elevated to this new monthly referendum give misleading information at best.

Of course, the presidency is supposed to be the nation's number-one democratic office. Presidents represent all the people; their election is the basis for whatever power they have. According to this logic, polls are simply a continuation of the electoral referendum, and all we need to do is gain a better understanding of what they mean. However, when Americans ask for leadership in the White House, they do not usually want the president merely to follow public opinion. In fact, some of our greatest presidents have been those willing to disregard the opinion of the moment to do what they thought was right. Truman, ranked highest by historians of modern presidents, had the lowest poll ratings. Paradoxically, part of Truman's stature appears to be
precisely that he did not care about the polls and took every opportunity to show it.

Even those who might want more public-minded presidents than Truman find the contemporary scene disturbing. Few Americans would like to think that they are manipulated by public-relations specialists holding emergency meetings in the White House or that they are "interpreted" by the same specialists in the news media, who may or may not have correct information. Nor would they like to feel that wars, presidential speeches, and White House news stories are crafted with anything but the national interest in view. They might not even like the idea that presidents often postpone what could be urgent issues, on the promptings of poll results or the electoral calendar.

The problem of balancing independence with attention to public opinion is complicated, because popularity matters, as we will see in subsequent chapters. Facing Congress, for example, presidents can do more and can implement more of their policies when they have public support. Hence, presidents with ambitious agendas scorn polls at their peril. This point, made famous in the 1960s by political scientist Richard Neustadt in his book of advice to presidents, had been noted earlier by Woodrow Wilson, writing as a political scientist in the nineteenth century. Presidential leadership requires public support. The point is not unqualified, however. There are times when presidents must choose which goals they will follow. Popularity helps ambitious legislative proposals, but the efforts to pass legislation hurt at the polls. Choosing one goal means that they cannot pursue others.

At best, there is an uneasy balance between popularity and the tasks Americans expect a president to do. Both of these contradictory things, it deserves to be reemphasized, can express public opinion. At worst, the popular basis of government has slipped somehow, and democracy has been turned on its head. Presidents govern in the name of the public, using poll reports and other devices as substitutes for more basic opinions and beliefs. To know a little more about what is going on, we can ask these questions: Is being popular the same as doing the job of president? What status should the polls have? How should the polls be interpreted in a modern democracy? What does the public
need to know to make these evaluations—about what it does and does not want its presidents to do? These questions help to frame our look at the modern presidency, in its recent past and in the present. 

This book looks at the place of popularity in the modern presidency, showing its constraints, ironies, and impact. In the process, it points out how individual presidents have balanced governing and gaining public support and identifies the components of this balance. It invites citizens to take back some of the responsibility of evaluation from various professionals, including the presidents, who predict the public’s opinions and interpret them.

WHAT THE PUBLIC NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT THE PRESIDENCY

A Basis for Evaluation

Evaluating presidents, one of the best-loved games of American politics, is played from the first poll of an election year to the latest word of historical revisionism. Americans assume they should make these judgments and that they can do so—that there is enough information available. This game is a celebration of democracy at work. Citizens say what they like and dislike about the candidates; argue—in taxis, bars, and introductory government courses—about a president’s handling of foreign policy; and answer the national surveys on how well they think the president is doing his job. Joining in and cheering the public on are the national media. Cartoonists, editorial writers, television comedians, and talk-show guests all confidently rate the current officeholder in matters large and small, on style and substance, and on his current standing. Over time, a residue trickles down into political folklore. This president was successful in dealing with Congress, but that president was not. This president was popular, but that president was not.