

Americans' Confidence in Their Leaders Declines Sharply

*Most agree on basic aspects of presidential leadership,
but candidate preferences reveal divisions*

Cambridge, MA—80% of Americans believe that the U.S. faces a leadership crisis today—up from 77% in 2007 and 65% in 2005—according to poll results just released by the **Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School** and the **Merriman River Group**.

Many Americans also agree that they are not getting the leadership they need from President Bush and his advisers. 60% say they have *not much* or *no* confidence in the leadership of the executive branch, up from 49% last year.

Despite this lack of confidence in presidential leadership, the poll results reveal important points of agreement on how the next president should lead. Moreover, Americans place great importance on the 2008 election: 77% believe it matters a great deal for the future of the country, up from 65% a year ago.

“We hear a lot about deep political divides in this country, but this poll shows that Americans have clear ideas about the kind of leadership they expect from their presidents,” said David Gergen, Director of the Center for Public Leadership.

The poll asked a demographically representative sample of 997 U.S. citizens (margin of error $\pm 3.1\%$) to choose between alternate conceptions of good presidential leadership. Many basic aspects of presidential leadership, such as building alliances and preserving checks and balances, are favored by a majority of Americans. For example:

- 72% say presidents should use the military only to defend America and react to enemy attacks
- 71% say presidents should share power equally with Congress and the Supreme Court
- 64% say presidents should make decisions based on fairness
- 56% say foreign policy should focus on building alliances
- 55% say they prefer presidents who are never willing to be unethical or bend the rules.

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The poll also revealed some key differences in the facets of presidential leadership favored by supporters of John McCain and Barack Obama. “These core debates about presidential leadership give us some clues about how the candidates’ leadership profiles attract supporters,” notes the study’s lead author, Seth Rosenthal.

“McCain supporters have a general preference for presidents who act as independent moral agents and focus on the country’s safety and strength,” noted Rosenthal. “In contrast, Obama supporters seem to prefer practical presidents whose decisions are more directly responsive to Americans’ opinions and needs.” For instance, when asked to choose between alternate conceptions of presidential leadership:

- 62% of McCain supporters say presidents should be willing to offend people and make enemies when necessary, while 61% of Obama supporters prefer that presidents always be respectful and diplomatic
- 60% of McCain supporters say presidents should lead based on moral beliefs about what is right and wrong, while 52% of Obama supporters counter that presidential leadership based on practical beliefs about what works and doesn’t work is more important.
- 58% of McCain supporters say presidents should protect the public’s safety, even if it infringes on their freedom, while 49% of Obama supporters believe that presidents should protect the public’s freedom, even if it infringes on their safety
- 40% of McCain supporters want presidents to reduce the government’s power to allow Americans to succeed and fail on their own, a sentiment with which only 15% of Obama supporters agree

Moreover,

- 70% of Obama supporters want presidents to keep religious faith a personal or private matter, while 54% of McCain supporters prefer that presidents express their religious faith in public
- 64% of Obama supporters say presidents should do what the American people think is right, while 50% of McCain supporters want presidents to do what they themselves think is right
- 63% of Obama supporters want presidents to ensure that America is respected for its fairness, while 53% of McCain supporters say it’s more important for presidents to ensure that America is respected for its strength
- 63% of Obama supporters say that presidents should focus on uniting people, while McCain supporters are about equally split on whether a president should focus on uniting people or on accomplishing goals, even if it divides people.

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Crisis in Confidence

The crisis in confidence in America's leaders is clearly reflected in the *National Leadership Index 2008*, which presents the public's confidence in the leaders of multiple sectors of society. From 2007 to 2008, many sectors experienced their steepest annual declines in confidence since the inception of the *National Leadership Index* in 2005. Among the survey's key findings:

- Confidence in the leaders of seven sectors—business, the Executive Branch, Congress, religious, educational, the Supreme Court, and state government—fell more sharply in the past year than ever before
- Confidence in business leaders dropped further than did confidence in leaders of any other sector
- Confidence in the Executive Branch and educational leaders has declined for three years in a row
- The only sectors in which Americans have more than a moderate amount of confidence are military and medical leadership
- Confidence held steady from 2007 for military, medical, nonprofit & charitable, and local government leaders
- For the third year in a row, confidence in leaders has not increased for any sector.

However, Americans may see some light at the end of the tunnel. A plurality, 39%, believe that things will be better after the 2008 election, while only 7% believe things will be worse.

“The American people are experiencing tremendous anxiety at the uncertain state of the nation, and they're holding those at the top responsible,” said Todd Pittinsky, Research Director at the Center for Public Leadership. “The next president will face significant challenges. And one of the most important will be to take the lead in restoring Americans' confidence.”

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About the Center for Public Leadership

Established in 2000 through a generous gift from the Wexner Foundation, the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School provides cutting-edge teaching and research as well as hands-on training in the skills of leadership for people in government, nonprofits, and business. For more information, go to: www.hks.harvard.edu/leadership

About the Merriman River Group

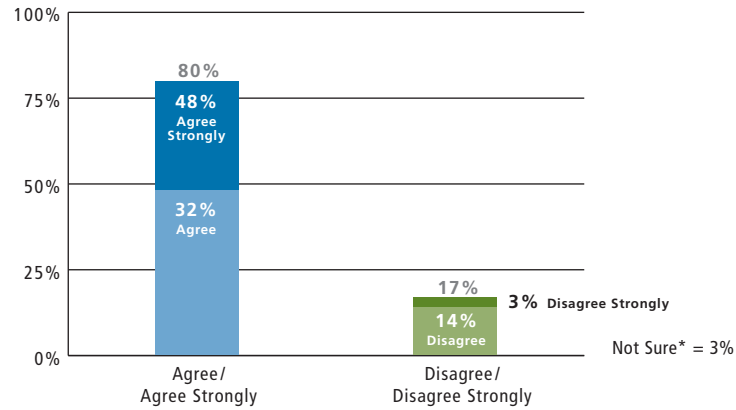
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CONFIDENCE IN LEADERSHIP 2008

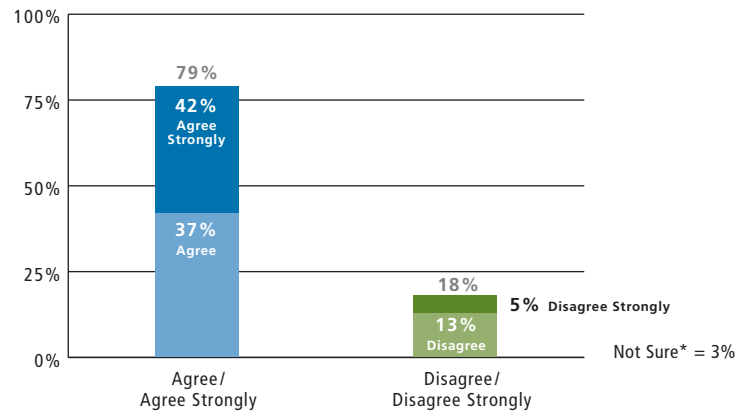
Americans have a crisis of confidence in their leaders

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

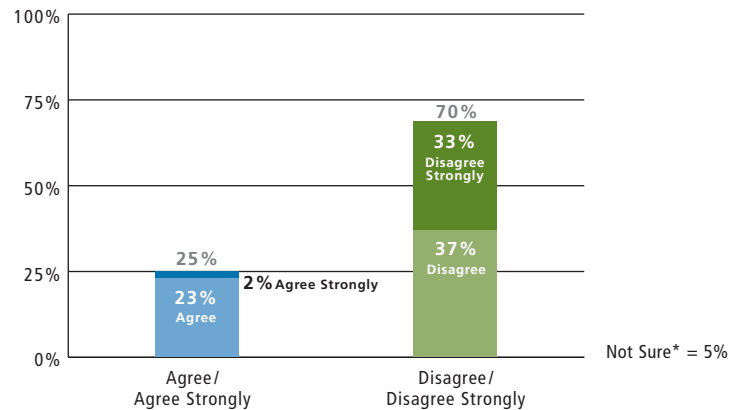
We have a leadership crisis in the country today



Unless we get better leaders, the United States will decline as a nation



Overall, our country's leaders are effective and do a good job

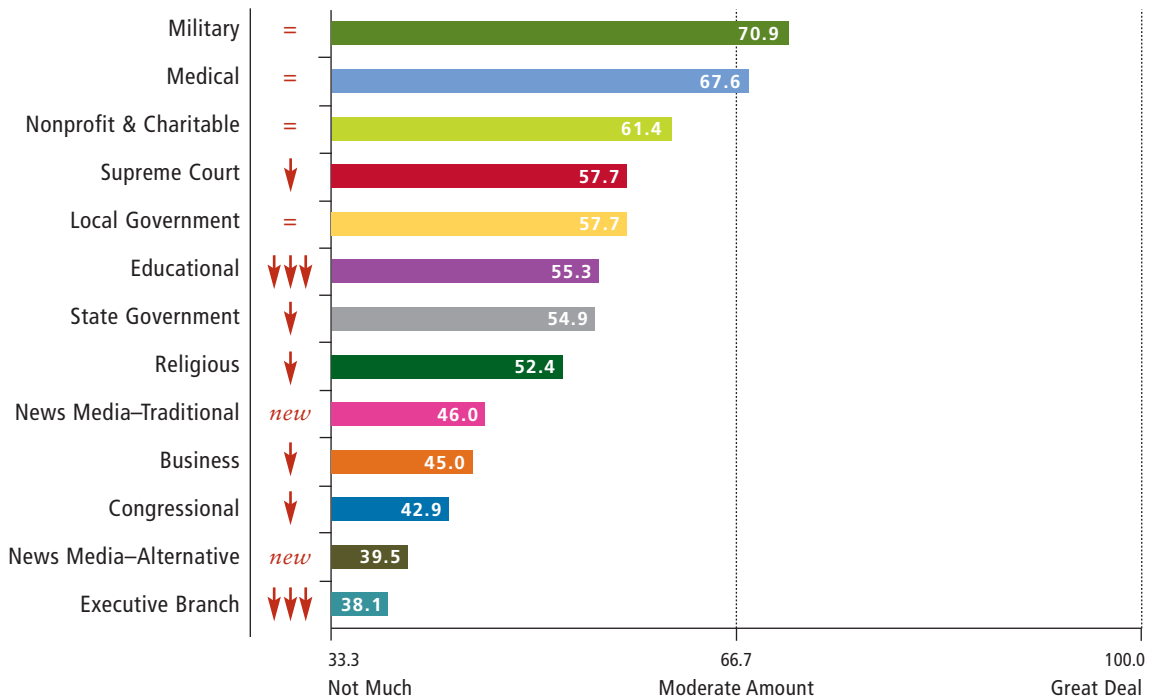


- 80% of Americans *agree* or *agree strongly* that "we have a leadership crisis in the country today"—a 3% increase from 2007 and an 15% increase from 2005
- As in 2007, 79% *agree* or *agree strongly* that "unless we get better leaders, the U.S. will decline as a nation"—a 6% increase from 2006
- Only 25% of Americans *agree* or *agree strongly* that "the country's leaders are effective and do a good job"

NATIONAL LEADERSHIP INDEX 2008

How much confidence do you have in the leadership of the following sectors, a great deal, a moderate amount, not much, or none at all?

Range: 0 (none at all) – 100 (a great deal)

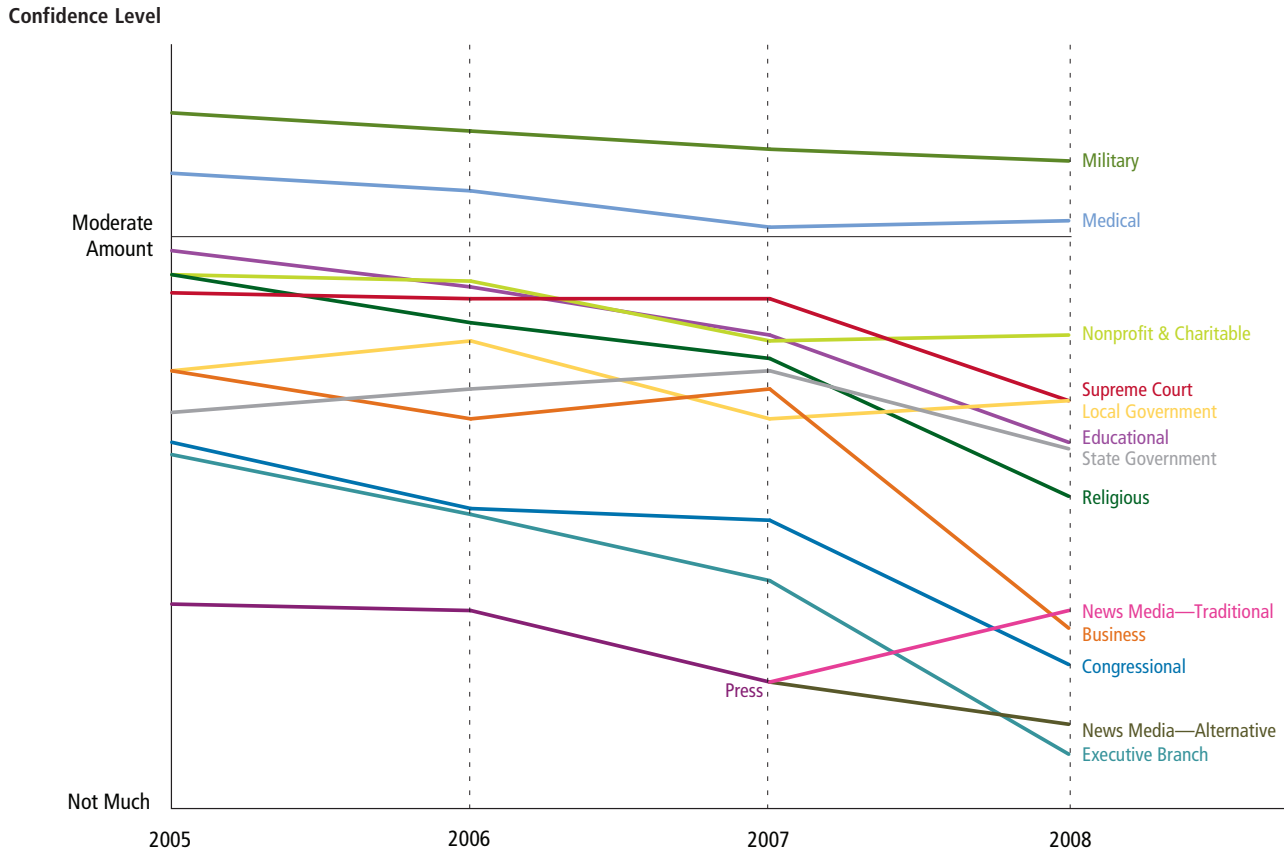


- ↓ indicates a statistically significant decrease from 2007
- ↓↓↓ indicates a statistically significant decrease three years in a row
- = indicates no significant change from 2007
- new indicates a new question for 2008

Key Findings

- Confidence in the leaders of seven sectors—business, Executive Branch, Congress, religious, educational, Supreme Court, and state government—has fallen sharply in the past year. Confidence in the leaders of each of these sectors experienced its largest decrease since the survey began in 2005.
- Confidence in business leaders dropped more than did confidence in leaders of any other sector.
- Confidence in the Supreme Court dropped for the first time since the inception of this survey. This decrease is fully attributable to Democrats' decreased confidence in the Supreme Court.
- Confidence in the Executive Branch and educational leaders has declined for three years in a row.
- As in 2007, the only sectors of leadership in which Americans have more than a moderate amount of confidence are military and medical leadership, and for the fourth year in a row, military leadership inspires the most confidence.
- Confidence is higher in leadership of the traditional news media than leadership of alternative forms of news media.
- Confidence held steady from 2007 for military, medical, nonprofit & charitable, and local government leaders.
- For the third year in a row, there were no statistically significant increases in confidence in any sector's leaders.

SECTOR LEADERSHIP CONFIDENCE, YEAR-TO-YEAR



Changes in Confidence By Sector (Alphabetical)

	2005 Mean (SD)	2006 Mean (SD)	2007 Mean (SD)	2008 Mean (SD)	Mean change (2007-2008)	Cohen's <i>d</i> (2007-2008)
Business	59.3 (26.1)	56.8 (26.1)	58.5 (25.3)	45.0 (29.0)	-13.5	-0.50**
Congressional	55.2 (28.7)	51.7 (28.0)	51.0 (28.5)	42.9 (29.6)	-8.1	-0.28**
Educational	66.1 (27.4)	63.9 (28.0)	61.4 (28.2)	55.3 (29.8)	-6.1	-0.21**
Executive Branch	54.7 (37.2)	51.3 (36.2)	47.7 (35.9)	38.1 (36.2)	-9.6	-0.27**
Local Government	59.2 (28.5)	61.0 (27.8)	56.8 (29.6)	57.7 (28.7)	0.9	0.03
Medical	70.5 (24.4)	69.2 (25.8)	67.5 (26.6)	67.6 (27.3)	0.1	0.00
Military	73.8 (27.3)	72.6 (28.4)	71.7 (29.1)	70.9 (29.9)	-0.8	-0.03
News Media—Alternative	-	-	-	39.5 (30.7)	-	-
News Media—Traditional	-	-	-	46.0 (30.8)	-	-
Nonprofit & Charitable	64.6 (27.5)	64.5 (27.9)	61.0 (26.1)	61.4 (28.3)	0.4	0.01
Press	46.2 (30.6)	46.0 (30.2)	42.0 (30.7)	-	-	-
Religious	64.6 (29.5)	61.9 (30.6)	60.0 (30.3)	52.4 (33.5)	-7.6	-0.24**
State Government	57.0 (29.5)	58.5 (29.7)	59.5 (29.0)	54.9 (29.7)	-4.6	-0.16**
Supreme Court	63.8 (28.7)	63.3 (28.6)	63.4 (28.0)	57.7 (31.1)	-5.7	-0.19**
Confidence, in General, in Leaders of All Sectors	-	-	-	46.4 (24.0)	-	-

Notes

- For 2005, *N* = 1,374; for 2006, *N* = 1,604; for 2007, *N* = 1,207; for 2008, *N* = 997
- Data from 2005-2007 National Leadership Index reports converted to an equivalent 100-point scale
- ** indicates a statistically significant change at the *p* < .05 level
- Cohen's *d* provides a standardized estimate of the magnitude of the difference in means (effect size), which is calculated by dividing the difference in means by the pooled standard deviation

I. “I am going to ask you some questions about how presidents lead. I will read you sets of two or three statements about what presidents of the United States can be like. These questions are about presidents in general, not just about the current candidates or president. For each set, please choose the statement that comes closest to what you believe. In your opinion, which of these would you say is more important to you in American presidents? That presidents...”

--Presidential Leadership Traits

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
1.			
A. Lead based on moral beliefs about what is right and wrong	52%	40%	60%
B. Lead based on practical beliefs about what works and doesn't work	41	52	31
Both equally*	4	4	3
Don't know*	3	4	6
	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
2.			
A. Are always respectful and diplomatic	48%	61%	33%
B. Are willing to offend people and make enemies when they think it's necessary	45	32	62
Both equally*	3	2	2
Don't know*	4	5	3
	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
3.			
Keep religious faith a personal or private matter	57%	70%	41%
Express religious faith in public	37	25	54
Both equally*	2	2	1
Don't know*	4	3	4

--Presidential Power and Autonomy

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
4.			
A. Do what the majority of Americans think is right	55%	64%	46%
B. Do what they think is right	40	32	50
Both equally*	2	2	1
Don't know *	3	2	3

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
5.			
A. Ensure that America is respected for its fairness	50%	63%	33%
B. Ensure that America is respected for its strength	38	26	53
Both equally*	10	8	11
Don't know*	2	3	3

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
6.			
A. Are never willing to be unethical or bend the rules	55%	56%	54%
B. Are willing to be unethical or bend the rules when they think it's necessary	37	38	35
Both equally*	2	2	3
Don't know*	6	4	8

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
7.			
A. Share power equally with Congress and the Supreme Court	71%	74%	66%
B. Have more power than Congress and the Supreme Court	23	20	27
Both equally*	4	4	2
Don't know*	2	2	5

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
8.			
A. Believe that other countries may have different, but equally acceptable ways of life	72%	73%	67%
B. Believe that the United States has a superior way of life to other countries	24	22	29
Both equally*	1	1	1
Don't know*	3	4	3

--Presidential Philosophy of Government

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
9.			
A. Protect the public's safety, even if it infringes on their freedom	48%	40%	58%
B. Protect the public's freedom, even if it infringes on their safety	41	49	34
Both equally*	5	4	4
Don't know*	6	7	4

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
10.			
A. Put the needs of future generations of Americans first	43%	48%	38%
B. Put the needs of today's Americans first	39	38	44
Both equally*	13	10	14
Don't know*	5	4	4

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
11.			
A. Use the military only to defend America and react to enemy attacks	72%	75%	66%
B. Use the military to actively further America's interests in the world	21	20	23
Both equally*	4	2	7
Don't know*	3	3	4

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
12.			
A. Use the government's power to make the country a fair place in which Americans can compete	40%	49%	32%
B. Reduce the government's power to allow Americans succeed and fail on their own	28	15	40
C. Use the government's power to directly solve problems that many Americans face	26	30	22
All equally*	2	1	2
Don't know*	4	5	4

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
13.			
A. Build mutual alliances with other countries	56%	58%	54%
B. Keep America out of the affairs of other countries as much as possible	32	33	30
C. Assert America's power and influence over other countries	8	8	11
All equally*	2	0	2
Don't know*	2	1	3

--Presidential Public Engagement

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
14.			
A. Focus on uniting people, even if it slows progress	56%	63%	45%
B. Focus on accomplishing goals, even if it divides people	37	32	47
Both equally*	3	3	5
Don't know*	4	2	3

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
15.			
A. Clearly understand the day-to-day experiences of average Americans	43%	44%	43%
B. Clearly understand the complexities of the wider world	41	40	39
Both equally*	14	13	15
Don't know*	2	3	3

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
16.			
A. Believe that dissent is good for the country	62%	65%	62%
B. Believe that dissent is bad for the country	26	25	27
Both equally*	2	2	1
Don't know*	10	8	10

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
17.			
A. Make decisions based on fairness, even if they don't help Americans like you	64%	68%	62%
B. Make decisions because they benefit Americans like you	27	26	29
Both equally*	4	2	4
Don't know*	5	4	5

II. Questions about Leadership and the 2008 Presidential Election

18a. We have a leadership crisis in this country today (2008)	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
Strongly Agree	48%	63%	31%
Agree	32	32	32
Disagree	14	5	28
Strongly Disagree	3	0	6
Not Sure*	3	0	3

18b. We have a leadership crisis in this country today (2005-2007)	2005	2006	2007
Strongly Agree	28%	36%	38%
Agree	37	33	39
Disagree	26	21	16
Strongly Disagree	7	8	6
Not Sure*	2	2	1

19a.	Unless we get better leaders, the United States will decline as a nation (2008)	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	Strongly Agree	42%	56%	25%
	Agree	37	36	38
	Disagree	13	4	24
	Strongly Disagree	5	2	9
	Not Sure*	3	2	4
19b.	Unless we get better leaders, the United States will decline as a nation (2005-2007)	2005	2006	2007
	Strongly Agree	33%	37%	39%
	Agree	38	36	40
	Disagree	21	20	16
	Strongly Disagree	6	6	3
	Not Sure*	2	1	2
20.	Overall, our country's leaders are effective and do a good job	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	Strongly Agree	2%	1%	4%
	Agree	23	7	47
	Disagree	37	40	35
	Strongly Disagree	33	50	10
	Not Sure*	5	2	4
21a.	How much confidence do you have in the executive branch, including the president, vice president, and advisers? (2008)	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	A great deal	14%	5%	29%
	A moderate amount	24	10	47
	Not much	22	25	13
	None at all	38	60	11
	Not sure*	2	0	0
21b.	How much confidence do you have in the executive branch, including the president, vice president, and advisers? (2005-2007)	2005	2006	2007
	A great deal	29%	22%	19%
	A moderate amount	28	33	31
	Not much	21	20	23
	None at all	22	24	26
	Not sure*	0	1	1

22.	Do you think that things will be better after the 2008 election, worse after the election, or that things won't change?	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	Better	39%	46%	36%
	Worse	7	4	7
	Won't change	25	16	31
	Depends who wins*	27	31	24
	Don't know*	2	3	2
23.	Putting aside who you are supporting, who do you think the American voters will choose as the next President?	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	Obama	48%	78%	18%
	McCain	38	15	71
	Don't know*	14	7	11
24a.	How much confidence do you have that Barack Obama would be a good leader?	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	A great deal	36%	69%	4%
	A moderate amount	24	28	15
	Not much	17	1	36
	None at all	20	1	45
	Not sure*	3	1	0
24b.	How much confidence do you have that John McCain would be a good leader?	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	A great deal	19%	6%	41%
	A moderate amount	36	24	50
	Not much	23	35	7
	None at all	19	35	1
	Not sure*	3	0	1
25.	And who would you like to become the next president?***	Overall	--	--
	Obama	47%	--	--
	McCain	37	--	--
	Other*	7	--	--
	Don't know*	8	--	--
	Don't care*	1	--	--

26.	How strongly would you say you support that candidate?	--	Support Obama	Support McCain
	A great deal	--	76%	71%
	Somewhat	--	17	22
	A little	--	5	4
	Not much at all	--	2	3

27a.	In your view, how much does it matter to the future of the country which candidate becomes president? (2008)	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	A great deal	77%	83%	79%
	Somewhat	12	12	12
	A little	3	2	3
	Not at all	6	3	4
	Not sure*	2	0	2

27b.	In your view, how much does it matter to the future of the country which candidate becomes president? (2007)	Overall	--	--
	A great deal	65%	--	--
	Somewhat	21	--	--
	A little	7	--	--
	Not at all	5	--	--
	Not sure*	2	--	--

28.	And how much does it matter to you personally which candidate becomes president?	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	A great deal	67%	76%	70%
	Somewhat	18	13	20
	A little	3	2	2
	Not at all	9	6	5
	Not sure*	3	3	3

III. Weighted demographics

D1.	Gender	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
	Male	48%	49%	45%
	Female	52	51	55

	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
D2. Median Age	44 years	42 years	49 years
D3. Party Identification	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
Democrat	31%	55%	5%
Republican	24	3	56
Independent	40	41	36
Other*	2	0	2
Not Sure/Refused*	3	1	1
D4. Household Income	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
Less than \$20,000	12%	13%	10%
\$20,000 - \$34,999	14	17	11
\$35,000 - \$49,999	13	12	10
\$50,000 - \$74,999	17	17	18
\$75,000 - \$99,000	12	10	15
\$100,000 - \$124,999	9	9	10
\$125,000 - \$149,000	4	4	7
\$150,000 and above	8	8	10
Refused*	11	10	9
D5. Born Again/Evangelical Christian	Overall	Support Obama	Support McCain
Yes	35%	28%	44%
No, neither	61	68	54
Not Sure/Refused*	4	4	2

Method

Survey results were obtained through telephone interviews of a weighted, representative sample of U.S. citizens, 18 years of age or older, in the continental United States.

Study data were collected by Merriman River Group. A total of 997 respondents were interviewed. Random-digit dialing was used to ensure that individuals with unlisted numbers and cell phones would be included in the study. U.S. Census data were used to weight key demographic dimensions to ensure that the sample was representative of the adult population. Statistical weighting was conducted by Martin R. Frankel, Ph.D.

Interviews were conducted from September 13-22, 2008. Calls were made from 12:00 noon to 9:00 P.M. in each local time zone. The order of the presidential leadership questions and the response choices within each question were randomized for each interview. The response rate was 28%.

The survey is part of the *National Leadership Index 2008*, a collaboration between the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School and the Merriman River Group. The National Leadership Index is an annual report of the Center for Public Leadership's National Study of Confidence in Leadership, which was pioneered in 2005 by the Center's Research Director, Professor Todd L. Pittinsky. Full results of the 2008 study will be released on November 24, 2008. Past editions of the National Leadership Index can be found on-line at:
<http://content.ksg.harvard.edu/leadership/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=413&Itemid=98>

Notes

*All responses of *don't know/not sure, other, equally, depends who wins, and don't care* were volunteered by interviewees. In some cases, data in *not sure, don't know, or refused* response categories were adjusted to correct for rounding.

**All differences reported are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level

***Data are adjusted to be demographically representative, but are *not* adjusted with respect to voter registration status, likelihood of voting, or voter turnout models. Accordingly, the candidate preference question should not be interpreted in the context of any potential outcome of the voting in the 2008 presidential election.

Center for Public Leadership: <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/leadership/>

Merriman River Group: <http://www.merrimanriver.com>

Lead Author: Seth A. Rosenthal, Ph.D., Research Fellow, Center for Public Leadership

Reference:

Rosenthal, S. A., Pittinsky, T. L., Moore, S., Ratcliff, J. J., Maruskin, L. A., & Gravelin, C. R. (2008). *National Leadership Index 2008: A National Study of Confidence in Leadership*. Center for Public Leadership, Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.