

THE 2020 CITIZEN'S GUIDE

**ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AMONG
ELECTED OFFICIALS 1.0**

LEADERETHICS-WISCONSIN

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THE ETHICS REPORT



Overview

There is a growing sense of partisanship in American politics. And along with this, there is an increased absence of civility. Our nation is divided politically. Throughout the history of the United States, the nation faced serious division...notably during the Vietnam War and the Civil War. Unlike prior times, the evidence indicates today's division is largely by design as the political parties and special interests seek short-term gain at the expense of the opposing political party. The advancement of social media and disinformation add complexity.

Notably absent are the voices of elected leaders calling for ethical leadership practices. The organization LeaderEthics-Wisconsin defines ethical elected leaders as individuals who are:

- Truthful
- Transparent with public information
- Unifiers
- Committed to represent their entire constituency

As Citizens, What Can We Do?

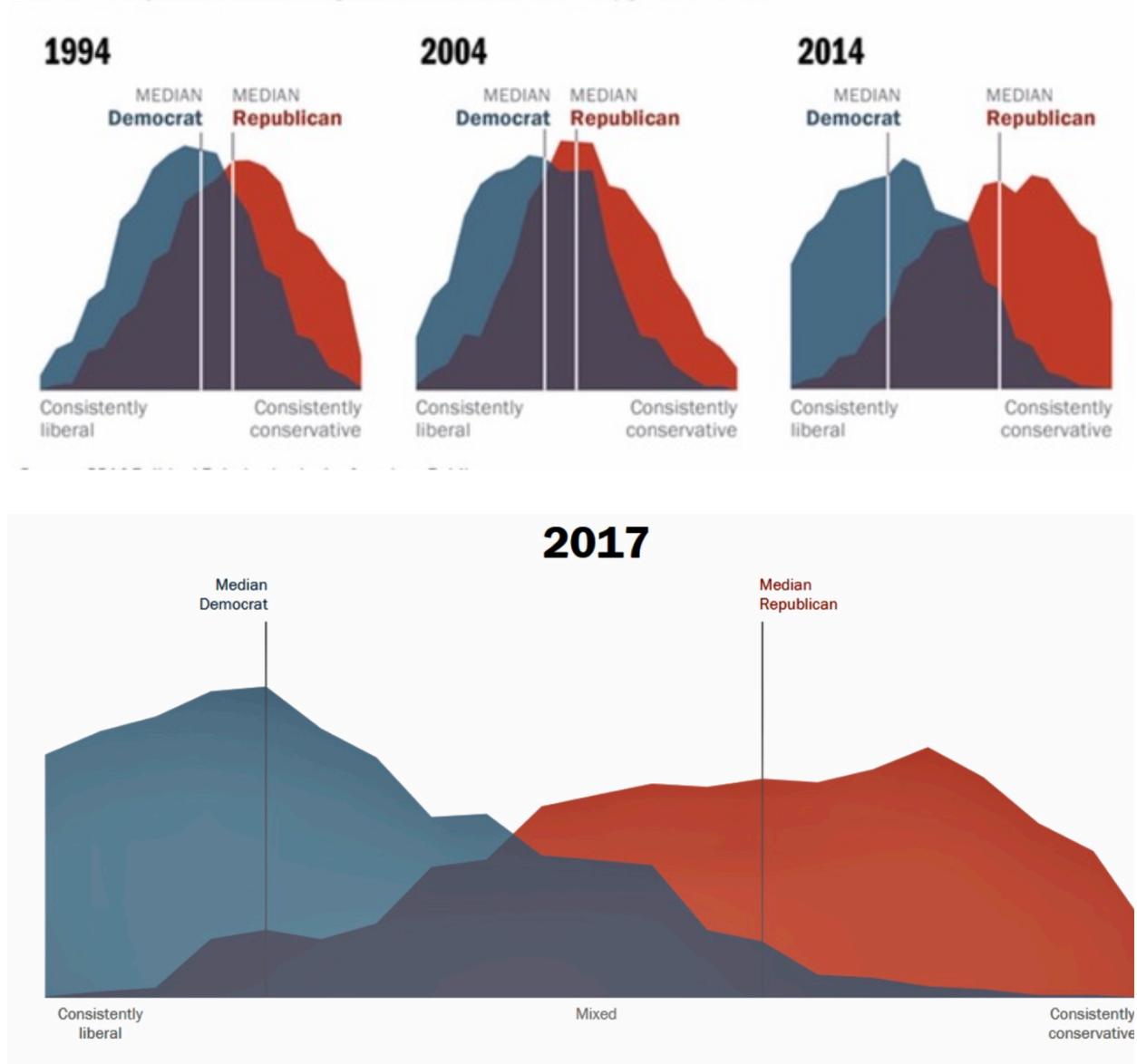
It is understandable that these conditions can lead to a sense of powerlessness. Yet, in reality, there is a robust list of actions that can be done. It starts with creating a personal expectation of ethical leadership. We value ethical leaders in business, education, healthcare and services...every area except the political arena. As citizens, we should not accept that. The change process starts with a personal expectation that elected officials should not be viewed as the exception when it comes to ethical leadership.

Secondly, we should recognize that the change process will begin at the local level, not in Washington DC or at the state capital. And the change process will likely take time. Nonetheless, there are a number of practical activities that we can practice, as citizens, that can make a difference. This document is designed to provide insight as well as practical suggestions.

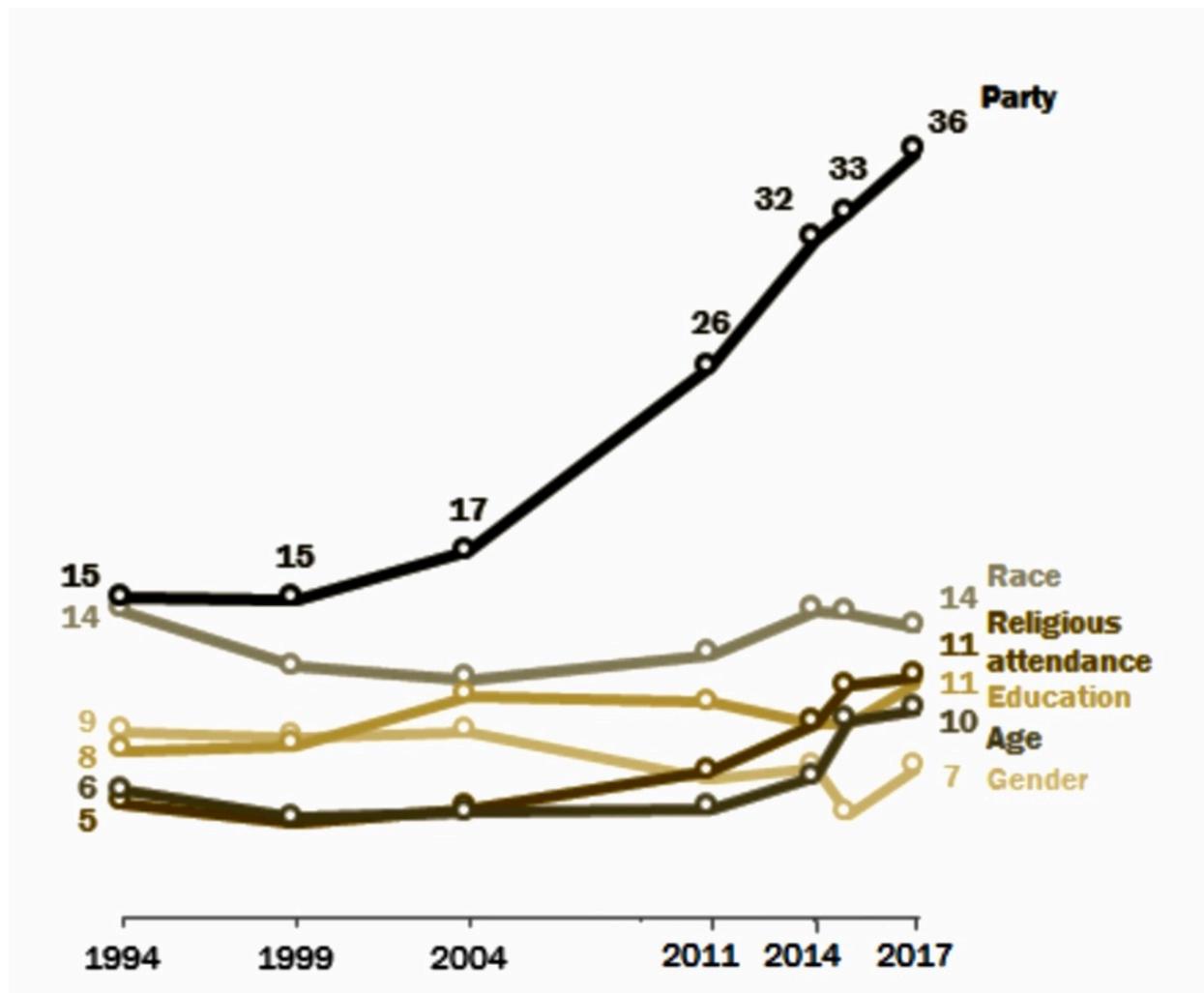
Background

The Political Divide is Growing

Many believe that citizens in the United States are more polarized than in recent decades. The data seems to support this assumption. For example, the 2017 Pew Research analysis compared the median positions on ten criteria for declared Democrats and Republicans. The results below show the following comparison between 1994, 2004, 2014 and 2017. Clearly, the political divide has grown.



Furthermore, Pew Research determined that the widening partisan divide was due primarily to political party identification rather than 5 other factors such as age, race, religious attendance, education and gender. Pew Research has been tracking the response to standardized survey questions since 1994. The survey questions are designed to determine the demographic variables that may be contributing to the growing political divide. The attached results showed very little variability in all areas, except political party identification.



Disinformation on Social Media is an Emerging Concern

The 2016 general election was a watershed in many ways. Among the changes experienced was the maturation of social media impact on the electoral process. The report made to the Senate Intelligence Committee indicated the Russian organization, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), produced numerous fabricated stories and pages designed to divide the American public. The fabricated stories and pages were designed to divide American citizens, frequently focusing on racial issues. In a report to the Senate Intelligence Committee, representatives summarized the University of Oxford/Graphika 2018 study. It was most disturbing to learn that in 2015 and 2016, more than 30 million Americans liked and shared the fabricated and divisive IRA stories and pages on Facebook and Instagram!

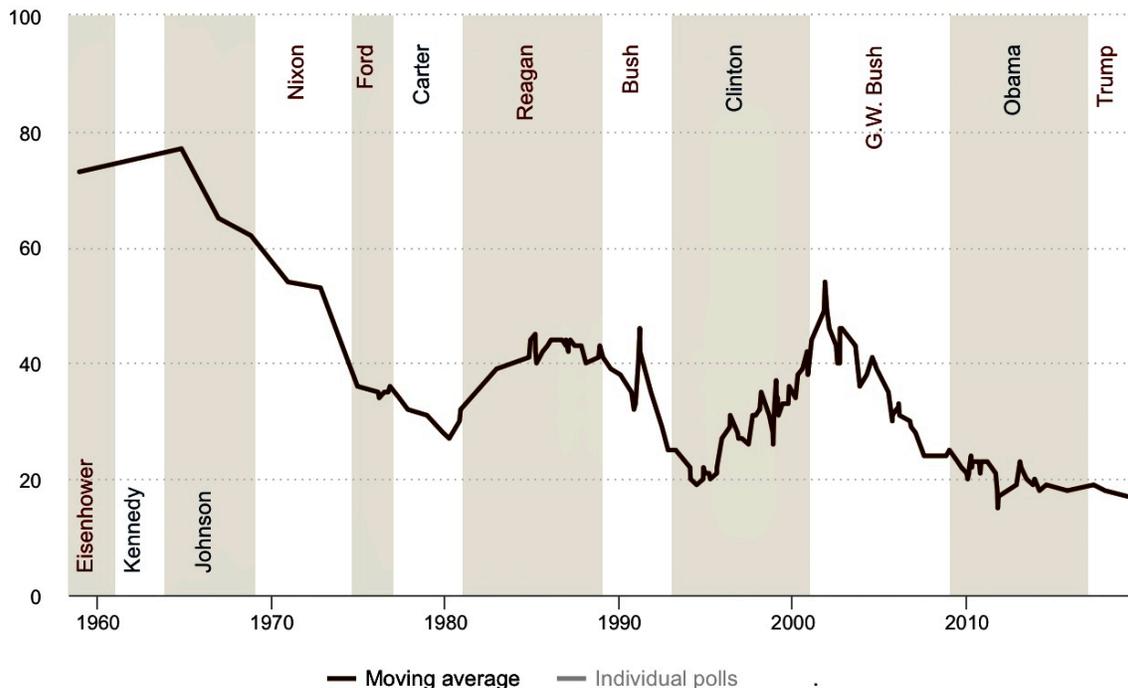
Paul Barrett of the New York University Stern Center projects an expanded use of disinformation on social media in 2020. The following image summarizes the Stern Center projections.



Trust in Government is at a Low Level

Given these developments, it is not surprising to learn that Americans' trust in government is at a very low level. Pew Research has been tracking the trust in government since the late 1950's. The following 2019 study shows a significant overall decline in the trust in government, with the exception of years immediately following the 2001 9/11 attacks.

% who trust the govt in Washington always or most of the time



LeaderEthics-Wisconsin believes the decline in trust is a reflection of declining ethical leadership among elected officials. Ethical leadership is determined to reflect:

- truthfulness
- transparency with public information
- efforts to unify rather than divide
- a commitment to represent their entire constituency

Given the overall trends, what can the average citizen do to promote ethical leadership? The challenge is certainly daunting. But there are actions that will increase awareness of the importance of ethical leadership. The actions will not start at the top. Rather they will begin at the local and personal level. The following pages will offer some suggestions.



Questions to Ask Elected Officials, Candidates...or Yourself

It can be challenging to fully understand whether a candidate or elected leader is embracing the principles of ethical leadership. Voting records can be misleading. And ethical leadership is not tied to a particular political party or to legislative policy. However, questions raised may provide insight. You may have the opportunity to meet with a candidate or elected official. Or you may raise a question at a candidate forum. Or you may ask yourself prior to voting whether the actions of a candidate/elected official demonstrate a response to a question. In any case, raising questions can accomplish two important things:

- It can provide insight regarding the individual. A vague response may indicate the question is not valued. Or it may indicate that the individual has not given the topic much thought. A thoughtful response may indicate otherwise.
- It can raise awareness among others about the importance of ethical leadership to the integrity of our democracy. This is an important element. The preponderance of campaign ads and messaging (including disinformation) can create a very murky environment. On the other hand, if you raise a question with a candidate/elected official, others may pick up on the focus on integrity as well.

The following are questions that could be asked. They are broken down by the four principles of ethical leadership. This is not a complete list. Indeed, citizens are encouraged to add questions to their personal list.

ETHICAL LEADERS ARE *TRUTHFUL* IN THEIR WORDS AND ACTIONS

- Do you support public information efforts to curb the effects of disinformation?
- Do you feel current slander and libel laws are adequate to address the abuse of "deep fake" videos?
- Do you believe the media should declare when they are: a) reporting the news, b) providing commentary, or c) providing entertainment?
- Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act gives tech companies broad leeway over the content users post on their sites. Should it?

ETHICAL LEADERS SUPPORT TRANSPARENCY WITH PUBLIC INFORMATION

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- Recently, several elected leaders faced stories and photos from years past. What are your thoughts regarding transparency in such cases?
- Do you support legislative actions to curtail election interference from other nations?

ETHICAL LEADERS ARE UNIFIERS RATHER THAN DIVIDERS

- What steps will you take to work with members of the other party or parties?
- Efforts like *Better Angels* and *America in One Room* have shown that dialogue among citizens can significantly reduce the political divide. Do you support such efforts among your constituents?

ETHICAL LEADERS WORK TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THEIR ENTIRE CONSTITUENCY

- What steps will you take to meet the needs of your entire constituency, rather than just the simple majority that voted for you?
- Are you willing to listen to those that may disagree with you?





The influence of social media on elections is evolving rapidly. And it is common to find inflamed debates involving candidates, legislative policy and social issues. It is important to remember that many social media issues are carefully orchestrated efforts to collect data and manipulate public opinion through disinformation. It is futile to attempt to out-debate the internet. Furthermore, such interactions may actually contribute to disinformation campaigns.

It is further complicated because there is evidence that people are most willing to believe what they want to believe. In a recent study by the University of Texas at Austin, participants fitted with a wireless electroencephalography headset were asked to read political news headlines presented as they would appear in a Facebook feed and determine their credibility. They assessed only 44% correctly, overwhelmingly selecting headlines that aligned with their own political beliefs as true.

So what can you do? Here are some practical suggestions.

- If you use social media and you see a story that appears falsified, exaggerated or dated, do not “like” or “share” the story. The social media companies have developed their business model by enticing subscribers to like and share information. This business model may pose privacy concerns, even for legitimate stories and advertisements. It is particularly troubling with disinformation because it also keeps the “erroneous information” ball rolling. ***Simply put, no one can force you like or share anything.***
- When you come across a post that appears to be part of a disinformation campaign, you have the option of posting in the comments a statement such as this. *“There are many stories circulating Facebook (or Instagram, Twitter, etc.) that are designed to widen the political divide in advance of the election. When I sense this to be the case, I do not like or share the information.”* In making such a statement, it is important to be realistic. Such a statement will not change many (if any) of the minds of people that do not know you (you will not “out-debate” the Internet). But most social media subscribers are also connected with personal friends and family members. Your message may be heard (and appreciated) by them. Disinformation on social media can be curtailed, not en masse, rather “one person at a time”.
- Learn to recognize messaging that is coming from a disinformation campaign. The playing field is constantly evolving. There are resources such as the News Literacy Project (<https://newslit.org/>) that provide updated insight and suggestions to help sort the truth from disinformation.



Ethical leadership is a challenge at any time. Perhaps it is even more challenging during times of the wider political divide. And during these times, it is understandable if some citizens feel a sense of hopelessness. Nonetheless, there are resources available that can provide encouragement and support for ethical leaders and citizens. The following is a list of some of these resources. The list is in alphabetical order (not ranked) and LeaderEthics-Wisconsin is not specifically endorsing these resources. However, we find their work to be appealing and are encouraging citizens to check them out.

Ballotpedia - Ballotpedia is the digital encyclopedia of American politics and elections. Their goal is to inform people about politics by providing accurate and objective information about politics at all levels of government. They are committed to neutrality in their content. As a nonprofit, their mission is to educate. They pledge to be a resource for you when:

- You're considering a run for office.
- You're making decisions about how you'll vote in an election.
- You need the latest political news and analysis from a reliable, nonpartisan source.

Ballotpedia's articles are written by a professional staff of more than 50 writers and researchers. They have an office in Middleton, Wisconsin, yet the majority of the staff work from home offices across the United States.

Website: www.ballotpedia.org

Better Angels - Better Angels is a national citizens 'movement to reduce political polarization in the United States by bringing liberals and conservatives together to understand each other beyond stereotypes, forming red/blue community alliances, teaching practical skills for communicating across political differences, and making a strong public argument for depolarization. Better Angels is a 501c3 organization formed in December of 2016. They have a presence in most states in the U.S. **Website:** www.better-angels.org

Bi-partisan Policy Center - The Bipartisan Policy Center is a non-profit organization that (as they describe themselves) combines the best ideas from both parties to promote health, security, and opportunity for all Americans. BPC drives principled and politically viable policy solutions through the power of rigorous analysis, painstaking negotiation, and aggressive advocacy. As a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that actively promotes bipartisanship, BPC works to address the key challenges facing the nation. The policy solutions

are the product of informed deliberations by former elected and appointed officials, business and labor leaders, and academics and advocates who represent both ends of the political spectrum. They are currently focused on health, energy, national security, the economy, financial regulatory reform, housing, immigration, infrastructure, and governance.

BPC's experts work to find consensus and common ground. In addition, [Bipartisan Policy Center Action](#) (BPC Action), a 501(c)(4) affiliate, is committed to seeing bipartisan policy solutions enacted into law. As such, BPC Action engages in advocacy and outreach to unite Republicans and Democrats. They report that while a healthy, civil debate among those with differing viewpoints is an essential component of our democracy, the current partisan tone in government is impeding progress. Through the Democracy Project and events like political summits and timely policy discussions, BPC is fostering an ongoing conversation about how to overcome political divides and help make our government work better. **Website:** <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/>

EnCiv - As described on the website, EnCiv is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin's Leather Apron Club. The Leather Apron Club had the purpose of exchanging knowledge and discussing questions of politics, science, and values. EnCiv enhances a network of key civic organizations working for that same purpose. **Website:** www.usatalk.org.

FAIR - FAIR, the national media watch group, has been offering criticism of media bias and censorship since 1986. They pledge to work to invigorate the First Amendment by advocating for greater diversity in the press and by scrutinizing media practices that marginalize public interest, minority and dissenting viewpoints. FAIR believes that structural reform is ultimately needed to break up the dominant media conglomerates, establish independent public broadcasting and promote strong non-profit sources of information. **Website:** www.fair.org

The Fulcrum - The Fulcrum is a digital news organization focused exclusively on efforts to reverse the dysfunctions plaguing American democracy. They are nonprofit and nonpartisan. They develop original stories regarding the news and political topics gathered from across the country. Information about their stories is also presented in their *opinion forum*. Their focus is on money in politics, redistricting, voting rights, election access, government ethics, civic engagement and the imbalance of powers. **Website:** <https://thefulcrum.us/>

Institute for Civility in Government - They are a grassroots, non-partisan, non-profit organization committed to building civility in a society that all too often seems tilted toward uncivil speech and actions. The Institute does not endorse any political candidate, nor do they take a position on any issue. Their emphasis is civility training at the grassroots level. **Website:** www.instituteforcivility.org.

VoteSmart - Their stated mission is to provide free, factual, unbiased information on candidates and elected officials to ALL Americans. They are a non-partisan/non-profit organization and a rich source of data about candidates and elected officials. **Website:** <http://votesmart.org>

This is not an all-inclusive list. But we hope you find these resources to be encouraging. LeaderEthics-Wisconsin differs from them, primarily with our focus on ethical leadership. But this serves as a reminder that we are not alone in our desire to improve our government and our democracy.

So, who has time to check out all of these organizations?

While some may view this information as an opportunity to do some personal research, most people will not find this to be practical or appealing. Fortunately, many of these organizations invite guests to sign up for periodic email updates. An even simpler approach is to follow them on Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn. With this approach, you can receive updates, scan for topics and information of interest, and pass on the rest.

Or you can take the lead in your community

There are steps that you can take to expand the conversation within your community. You can set up a **Better Angels** event in your community. It will take a little effort in organizing. But it will lead to an enlightened discussion about improving our understanding of political differences by becoming better listeners. You can also invite a representative from **LeaderEthics-Wisconsin** to speak at your service club, business organization or church group. There is no speakers fee and the presentation will likely expand the conversation about ethical leadership within your group.

Remember, democracy is not free. It takes an effort to maintain. At the same time, improving the integrity of the American democracy is not out of our reach. The November 2019 issue of *The Ethics Report* (attached) highlights some stories about citizen-led, grassroots efforts. The changes process starts with you.