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RESEARCH TEAM REPORTS LATEST LEADERSHIP SURVEY FINDINGS

IS SOCIAL MEDIA SCARING AWAY POTENTIAL LEADERS?

by [Jim Hanchett](#) | July 29, 2024*Read time: about 2 min*

IS VIOLENCE AS “ACTIVISM” NOW CONSIDERED LEADERSHIP?

The way social media functions may have the unintended consequence of scaring people away from taking on leadership roles, according to the results of an annual national survey about leadership.

The scientific online survey of 2,050 people as a nationally representative sample was conducted by Leadership Studies researchers Dr. Lynn Shollen, Dr. Elizabeth Gagnon and Dr. Kat Callahan. The survey, entitled “Attitudes About Leadership in the United States,” is [the fourth annual version](#) of a longitudinal research project based at Christopher Newport. The project’s primary goal is to bring awareness to the data so that it can be used by other researchers. A glimpse of the CNU team’s findings are as follows:

- There is indication that the social climate within the United States and reactions on social media make people hesitant to lead.
- In 2022, only 34% agreed that the social climate during the previous year made people willing to lead, while the same proportion agreed that it was too risky to be a leader considering the social climate during the previous year.
- In 2022, 45% believed that social media makes it more difficult to be a leader.

- Across the past three years, almost half of respondents indicated that social media lowers people's expectations of leaders, whereas one-third indicated that social media raises people's expectations of leaders.
- Almost half disagree with the statement that social media makes it easier to accurately evaluate public leaders.
- A large majority of respondents considered activism as leadership if it involved armed or unarmed, violent/destructive protesting. Unarmed, non-violent/peaceful protesting was much less likely to be seen as leadership.
 - When asked about this rather alarming result, Shollen explained that "the research team was also surprised by this result, so we triple-checked the data. The only factor we could think of that may have biased the results is that we defined activism for participants as the principle or practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or social change, so perhaps respondents thought of the vigorous action component as violence and destruction. However, two-thirds of participants indicated that armed, non-violent/peaceful protesting would also be considered leadership, so the results may truly be showing that being armed and being violent were considered by many as leadership in 2021 and 2022."
- About 65% of respondents felt it is important or very important for leaders at the national and local levels to care for the natural environment, with another 15 to 20% indicating it is somewhat important.
- The trend continues that about 60% of respondents believe that people ages 25 and younger are not being equipped to lead. Further research could explore why the perception exists and if it is indeed true.
- The percentage who felt that it is important or very important for national leaders to consider perspectives of diverse people when making decisions dropped notably from 2019-2020 to 2021-2022.
- There was consensus that the best leaders should understand the experiences of ordinary, everyday people, but the respondents said most leaders do not, and are far removed from understanding how average people live.
- The trend continues that over 75% believe that within their lifetime leaders in the United States have become less effective.

"The survey isn't intended to examine perceptions of how specific leaders are performing, rather how people view the effectiveness of leaders and leadership generally within the U.S., as well as the impact of various factors on their perceptions of leadership and willingness to follow" Shollen said. "Although certainly a challenge and never fully controllable, the survey was designed to be as apolitical and ideologically unbiased as possible."

More comprehensive findings and a fuller explanation of the project is available [here](#). The research team is currently working on making the 2023 data available. For researchers who are interested, results can also be analyzed by demographics.
