

Abraham Lincoln on Public Sentiment and Political Results

John Pisciotta, Founding Director
Pro-Life in the Public Square (2024)
Pro-Life Waco (1995)

Abraham Lincoln had a profound understanding of the interplay between political leadership and public sentiment.¹ His quote, *“Public sentiment is everything. With favorable public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed,”*² highlights the vital role public sentiment plays in shaping political outcomes. This memorable quote reveals his strategy for leadership and understanding of democracy.

The Influence of Public Sentiment on Policy and Politics

Lincoln’s quote suggests that public sentiment is not merely a background force or influence on politics. Rather, public sentiment is a driving force that can make or break political initiatives. In his era, Lincoln navigated one of the most tumultuous periods in American history. Understanding this, Lincoln invested time and effort in swaying public sentiment.

For Lincoln, the key to political success lay not only in crafting laws and policies but in ensuring these policies had the public’s support. Without public sentiment on his side, his administration’s efforts to abolish slavery or to unify the country would likely have faced insurmountable challenges. Lincoln’s leadership exemplifies how aligning with, or shaping, public sentiment can provide leaders with needed authority to implement significant changes.

Public Sentiment and Democratic Governance

At a foundational level, Lincoln’s statement captures the essence of democratic governance, where the government derives its power from the consent of the governed. Public sentiment acts as a check on leaders, ensuring that they remain aligned with the people’s interests rather than acting solely on personal or partisan motivations. When leaders ignore or misjudge public sentiment, they risk losing the public’s trust, which can bring resistance and even failure of their initiatives.

The Challenges of Shaping Public Sentiment The Relevance of Lincoln’s Insight Today

Lincoln’s wisdom about public sentiment remains relevant today. Social media, news outlets, and the internet have amplified the voices of the public, making sentiment both more volatile. Leaders today still depend on public sentiment to enact significant changes. A failure to understand or engage with public sentiment can lead to resistance or even backlash, which can stall or reverse political intentions.

In contemporary democracies, Lincoln’s statement serves as a reminder that leaders must remain attuned to public sentiment. Leaders who dismiss public sentiment often find themselves facing challenges in implementing policies, as they lose the essential support required to drive forward change. Conversely, leaders who skillfully engage with public sentiment can mobilize citizens and rally support, creating a momentum that enables the successful realization of their policies.

Conclusion

Abraham Lincoln’s observation that *“Public sentiment is everything”* is an enduring reflection on the nature of democratic leadership. It underscores the idea that, in a government of the people, no policy or leader can succeed without existing or molded support of those governed.

¹ “Public opinion” comes close to the meaning of Lincoln’s public sentiment. However, public sentiment has a deeper connotation of thought than public opinion. Also, public opinion is more individual and less collective than public sentiment.

² Here is an extended version of Lincoln’s quote on public sentiment: “In this country, public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail; against it, nothing can succeed. Whoever molds public sentiment goes deeper, lasts longer than he who enacts laws and pronounces judicial decisions.”