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The 2016 election highlights misperceptions about credibility, fairness, Stanford expert says.



This is an installment of **Wide Angle: Election 2016**, a Stanford media series that offers scholarly, non-partisan perspectives on the forces shaping the election.

An interview with Stanford political science professor **Margaret Levi**

Does the 2016 election campaign reflect a loss of trust in the U.S. government and its leaders? Stanford political science Professor Margaret Levi advocates a nuanced perspective on the sources of credibility, confidence and fairness.

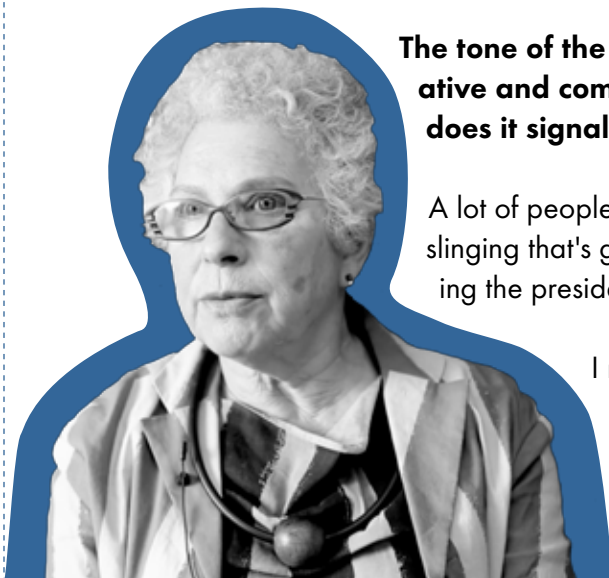
The 2016 election campaign is hardly unique in terms of mudslinging, but it does raise serious questions about broader civil discourse, and the sources of credibility, fairness, and confidence.

Worldview Stanford interviewed Margaret Levi, a professor of political science at Stanford University and the director of the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences (CASBS). Levi studies the legitimacy and reliability of government and citizen-government interactions. This interview is part of Wide Angle: Election 2016, a Stanford media series that offers scholarly, non-partisan perspectives on the forces shaping the election.

The tone of the 2016 presidential campaign is widely seen as negative and combative. Is this unique to the current campaigns or does it signal a deeper dysfunction in American politics?

A lot of people seem extraordinarily concerned about the kind of mudslinging that's going on among the candidates for various offices including the presidency.

I mean the Lincoln election was a mess; the Andrew Jackson election was a mess. I just watched [the television miniseries] "John Adams" – it's a mess! People have been slinging mud at each other since the birth of democracy, right? There are brawls in the early days of democracy and into the 20th century at polling places,



over candidates, over parties. This is not new. It's like coming back to where we were after this extraordinary period where things were relatively calm.

What really concerns me is not so much the mudslinging among the candidates or against the candidates, but the fact that we're seeing potentially a real crisis in democracy. That's coming from two sources: one is the appeal to authoritarianism or the emergence of an authoritarian spirit among some – too much – of the public. The second really has to do with what constitutes credibility of facts and evidence.

The problem with credibility of information has multiple sources. We've always had media that has made up facts – always. Go back to the Hearst papers of a particular era.

Two, we're coming out of a long period of relative civility, consolidation of journalism and consolidation of ethics about what is appropriate journalistically to a period with multiple voices and possibilities of echo chambers. That's the bad side of it. The good side is that we also have additional sources of information. We can learn about things we didn't know about before and opinions can be expressed that weren't expressed before. It's a period of disruption and turmoil that hasn't yet been reconsolidated.

The third source, I think, is psychological. We know that people have different values and we know that they often interpret facts and evidence through those values. What we don't know is how to intervene in that process when they're interpreting them in a way that disrupts the fact itself.

What we want to do is get people to agree on the facts and disagree about their perspectives, their values – the things we should be agreeing about, not about the facts.

You have studied the role of trust and confidence in politics and governance for decades. Do you think Americans are losing trust in their government and its institutions?

There's a lot of conversation about the extent to which both government and the candidates for president and many other candidates are untrustworthy. I find that very loose talk for a variety of reasons.

One, it is historically ungrounded; if we look to the history of the United States there are very few moments in time where confidence in government or candidates has ever been complete. It's democracy! We're supposed to be skeptical and we are skeptical. Questions get raised. The other reason that I'm very suspi-

cious of it is that the ways we're measuring the trustworthiness of government or how much that we actually trust government are, to my mind, extremely flawed. One of the main measures we've used for our trust in government is from the American National Election Studies. The first time the questions were used was in the late '50s and early '60s. I'm going to read to you the fundamental question that gets asked about trust in government: "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" You can say: just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time.

The problem with that question, which we've used now for many, many years – the last time in 2012 – is that it doesn't really measure trust in government. It doesn't tell us what who we're being asked about or what we're being asked about. When I think about my own history over that many years, sometimes I've had a lot of confidence in government about policy X but not about policy Y. I was opposed to the war in Vietnam, but I was for Johnson's war on poverty.

How do I answer that question? Probably, "some of the time." That would be a sensible answer when the question is as vague as that. We continue to use that question because we have a baseline now so we have a trend.

I would use different measures, totally different measures. First of all, if we're using a survey I'd use a different set of questions that are much more specific about the individual we're talking about, the policies we're talking about, who do we trust about what. What do we mean by trust? Do we mean competence? Do we mean that they're going to deliver on their promises here? Do they mean they can implement the policy? Is it fair?

If we're going to measure trust in government, I also think that we really have to look at behaviors, the ways in which citizens interact with government. I would look at social order and social disorder, feelings of safety and security, rules of the road, compliance with taxes and with a variety of things, rather than at government policies, rather than at a survey.

Another measure that I would use for trusting government is the extent to which there is social mobilization, demonstrating dissatisfaction with particular government practices or with government as a whole. If we think about today, it's very high in certain populations who are very dissatisfied and have very good reasons to be. Is it more than the 1960s? I doubt it. Is it more than the 1930s? Doesn't seem to be. Again, I think that by these kinds of measures confidence in government is reasonably high.

You mentioned fairness as being an important factor in instilling confidence in government. How do you determine fairness in a diverse society?

First, is our particular office holder trustworthy, reliable? [As I mentioned] are the promises that are made credible? Do we think that those could even be achieved? Do we think that there's competence to achieve them if we even think they could be achieved?

Then, do we have some sense that the processes by which these promises are going to be made and implemented are transparent? Are they accountable?

But it's not just transparency and accountability; it's also are people being treated more or less equitably? More or less equally? Are certain populations being discriminated against? Are certain populations being given special privileges that others aren't given? We would lose confidence in government if we believe that some people are taxed and other people are not. Or that lots of people are put in jail from one group but not from another group. You can see why some populations have considerably less confidence in government than others do.

The final part of fairness which has been an important part of my work forever is that when we think about ensuring that people comply with government what we want is a world in which I would comply if I have confidence that others are complying. I believe that government is more or less doing the right thing in this set of policy areas, state taxes, but I'm not going to pay my taxes or I'm not going to go, I'm not going to sign up for the military in a war if I think nobody else will or most people won't. What I really want government to do is enforce not against me but against you to make sure that if you're going to be free rider that you can't be and make me pay the cost.

As a long-time observer of politics, how might we, as citizens, create a more constructive civil discourse in this election – and beyond?

The simplest and most straightforward way is to just remember that the person you think you hate is another human being, who also has a family, who also has to earn money or get an education or make a life. You probably have more in common with each other than you have differences.

In fact, when we've looked at some of these crowds that are so angry, when somebody can break through in a human ground it often makes a big difference. It calms everything down. Creating a space of calm, of trying to find some sources of empathy, is crucial. That's a value on which democracy is based that we're all basically in the same boat and we all have to help each other out and we have to take each other into account at least to some extent.



Finally, we can get people to think that way, which again doesn't tell them how they're going to stand in a particular policy or a particular practice, but it does remind them that we're all trying to do the right thing by each other here.

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