Stanford University WIDE ANGLE ELECTION 2016

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Revisiting U.S. history sheds light on how the presidency and the practice of politics have changed, 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.

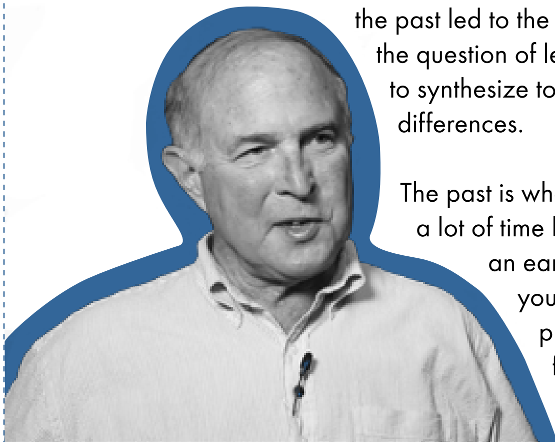
An interview with Stanford history professor Jack Rakove

How resilient is the U.S. political system after 210 years, given the demands of politics and society in the 21th century? Stanford history Professor Jack Rakove offers a long-term perspective on some of the changes and challenges.

Amidst today's relentless 24/7 news cycle, it's difficult to put this year's election events into a deeper historical and philosophical context. To explore how the presidency and the practice of politics have changed since the early days of the Republic, Worldview Stanford interviewed Jack Rakove, a professor of history and American studies at Stanford University. Rakove is a historian of the American Revolution and the origins of the U.S. Constitution, and the author of a Pulitzer Prize winning book on the political ideas and activities of James Madison. 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.

We've all heard the saying that those who don't learn from the past are doomed to repeat it. What can history teach us about the 2016 election?

Historians are very nervous about the idea of learning lessons from the past. That sounds somewhat counter-intuitive because common sense wisdom is that we study the past to learn lessons that we can somehow apply to the present. Many, perhaps most, historians would say something rather different – that the reason we study history is partly to understand the origins of the present. You cannot be an informed person in any full sense of the term if you don't know how the past led to the present, or how the present evolved out of the past. But when it comes to the question of lessons, many historians think that the real value of learning history is not to synthesize too easily or too casually or too deliberately. It's really to try to appreciate differences.



The past is what we call a foreign country. You go there as a tourist. You have to spend a lot of time learning things that were ordinary evidence, that people then knew from an early age. You have to acclimate yourself to what the past was like. The more you're there, you will probably realize how different the past is from your present. Thinking critically may require as much differentiation as oversimplification or easy comparison. It's a hard lesson to grasp, but it means that when you're operating in the present, you want to do your best to understand the present on its own terms, being historically informed about its

origins, but not allowing history to run roughshod in some crude or gross or simplistic way over how you view the events or the developments in your own life.

Since George Washington served as the first president of the United States, the office has been revered, despite differences of opinion over which candidate should hold it. How have perceptions of the presidency changed since the early days of the Republic?

I've come to think that of all the institutions we have, particularly given the repeated deadlock in Congress, the presidency has become the most important of all. Partly we live in a dangerous world. For better, for worse, we need to have a vigorous national security state and that creates all kinds of difficulties. Rule-making has to be done somehow when Congress itself is paralyzed. I think one of my big concerns is that when I look at the last three presidencies, it seems to me that there has been a concerted effort to delegitimate individual presidents, but it's net effect may also be to delegitimate the very nature of executive power.

Going back to 2000, I have written a lot arguing for a national popular election. My initial rationale, originally my strongest rationale, was that one person, one vote is the fundamental norm of modern democratic political justice, and votes should not have different weight depending on the accident of where they happen to be cast.

For the last few years, I think particularly during the Obama presidency, I've come to a second conclusion, which I'm now starting to think is even more powerful. If you think about the last three presidencies and the next president, whoever it's going to be, they have all suffered from delegitimization efforts. What do I mean by that? Well, if you think about Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, for different reasons, virtually from the start of their presidencies, each faced opposition, which tried to deny that the occupant, the resident of the White House, was somehow legitimately there.

I think in Bill Clinton's case, a lot of it was the old slick willy effect. Even though he had a Yale law degree and a Rhodes scholarship, he was just a backwoods operator. The Whitewater issue, which in the end, led exactly nowhere. The whole futile impeachment campaign.

The case of George W. Bush – the Bush/Gore thing, the question of Florida. The idea that he did not have a national plurality or majority. That his gaining the White House relied upon having a five-to-four majority in the Supreme Court. A lot of that was mitigated by the September 11th disaster, but it wasn't wholly destroyed.

The case of Barack Obama: Obama's election for me and I think for many in my generation was a truly great moment in American history. I never thought I'd see an African-American president in the United States. You could see it on "24;" you could see it on TV dramas – Morgan Freeman plays a great president! But the idea of having an African-American political leader? I never thought I'd see it. That by itself was a great source of rejoicing. But obviously what's happened—and we see enormous amounts of controversy about this—is Obama has not moved us into a post-racial society. We know from the overtly racist opposition he's received for a long time, that old racist prejudices are alive and well in American politics.

All three of those presidents suffered in different ways from the efforts of their delegitimization. There's no doubt that whether Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton gets elected in November, the same thing's going to accompany the next presidency.

The founders of the Republic created a representative political system based on give-and-take and compromise. Given the current levels of gridlock and polarization, are we in danger of losing that capacity?

When I think about how the framers of the Constitution, or let's say the founders more generally, thought about politics, the person I think about most often and with the greatest depth is James Madison. One of the things that really fascinated Madison was the whole topic of deliberation. By deliberation, he really meant calm, patient, increasingly informed discussion where representatives would go to Congress. They would be locally accountable to their districts, so locally responsible for expressing their interests and their concerns. To use a term very popular in the 18th century, they should have deep sympathy with their constituents. Sympathy is a great subject in the 18th century. It's the major theme for Adam Smith, the author of The Wealth of Nations, but also The Theory of Moral Sentiments.

Having both knowledge and sympathy were the defining criteria of being an effective representative. When Madison tried to imagine what the new Congress would look like, he rightfully anticipated that for a long time, it would consist mostly of amateur lawmakers. Most congressmen would serve only a term or two and in fact, that was historically true pretty much for the first century of the Republic. Most members of the House of Representatives served three years down to the 1890's—basically one- or two-term congressmen.

The model of deliberation is you would show up. You would be in effect educated on the job. Education would involve deliberation. It would involve a process of you providing information and acquiring information from others. Now, for lots of reasons, we've abandoned that system, but I think the dominant fact we're confronting now, which everybody talks about, is the whole question of deadlock or impasse in government. Again, the parties have become so ideologically divided, the animus between them is so deep. If you talk to people that actually study the day-to-day workings of Congress, they barely eat with one another.

There was a time when I think the sources of mutual sympathy bound politicians one to the other. They might have different preferences and values, but they all were practicing the same trade. A lot of that has really collapsed. The party animus, some of it driven by the weight and the preferences—even the prejudices—of primary voters.

It's a remarkable thing—the fear of "being primaried," the idea that you might be challenged in your own district. You have to flip that around. The fear of being primaried? Is there nothing else useful you can do in life if you were to lose a congressional election? Wouldn't you rather stand up for your principles than have to feel you had to toady to the most prejudiced voters within your district? That's a very disturbing specter of what's happened to the popular character of our politics.

In a world that faces daunting challenges—many of which are global in scope and impact—are America's political institutions still up to the task?

The world in 2016 faces a number of challenges. Two of the most obvious ones, things we talk about all the time, are the consequence of globalization and its impact on the economy, and the consequences of terrorism. These, of course, are deeply disturbing phenomena, but if you're a historian like me and you take the long view, these are really not such new things. The world economy's been globalizing since at least the 16th century, arguably earlier. Terrorism in differ-

ent forms goes back to the religious wars of the 16th century. Not a wholly new phenomenon either, as are other religious conflicts at other points in time.

The one issue that I think is most outstanding and would be the most severe test of the capacity of institutions throughout the world, is obviously climate change, which carries with it the specter of massive damage to our very habitat, the kind we can't really imagine. To have our ability to think rationally about the sources and the consequences of climate change severely diminished and impacted by highly partisan politics, which in the 21st century doesn't even take the data supporting climate change all that seriously. Many segments of the electorate find it hard to accept the reality of the data, even though 98% of the scientific community seems to agree that the general model holds up.

That's truly depressing. To me, it leads to a really interesting question and it goes back to the preamble of the Constitution: To secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity. I've often asked the question, "What does it mean to talk about posterity?" There's a saying that three weeks in politics is a long time. Three months or three years is forever. If you talk about posterity in terms of climate change, you are talking about posterity in a truly cosmic, massive-scale sense of the term.

To have a political system that cannot take that kind of vision or to have it possible to adapt; to do the best research possible and to try to start thinking your way through a set of problems and then have a political system that's incapable of dealing adequately with the data, with what the evidence reveals – that's truly disturbing.

I'm not going to live long enough to find out what the answer's going to be, but if I worried about my posterity, including my 22-month old grandson, that's what I would worry about.

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