

December 13, 2016 | By Brie Linkenhoker

The dynamics of the 2016 election are less surprising when viewed in a long-term historical context, 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, **David Kennedy**

The respective roles of the president, Congress, and the military are deeply rooted in U.S. history, says David Kennedy, professor emeritus of history at Stanford. But that doesn't mean that they do not change.

What can the framers of the constitution and Woodrow Wilson teach us about the power – and challenges – of the presidency as America inaugurates its 45th president? Worldview Stanford interviewed David Kennedy, professor of history, emeritus, at Stanford, whose interdisciplinary scholarship integrates economic and cultural analysis with social and political history. In 2000, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*.

As a lifelong scholar of American history, how do you place the 2016 election in historical context?

In many ways, the current electoral cycle is without precedent. We really are in the process of redefining the procedure through which we recruit and select presidential candidates, and I think the future may redefine the nature of the presidency itself.

But it's worth revisiting the constitutional moment in Philadelphia in 1787 when the founders actually defined our constitutional system. There are a couple of numbers that are quite indicative of what the founders thought the presidency would be all about.

Article 1 of the Constitution is the article that concerns the legislature, or the Congress. It has 51 paragraphs and a lot of detail about what the responsibility and limitations on the Congress are, and often uses the word "Congress" almost synonymously with the term "government."

Article 2 of the Constitution concerns the presidency, or the executive. It has 13 paragraphs, one of which is about the procedures for impeaching the president. That asymmetry between 51 paragraphs devoted to the character and nature of the Congress and



13 to the presidency is a pretty strong suggestion that the founders intended the president to be, by and large, the creature of the Congress, or to be subordinate to the Congress in the overall political balance of the system.

That's a lot different than our notion of the president today. When did our attitudes about the presidency change?

For most of the 19th century, with conspicuous exceptions like Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Jackson, and maybe James Polk, the center of gravity of the political system was still in the Congress. That began to change in the early 20th century. We're living today in the early 21st century with a legacy whose roots really go back to the so-called Progressive era of just about a hundred years ago with the presidencies of Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt.

Wilson was a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University in the 1880s when he wrote a treatise that was published almost immediately as a book called *Congressional Government*. His basic argument was that the Congress by its nature is too parochial and fragmented, and therefore is incapable of representing truly national interests. He argued that the president is the one actor in our entire political system who is elected by the country at large, not by individual congressional districts or individual states, and who is charged with responsibility for the overall well-being, defense and security of the entire country.

Wilson's presidency was one that helped define the modern presidency, where the candidates campaign on a coherent platform of policies and proposals for which the candidate will stand as champion if elected. We see with his campaign and others in the 20th century these slogans that define in capsule form presidential programs and aspirations. Before Wilson, we had Theodore Roosevelt's "Square Deal." Then Wilson's "New Freedom." Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal." Harry Truman's "Fair Deal." John F. Kennedy's "New Frontier." Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society."

These are all artifacts of the 20th century. There's no such parallel in the 19th century.

What influence did those 20th century developments have on our elections today?

In the 2016 election, I think we see the convergence of two lines of development in our political system and culture whose origins can be traced back to about a century ago. One is this increasing expectation that the president is the one actor in our political system who really can stand for the national interest.

At the same time the organizations, the entities that we've evolved in our political culture beginning back in the 19th century – political parties – have become less able to do what political parties traditionally did, which was to identify, recruit, groom and put forward candidates for office at all levels, including the presidency.

This development traces right back to the early 20th century and to the states of California and Oregon, which were the first two states in 1910 and 1912 to enact the primary election system. It was all done in the name of democracy, of getting political decisions out of the hands of the bosses and the industrial interests. It was sold to the public at large as a mea-

sure to improve democracy by increasing public participation at the most fundamental level of decision making about who can stand for office.

It's very hard to argue with that on the grounds of principle or theory about how democracy should work. It's inclusive, and it puts government more in touch with the people directly. It all sounds wonderful. But as late as the 1960s only 12 states had primary elections. Beginning essentially in 1968-72, in that very turbulent period, almost every single state adopted either a primary election process or its close equivalent, caucuses, which also instruct parties how to select candidates.

We now have a primary election season. It used to be the party would select a person to represent its program and interests to stand for office. We've reversed that. Presidents are often elected now with only fractional or grudging support of their party. They capture the party – some would say *hijack* the party in this current cycle, but they're unable to discipline the Congress very effectively. Yet, we have had for the last century had these increasingly extravagant expectations of what the president should do as our single, national elected political officer. It's an ironic circumstance, to put it mildly, where we expect more of the presidency, but our system is such that the president is a less effective representative of his party and his party's interests than was the case in the 19th century.

Can our political system continue with these conflicting expectations?

I hate to say something as dramatic or extravagant as that we are at a breaking point given the polarization and the paralysis in the Congress that we've witnessed for the last many years. That may be true, but the historian in me just doesn't let me actually say that. I will say that there are moments in American history when we've been able to address conspicuous national problems – think of slavery and disunion, or responding to the Great Depression, or finally grasping the nettle of racial equality in the Civil Rights Era. In each of those cases, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson had enormous majorities in his party in the Congress.

In those moments, we had a kind of de facto parliamentary system, where the majority party had a sufficient majority and its agent in the White House, and they could get things done. Those moments are rare. We have a system designed by our founders in Philadelphia in 1787 to be difficult to operate. It was purpose built; it was designed to be a system in which it would be difficult to exercise power from the center. As Woodrow Wilson and others knew more than a hundred years ago, in an increasingly complex, urban, industrial or post-industrial, diverse society with major international responsibility and commitments, that system maybe isn't quite adaptable enough to the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

The U.S. military—and its role in foreign policy—has also changed dramatically in the past century. From the historian's perspective, what do you want the new president to keep in mind about the development and deployment of our military?

The military force that we have today is quite unusual in the context of American history. Number one, it is quite small. It is today about 1.3-1.4 million active duty personnel. Think of World War II as a reference point: World War II mobilized 16 million men or about 12% of the entire population. The active duty force today is about .4% of the general population. It's just very, very small both in absolute and in relative terms. Number two – and this point often

surprises people – but the force we have today is actually quite inexpensive. The Department of Defense Budget is in the range of 3-4% of GNP (gross national product). In the Cold War period it was 10-12% of GNP. Through the application and militarization of new technology, we've enabled the average soldier, sailor, airman or marine to be a much more effective fighting unit than he or she was in the prior year.

In all of American history from the Revolutionary War to the present moment, we've only had draft conscription in place at four moments: the Civil War briefly, World War I briefly, World War II, and then of course the Cold War, which is more or less continuous with World War II. It adds up in total to a little bit less than 40 years in more than two centuries of our national history that we've had a conscript force. In 1973 we transitioned to the all-volunteer force, which we've now had for 43 years—longer than the World War II and Cold War draft force.

The fact that it's a volunteer force means in practice that it's quite unrepresentative of the population as a whole. African Americans are significantly overrepresented in the military, relative to the civilian population. Hispanics are, interestingly, underrepresented in the military, relative to their presence in the general population. Women are woefully underrepresented: 15% of the military versus 51% of the general population. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates gave the commencement address at Duke University in 2010 and said the force was being recruited disproportionately from the rural South and the rural Rocky Mountain West. He was in effect saying to these Duke graduates, "Why aren't people like you going into the military?"

You add all of this together – the force is relatively small, it's relatively cheap, it's composed of underprivileged people who have lesser political voice – and what happens? The force gets easier to use as an instrument of policy than it was in another era.

This has been studied by the Congressional Research Service, and there are some quite striking numbers to it. In the era between the end of World War II and 1973, there were 19 overseas deployments in the American military. The big ones were Korea and Vietnam. From 1973, when we went to the all-volunteer force, to 2013, there were 144 overseas deployments. You can quibble about what constitutes a deployment, but on the face of it the difference between 19 deployments in the conscript era and 144 in the all-volunteer force era strongly suggests that the nature of the force we have makes it easier for the political leadership – the commander and chief – to use it as an instrument of policy. Now we have a very small force and we can deploy it without civil society breaking a sweat.

I think we would be well served if we had a more focused discussion about our foreign policy objectives, the means we have at our disposal to pursue them, the relative cost of different means of pursuing those objectives, and then rethinking just how easy it has been for the last 40 years to use the military as an instrument of policy. ✨

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