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The 2016 Rhetorical Leadership Lecture

Anger in Presidential Elections

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Mary E. Stuckey specializes in political and presidential rhetoric, political communication, and American Indian politics. She is the author, editor, or co-editor of twelve books and author or coauthor of roughly 80 essays and book chapters. She has received the Michael M. Osborn Teacher/Scholar Award, the Rose B. Johnson Award (with Zoe Hess-Carney), the Roderick P. Hart Outstanding Book Award, the Marie Hochmuth Nichols Award, and the Carl Couch Center's inaugural Bruce E. Gronbeck Political Communication Award. She has served as editor of the Southern Communication Journal and as book review editor for Rhetoric and Public Affairs. She is Editor-elect of the Quarterly Journal of Speech. She currently co-edits (with Mitchell McKinney) Peter Lang's series The Frontiers of Political Communication. She received the John Sisco Teaching Award from the Southern States Communication Association, the Pi Sigma Alpha Teaching Award from the American Political Science Association, and the Elsie M. Hood Teaching Award from the University of Mississippi. Her current book project is on the rhetoric of political change.

Political candidates have often used anger as a way of motivating their coalitions and defining their campaigns. Anger is useful as a way of separating the mass public from the system and its leaders, but is less useful as a way of attaching members of the public to a candidacy. Anger is useful as one part of a rhetorical repertoire, especially as it helps voters feel that a candidate is fighting for them, but is of limited use when it's the primary tactic used by a candidate.

In this presentation, I develop this argument through a focus on three moments in US political history. First, I examine the 1930s, when FDR mobilized anger against the "moneychangers in the temple" and his opposition relied on fears that Roosevelt was an incipient dictator. In both cases, the anger was directed at those who were presumed to be distorting the political system, which was treated as inherently sound. Second, I look at the ways in which Goldwater and Reagan wielded populist anger in their presidential efforts, which reveals the importance of political style. Finally, I look at the current campaign, in which Bernie Sanders concentrates on injustices he considers inherent in the political system while Donald Trump makes specifically personal attacks, which reveals both the ways that anger can be used to critique and to sustain political structures.

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