

Alumni Q&A



**Ying Ma,
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In 2021, Ying Ma served as communications director and spokesperson for the Elder for Governor campaign in the California recall election. Following the campaign, we caught up with Ms. Ma to hear her reflections on the trail.

On Stanford's influence upon her present line of work:

It stunted my progress. Stanford Law School might have done wonders for others, but it was a mistake for me. The law was never my calling, and studying it was not a happy experience. It also set me off course from the pursuit of politics and policy, both of which I had been involved in and cared about deeply. The first campaign I worked on was Proposition 209 in 1996, which ended racial and gender preferences in public education, contracting, and employment here in California. Right before law school, I worked for a congressional commission in Washington, D.C., where I was immersed in issues central to American national security and domestic economic competitiveness. Attending law school and practicing law afterwards meant that I had to leave the policy and political world. It took a long time to find my way back.

On getting involved in the California recall effort:

I served as communications director for the “No on Proposition 16” campaign in California last year. Prop 16 sought to reinstate racial and gender preferences in public education, contracting, and employment. In other words, it sought to overturn Prop 209, which I helped pass years ago. The “No on 16” campaign defeated that attempt. We were outspent by sixteen-to-one, but we nevertheless won by a margin of 57% to 43%. This was in the same election when Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump by nearly two-to-one in California.

Veterans in the political world who knew Larry Elder had taken note of my work, and they recommended me when Elder was putting his team together. I joined his campaign on Day One as communications director.

On strategy when running an “underdog” campaign:

I would characterize us as an “outsider” campaign or an “insurgency” campaign. Unlike his opponents, Larry Elder is not a career politician, and hence not ensconced in the same groupthink or bureaucratic paralysis, and certainly not the cronyism and corruption, that is common in politics. Instead of allegiance to special interests, outsiders generally offer common-sense solutions to seemingly intractable challenges that politicians talk about but cannot solve. This is especially true in Larry Elder’s case—it is his obvious common sense, combined with his sincerity and passion, which got so many Californians excited about his candidacy.

In many ways, two previous campaigns I worked on in the 2016 elections—the Ben Carson presidential campaign in the GOP primary and the candidacy of Donald Trump in the general election—shared similar characteristics. They were both outsider campaigns tapping into the widespread frustration of voters who believed it was time to take back their government from the entrenched ruling elites. In each of these campaigns, the candidate offered authenticity instead of business as usual.

On a highlight and a challenge from the campaign:

Highlight: Being on the campaign trail with Larry Elder and witnessing the love affair that Californians of all stripes had with the man they hoped would be their next governor.

Challenge: The sleaze, smears, and slander from Gavin Newsom, his cronies, and the political establishment in this state. The barrage was relentless, funded by a massive war chest made possible by woke billionaires and big unions, and aided by a dishonest media establishment in California and nationwide. In a despicable fashion, some of our opponents on the Republican side participated and allegedly even colluded with the Newsom camp. By contrast, our campaign ran on the issues, never besmirched our Republican opponents, and stayed focused on the endless failures of Gavin Newsom while offering solutions meant for Republicans, Democrats, and independents alike.

On the future of California and what’s next:

The Larry Elder campaign shook the political establishment to its core. Newsom and his allies across the state—and across the country—feared that he could lose it all. So they slandered and smeared the candidate most likely to replace him. Instead of addressing pressing issues or defending his record, Newsom succeeded with the only strategy that could prevail: characterizing the populist recall effort as a

Republican hostile takeover of a deep blue state and convincing Californians that a candidate who voted for Donald Trump was scarier than the solutions we all deserve.

The problems that led over 1.7 million Californians to petition for the recall of this governor—rising homelessness, rampant crime, the out-of-control increase in the cost of living, rolling brown outs, water shortages, raging wildfires—have not gone away. But engaging in scaremonger tactics about Trumpism rather than governing competently seems enough to keep a politician in office. At least that was the upshot from the frenzy of hyper-partisanship and hostility created by the Newsom team in the recall election. I hope that is not the future of California.

As for me, I don’t have any grand plans. It’s always disorienting when campaigns end. You essentially go from 120 miles an hour to a complete halt. Staffers often get sick, which I did at the end of this campaign. I am trying to decompress but not exactly succeeding at doing so.

On advice for the Stanford Federalist Society:

If you intend to go into politics, just be prepared for a lot of sleaze, backstabbing, and dirtiness. The saying, “if you want a friend in Washington, get a dog,” rings true in politics in general.

Those who wish to pursue policy will find plenty of their peers in prominent positions in Washington as the years go by. The opportunities are abundant, especially for those who stay involved with the Federalist Society. With that said, courage and convictions are rare commodities in the political and policy world. I’d like to advise current students to strive for these qualities, even though it’s clear that they are not necessary for success.



Ms. Ma walking with Larry Elder. This photo is from Venice Beach, where a woman wearing a gorilla mask threw eggs at Larry Elder and attacked his campaign staff.