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The Rise of Anger in the American Public

It's quick, it's binary, it's delicious. And more and more, we're gorging on it.
— Time Magazine, on anger, June 2016[1]

The 2016 presidential election in the United States laid bare a reality about the country's political scene: Americans are angry. Presented with two candidates who were both historically unpopular, the level of vitriol and disgust exhibited by both sides of the political divide was noteworthy. Yet, while the 2016 election was characterized by these notably high levels of anger, such negativity was not a sudden development. In fact, the anger-fueled election of Donald Trump to the presidency was part of a trend that had been developing for decades.

Indeed, politicians have long known that anger can be a useful tactic for furthering their electoral goals. For example, during his successful campaign for Congress in 1978, Newt Gingrich spoke to a group of College Republicans about what he saw as the fundamental difference between the Democratic and Republican parties. The Democrats, Gingrich argued, "always produced young, nasty people who had no respect for their elders." By contrast, the Republicans encouraged their supporters to be "neat, obedient, and loyal and faithful and all those Boy Scout words, which would be great around the camp fire, but are lousy in politics." The solution to the Republicans' woes, according to Gingrich, was to encourage their supporters "to be nasty." To drive home his point,

[1] Quote taken from Kluger (2016). The entire article can be read at http://time.com/4353606/anger-america-enough-already/.

Gingrich urged his audience to "stand up …in a slug fest and match it out with their opponent[s]."[2]

Gingrich's wish for a zero-sum, winner-take-all, anger-fueled style of politics has been aided by the dramatic growth of "negative partisanship," which Alan Abramowitz and I have developed in a series of articles (Abramowitz and Webster 2016, 2018*b*). A phenomenon describing the ways in which Americans' political behavior is more often guided by the candidates and parties they *dislike* rather than the ones they *like*, negative partisanship "is flipping politics on its head" as "voters form strong loyalties based more on loathing for the opposing party than on the old kind of tribal loyalty" seen in previous eras (Fournier 2015; Zahn 2016). As a chief component of negative partisanship, the central argument of this book is that anger has the profound ability to alter American political behavior and public opinion. Moreover, anger is not synonymous with partisan or ideological polarization. Though it is conceptually related to polarization – and most salient for guiding political behavior when polarization is high – anger has consequences that move beyond polarization-induced congressional gridlock (Binder 1999, 2004; Krehbiel 1998), altered legislative agendas (Cox and McCubbins 2005), or "unorthodox" styles of lawmaking (Sinclair 1997). Indeed, anger has deeply affected American political behavior and public opinion in three distinct ways: it has lowered Americans' trust in the national government, it has caused Americans to weaken in their commitment to democratic norms and values, and it has produced extraordinarily high levels of partisan loyalty at the ballot box.

In this chapter, I begin by conceptualizing anger: what it is, how it arises, and what its effects are. I then discuss the psychological mechanisms behind anger's ability to affect political behavior and public opinion in contemporary American politics. Next, I discuss three important ways in which anger shapes public opinion and political behavior. The first way in which anger affects public opinion and political behavior is by lowering citizens' trust in their government. Given its necessity in "making Washington work" (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), understanding the historical trend in citizens' trust in government – as well as some potential reasons for its precipitous decline – is of paramount importance. I also argue that anger affects public opinion and political behavior by weakening citizens' commitment to democratic norms, those

[2] Gingrich's remarks to the College Republicans can be found in full at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/newt/newt78speech.html.

sorts of "informal institutions" (Helmke and Levitsky 2006; Lauth 2000) that dictate which types of behavior are proprietous and which are not. Finally, I argue that anger is crucial in forging partisan loyalty. In this sense, the growth in anger within the American electorate has reshaped political behavior by increasing partisan loyalty and decreasing citizens' affective evaluations of the opposing political party. Finally, I conclude by discussing the relationship between anger and negative partisanship with a focus on the trends that have helped to create and sustain the current climate of anger-fueled negative partisanship in American politics.

1.1 WHAT IS ANGER?

Anger, like happiness, or anxiety, or fear, is both a personality trait and an emotion. What, then, are personality traits and emotions? Personality traits are "internally based psychological characteristics" (Allen 1994) that define "who we are as individuals" (Mondak 2010). Personality traits are the psychological forces behind individual differences in behavior, tastes, and thoughts (Wiggins 1996). Accordingly, personality traits shape the ways in which different individuals respond to the same situation. These different situational responses arise due to the varying degrees to which individuals possess various personality traits and encounter particular stimuli. As Buss (1999) notes, "all individuals may possess a psychological mechanism of jealousy, but differ in the degree to which they enduringly occupy an environment filled with threats to their … relationships." Personality traits, then, are deep-seated phenotypic characteristics of an individual that guide patterns of behavior and tend to remain stable throughout the course of the lifespan (Allen 1994; McCrae and Costa 1994).

Emotions, by contrast, are more ephemeral and can best be thought of as momentary feelings. Indeed, according to James's (1884) classic analysis of the subject, an "emotion" is simply a feeling that corresponds to various actions and bodily stimuli. For others, such as LeDoux (1998), emotions are distinctly "biological functions of the nervous system." Emotions are usually, though not always, aroused in response to some event and fade with time. Accordingly, a key difference between emotions and personality traits is that the former are manipulatable, while the latter are not. That emotions are manipulatable plays a crucial role in much of the analyses in this book, particularly in Chapters 4 and 5.

Regardless of whether it is studied as a personality trait (as in Chapter 3) or an emotion (as in Chapters 4 and 5), there are key

features that differentiate anger from other emotions or personality traits. The first differentiator is that anger is negatively valenced (Lerner and Tiedens 2006; Moons, Eisenberger, and Taylor 2010). Put simply, anger is something that is felt when one is irritated, frustrated, upset, or begrudged. This contrasts with happiness, joy, or contentment, all of which are positively valenced. A second aspect that is unique to anger is that it often causes individuals to attribute blame to a specific person, group of people, or entity. Moreover, anger causes people to seek some form of retribution toward that which elicited their anger (Allred 1999; Allred et al. 1997; Bower 1991). A third differentiator between anger and other emotions is that anger typically causes individuals to "mentally retreat." In other words, anger causes people to both fall back on the information and beliefs that they already have and increase their reliance on group-based cues or heuristics (Bodenhausen, Sheppard, and Kramer 1994). These reactions differ from those engendered by anxiety, for example, which has been shown to push individuals to seek new information (see, e.g., Albertson and Gadarian 2015). These characteristics of anger – its negative valence; the fact that it often leads to an attribution of blame and the search for retribution; and its ability to cause individuals to rely on what they already know, and to increase their reliance on group-based heuristics – will be key theoretical elements in the chapters to come. Next, I briefly outline the ways in which these three characteristics of anger affect patterns of political behavior and public opinion.

1.2 Anger, Public Opinion, and Mass Political Behavior

Traditional models of political behavior often assume that Americans' political choices are governed by rational decision making (Downs 1957), sincere ideological policy preferences (Abramowitz 2010), or through group-based notions of partisan identification (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Mason 2015). Though these are important mechanisms for guiding political behavior and public opinion, Americans form opinions about political institutions, adopt attitudes about democratic governance, and make choices at the ballot box for more psychologically rooted reasons (Marcus 2002; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). Indeed, an individual's felt emotions (Banks 2014) and personality profile (Gerber et al. 2010; Johnston, Federico, and Lavine 2017) have both been shown to affect political behavior in profound ways. In the current era of American politics, which is characterized by high levels of animosity between partisans, anger is likely to be among the most powerful of

emotions and personality traits shaping the ways in which Americans interact with the political system.

One way in which anger affects public opinion and political behavior is through its negative valence. All emotions have either a positive or a negative valence, and the direction of this valence is important in determining how individuals both perceive and react to that which aroused the emotion in the first place (Bower 1991). Emotions with a positive valence, such as happiness or joy, will cause people to evaluate other people, places, and ideas in a positive light. Emotions with a negative valence, such as anger, will lead people to evaluate those same people, places, or ideas in a negative fashion (Moons, Eisenberger, and Taylor 2010; Schwarz and Clore 1983). Thus, when individuals are made angry by politics, politicians, or political affairs, their felt emotion will push them to render negative evaluations of those politicians or political affairs that elicited their anger (see, for instance, Bennett 1997; Lerner and Tiedens 2006).

Yet, anger need not be elicited specifically by politics or some political actor in order to shape Americans' views of the political world. In fact, it is possible for generalized apolitical anger, or "incidental anger," to also affect Americans' political behavior and opinions. That incidental anger can affect political views stems from the fact that emotions are not easily compartmentalized. In fact, anger in one setting can – and often does – spill over into completely different settings (Dunn and Schweitzer 2005). Moreover, anger aroused in one aspect of an individual's life can alter evaluations of objects completely orthogonal to the person or stimulus that initially aroused their anger (Forgas and Moylan 1987). As a result, anger – whether targeted political anger or generalized apolitical anger – is capable of shaping patterns of political behavior and public opinion. In this book, I draw on these properties to show how individuals who are angry – whether specifically about politics or something apolitical – have lower evaluations of the national government.

Anger also affects political behavior through its tendency to cause people to blame others for perceived wrongdoings and, moreover, to seek retribution for that which elicited the anger (Allred 1999; Weiner 2000). Survey data suggests that Democrats and Republicans today are increasingly angry at each other and are likely to attribute blame for the country's ills to the opposing political party and its supporters.[3]

[3] This claim is derived from a report by the Pew Research Center, "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," which highlights the growing animosity between Democrats and Republicans in the American electorate. The report can be found here: www.people-press.org/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/.

Such anger-fueled blame has the potential to lead Democrats (Republicans) toward the action of lowering evaluations of Republicans (Democrats) *as people* by doubting the legitimacy of their opinions and their personal intelligence. In this sense, anger can weaken Americans' commitment to democratic norms and values such as political tolerance and the respect for minority rights.

Finally, anger can affect political behavior by causing individuals to "mentally retreat" by increasing their reliance on group-based cues and heuristics. In the context of American politics, no group-based cue or heuristic is stronger or more prevalent than partisan identification (Campbell et al. 1960). Accordingly, when Americans are made angry, they are likely to increase their reliance on their identity *as partisans*. This increased focus on partisan identities, in turn, has the ability to increase voters' loyalty to their party's slate of candidates at all electoral levels.

1.3 Trends in Public Opinion and Political Behavior

Recent years have seen the emergence of three distinct patterns or trends in public opinion and political behavior. First, Americans are exhibiting lower levels of trust in their government. Second, Americans appear to be less committed to democratic norms and values. Third, and finally, Americans are increasingly voting loyally for their own political party's slate of candidates even though they are professing to be politically independent (see, e.g., Klar and Krupnikov 2016).

The primary argument of this book is that anger, as described above, has caused and helped to perpetuate these three trends. That is, anger has facilitated a decline in citizens' trust in their own government, has weakened Americans' commitment to democratic norms and values, and has forged partisan loyalty at various levels of electoral competition. In this section, I briefly describe these three trends. Later chapters will more explicitly detail how and why anger affects trust in government, commitment to democratic norms, and partisan loyalty in voting behavior.

1.3.1 Declining Trust in Government

Since the Dwight Eisenhower era, Americans have become increasingly distrustful of their government. Figure 1.1 plots the moving average of the

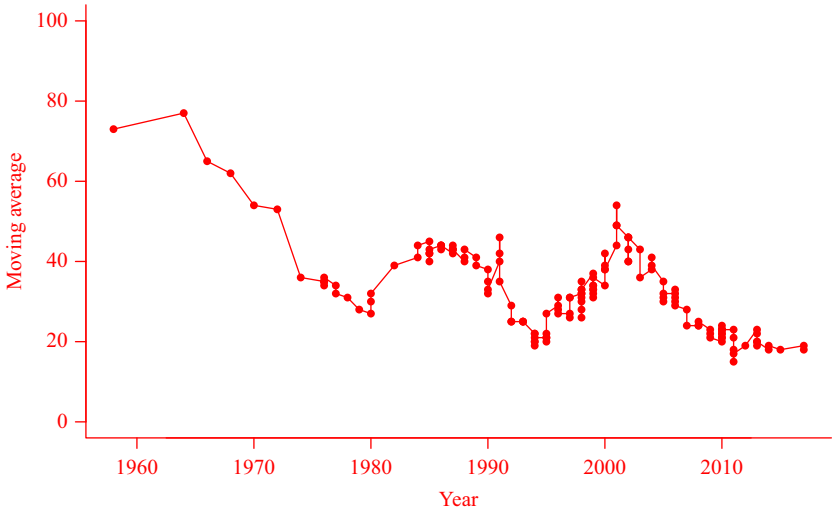

FIGURE 1.1. Declining trust in government in the United States. This figure shows the extent to which Americans have come to distrust their government over time. The line indicates the moving average of the percentage of Americans who say they trust the government "always" or "most of the time." Data comes from the CBS/NY Times Poll, the ABC/Washington Post Poll, Gallup, Pew Research Center, and the American National Election Studies.

percentage of Americans who say they trust the government "always" or "most of the time." As can be seen, the apex of Americans' trust in their government was at the beginning of the time series. Over the past fifty-five years, the percentage of Americans who say they trust the government has fallen precipitously.[4] By 2015, only 20% of Americans said they trust the government.

This sharp decline in the percentage of Americans who say they trust the government is problematic for multiple reasons. As Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) note, trust in government can facilitate bipartisan legislation and compromise. Absent trust in the institution of government, gridlock and partisan grandstanding is likely to persist. Yet, more important than its ability to induce bipartisan legislation is trust's role in facilitating support for government programs that benefit the most disadvantaged members of society. As Hetherington (2005) argues, "people need to trust

[4] One notable upward spike in Americans' trust in government occurred shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

the government when they pay the costs but do not receive the benefits" of social welfare programs. Otherwise, support for such programs will diminish and collective outcomes will be suboptimal. Trust, according to Hetherington (2005), is essential to societal and political prosperity.

Moreover, this secular decline in trust in government is problematic because trust is a necessary component of governmental legitimacy. Democratic theory argues that the people are sovereign and that they should have a say – directly or, as in the case of the United States, indirectly – in governmental decision making. Absent trust in the very organization that is meant to aggregate and represent individuals' interests, it is hard to imagine a functioning and robust democracy.

If trust is essential to the democratic process, what, then, is causing Americans to lose trust in the government? Hetherington and Rudolph (2015), building on earlier work by Citrin (1974), suggest that Americans' trust in government is a function of their partisanship. More specifically, this line of thought argues that Americans trust the government when their own political party holds power. Conversely, when the opposing party is in charge, Americans have lower trust in the government. While partisanship certainly plays a role, this theoretical argument is difficult to square with the trends shown in Figure 1.1. Indeed, if trust in government was purely a function of partisanship, it is not clear why we should see the downward trends that we do, in fact, observe. If partisanship was the sole reason Americans gained or lost trust in government, the over-time trend in trust in government should be characterized by slight perturbations around some mean level of trust as party control of the government switches back and forth. That we see a continual decline suggests something else is happening – something which cuts across partisanship.

One of the arguments that I make in this book is that the rise of anger in American politics has been an important and overlooked reason that Americans have lost trust in their government. In Chapter 3, I show how higher levels of trait-based anger are associated with lower levels of trust in the government across a variety of metrics. I also show how this relationship is moderated by an individual's partisan affiliation. In Chapter 4, I utilize a survey experiment on a national sample of registered American voters to show that anger – both political and apolitical in nature – has a causal effect on reducing trust in government.

1.3.2 Weakening Commitment to Democratic Norms

In addition to being noteworthy for dangerously low levels of trust in government, American politics today is more adversarial and less tolerant of opposition points of view than in previous years. Thisf rancorous political competition is the result of Americans' increasing willingness to flaunt long-held democratic norms that dictate the ways in which politics should be approached. To the extent that democracy is, as Bernard Shaw said, "a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve," then the nature of contemporary American political behavior is worrisome.

As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) note in their analysis of "how democracies die," democratic governance is not something that is protected merely by a codification of rules, regulations, and institutional arrangements within a constitutional framework. While such a written commitment to democracy as "the only game in town" is important to democratic health, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) note that democracy is best served when these codified rules of the game "are reinforced by norms of mutual toleration and restraint in the exercise of power." That these norms have begun to disappear has been a chief characteristic of modern-day American political competition.

A recent Pew Research Center report sheds light on Americans' gradual disregard for democratic norms. According to the Pew report, a growing percentage of Americans no longer view supporters of the opposing political party as merely those who hold a different political opinion than themselves. Instead, a large percentage of both Democrats (41%) and Republicans (45%) see the policies advocated by the other party as a threat to the country. Moreover, the Pew report notes that both Democrats and Republicans are likely to believe that the political views one holds says "a lot" about the kind of person they are. Indeed, 63% of Republicans agreed that how a person thinks about politics says a lot about the kind of person they are, while 70% of Democrats felt similarly.[5]

This increasing willingness to view supporters of the other party as dangerous and to view the totality of an individual in terms of their political beliefs has potentially catastrophic consequences. In fact, recent

[5] The report, "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," can be found in full at www.people-press.org/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/. Accessed May 19, 2018.

work suggests that this extreme dislike and lack of tolerance for those who hold different political opinions has the potential to spill over into support for physical violence. Utilizing a series of experiments surrounding the 2016 presidential election, Kalmoe (2018) found that partisans were more supportive of state-sponsored violence toward out-party supporters than toward their fellow partisans when these individuals were engaging in civic protest. Notably, such support for violence "is not limited to extremists – it resides comfortably in the attitudes and behaviors of ordinary partisans when legitimized and mobilized by the state." This support for violence can also affect how partisans view in-party members who are not sufficiently ideologically extreme. Indeed, new work suggests that some partisans wish ill-health or even death on those party members who do not support the party's agenda.[6]

This extreme dislike – dislike to the degree of wishing physical violence or some other harm on those who hold different political views – is deleterious to the proper functioning of democratic government. As Svolik (2018) cogently shows, heightened political polarization within a society can push citizens to put their partisan interests over the country's well-being. More specifically, Svolik's (2018) work illustrates how authoritarian leaders can subvert democratic processes by exploiting the fact that polarized societies often produce a situation in which partisans' dislike of the opposing political party outweighs their concern for free and fair elections. Thus, Svolik (2018) concludes that "electoral competition often confronts voters with a choice between democratic values and partisan interests, and …a significant fraction of a polarized electorate may be willing to sacrifice the former in favor of the latter."

The dramatic growth in negative partisanship and affective polarization within the electorate, which I will highlight in Section 1.4, indicates that the United States is in a perilous position in terms of the respect for democratic norms. Heightened partisan antipathy in the country has led to a scenario where citizens wish ill-will on those on the other side of the political divide, as Kalmoe (2018) has found, and has produced an environment where the country is vulnerable to the democracy-versus-partisanship tradeoff described by Svolik (2018). In Chapter 5, I build on these studies by showing how higher levels of anger have a causal effect

[6] See this report in *The Washington Post* "Monkey Cage" section: www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/05/16/surprised-by-the-anger-toward-mccain-party-loyalists-can-hate-apostates-as-much-as-opponents/. Accessed May 21, 2018.