

American Rage

American Rage argues that anger is the central emotion governing contemporary US politics, with powerful, deleterious effects. Tracing the developments that have given rise to a culture of anger in the mass public, the book sheds new light on both public opinion and voting behavior. Steven W. Webster skillfully uses a combination of novel datasets, new measures of anger, and a series of experiments to show how anger causes citizens to lose trust in the national government and weakens their commitment to democratic norms and values. Despite these negative consequences, political elites strategically seek to elicit anger among their supporters. Presenting compelling evidence, Webster ultimately concludes that elites engage in this behavior because voter anger leads to voter loyalty. When voters are angry, they are more likely to vote for their party's slate of candidates at multiple levels of the federal electoral system.

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American Rage

How Anger Shapes Our Politics

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Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-49137-2 — American Rage
 Steven W. Webster
 Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
 New Delhi – 110025, India
 79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108491372

DOI: 10.1017/9781108868303

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First published 2020

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Webster, Steven W., 1990– author.

TITLE: American rage : how anger shapes our politics / Steven W. Webster.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2020012948 (print) | LCCN 2020012949 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781108491372 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108811927 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781108868303 (epub)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Political culture—United States. | Political psychology—United States. |

Anger—Political aspects—United States. | Voting research—United States. |

Party affiliation—United States. | United States—Politics and government—21st century—Public opinion. | Public opinion—United States.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC JK1726 .W39 2020 (print) | LCC JK1726 (ebook) |

DDC 306.20973—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020012948>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020012949>

ISBN 978-1-108-49137-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-81192-7 Paperback

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-49137-2 — American Rage
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Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

For Wayne and Kathleen.

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
1 The Rise of Anger in the American Public	1
1.1 What Is Anger?	3
1.2 Anger, Public Opinion, and Mass Political Behavior	4
1.3 Trends in Public Opinion and Political Behavior	6
1.3.1 Declining Trust in Government	6
1.3.2 Weakening Commitment to Democratic Norms	9
1.3.3 High Partisan Loyalty	11
1.4 Rage, Negative Partisanship, and the Sources of Anger	12
1.4.1 Partisan Sorting	14
1.4.2 A New Media Environment	23
1.4.3 Technology and the Internet	25
1.5 Political Elites and American Rage	26
2 Political Elites and the Strategic Use of Anger	28
2.1 Elites and the Invocation of Anger	29
2.1.1 Historical Trends	29
2.1.2 Anger in the Contemporary Era	32
2.2 Anger as an Essential Function of Candidate Performance	36
2.3 Anger and Candidate Rhetoric in 2016	38
2.4 Anger and Partisan Media	45
2.5 Conclusion	55
2.6 Appendix	56

3	Trait-Based Anger and Governmental Distrust	58
3.1	Trait-Based versus State-Based Anger	59
3.2	Anger, Political Preferences, and Public Opinion	61
3.3	Personality in Context	63
3.4	Study Design	64
3.5	Anger and Evaluations of the National Government	67
3.6	A Note on the Causal Ordering	71
3.7	Conclusion and Discussion	72
4	The Causal Effect of Anger on Trust in Government	74
4.1	The Behavioral Effects of Anger	75
4.2	Anger, Behavior, and Trust in Government	76
4.2.1	Targeted Political Anger and Trust in Government	76
4.2.2	Generalized Apolitical Anger and Trust in Government	77
4.3	Anger, Evaluations of Government, and Causality	79
4.4	The Magnitude Is What Matters	86
4.5	External Validation	88
4.6	Conclusion and Discussion	93
4.7	Appendix	95
5	Anger and Democratic Values in the Mass Public	99
5.1	Conceptualizing Democracy	101
5.2	Anger and Democratic Commitment	103
5.3	Empirical Examination	108
5.3.1	Study Design	108
5.3.2	Results	111
5.3.3	Anger and the Institutional Structures of Democracy	113
5.4	Conclusion and Discussion	116
5.5	Appendix	117
5.5.1	Experiment #1	117
5.5.2	Experiment #2	119
6	Anger and Voter Loyalty	122
6.1	The 2016 US Presidential Election	123
6.2	Why Stoke Anger?	124
6.3	Angry Voters, Loyal Voters	127
6.4	Anger and Voter Loyalty in a Nationalized Environment	132
6.5	Just Polarization?	140
6.6	Conclusion and Discussion	144
7	Anger and the Future of American Government	146
7.1	Can It Be Reversed?	147
7.2	Consequences of Anger for American Government	150
	<i>Bibliography</i>	153
	<i>Index</i>	165

Figures

1.1	Declining trust in government in the United States.	<i>page</i> 7
1.2	The growth of negative partisan affect.	13
1.3	Change in racial composition of the parties.	16
1.4	Partisan scores on moral traditionalism by quartile.	18
1.5	Partisan-ideological sorting, 1972–2016.	20
1.6	Ideological identification and personality differences.	21
1.7	Ideological identification and authoritarianism.	23
2.1	Anger-inducing tweets in the Republican primary season.	41
2.2	Anger-inducing tweets in the Democratic primary season.	42
2.3	Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's tweet volume by day.	44
2.4	Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's anger-inducing tweet volume by day.	44
2.5	Average partisan balance ratio by channel.	54
3.1	Hypothetical distribution of trait-based anger.	60
3.2	Distribution of anger by partisanship.	69
5.1	Causal pathway of anger to weakening of democratic commitment.	107
5.2	The effect of anger on support for democratic norms.	113
6.1	Negative partisans and anger at opposing party candidates.	128
6.2	Anger forges partisan loyalty.	131
6.3	Anger and voter loyalty in House elections.	136
6.4	Anger and voter loyalty in Senate elections.	137

List of Figures

6.5	Anger and consistent voter loyalty.	139
6.6	Polarization in Congress, 1980–2012.	142
6.7	Anger and strength of partisan identification, 1980–2012.	143
7.1	How Americans feel about their government.	148

Tables

2.1	Twitter activity in the 2016 election.	<i>page</i> 39
2.2	Broadcast TV transcripts.	48
2.3	Top words on Fox News and MSNBC.	50
2.4	Partisan balance ratio.	53
3.1	Anger and evaluations of government.	68
3.2	Anger and evaluations of government, with interaction term.	70
4.1	Experimental design.	81
4.2	Effect of anger on trust in government.	82
4.3	Sentiment analysis by treatment status.	86
4.4	The magnitude is what matters.	87
4.5	Anger and trust in government, external validity.	91
4.6	Regression estimates of trust in government (ordered logit).	95
4.7	Regression estimates of trust in government, additional dependent variables.	95
4.8	Regression estimates of trust in government, accounting for strength of partisanship (standardized).	96
4.9	Regression estimates of trust in government among democrats.	96
4.10	Regression estimates of trust in government, with generalized measures of anger and alternative dependent variables.	97
4.11	Anger and trust in government external validity check, with anxiety.	98
5.1	Comparison of treated and control groups.	112

5.2	Anger and democratic commitment.	115
5.3	The causal effect of anger on democratic norms and values.	120
6.1	The relationship between anger and negative partisanship.	129
6.2	Angry voters, loyal voters.	130
6.3	Anger and partisan loyalty in subpresidential elections.	134
6.4	Anger and consistently loyal voters.	138

Preface

One of the most notable characteristics of American politics in the twenty-first century is the degree to which both Democrats and Republicans are angry at the opposing party, its leaders, and its supporters. In a January 2016 opinion piece for *The Washington Post*, Jennifer Rubin argued similarly, saying that “[a]nger has almost become a fad, a way of signaling that you know what’s going on, you’re sophisticated enough to see you’re being taken advantage of.”¹ Yet, if anger is a fad or the signal emotion of our day, the current body of scholarship knows far too little about the causes and political consequences of anger. Utilizing a combination of novel datasets, new measures of anger, and a series of experiments on people throughout the country, this book argues that anger is a powerful and all-present force in shaping patterns of political behavior and public opinion. Specifically, I argue that anger has served to reduce Americans’ trust in their governing institutions, has weakened the citizenry’s commitment to democratic norms and values, and has given rise to extraordinarily high levels of voter loyalty at multiple electoral levels.

Given such a holistic view of anger, this book is divided into two main parts. In the first part of the book, I give an overview of how anger affects American political behavior and public opinion. I also consider three primary developments that have given rise to the heightened levels of anger that currently exist in American politics. The first development that has given rise to anger is the sorting of partisan identities with racial,

¹ Rubin’s piece can be found here: www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2016/01/05/isnt-obama-responsible-for-some-of-this-anger/?utm_term=.dd8ac7224b54. Accessed June 4, 2018.

ethnic, cultural, and ideological identities. The increasing alignment of these crucial identities has led to a society where the demarcations between “us” and “them” have grown ever clearer. These divisions, in turn, have helped to create and perpetuate an anger-fueled style of politics.

The second development that has contributed to the growth in anger is the development of what Prior (2007) has labeled the “post-broadcast” media environment. Characterized by explicitly partisan and ideological news outlets, this new media landscape has allowed Democrats and Republicans to self-select into news outlets that do little more than confirm their preexisting beliefs and further entrench their partisan identities. The third – and related – development that has helped to fuel the growth in anger is the emergence of the Internet and associated technologies that serve to exacerbate partisan divisions. How these three trends have led to the creation of an increasingly angry electorate is the subject of Chapter 1.

After outlining an argument as to how partisan sorting has led to an anger-fueled style of politics, I finish the first part of the book by showing in Chapter 2 that political elites actively seek to elicit anger among the electorate. Utilizing the universe of tweets sent by presidential candidates during the 2016 campaign, as well as the transcripts of broadcast TV shows that aired on Fox News and MSNBC between 1999 and 2016, I show that political elites do seek to elicit anger among their supporters. Additionally, I present evidence that suggests that political elites are more likely to elicit this anger during key points of a campaign.

In the second part of the book, comprising Chapters 3 through 6, I illustrate the ways in which anger shapes patterns of public opinion and voter behavior. In Chapter 3 I introduce a measure of trait-based anger, derived from clinical psychology, to show how an individual’s predisposition to be angry shapes their evaluations of the national government across two different metrics. Moreover, I show how the relationship between personality-governed levels of anger and evaluations of the national government is moderated by partisan affiliation.

Chapter 4 moves beyond studying anger as a personality trait and examines the relationship between anger, conceptualized as an emotion, and trust in government. To do so, I utilize an experimental design that allows me to determine the causal effect of heightened levels of anger on trust in government. The experimental design randomizes individuals into one of three different treatment conditions: a condition that primes apolitical anger, a condition that elicits anger specifically about politics, or a condition that increases the salience of politics or political issues. This

design feature is important because it both facilitates an experiment with clearly defined interventions and allows for a straightforward examination of possible heterogeneous treatment effects. The results suggest that both apolitical anger and targeted political anger lower citizens' trust in the national government. In fact, the effect of apolitical anger on lowering trust in government is just as strong as the effect of political anger. This suggests that the *magnitude*, and not necessarily the *source*, is the most important element in anger's ability to weaken the bonds of trust between Americans and their governing institutions.

In Chapter 5, I examine the role of anger in weakening citizens' commitment to democratic norms and values. Utilizing a similar experimental design to the one employed in Chapter 4, this chapter examines the causal effect of anger on Americans' support for political tolerance, respect for minority opinions, and a commitment to maintaining "the spirit of the law" in addition to "the letter of the law." The results suggest that higher levels of anger serve to reduce Americans' commitment to these essential norms and values – particularly with respect to political tolerance – that have long been the lynchpin of a well-functioning democratic society.

The results I present in this book yield a puzzling question: If anger has a harmful effect on American government and politics, then why do political elites persist in seeking to provoke anger among their followers? Chapter 6 argues that political elites seek to elicit anger among their followers because voter anger leads to voter loyalty. In this chapter I show that more frequently feeling angry toward the opposing party's presidential candidate is predictive of higher levels of voter loyalty. This relationship is most pronounced for those individuals who do not particularly like their own party's presidential candidate. Among this subgroup of the electorate, higher degrees of anger leads to behavior more characteristic of committed partisans. Additionally, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that, in the current era of nationalized politics, anger toward the opposing party's presidential candidate leads to voter loyalty in subpresidential elections.

Finally, I conclude with a chapter discussing anger and the future of American government and politics. Is it possible to reverse the rise of anger within the electorate, or is this contentious style of politics here to stay? The answer has lasting implications for public opinion, political behavior, and the nature of political competition in the United States.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the generous assistance of so many people. Alan Abramowitz has been a consistent supporter of this work, a true friend, and a real source of encouragement throughout this project. The book itself likely would have never come to fruition if it weren't for Adam Glynn, whose gentle nudging over lunch one day convinced me that writing a book was work worth doing. His belief in my research, as well as his willingness to offer advice when I was stuck, have both been invaluable. Andrew Reeves and Betsy Sinclair both deserve a tremendous amount of thanks as well. Andrew was instrumental in the progression of this manuscript and never hesitated to read through drafts of chapters. Betsy's enthusiasm, encouragement, and belief gave me the motivation to finish this manuscript. Thanks are also due to Chris Lucas, who has been a sounding board for my ideas and a consistent source of optimism.

I am also grateful for having had the opportunity to work with such a wonderful group of people at Cambridge University Press. At every stage of the publication process, the team at Cambridge has been top-notch. My editor, Sara Doskow, expressed an early interest in my ideas and has done much to shepherd this project through to completion. Additionally, I am thankful to the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript. Their detailed comments and suggestions have done much to strengthen the manuscript.

Finally, I must thank my family for their support throughout the writing process. This book would not have been possible without any of them.

However, special thanks are due to Melanie Gomez, whose phone calls were both a source of levity and a way to stay up to date with political current events as I was finishing this manuscript. Thanks, as well, to my grandparents, whose dedication to their country and their commitment to the political process were unrivaled. This book is dedicated to their memory.