

# What does 'voter rage' mean?

By Michael Rust

Susan J. Tolchin is a learned, eloquent and compassionate scholar who has thought deeply about the current state of the body politic. Why then did I find myself irritably flipping ahead to see how many more pages there were to go as I perused this slim book? The answer is easy — Washington now makes me angry, and this book is, for better and worse, very much a product of Washington culture.

"The Angry American" is a thorough discussion of a timely Washington topic: the apparent anger of the American voter. Mrs. Tolchin, a professor of public administration at George Washington University, recognizes that anger is not a new phenomenon in U.S. politics. "At its best, it is healthy and can lead to positive change. At its worst, it can lead to violence and disaster."

The big difference between anger then and anger now is that "the anger against government that we are now experiencing has seldom been as all-encompassing or grass-

roots-based as it is today."

The psychological sources of this are varied. Deprivation, or the sense that someone else has something to which you are entitled, leads to the sense of having been cheated, which in turn leads to resentment and anger.

Scapegoating is another exercise in anger, which Mrs. Tolchin finds "an all too common thread in legislation, political rhetoric, and public budgeting choices." She lists as "the nation's current crop of scapegoats," a collection of groups she regards as having little political power: "immigrants, welfare mothers and children, seniors on Medicaid, the poor and the disabled."

The third source of anger is a feeling of betrayal, which can lead to flip-flops in the traditional loyalties of ideological groups. As an example, she cites right-wing law-and-order advocates who have led the charge against what they see as excessive government force from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the FBI.

All of this, argues Mrs. Tolchin, has led us to our current travail, in which "leaders from both parties worry about the absence of civility, the decline of intelligent dialogue, and the rising decibels of hate in

political discourse." Mrs. Tolchin regards the 1992 and 1994 elections as watershed events in this development. The one unifying theme of the free-floating political anger of the 1990s has been its target: government. Politicians have recognized this fact and have tried to

## POLITICAL BOOKS

**THE ANGRY AMERICAN: HOW VOTER RAGE IS CHANGING THE NATION**

By Susan J. Tolchin  
Westview, \$45, \$13.95 paper,  
170 pages.

manipulate this anger to their own benefit, but their efforts can backfire — witness the popularity of the term-limits movement.

Mrs. Tolchin is comprehensive in her account of this phenomenon, but as we stumble toward the conclusion of what seems to be universally regarded as a less than successful election cycle, her analysis seems a bit too in step with the unspoken attitude of the nation's capital: If people are truly disaf-

fected with the political system that dropped so many of us here, it must be a sign of some underlying social pathology.

While the subtitle asserts that "voter rage" is changing the nation, many voters this year seem more resigned than angry. At their worst they are apathetic and willfully ignorant. At their best they have acquired an ironic detachment from the immediacy of politics; they vote,

but in the same spirit that they brush their teeth every day. Perhaps this is because political insiders across the spectrum have become increasingly distant from the electorate they supposedly monitor and serve.

Even the fair-minded Mrs. Tolchin uses California's Proposition 187 — passed in 1994 — as a "classic example of blaming the victim" and an example of "the flowering of ugly xenophobic emotions, which lurk very close to the surface of our society." This is probably typical of much establishment thinking on the subject, whether from the multicultural left or the free-market, open-borders right; it also misses the point. Voters — most of whom are probably no more fearful of outsiders than anyone else — are simply reacting to a virtual collapse of a basic function of government: maintaining borders. Instead of dealing with the problem, the nation's elites responded by labeling anyone gauche enough to question their own assumptions as racist or nativist. Why shouldn't a degree of frustration result?

"Public humiliation also generates feelings of blame and punishment: Jimmy Carter was booted from the presidency primarily because he was unable to effect the release of the fifty-two American hostages held by Iran from 1979 to 1981, and Clinton was damaged in

1993 by the spectacle of Somali warlords dragging an American soldier through the streets of Mogadishu."

Here, the psychological trumps the practical. When an American government seems incapable of guaranteeing the safety of its embassy personnel, it often occurs to the electorate — even those who lack father fixations — that the government's ability to accomplish anything might be less than outstanding.

"The Angry American" does succeed in pointing out a salient fact of modern political life. "The distance between the elites and the rest of society has grown as wide and deep as the income gap, which partly explains why voter reaction appears so disconnected from the nation's buoyant economic indicators."

Poll numbers show that public belief in the futility of government rose dramatically during the 1990s. Perhaps what we are witnessing is a large-scale loss of faith in government, a phenomenon that has been matched by corresponding declines in confidence in other institutions. Anger is probably a periodic manifestation of this loss of faith. Perhaps, if contrasted with the apathy that exists outside the Beltway and the mixture of cynicism and ideological certitude one can find within it, anger may not even be the most destructive response.

## The Angry American

How Voter Rage Is Changing the Nation



Susan J. Tolchin

Michael Rust is a writer for *Insight magazine*.