For the third consecutive election American voters have raged for change. Although this year's tea partiers attacked from the rightward edge of the political spectrum rather than MoveOn's assault from the left in the two previous election cycles, populist venting has become the new normal in American politics.

At a certain point, the economy will improve and the anger will subside. But until that economic and emotional recovery takes hold, the question is how an outraged electorate communicates with those they've installed in office. At what point does voter fury give way to fatigue, to a point where they no longer have the energy to continue to yell?

As has often been the case, the nation can look to California, where we once symbolized America's optimism, and where we now stand as either a warning or a promise as to what happens when the ire that replaced optimism is spent, as well.

California has always been the source of the nation's political and social trends. Tax cuts and term limits, stem cells and skateboards, megachurches and green technology incubators: think of us as either the clarion of the future or the canary in the coal mine. But in the second decade of the 21st century, perhaps we are a harbinger of the emotional state of the electorate, too.

Californians historically have been optimists, to the point of self-congratulation and occasional self-delusion. The same spirit that drove people here in search of a better life than what was available back East has always convinced us that -- even in the worst of times -- salvation was around the next corner.

But even our state's brand of optimism has its limits. John Steinbeck famously wrote about "a line of old men along the shore, hating the ocean because it stopped them." When there's no place left to go, and the confidence that brings you to the end of the continent hasn't paid off, that hopefulness first turns to anger -- and then to sadness.

Like voters in other parts of the country, Californians are deeply frustrated. But unlike their counterparts in other states, voters here are not so much angry as they are despondent. There's a sense that we're fresh out of miracles. The most notable emotion coming off of the electorate this year has been gloom. While the rest of the country screams for revolution and retribution, on the Pacific Coast we have retreated into quieter resentment and resignation.

Part of this may be because this state has recent experience with political warfare: it was only seven years ago when Californians recalled a sitting governor. Yet the state is still struggling with its endemic economic and budgetary difficulties, leaving the
electorate uncertain of how to fix these problems and wary of another generation of candidates making promises. We have already raged against the political machine, but we still have more than 12 percent unemployment. Now there isn't any rage left, at least not enough to fuel another populist rebellion. So now a line of us sits along the shore, wondering what's to be done when the anger runs out.

But while we are resentful, we are also resilient. For more than a century, our economy and self-esteem have been continuously resuscitated during difficult times by a series of seemingly magic solutions. The entertainment and aerospace industries, the technology and real estate booms, have all come to our rescue when needed and restored our sense of collective pride and prosperity. And even while most of us wonder if there's still any magic left in our mountains, the newest Californians are also the most optimistic.

According to a USC-Los Angeles Times poll, those who have suffered the most in this recession -- most notably 20-somethings and minority voters -- are also the most positive about the state's future. The lesson for us to remember is that the old men staring out at the water rarely regain their optimism and their ambition. It is the newly arrived and the newly empowered who provide the drive that can put a community, a state and a nation back on track.

Another of our state's great writers, Wallace Stegner, said that "California is America, only more so." We may not be more, but we are inevitably the future. And after the excitement and the anger that have roiled the national landscape both fade, there will come sadness. Until our next generation of leaders steps up and the cycle begins again.

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