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Wither the Tea Party? The Future of a Political Movement

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INTRODUCTION



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Pundits are once again writing off the Tea Party. It began with David Weigel administering the last rites *prior* to primary season. In Texas, the *Slate* journalist said the Tea Party's "...grassroots conservatives don't have a chance." In light of the early returns of the primaries, others have joined the chorus putting the Tea Party out to pasture. The Washington Post's, Jamie Fuller's recent blog post bleges that: "The tea party isn't just losing; it's losing badly."¹ Altogether, the media's declared the Tea Party dead no less than 18 times since 2011.²

Yet, as the *New York Times* recently reported, Tea Party affiliated groups' fundraising efforts in 2013 outstripped their establishment counterparts by almost 3-to-1.³ Further, according to the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (IREHR), its membership has tripled, increasing from 185 thousand to 550 thousand.⁴ The movement's been around for five years now, and no one seems to know if they're coming or going.

Some may question whether or not this is really an "astroturf" movement, one that wouldn't survive in the absence of support from the Koch brothers, or other big-money funding sources. But Tea Party membership has continued to grow over the last year. As IREHR indicates, this was during a time when big-money donors were all but absent: 82 percent of the donations to five Tea Party affiliated organizations were un-itemized individual donations, which are capped at \$200, and 97 percent of the itemized contributions to three national Tea Party affiliated Super PACs—Freedom Works for America, Patriot Super PAC, and Tea Party Patriots Citizens fund—failed to exceed \$1,000.⁵ This suggests that the Tea Party movement isn't "astroturf." It's a real *grassroots* movement, one that will likely be around a while.

Considering the ways in which they've shaken up the American political scene, it's time to take stock of Tea Partiers. What motivates them? Will they remain a force in American politics? If so, how will they affect the upcoming midterms, and the 2016 general election?

The Tea Party is neither exclusively motivated by conservative principles nor is it driven solely by racial resentment, as many liberals contend. Consider, for instance, their hostility to reproductive rights and gender parity. What about their angst over the growing acceptance of same-sex marriage and adoption, and the open inclusion of gays and lesbians in the armed forces? Or, the Tea Party's continuing opposition to comprehensive immigration reform?

Social science suggests people who think their way of life is threatened or perceive the world as a dangerous place tend to be attracted to conservatism.⁶ Indeed, recent scholarship indicates that at least part of the Tea Party's anxiety is driven by a belief that America is in rapid decline,⁷ something that's associated with perceived social and cultural change.⁸

Hence, for Tea Party conservatives, the increasing visibility of fights for gender rights, recognition of same-sex rights, and increasing calls for embracing all immigrants heralds a threatening social and cultural change. Tea Partiers associated the election of President Obama with the social and cultural shift occurring in America. As such, he became the focal point of the Tea Party's anxiety, the personification of their perception of a new and dangerous world.

Unlike establishment conservatives who are amenable to compromise, and see policy disputes with progressives as the result of ideological differences, Tea Party conservatives take such distinctions to an alarming level. For them, it's a zero-sum game in which if Obama succeeds, "real" Americans lose. This accords with social science showing that ultra conservatives are far less moved by reason than by fear and anxiety.

Most would agree the movement began shortly after Obama assumed office five years ago. The "Porkulus" rallies of mid-February 2009, protesting the stimulus, were the first organized protests associated with the Tea Party. They were followed a few days later by a now (in)famous Rick Santelli diatribe in Chicago, and the "Tax Day" rally in April. However, Tea Party protests reached their height the following spring, in 2010, during floor debates over health care reform. At this point, Tea Party elites introduced Americans to the concept of "death panels" as a means of generating resistance to the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

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The ACA passed, but it triggered a backlash that continues to reverberate today. In the aftermath of the 2010 midterm elections, the GOP, thanks in large measure to the Tea Party, gained 63 seats in the House, enough to return control of the lower chamber to Republicans for the first time since 2006. Overall, 85 Republicans won with the endorsement of the Tea Party that year. Even in the less amenable general election cycle of 2012, 48 of the 52 House Tea Party caucus members seeking another term succeeded.

Such electoral success must produce legislative victories if it's to have any real meaning and at least two pieces of legislation stand out as being influenced by the Tea Party: the one that resulted in massive spending cuts, and the one that affects immigration policy. In 2011, in return for raising the debt ceiling and avoiding irreparable harm to the American—and the world—economy, the Tea Party-assisted GOP achieved the spending cuts it desired by forcing President Obama to sign the Budget Control Act. And last year, the Republicans, at the insistence of its Tea Party members in the House, put the brakes on the comprehensive immigration passed by the Senate. It remains in limbo.

The most recent Tea Party-influenced event of significance is the shutdown. For two weeks, politicians associated with the Tea Party pushed the GOP to demand the president strip funding for the ACA, his signature legislation, in exchange for funding the federal government. The gambit failed, but the Republican Party sustained short-term damage.

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Why would the Tea Party risk imperiling the world economy with the debt limit showdown? What purpose does it serve to repeal the already enacted ACA at a total cost of \$109 billion when simply following through with it saves \$124 billion, according to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO)? Why continue impeding comprehensive immigration reform when it ultimately promises to reduce illegal immigration by at least one-third and save taxpayers \$820 billion?⁹

It's certainly not out of rank ignorance or stupidity. Twenty-six percent of Tea Partiers hold at least a four-year degree, only a bit below the rest of the population. One-in-five reports having a household income of at least \$100K per year, a bit higher than the population.¹⁰ Perhaps most relevant, Tea Partiers are political sophisticates: they know a lot about the political process, and to whom they need to turn in order to apply pressure.¹¹

Ruling out ignorance leaves us with two other reasons why Tea Partiers seem to embrace policies that run counter to their self-interest: ideology and concerns centering on President Obama.

Conservatism is about law and order, stability, and fiscal responsibility. Risking the stability of the world economy isn't consistent with conservative principles. Neither is costing taxpayers more by repealing the ACA, and rejecting comprehensive immigration reform.

Indeed, research that I've conducted with Matt Barreto rejects ideology as an explanation for why Tea Partiers embrace policies and tactics at odds with their self-interest or ideology.¹² We believe that the Tea Party is motivated, in chief, by the belief that Obama's election represents a social and cultural sea change for what it means to be a "real" American.

We devised tests that allowed us to determine whether Tea Partiers policy goals were driven by ideology or by their perception of Obama. Exploring these competing claims required us to divide self-identified conservatives into two camps: one that strongly identifies with the Tea Party and another that doesn't. If Tea Partiers' objections to these policies are really based on ideological considerations, we should see no difference between the conservative camps. First, however, we wanted to examine how conservatives felt about the president.

To determine whether the Tea Party believes Obama poses an existential threat, the survey asked respondents if the president is trying to destroy the country. Only 6 percent of establishment conservatives believe this to be true, versus 71 percent of Tea Party conservatives.

Apparently, these results bleed over into whether or not Tea Partiers wish to see the president's policies succeed or fail: 38 percent of establishment conservatives are rooting for failure compared with a whopping 78 percent of Tea Party conservatives.

So far, the results reflect sentiment on questions in which the president was directly invoked. Next, we returned to the policies I mentioned above, which, though part of President Obama's agenda, stand to benefit Tea Partiers and are consistent with conservative ideology. If Tea Partiers rejected them on the basis of ideology, we should observe little to no differences between them and establishment conservatives.

But that's not what we find. In our surveys, 59 percent of establishment conservatives reject health care reform versus 93 percent of Tea Party conservatives. And 20 percent of establishment conservatives refuse to support comprehensive immigration reform versus 40 percent of their Tea Party counterparts.

The Tea Party does have an overarching agenda that extends beyond simple opposition to the president and his agenda. Fear and anxiety drives their desire to arrest change by any means necessary. If nothing else it's a first step in a process that promises a return to an America in

which “real” Americanism is defined as white, male, native born, heterosexual, and paternal. For now, simply directing their representatives to say “no” serves that end.

In the past, the desire to impede social and cultural change ultimately resulted in the Tea Party pushing for Republican candidates that cost the GOP at least six senate seats: four in 2010 and two in 2012. Barring anything out of the ordinary, I don’t see a Todd Akin, Sharon Angle, or Christine O’Donnell in the GOP field as the 2014 midterms approach.

Still, fear and anxiety over change may push the Tea Party, and ultimately the Republican Party, into a bigger blunder in 2014: failing to pass comprehensive immigration reform through Congress. George and Jeb Bush, and Sens. John McCain and Lindsay Graham, support comprehensive immigration reform. So do conservative pundits, activists, and strategists such as David Brooks, Grover Norquist and Karl Rove, as well as more than 100 conservative economists, the *Wall Street Journal* and the Cato Institute.

Clearly, then, House Republicans’ refusal to bring the Senate bill to the floor for discussion, much less pass it, has nothing to do with conservatism. Instead, it’s really about fear and anxiety. For instance, we found that 82 percent of Tea Party identifiers were either fearful or anxious about “illegals.” And, according to a recent Gallup Poll, the Republican Party is 89 percent white.¹³ Further, 97 percent of Republican House districts have white majorities, and 67 House Republicans won seats with Tea Party support of some kind. For good measure, 90 percent of Tea Party identifiers are white. Thus, it’s unlikely that House Republicans will pass anything in the way of comprehensive reform, something for which the GOP will pay the price for years to come.

In 2016, the most likely scenario appears to be one in which a President Hillary Clinton takes the reins. If this comes to pass, Obama’s departure from office won’t lead to the Tea Party’s disappearance.

Just as the far right rejected feminism in the 1960s and ‘70s, people who identify with the Tea Party harbor anti-feminist tendencies. For this reason, we will likely witness continued Tea Party activity. But even though Obama’s rise helped mobilize the movement, its intensity will wane. The Tea Party’s reaction to the first woman in the Oval Office will likely be relatively muted.

The movement saw—and continues to see—Obama as a vessel for the hitherto ignored claims for equality from marginalized groups. While not new, the push for equality by these groups appears to have gained currency on Obama’s watch. The simultaneity, suddenness, and force with which marginalized groups have pressed their claims during the Obama presidency no doubt contributed to the fear, anxiety, and anger felt by Tea Partiers.

But even if Clinton succeeds Obama, these issues will have already been on the radar for eight years. And since Tea Partiers have already been exposed to the new political playing field, I suspect their reaction to Clinton won't be as rabid if she chooses to continue the president's equality-based agenda. By this logic, only if a white male Democrat wins the White House in 2016, will the Tea Party movement go to ground.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/05/21/the-tea-party-isnt-just-losing-its-losing-badly/> It's worth noting that the Tea Party really isn't doing so badly. See <http://teapartycandidatestracker.com/>
- 2 Devin Burghart, "Special Report: The Status of the Tea Party Movement; Part Three," IREHR, January 31, 2014. <http://www.irehr.org/issue-areas/tea-party-nationalism/tea-party-news-and-analysis/item/525-status-of-tea-party-part-one>
- 3 Nicholas Confessore, "Fund-Raising by GOP Rebels Outpaces Party Establishment," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/02/us/politics/rebel-conservatives-lead-way-in-gop-fund-raising.html>. It's worth noting that several sources report the Chamber of Commerce now outspending Tea Party-related efforts. However, this varies by race. It's not a global estimate. The New York Times piece to which I refer reflects aggregate spending, not resources spent on a race-by-race basis.
- 4 <http://www.irehr.org/issue-areas/tea-party-nationalism/tea-party-news-and-analysis/item/527-status-of-tea-party-by-the-numbers>
- 5 Leonard Zeskind, "Cut the Tea Party Movement from the Ground Up," IREHR, February 12, 2014. <http://www.irehr.org/issue-areas/tea-party-nationalism/tea-party-news-and-analysis/item/542-cut-the-tea-party-movement-from-the-ground-up>
- 6 John T. Jost, Arie W. Kruglanski, Jack Glaser, and Frank J. Sulloway, "Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition," *Psychological Bulletin* 129. No. 3 (2003): 339-375.
- 7 Knowles ED, Lowery BS, Shulman EP, Schaumberg RL (2013) Race, Ideology, and the Tea Party: A Longitudinal Study. *PLoS ONE* 8(6): e67110. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0067110
- 8 Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton University Press, 2013).
- 9 For how much the ACA will ultimately save the following CBO report <http://www.cbo.gov/publication/44397>. For a revised estimate of how much it will cost to repeal it, see this CBO report: <http://www.cbo.gov/publication/43472>.
- 10 Parker and Barreto.
- 11 Theda Skocpol and Vanessa, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 12 Parker and Barreto.
- 13 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/160373/democrats-racially-diverse-republicans-mostly-white.aspx>

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