

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45:

On Tea Party activism and Trump opposition

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

WILLIAMSON: My name's Vanessa Williamson and I am a fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution. So this week marks the first recess of any length since the start of the Donald Trump Administration, which means that members of Congress and Senators are going back to their districts and states, and typically this means that it's an opportunity for local constituents to meet with their representatives and raise any concerns or talk to them about local issues. This year is unusual because there has been a tremendous uptick in the interest in attending town halls, so you're seeing huge crowds show up at events across the country. Already, we've seen huge crowds show up for Democratic leaders like Sheldon Whitehouse and Elizabeth Warren, and this last week we've begun to see really large turnout at some Republican Senators' events as well, like Chuck Grassley.

So what's happening here is basically the left adopting some of the tactics that are familiar to those of us who remember the Tea Party from the early years of the Obama administration, and the town halls that were so popular then – the angry town halls that opposing Obamacare, primarily. Well this time, we're seeing that shoe on the other foot, and a substantial pro-Obamacare and anti-Trump agenda being put forward by constituents.

So if there's a parallel between the Tea Party of 2009-2010 and the Trump opposition we're seeing today, what can we learn from that? I think there are a couple of things. First of all, one noticeable difference is the magnitude of the anti-Trump protests

compared to the Tea Party, and the speed at which they've gotten organized. In 2009, the very first Tea Party protests come at the end of February and they're really quite small, certainly nothing that you would think was going to be a national movement, and it took until April 15th, Tax Day that year, that you really began to see large protests, and the town halls only occurred that summer in August. So, by contrast, this year you can see Democrats and other anti-Trump constituents organizing much quicker and in much larger numbers. But the question, of course, is whether that early energy can be maintained. I mean, if anyone call tell you, Hillary Clinton can attest to the fact that having the most numbers does not mean that you win.

So what are we going to see in the coming months, how effective is this going to be? I think there are some lessons from the Tea Party here too. First of all, it's important to remember that the Tea Party was not just grassroots activists showing up at town halls or having brightly-colored protests with revolutionary-era garb on. No, there were other parts of the Tea Party that were crucial to its success, including an active conservative media presence, which is really quite different from what exists on the Left. So, places like Fox News and conservative radio that made a concerted effort to promote local Tea Parties, that will be hard to replicate on the Left because there isn't such a coherent media ecosystem on the Left as on the Right. And at the same time, Republican elites, or at least a part of the Republican Party elite, really adopted the Tea Party movement as something that they saw as a source of power, and it's going to be interesting to see whether Democrats can make that same shift to harnessing grassroots energy into electoral success.

Finally, if you begin to see this initial burst of protests ending up being an effective electoral force, the question is whether that'll be happening at the state level because statehouses are really important for policymaking, and at the same time Democrats don't control very many governorships or statehouses and they've been really losing ground there in the last decade. So that'll be an important test in addition to the perhaps more prominent contests for the Senate and for Congress. Those statehouses are going to be really important. Now, if Democrats do manage to make inroads the way the Tea Party did at that level of government, what kinds of policies would be most effective? This is the final lesson, I think, that Democrats can learn from the Tea Party this year. The Tea Party-fueled Republican Party focused on policies that were ideologically appealing but were also strategic, right? So efforts to limit access to polling places – so voter suppression laws; laws that reduced the power of unions, both of these efforts fit with conservative ideology but they're also just smart tactically, because what it did was make it much more difficult for Democrats to organize, right? So an important question for Democrats is, can they do the opposite? Can they prioritize inclusive policies like automatic voter registration that will help them not just win one round of elections but elections into the future?