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POST POLITICS

GOP-Tea Party Rift Is a Myth

One of the most popular narratives of this past electoral season cast the Tea Party, and its champion Sen. Jim DeMint (R-SC), as far-right insurgents smashing against the citadels of the GOP establishment, led by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY). In this view, the new Republicans elected to the Senate on Tuesday, including Tea Partiers like Rand Paul (R-KY), Ron Johnson (R-Wisc), Marco Rubio (R-Florida), John Boozman (R-Arkansas), Dan Coats (R-Indiana), and Pat Toomey (R-PA), will shift the party even further to the right, and challenge party leaders who have compromised conservative principles in favor of bipartisan cooperation.

Stories about the war within the GOP have been a consistent theme in major publications in the past month. In early October, for example, a *New York Times* article focused on the battle for the soul of Rand Paul, the Tea Party-backed Republican candidate who just won his race for a Senate seat from Kentucky. The story framed McConnell and DeMint as representatives of two distinct ideological poles, forcing Paul to decide which one to support for Senate GOP leader should he win in November. If Paul chose to back DeMint, the reporter noted, he would be "going up against the Republican establishment to push the Tea Party goal of limited government." Last week, the *Times* called DeMint the leader of the GOP's "anti-establishment" wing.

An October 18 analysis in the *Los Angeles Times* observed that "Jim DeMint relishes life on the Republican fringe," suggesting that he stands in stark contrast to the GOP mainstream, led by McConnell. "I think we've got a lot of great candidates who are going to change the face of the Republican Party," boasted DeMint.

In its post-election analysis, the *National Journal* described an "intra-party spat" between DeMint and the GOP's establishment, including McConnell and Karl Rove.

It's a good story, complete with hints of backroom machinations, rebellion in the ranks, wacky worldviews, and a colorful cast of characters. But as absorbing as good old intraparty strife can be, the narrative suffers from a big drawback. In real world policy terms, it doesn't mean anything.

The battles within the GOP are mostly about personal power, not ideology. The views of the Tea Party-backed candidates who will enter Congress in January are similar to those of current Republicans in both houses. The *National Journal* [ranks](#) Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio), the next Speaker of the House, as the 14th most conservative member of the House, but his right-wing views are now the GOP's mainstream. He voted with a majority of his Republican colleagues [95.7 percent](#) of the time.

In reality, the fiery DeMint and buttoned-down McConnell are ideological soulmates. The *National Journal* ranked DeMint as the second most conservative Senator and McConnell as the eighth most conservative. Based on their voting records, DeMint had a score of 95 (out of 100) on the conservative scale; McConnell scored 89.5. Both McConnell and DeMint are party loyalists. DeMint voted in lock-step with the Republicans 90.4% of the time, compared to McConnell's [92.9 percent](#).

For the most part, interest groups on both sides of the ideological and partisan divides rank DeMint and McConnell as identical ideological twins. The Military Officers Association of America, National Breast Cancer Coalition, Citizens for Tax Justice, and NARAL all gave both men big fat zeroes in their most recent ratings. The League of Conservation Voters gave DeMint 0, McConnell 9. Their AFL-CIO lifetime ratings are 11 and 12, respectively. Both men are loved by big business and conservative groups. In their most recent ranking both Senators score 100s from the Christian Coalition of America, American Security Council Foundation, Americans for Tax Reform and Family Research Council. The National Federation of Independent Business, the National Association of Manufacturers, the American Conservative Union, and the Club for Growth all rank DeMint and McConnell between 90 and 100.

Both men voted against almost every major Obama initiative of the last two years, including the Lily Ledbetter Act (making it easier for women to sue over workplace discrimination), the stimulus package, health care reform, financial reform, don't-ask-don't-tell repeal, both Supreme Court appointments, and the recent extension of unemployment benefits. (One exception -- they both voted for credit card reform.)

Political scientist Keith Poole of the University of Georgia and his colleagues have used Congressional voting records to document that since the 1970s, the two major parties have become more polarized. According to Poole, the GOP has shifted much more to the right than the Democrats have moved to the left. Based on their voting records, Poole calculated that fewer than ten percent of Republicans in Congress can be called "moderates." That number will shrink even more after Tuesday's election. The tidal wave of Republicans will bring more Tea Partiers and right-wing fellow travelers to Washington.

The Republicans have not only become more conservative but also been extremely disciplined when it comes to party-line voting. They have become more ideologically cohesive. On the historic health care reform legislation, for example, the Senate

voted along partisan lines, with all 58 Democrats (and two independents) voting in favor and all 39 Republicans in opposition, but in the House 34 Democrats joined all 178 Republicans in voting against the bill.

If DeMint challenges McConnell for the party's leadership, it will be about style, rhetoric, and personal loyalties, not significant policy differences. Both reflect the GOP's rightward movement.

Most contemporary Republican politicians fall comfortably within these conservative ideological parameters, whether they were backed by the Tea Party or not. The species called "liberal Republican" -- like former Gov. Nelson Rockefeller of New York and Sen. Wayne Morse of Oregon -- is virtually extinct. Moderates like former Republican Senator Arlen Specter (D-PA) and dethroned Rep. Mike Castle of Delaware have been pushed out. Even Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), who once described himself as a "maverick," has fallen in line with the party's hard-right wing. During the 109th Congress he voted with the GOP 79.4 percent of the time, compared to 93.1 percent today.

If there's a "fringe" within the GOP, it isn't the Tea Partiers, but the two moderate Senators from Maine, Susan Collins and Olympia Snow, joined on occasion by Scott Brown (R-MA).

Perhaps the biggest difference between the GOP establishment and the new breed of Tea Party candidates is one of rhetoric and zealotry. But on almost every policy issue of any importance -- protecting tax cuts for the rich, privatizing Social Security, opposing cap-and-trade legislation, overturning the federal right to an abortion, repealing the recently-enacted health care legislation, opposing a withdrawal timetable for Afghanistan, expanding off-shore oil drilling, combating a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, supporting the proliferation of nuclear weapons, limiting the authority of the Food and Drug Administration, and many others -- the new cohort of Republican Senators, including the Tea Partiers, share the convictions of the GOP mainstream.

Regardless of any personal differences, they will join forces to try to stop Obama and his fellow Democrats from winning any more legislative victories.

Those who view the Tea Party vs. the GOP establishment as a major rift suffer from what Freud called the "narcissism of small differences." The GOP is a coalition. Big business provides the money for campaign contributions, lobbying, think tanks, and publications, while small business, the Christian Right, and the Tea Party zealots provide the ground troops. Although they may occasionally disagree on policy matters, the similarities among these conservative factions greatly overwhelm their differences.

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Note: This article originally indicated that the Children's Health Fund rated Senators McConnell and DeMint. Although the Children's Health Fund does track votes, it does not rate Senators.

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