

SYMPOSIUM

The Battle for the Republican Soul: Who Is Drinking the Tea Party?

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One of the great paradoxes of American politics is that most liberals and progressives believe in the important role of government, but are often so frustrated by Democrats or so alienated from society that they do not get involved in campaigns or even vote. In contrast, conservatives distrust, and some even hate, government, but they are more likely to participate in campaigns and show up at the polls to express their anger. And that is how Republicans win many of their elections.

Soon after Barack Obama took office in 2009, the Tea Party emerged, seemingly, as many reporters and pundits suggested, "out of nowhere." The triggering event was an angry rant by CNBC reporter Rick Santelli on February 19, 2009. Outraged by the Obama administration's plans to help families facing foreclosure, Santelli accused the federal government of "promoting bad behavior." He called consumers who faced foreclosure "losers," and asked, "How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills?" (Weigel 2011). Then he called for a "Chicago Tea Party" to protest Obama's misguided policies. The video was widely re-broadcast, at first on Fox News, then on the mainstream networks. Over the next few months, local Tea Party groups came into view and mobilized people to attend town meetings sponsored by members of Congress, where they expressed opposition to the Democrats' proposed health care reform, and expanded their protests to include opposition to various government social programs as well as the federal stimulus plan and the auto industry bail-out.

In 2010, Republican candidates for House and Senate sought the endorsement of Tea Party groups and the support and votes of

The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism, by **Theda Skocpol** and **Vanessa Williamson**. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012. 245pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780199832637.

Tea Party sympathizers. A number of Tea Party-oriented candidates won GOP primaries. In November, several Republicans with close Tea Party ties, such as Marco Rubio of Florida and Rand Paul of Kentucky, won their Senate races. Republicans gained 63 seats in the House, with enough Tea Party winners to form a significant caucus opposed to any bi-partisan compromises. These victories pulled the GOP's center of gravity to the right. Even the conservative Republican House Speaker John Boehner found himself outmaneuvered by Tea Party-leaning members (like Majority Leader Eric Cantor) when trying to negotiate a compromise with the Obama administration over the debt ceiling.

Many pro-Tea Party Republicans were also elected to state-level offices, triggering efforts by several governors in Ohio, Wisconsin, and elsewhere to slash public services and weaken public sector unions. The momentum continued into the 2012 GOP primaries. A number of Tea Party-endorsed candidates won GOP primaries, including some who defeated long-term Republican incumbents like the veteran conservative (but not conservative *enough*) Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana. In the GOP presidential primaries, every candidate genuflected to the Tea Party's fiscal and social conservative agenda, including Mitt Romney, the eventual party nominee.

How did the Tea Party marshal such influence in so short a period of time? And what does this phenomenon tell us about American politics and the state of our democracy? Those are the questions that Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson ask, and brilliantly answer, in *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*.

In the course of only 205 pages, the authors examine the social and demographic backgrounds of Tea Party activists and supporters, look at their beliefs and values, excavate the landscape of local Tea Party organizations, reveal the pre-existing national right-wing funders and advocacy groups behind the Tea Party, document the incredible role of the conservative media echo chamber that served as a “cheerleader” and “megaphone” for the Tea Party, document the mainstream media’s infatuation with the Tea Party, and describe how the Tea Party helped push the Republican Party even further to the right.

The authors provide historical perspective by viewing the Tea Party as the most recent wave of right-wing populism that has a long history in the United States, including groups and crusaders like the Ku Klux Klan, Father Charles Coughlin, the John Birch Society, Barry Goldwater, and the Religious Right.

In some ways, the Tea Party is as much a mood as it is a movement. According to Skocpol and Williamson, the grassroots Tea Party is really comprised of “about 1000 groups spread across all fifty states.” The authors report that “Some local Tea Parties are very large, with online memberships of 1000 people or more. But most local Tea Parties have much smaller contact lists, and the typical local meeting has a few dozen people in attendance” (p. 22). Overall, they estimate that there are only about 200,000 active Tea Party participants who keep the local chapters alive through websites, meetings, and social media. These numbers are much smaller than liberal groups like the Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood, or labor unions. So what’s the secret of the Tea Party’s success?

Showered with media attention and right-wing money, the Tea Party quickly became a phenomenon. Skocpol and Williamson scrutinize many polls to reveal that “strong” Tea Party supporters “amount to about

one-fifth of voting-age adults, or roughly 46 million Americans” (p. 22). They are part of demographic groups, particularly the elderly, with high levels of voter turnout, even in off-year elections like 2010. Incumbent Republicans and would-be GOP candidates fear upsetting this constituency but also seek to use it to curry votes and raise money from right-wing billionaires and Political Action Committees.

The initial Tea Party eruptions were local and spontaneous. But, as Skocpol and Williamson explain, this grassroots fervor was quickly transformed into an effective political force by two top-down factors that are very rare among social movements. The Tea Party’s success is due in large measure to emerging at a time when billionaire reactionaries had both the capacity and the legal authority (thanks to changes in campaign finance and tax laws) to shower the Tea Party with cash and national connections. Several well-funded and well-connected national conservative organizations and PACs quickly grabbed the Tea Party momentum and provided considerable resources and political direction. Some existing conservative groups simply rebranded themselves as Tea Party organizations and used their contacts in the right-wing and mainstream media to establish themselves as Tea Party “leaders.” This network of existing right-wing groups, the authors explain, “has been strategizing and writing for many years, awaiting the moment when political and electoral winds might shift just enough to allow their ideas to find a larger place on the mainstream agenda” (p. 84).

One was Americans for Prosperity, a hard-line free-market advocacy group funded by the Koch brothers, right-wing billionaires who inherited and expanded an energy industry fortune from their father, a founder of the John Birch Society. Another was FreedomWorks, run by Dick Armey, a former House Majority Leader turned big-business lobbyist, who helped orchestrate the town hall protests against health care reform in August 2009. Two GOP operatives—Jenny Beth Martin and Mark Meckler—created Tea Party Patriots, which organized webinars for local Tea Partiers and organized a three-day national Tea Party summit in Phoenix in early 2011.

A small army of Republican political consultants used the Tea Party momentum to latch onto and help right-wing candidates run campaigns against more “establishment” Republicans. One was Sal Russo, who rebranded his “Our Country Deserves Better” PAC as the “Tea Party Express” in search of right-wing candidates. In 2010 he helped Sharron Angle (in Nevada), Christine O’Donnell (in Delaware), and Joe Miller (in Alaska) defeat incumbent Republicans, although they lost in the final run-offs. In 2012, Russo’s Tea Party Express backed Richard Mourdock’s successful primary challenge to Sen. Richard Lugar in Indiana and Ted Cruz’s defeat of Texas Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst in GOP primaries.

These national organizations paid for buses to take members to rallies, seminars, conferences, video tutorials, speakers at local meetings, and training sessions. They helped Tea Partiers gain influence in local Republican organizations and campaigns, poured money into campaign war chests of right-wing candidates, and drew on their connections to the existing network of conservative policy groups (like Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute), funded by wealthy ultra-conservatives, including the Koch, Scaife, Olin, and Coors families, for educational materials and policy ideas. For these political entrepreneurs, the Tea Party was both an ideological crusade and a business opportunity.

The other top-down factor was the rise of cable television (especially Fox News and its key personalities, Bill O’Reilly, Glenn Beck, and Sean Hannity) and conservative talk radio (not only Rush Limbaugh but also many local radio reactionaries), which serve as a megaphone and organizer of discontented conservatives, whose anger at various trends in American society were catalyzed by Obama’s election. The aggressive cheerleading of the conservative echo chamber provided the Tea Party with millions of dollars of “free” media that not only amplified its message but also served as an organizer of its activities. Indeed, TV and radio conservatives encouraged their audiences to attend Tea Party events and even co-hosted some of those rallies. Imagine the shock and outrage that would have erupted if Walter Cronkite had spent the summer of 1963 urging his nightly CBS news viewers

to participate in civil rights protests and attend the March on Washington in August. The general taken-for-grantedness of today’s conservative echo chamber reveals how much our media culture has changed.

The mosaic of local Tea Party groups lacked the coordination and/or sophistication to make their voices heard on the national stage. In their place, these national usurpers with long-standing connections to money and media (including Sarah Palin, whose fading visibility was revived by the Tea Party) became seen as the movement’s spokespersons and created the misleading perception that the Tea Party was a coordinated national movement, not a crazy-quilt of independent local organizations. This combination of money and media was the wind beneath the Tea Party’s wings, allowing it to fly much higher and faster than its grassroots activists could have achieved on their own.

During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, there was a power struggle within the Republican Party between liberals and moderates, on the one hand, and conservatives (led by Senators Robert Taft of Ohio and Barry Goldwater of Arizona), on the other hand. Politicians like Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon walked a tightrope between these two poles.

As Hacker and Pierson (2010) document in *Winner-Take-All Politics*, since the 1980s the GOP has been increasingly dominated by right wing zealots, helped by the growing influence of business lobby groups and PACs, corporate-funded foundations, and conservative think tanks. In 1994, Newt Gingrich helped orchestrate the GOP’s 1994 take-over of the House. Since then, the party has moved steadily and relentlessly to the right, with the likes of Tom DeLay, Dick Armey, Phil Gramm, Mitch McConnell, Jim DeMint, Darrell Issa, and Tom Coburn leading the charge.

In 2001, moderate Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords left the GOP to become an independent, then retired in 2006. In 2009, another GOP moderate, Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, realized he was so out of sync with the activists in the party that he became a Democrat, and lost his next election to a Tea Party-oriented Republican, Pat Toomey. Republican Senator Olympia

Snowe of Maine, a moderate by today's standards, was so fed up with her party's right-wing zealotry that she announced she wasn't going to run for re-election. By mid-2012, the only real moderate Republican in the Senate is Susan Collins of Maine. The same dynamic is true in the House.

In the 2012 GOP presidential primary, every candidate—Gingrich, Perry, Huntsman, Cain, Paul, Bachmann, Santorum, and Romney—tailored their messages to appeal to the party's right-wing activists. Indeed, the Tea Party wing of the GOP boxed in Romney so effectively that after he won the party nomination he was unable to pivot to the center to capture the votes of independents and other "swing" voters, as most political analysts expected; indeed, he picked a Tea Party favorite, Paul Ryan, as his running mate.

Skocpol and Williamson seamlessly weave the information they collected—using field work observing local Tea Party groups in Massachusetts, Virginia, and Arizona, in-depth interviews, analysis of media coverage, a nuanced review of polling data, and journalistic reports—into a fascinating, readable, and comprehensive study of a still-evolving phenomenon. They are adept at describing the Tea Partiers with great understanding and without condescension.

The Tea Party's core activists tend to be white, middle-aged and older, relatively well-educated, and "comfortably middle-class." They are disproportionately Protestant evangelicals and regular church-goers. A plurality are (or were before retirement) self-employed in small businesses, such as construction, remodeling, and repair. Others are professionals, but more oriented toward business than the helping occupations. Many are military veterans. Tea Party women are (or were) primarily stay-at-home moms.

The authors challenge the view that the Tea Party came "out of nowhere" or that it "woke up" previously apathetic voters. Many Tea Partiers have deep ties to existing conservative and Republican organizations. Many "dated their first political experience to the Goldwater campaign in 1964" (p. 41). Almost half previously worked in a political campaign or gave money to a candidate.

Ideologically, the Tea Party is dominated by social conservatives (against abortion and gay marriage), but it also includes

libertarians of the Ron Paul ilk. They generally keep their differences below the surface to promote their common goal of defeating Obama and the Democrats' liberal policy agenda.

The Tea Partiers are fearful and angry: at the cultural changes brought about by the civil rights and women's and gay rights movement, at immigrants, minorities, young people, and poor people, and at what they consider corrupt, profligate government spending. As the authors reveal, Tea Partiers are angry, but they are not blindly anti-government. They want fewer government regulations on business and lower taxes, but they also want the government to stop abortions and crack down on immigrants. Given their demographic profile, it should not be surprising that Tea Partiers oppose cuts to Social Security, Medicare, and veterans benefits. In other words, the Tea Partiers are not as conservative as the self-appointed national "spokespersons" who claim to speak on their behalf and who want to privatize Social Security and dismantle Medicare. "So much for the notion that Tea Partiers are all little Dick Armeys," write Skocpol and Williamson (p. 63).

Tea Partiers believe that they are productive citizens who have worked hard and "earned" these entitlements. They reserve their anger for the "undeserving" people who utilize welfare, food stamps, public schools, college student aid, subsidized health care, and other government benefits, whom they consider "freeloaders" and "moochers." A frequent sign at rallies was "Redistribute My Work Ethic." They also distrust liberal "elites" who support these "undeserving" and ungrateful recipients of social programs and economic redistribution, including Obama's health care reform plan. They worry that government spending on these "undeserving" groups threatens their own current or future Social Security and Medicare benefits. They worry, too, about the economy's impact on their two biggest investments—their homes and retirement accounts—even though, Skocpol and Williamson report, most Tea Partiers were not significantly hurt by the recession. Yet they do not blame big business or Wall Street for the nation's economic troubles. They even believe in reducing taxes on the very rich.

Tea Partiers think America has shifted in the wrong direction, away from what the Founding Fathers believed and from a simpler, safer, better past when the government did not encroach on people's basic rights. The Tea Party is, the authors write, "an effort at restoration" (p. 50).

Of course, many problems that triggered Tea Partiers' protests have existed for some time. It was Obama's election that catalyzed the Tea Party eruption. Skocpol and Williamson acknowledge that racism played a role in the ferocious anger displayed by Tea Party members against Obama at public rallies and in their interviews with the authors. Various aspects of Obama's "otherness"—including "his race, his foreign father, and his background as a college professor and community organizer" (p. 79)—allow Tea Partiers to believe that he is someone to fear. Obama is also a symbol of many other things that Tea Partiers hate, including, in their view, over-educated, arrogant liberals who try to impose their views on the rest of the country through their control of the "liberal" media, government, and universities. Because Tea Partiers rely on the right-wing media for much of their information, they are misinformed about many things, including the "birther" charges against Obama. They believe what Beck, Hannity, O'Reilly, and Limbaugh say because it fits into their worldview.

On most economic issues, the GOP's Tea Party and corporate wings are in sync. They both oppose government regulation of business to protect workers, consumers, and the environment. They hate labor unions and progressive income taxes. They both want to protect tax cuts for the rich, oppose cap-and-trade legislation, and expand offshore oil drilling. Most corporate lobby groups do not care about the GOP's right-wing social issues—such as abortion and gay rights—but they support candidates because they want to elect pro-business Republicans. They understand that while they have the cash, it is the Tea Party, the Christian Right churches, and the National Rifle Association that have the troops. So the two wings of the GOP generally get along as a coalition of necessity.

There are tensions on some issues, however. Some elements of the GOP's big business

wing are frustrated with the political gridlock that can undermine a healthy business climate, including funds for education, government contracts for business, and matters like the debt ceiling. The major big business groups like the Chamber of Commerce and Business Roundtable support government funding for public infrastructure, which the Tea Partiers tend to view as wasteful "pork." But do the business groups feel strongly enough about these concerns to challenge and defeat the Tea Party zealots, their friends in Congress and state legislators, and the right-wing billionaires who fund them? Probably not.

Skocpol and Williamson completed their book in early 2012 and this review is being written two months before the November 2012 elections, so we do not yet know whether the Republicans will win the White House, expand their control in the House, or even take control of the Senate.

In April 2012, middle-of-the-road political pundits Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, frustrated by the political gridlock, authored a widely-read *Washington Post* op-ed column, "Let's Just Say It: The Republicans Are The Problem," and a book on the same topic. The GOP, they observed, seems content to be the party whose governing philosophy is "no compromise." The Tea Party's influence with the GOP has been helped by its effective use of an "outside/inside" strategy. Although it is often portrayed as a protest movement, the Tea Party has helped move the GOP to the right by mobilizing voters in Republican primaries and in general elections. It is the Tea Party's threats to oust Republican elected officials and challenge GOP candidates who stray from the Tea Party's views that have given it such political clout. Although its core membership is relatively small, it appears to have aroused enough voters to have a significant impact on election outcomes.

But, as Skocpol and Williamson make clear from their review of survey data, the views of both rank-and-file Tea Partiers, even more conservative national spokespersons, and Tea Party-affiliated politicians fall far outside the mainstream of American political culture and beliefs on most issues, from government regulation of big business to birth control and same-sex marriage. If the

Republican Party continues to move to the far right, partly in response to the Tea Party, it will be increasingly difficult for its candidates to win elections for president, Senate, and House in most swing states and districts, particularly given the growing number of Latinos in those areas and other demographic changes.

In September 2011, another protest movement, Occupy Wall Street (OWS), made its voice heard, first in Zuccotti Park and then in cities across the country. It had an immediate impact in terms of changing the nation's conversation. At kitchen tables, in coffee shops, in offices and factories, and in newsrooms, Americans, including the media, were talking about economic inequality, corporate greed, and how America's super-rich have damaged our economy and our democracy.

Even many Americans who did not agree with OWS's tactics or rhetoric nevertheless share its indignation at outrageous corporate profits, widening inequality and excessive executive compensation side by side with the epidemic of layoffs and foreclosures. Most Americans now recognize that the biggest corporations and the very wealthy have disproportionate political influence. A Pew Research Center survey released in December 2011, two months after OWS emerged, found that most Americans (77 percent)—including a majority (53 percent) of Republicans—agree that “there is too much power in the hands of a few rich people and corporations.” Pew also discovered that 61 percent of Americans believe that “the economic system in this country unfairly favors the wealthy.” A significant majority (57 percent) think that wealthy people do not pay their fair share of taxes.

Moreover, soon after the Occupy movement emerged, a *Time* magazine survey found that 54 percent of Americans had a favorable impression of the Occupy protests, while just 27 percent had favorable views of the Tea Party.

Both the Tea Party and OWS have voiced the frustrations of millions of Americans. Many pundits and journalists considered the Occupy movement to be the left-wing counterpart to the Tea Party. But what they missed, and what Skocpol and Williamson help us to understand, is that the Occupy movement lacked the money, media

contacts, and national support network that boosted the Tea Party's political influence. Moreover, in contrast to the Tea Party, most Occupiers voiced skepticism bordering on hostility for electoral politics. Many felt let down by President Obama, making many of them unwilling to engage in partisan politics. Many bristle at suggestions from some quarters that OWS should have a more specific set of demands or support specific pieces of legislation, like Obama's jobs plan, or proposals for a tax surcharge on millionaires, and communicate to their own members of Congress. OWS remained an “outside” movement, without an “inside” strategy. A number of unions and community organizing groups have sought to fill that vacuum and take advantage of the new “99% vs. 1%” mood to build grassroots campaigns for legislative reform. Whether that translates into higher voter turnout, however, is not clear.

Both Occupy and the Tea Party, however, still have to deal with a dilemma that has faced many movements: how to link visionary calls for radical change with specific demands for immediate reform? They also reflect the difference between what organizers call “mobilizing” and “movement building.” The first involves large protests that may generate media attention but do not necessarily build the organizations needed to follow up, train leaders, and negotiate with policymakers. The second involves the slow, difficult work of building grassroots organizations that can dig in for the long haul and keep people engaged when the excitement dies down.

Whether the Tea Party will sustain itself as a grassroots movement, or simply become a brand-name for a handful of right-wing political entrepreneurs, is still uncertain. Skocpol and Williamson have provided us with an excellent roadmap to trace where it came from, where it has been, and where it might be going.

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The Tea Party: Manufactured Dissent or Complex Social Movement?

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The Tea Party emerged as a conservative, anti-government spending, anti-health care reform, anti-Obama force on the extreme right side of the American political spectrum in February of 2009. CNBC reporter Rick Santelli's on-air rant against the Obama administration's proposed response to the foreclosure crisis provided the spark that started this right-wing phenomenon. Local Tea Party groups sprouted up across the nation, with the support of right-wing news media, as well as some newly formed (or reformatted) Political Action Committees. Only two months later, on April 15, 2009, these various Tea Party forces had organized a nationally coordinated set of Tax Day Protests in hundreds of cities across the nation.

Having demonstrated very clearly that this was a large, nationwide force, the Tea Party continued its fight to prevent the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, President Obama's proposed health care reform bill, despite the Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. As Democratic members of Congress discussed the bill in Town Hall meetings across the country, Tea Party activists produced angry disruptions, shouting down their Representatives and expressing their anger. While the energy of these protests may have fueled Republican efforts to delay this bill's passage, in the end, the bill was passed and signed into law in March 2010.

Despite this loss, the Tea Party's activism carried on, refocused on the Congressional midterm elections of 2010. In this election, the Tea Party achieved its greatest gains. Trying to reduce the power of Obama to push forward his legislative agenda, the 2010 midterms showed major gains for Republicans, especially in the House, where the

The Rise of the Tea Party: Political Discontent and Corporate Media in the Age of Obama, by **Anthony DiMaggio**. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2011. 287pp. \$18.95 paper. ISBN: 9781583672471.

The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism, by **Theda Skocpol** and **Vanessa Williamson**. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012. 245pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780199832637.

Republicans gained 63 seats. President Obama said the Democrats received a "shel-lacking." Pundits and scholars puzzled over the power of the Tea Party, which seemed to both support the Republican Party and call for the Party to move further toward the right. Scholars disagreed about how to define the Tea Party, how much credit to give this phenomenon for influencing policy and elections, and especially over what the lasting impact of the Tea Party will be.

These two books on the Tea Party, among the first attempts to apply a scholarly analysis to this right-wing force, offer starkly contrasting views on what exactly the Tea Party is. The authors do not agree on whether this is a social movement, whether this represents something new in the political sphere, or whether this will have any lasting impact on U.S. politics. Anthony DiMaggio, in *The Rise of the Tea Party*, focuses almost exclusively on the elite funders of the Tea Party and their longstanding relations with the Republican Party, and sees no social movement at all. Rather, DiMaggio sees the Tea Party as carrying on Republican business as usual. On the other hand, Theda Skocpol and

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