



Goaded by the Tea Party, Republicans Turn to Extortion

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The Republican-led House of Representatives has shut down the federal government and threatens to push the U.S. into default – unless Democrats agree to gut Affordable Care and enact tax and spending cuts pushed by the defeated 2012 GOP presidential and vice-presidential candidates. SSN scholars probe this extraordinary development.

Step by step, Tea Party radicals inside and outside of Congress have pushed House Republicans into extreme territory. Since last spring, House Republicans have refused to enter into normal budget talks with the Senate. GOP Budget Chairman Paul Ryan has openly declared his intention to use routine fall legislative deadlines for funding government operations and raising the debt ceiling to try to force spending cuts not achievable by normal negotiations or majority votes.

Still, few pundits believed a government shutdown would actually happen, and fewer still believed that Republicans would choose to demand "defunding" or delay of the Affordable Care Act of 2010 as the price for keeping federal agencies going or allowing the Treasury to keep paying the nation's bills. The extraordinary effort to destroy President Obama's signature health reform law emerged in August, when far-right freshman GOP Senator Ted Cruz of Texas called on grassroots activists to push House and Senate Republicans into this high-stakes battle. The Cruz crusade is backed by ideologically oriented big-money advocacy groups – including Heritage Action, the Senate Conservative Action Fund, and the Club for Growth. These groups threaten to fund primary challenges and run ads against even very conservative Republican Senators and House members who accept any sort of compromise on government funding or the debt ceiling.

Tea Party funders and activists cannot honestly claim to speak for the preferences of most Americans, [argues Tom Mann in a recent opinion piece published by CNN](#). They are using coercive tactics to realize minority demands. Whether they like ObamaCare or not, most Americans have made it clear they do not support extreme measures to force repeal or defunding of the law. Majorities oppose closing the government and blame the shutdown on the GOP, while most Americans also tell pollsters they want Congress to raise the debt ceiling without partisan conditions.

Indeed, as [Theda Skocpol spells out in another CNN piece](#) co-authored with historian Ellen Fitzpatrick, current GOP moves are unprecedented in modern U.S. history. Not since 1860 has a major party threatened harm to the national government and economy in an extortionist effort to destroy landmark legislation approved by

Congress, signed by the president, upheld by the Supreme Court, and ratified by a five-million-vote margin in the most recent presidential election.

If current Tea Party inspired Republican tactics are not popular and break longstanding norms in American governance, why are they being so doggedly pursued by most Republican politicians and legislators – including by many who tell reporters or colleagues that they really would prefer normal compromises and bargains? Here, too, SSN scholars have telling evidence and insights to offer.

Drawing from the original research he has done with Matt Barreto for their recent book [*Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*](#), SSN scholar Christopher Parker [discusses with Ezra Klein of *Wonkblog* the uncompromising, fearful outlook of Tea Party voters who are pressuring Republican candidates and legislators from below](#). They hate President Obama and see his policies, especially ObamaCare, as pushing the country in directions they dread. Racial fears and resentments are part of what drives Tea Party anger at the grassroots – leading to demands that Republicans should stand firm and never compromise with Democrats.

In another discussion with Klein posted at *Wonkblog*, [Theda Skocpol draws on her work with Vanessa Williamson to illuminate how bottom-up and top-down Tea Party forces combine to push Republican politicians toward uncompromising stands](#). Grassroots Tea Partiers are attentive citizens who always vote, and they make up at least half of those who turn out for GOP primaries. Elite Tea Party forces and ideologically oriented funders are willing to support primary challenges to any Republican legislator who wavers on taxes, health reform, and social spending. It adds up to a virtual capture of the national Republican Party by extremist forces who do not rely on popularity or winning elections to pursue their goals, as Skocpol discussed with *Daily Beast* writer David Freeland in his [July 29th article, "The Tea Party Isn't Dead Yet."](#)

Affordable Care reforms are at the epicenter of current battles, in part because Republicans have long feared an expanded federal role in funding health care for low and middle-income working aged adults and their children. Now the Tea Party is taking a desperate last stand to prevent Affordable Care from extending new coverage to millions who will not want to surrender subsidized health coverage once they sign up. [New York Times columnist Eduardo Porter explores this angle with Theda Skocpol](#), who argues that Obama's health reforms represent a possible major step toward closing a longstanding "hole" in America's social security system and perhaps creating new ties between millions of working Americans and an active government.

Ironically, as DC Republicans go all out to stop Affordable Care, a number of Republican-run states are reversing earlier refusals to implement the expansion of Medicaid to near-poor people authorized under the law for 2014 and beyond. Republicans in many states have been at odds over Medicaid, with Tea Party conservatives refusing to go forward, while many GOP governors and some legislators have taken a more pragmatic position, responding to hospital executives, business leaders, and consumer advocates who want to take the federal money to pay for health care in their states. Michigan saw the full struggle play out among Republicans, as SSN scholar David Jones recounts in a [recent brief](#) and [a companion opinion piece published](#)

[by Aljazeera America, "Michigan Battle over ObamaCare Becomes Fight for Soul of GOP."](#) Similar struggles are unfolding in many states, and we can expect pragmatic adaptation to Affordable Care to spread among Republicans who face the challenges of governance and do not have the luxury to "just say no" forever.