



The Tea Party Lives On - And Pulls Republicans to the Right

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The 2010 elections were a high mark for Tea Party funders and voters determined to reshape the Republican Party and block President Obama's agenda. With low voter turnout and high public frustration during a slow economic recovery, Tea Party Republicans triumphed in Congress and many states. But the 2012 contests proved much more treacherous. In contests where younger and minority voters turned out in force, many GOP candidates could not manage simultaneously to propitiate Tea Party sympathizers and appeal to other voters.

Republicans lost the 2012 presidential contest and gave ground in Congress, but no one should imagine that Tea Party forces have left the field. They remain determined to block Obama initiatives and make new electoral and policy gains in the years to come.

The GOP Challenge in 2012

By mid-2011, conservative politicians and media talking heads knew that the "Tea Party" was unpopular with most Americans, and downplayed the once-ubiquitous label. There were less than 900 references to the "Tea Party" in Fox News transcripts during the six months prior to the 2012 general election, compared to over 3,000 references in the same period in 2011.

Downplaying the label was possible, but discarding controversial positions pushed by grassroots Tea Partiers was much more difficult, as became evident in states like Montana, Missouri, and Indiana. Despite the general conservatism of such states, Republicans who were too frank in pushing extreme positions risked alienating other supporters they needed to win in November 2012. In addition, publicity for extreme remarks such as those made by Missourian Todd Akin about rape hurt GOP chances in many states.

Nowhere was the detrimental leverage of the Tea Party clearer than in the campaign of eventual GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney. Romney's persona didn't fit the Tea Party ideal, but to win GOP primaries in which Tea Party voters were active, Romney took hardline positions. For example, hurting his chances to win Latino votes in November, Romney opposed college tuition breaks for students innocently brought to the U.S. as children, and argued that life should be made so tough for all undocumented immigrants that they would "self deport."

Romney also propitiated big-money Tea Party ideologues by selecting as his running mate their Congressional champion, Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin. Ryan has authored national budget plans that would abruptly shrink the U.S. federal government and remake social programs from the New Deal and Great Society eras. His ideas thrill billionaire Tea Party funders who have nurtured his national political career, but they are out of sync with majority voter preferences. Romney's careful positioning sewed up the GOP presidential nomination but put him in a general-election bind. In November 2012, Romney lost by twenty points or more in most demographic categories not solidly represented in the Tea Party base. He carried older whites, but lost big among Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and young people.

A Turn to Voter Suppression

Aware that high turnout would not help the Republicans' electoral chances, local Tea Parties engaged in concerted campaigns against imaginary "voter fraud." Thousands of legitimate voters, mostly low-income people and minorities in traditional Democratic strongholds, saw their rights challenged by groups such as "True the Vote," an organization founded by a Texas Tea Party activist. In the words of former President Bill

Clinton, these efforts were intended to “make the 2012 electorate look more like the 2010 electorate than the 2008 electorate.” Widespread publicity about voter suppression efforts seems to have aroused enough anger to keep youth and minority voting high in 2012. But Tea Party forces remain active in many Republican-governed states, looking for ways to reduce turnout in the 2014 midterm elections and change voting procedures or ways of counting votes for 2016. Republicans pushed by Tea Party activists know that they need to shrink the electorate if they are to win or hold office in the future, and there is no sign that voter suppression efforts are going away.

Where are Republicans Headed?

As Republican elites debate the future of the national Republican Party, grassroots Tea Partiers are still hard at work. About two thirds of the groups active in 2010 were still active during 2012. An impressive 350 groups were still meeting as frequently (or more frequently) than at the high tide of Tea Party effervescence. National election losses mean little for well-organized activists focused on local victories in conservative strongholds. Dozens of GOP members of the House of Representatives, for example, are more worried about ultra-conservative challenges in primaries than they are about majority public preferences in entire states or across the country.

The leverage and activism of the conservative base will make it difficult for the Republican Party to shift its national image. On the crucial issue of immigration, for instance, grassroots Tea Party activists will strongly oppose any kind of legalization that establishes a “path to citizenship” for low-income newcomers, especially Latinos. This may make it impossible for the “Republican establishment” to reposition their party on this pivotal issue. Similarly, Tea Party-prodded Republicans are likely to remain firm against tax increases and in favor of massive cuts to Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. And they are sure to oppose legislative and regulatory steps to fight global warming.

For the immediate future, many conservative Republicans will refuse to compromise, stick to their priorities, and look to recoup losses in 2014 – a mid-term election that could very well see reduced voter turnout. A single electoral setback, in short, does not mean certain defeat for the priorities pushed by the Tea Party’s ideologues, billionaires, and grassroots activists. Nor will other Republicans soon gather the nerve to resist Tea Party pressures. In 2012, the national Republican Party may have suffered more than gained from Tea Party activism. But the after-effects of the original mobilizations in 2009 and 2010 live on, and the Republican Party remains extreme in style and policy substance. The impact of the Tea Party will remain evident in American politics for years to come.

Read more in the new Afterword to the updated edition of Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford University Press, 2013).