

THE TEA PARTY AND THE REVIVAL OF PARANOIA IN U.S. POLITICS

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The Tea Party soared to national prominence in 2009 and remains a force to be reckoned with. In November 2012, some 45 million registered voters, a fifth of the U.S. electorate, reported in a Fox News exit poll that they identified with the Tea Party. To build political power through the GOP, in the 2010 midterm elections Tea Party factions helped right-wing Republicans win super-majorities in many states, secure gains in the U.S. Senate, and take control of the House of Representatives. Democrats may have rebounded in 2012, yet more than nine of ten Tea Party-backed Republican House candidates also won election or re-election.

Why is the Tea Party enjoying so much success? Partisans and some commentators point to its stated support for fiscal responsibility, lower taxes, and reduced regulation. But support for such long-standing conservative preferences is not all we see in Tea Party politics. Many Tea Party goals – and the angry style of politics – are anything but “conservative” in the sense of favoring social stability. Tea Partiers make flamboyantly extreme claims about President Obama – for example, that he wants to confiscate guns from Americans in order to facilitate massacres of whites. And they have urged Republicans to refuse to raise the debt limit and default on America’s debts, even if that would forfeit our nation’s good credit rating and push the world economy into financial crisis.

Getting at the true wellsprings of the Tea Party requires that we look again at what the late historian Richard Hofstadter famously called the “paranoid style in American politics,” a recurrent tendency characterized by “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.” In a survey I directed between January and March 2011, questions were put to 1,504 adults across the country. The results show that the paranoid beliefs and political style Hofstadter described have recurred in the Tea Party upsurge of the early 21st century.

Historical Precursors

Hofstadter traced the paranoid style in American politics back to the early days of the Republic. Movements featuring wild conspiracies and apocalyptic claims about the stakes of politics have erupted again and again – from the anti-Masonic movement of the early 18th century, through the xenophobic Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s, to the Ku Klux Klan efforts of the early twentieth century and the modern John Birch Society movement a few decades later.

This claim may seem far-fetched. After all, the Klan of the 1920s was full of violence-prone bigots, often from rural areas, whereas the businessmen who ran the later John Birch Society disavowed violence and overt racial prejudice and claimed only to promote economic conservatism. Even so, both the Klan and John Birch Society were stocked with white, middle-class, middle-aged, Protestant men who believed the American way of life to be under dire threat – from assertive Negroes, Catholic immigrants, and wealthy Jews according to the Klan; from the

Civil Rights movement and eastern elites with Communist sympathies in the eyes of the Birchers. In sum, the evidence suggests that America's recurrent reactionary movements of paranoid bent have been committed to holding the line against the perceived encroachment of minorities and political leftists on the proper status and prerogatives of white citizens.

The Tea Party and Paranoia about Obama

Today, the Tea Party recapitulates many elements of this stance, as we can see by comparing responses by various kinds of self-identified conservatives to questions about President Barack Obama and his policies. If all that is going on in the Tea Party is garden-variety conservatism, we should observe little or no daylight between responses from Tea Party supporters and answers from other conservatives who do not identify with the Tea Party. But as it turns out, more than straightforward conservative belief is at work.

- Averaging across all self-identified conservatives, 36 percent say President Obama is “destroying” the country. But that obscures the huge divide between Tea Partiers, 71 percent of whom hold this paranoid belief, versus all other conservatives, only six percent of whom think the same way.
- Twenty-seven percent of Tea Party respondents see the president as a practicing Muslim, compared with 16 percent of other conservatives. Is Obama a Christian? Nearly half of mainstream conservatives say yes, versus 27 percent of Tea Partiers.
- Only two-fifths of Tea Party conservatives believe that President Obama was born in the United States, compared with 55 percent of non-Tea Party conservatives.

Perhaps the Tea Party perception that Obama is some sort of alien explains why 76 percent of such conservatives want Obama's policies to fail. Only 32 percent of other conservatives yearn for such failure. Similarly, three-quarters of Tea Party conservatives dismiss the President's policies as “socialist,” compared to 40 percent of other conservatives who make such a claim.

Consequences for the Republican Party and American Democracy

If the views of Tea Party conservatives are at such variance with others, then why do many Republican candidates and office-holders cater to Tea Party demands? The answer, quite simply, is that Tea Party people are unusually politically engaged. During the 2010 election cycle, my results show that fully 85% of Tea Partiers were interested in politics, compared to two-thirds of other conservatives. Tea Party supporters were twice as likely to attend political meetings, more likely to vote, and much more supportive of GOP candidates.

The result of such passionate engagement on the paranoid edge of Republican politics is fierce, uncompromising GOP opposition to President Obama and persistent deadlock in Congress. The Tea Party tug on Republicans makes the two parties more polarized now than at any time since the 1890s. This sad situation is likely to persist until the Republicans turn away from catering to extreme, angry constituents – and decide, instead, to speak for core conservative ideals and seek compromises with Democrats to further the national interest. When that happens, America will be a safer, more prosperous, and more politically stable democracy than it is today.

Read more in Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in Contemporary America* (Princeton University Press, 2013).