

# *The Forum*

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*Volume 8, Issue 4*

2010

*Article 5*

MIDTERM ELECTIONS OF 2010

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## The Tea Party at the Election

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**Recommended Citation:**

Courser, Zachary (2010) "The Tea Party at the Election," *The Forum*: Vol. 8: Iss. 4, Article 5.

**DOI:** 10.2202/1540-8884.1410

# The Tea Party at the Election

Zachary Courser

## Abstract

This article is an examination of the Tea Party movement's effects on the 2010 midterm elections. The Tea Party proves to be a grassroots movement that was initially spurred by economic crisis and gradually pulled within the Republican Party. While a handful of experienced conservative interest groups—and the Republican Party itself—managed to use the energies of Tea Party sentiment to effect a Republican takeover of the House of Representatives, the movement's decentralized and independent nature prevented grassroots Tea Party groups from being a significant force in the election. While Tea Party supporters continue to resist organization, the effective translation of their political concerns into policy change seems very unlikely. Moreover, in the absence of severe economic crisis, their fortunes seem certain to be determined by the Republican Party.

**KEYWORDS:** tea party movement, midterm elections

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The question on most every American political observer's mind in 2010 was "What is the Tea Party?" For a term freighted with such importance by journalists, politicians, and activists, there was little consensus on what exactly this phenomenon was, much less what effect it would have on the midterm elections. Post-election, the Tea Party proved to be a grassroots movement that was initially spurred by economic crisis and gradually pulled within the Republican Party. It is more appropriate to call the Tea Party a "movement" rather than to suggest it had the character of a political party. Many groups and individuals attempted to organize, mobilize, or define the movement to give it the character of a political party (as its name suggests), but it never rose above the level of a disorganized protest movement.

There was no single actor or group that could claim to have directed the national energies of Tea Party sentiment to a single purpose. This lack of coordination gave the Tea Party's message and purpose a slippery nature that allowed candidates and groups to take advantage of the "Tea Party" label without having to define their beliefs fully or commit to a specific platform. There was no formal process of joining the movement, and one could not contribute money or volunteer for a national Tea Party. One could associate with groups or candidates that labeled themselves as part of the Tea Party, participate in marches or rallies organized by these self-identified groups, or attempt to organize a group independently. This lack of formal structure allowed the movement to grow quickly, albeit chaotically, beginning in early 2009. It also contributed to a chronic inability of the movement to organize as a distinct political interest.

The Republican sweep of the House in the midterm elections has focused attention even more on the Tea Party movement. Of the 63 seats that Republicans picked up, 42 were won by candidates that could be considered in some way associated with it (Table 1). The success of House candidates who entered into politics through the Tea Party movement or who received significant support from it during the 2010 midterm election, all of whom ran as nominees of the Republican Party, was very strong in Republican-leaning districts. Their record in districts that were considered toss-ups was also strong. Judging from early indications, like voluntary earmark bans in the House and Senate, the Tea Party movement has made a strong impression on Republican legislators.

Representative Michele Bachmann of Minnesota and Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina have associated themselves with the movement, and Bachmann now leads her own Tea Party caucus in the House. There is a desire among many Tea Party groups and affiliated candidates that the movement continue beyond the 2010 midterm election and continue to influence national politics. There are already plans for CNN to co-host a Labor Day 2011 debate among Republican presidential candidate with the Tea Party Express, an organization that supported

a variety of candidates in 2010. But how long the Tea Party movement will endure beyond the 2010 midterm elections remains very uncertain.

Considering that there are no plans for formal rule changes in the House or Senate regarding earmarks, and that key committee assignments and committee chairs are going to traditional, non-Tea Party Republicans, it is very possible the policy influence of those freshmen Tea Party candidates who managed to get elected will be limited in the next Congress. The commitment of Republicans in Congress to the Tea Party reform agenda is in question. For example, the "Tea Party Caucus", established by Rep. Bachmann in June of 2010, has not exactly distinguished itself during the lame-duck session: 38 of its 52 members requested earmarks for their districts in the 2011 federal budget, amounting to over a billion dollars. If Bachmann cannot hold her caucus together well enough in the afterglow of a historic Republican House victory to reach a consensus on banning earmarks, the ability of Tea Party members to organize effectively to influence legislation seems uncertain.

**Table 1. Tea Party Success Rate in 2010 Midterm Elections**

	<b>Race Rating</b>	<b>Won</b>		<b>Lost</b>		<b>Total</b>
<b>Senate</b>	<i>Republican/Leaning</i>	4	80%	1	20%	5
	<i>Tossup</i>	1	33%	2	66%	3
	<i>Democrat/Leaning</i>	0	0%	1	100%	1
<b>Total</b>		5	55%	4	45%	9
<b>House</b>	<i>Republican/Leaning</i>	19	100%	0	0%	19
	<i>Tossup</i>	15	63%	9	37%	24
	<i>Democrat/Leaning</i>	8	9%	78	91%	86
<b>Total</b>		42	33%	87	67%	129

Sources: CNN / New York Times

While it is still early to draw conclusions about the future of the Tea Party movement, its chronic decentralization and lack of organization suggests it will not endure very long beyond the midterm. During the election season, its anarchic nature prevented intensely felt but loosely defined sentiments among a significant portion of the electorate from forming into a competent electioneering organization. Most of the fundraising and campaign work of the movement was

done by select groups of political professionals like FreedomWorks, the Tea Party Express, or the Republican Party itself. The local Tea Party groups that formed nationwide did little to raise money or volunteer for candidates. Moreover, those in the electorate that identified as supporters were not very interested in campaigning or getting candidates elected. They were mostly interested in maintaining their independence from national groups and continuing to raise awareness about their political concerns. As long as the vast majority of Tea Party supporters continues to resist organization, the effective translation of their political concerns into policy change seems very unlikely.

The primary reason that the Tea Party movement has continued to be disorganized is the resistance of the independents within its ranks to associate with a political party. Also, the limited skills and experience in political mobilization of its membership make organization a challenge. Instead of laying the expensive, time-consuming, and challenging groundwork that would have been required for a true Tea Party mobilization effort, such as holding conventions, drafting platforms, electing leadership, and nominating candidates, Tea Partiers continue to be isolated, independent, and unwilling to become fully a part of the political process.

As a consequence, the movement has been effectively co-opted by the Republican Party, so that its long-term prospects as a distinctive voice in national politics are very uncertain. This article examines the electoral effects of the Tea Party movement on the 2010 midterm elections. However, it also offers some speculation on what the recent Tea Party experience tells us about the state of participatory politics in America, such as the frailty of mobilization infrastructure coupled with the incipient desire of an increasing number of inexperienced citizens to engage in electoral politics.

### **Emergence of the Tea Party Movement**

When the Republican Party lost control of the House in 2006, the perception held by independent and conservative voters was they had abandoned their skepticism of government and the dedication to fiscal responsibility that they had sounded during the 1994 midterm election. The increasing federal deficit, combined with a gradual expansion of the size of the federal government, alienated conservatives as well as Perot independents who had been successfully courted by Republicans twelve years before. The perception that Republicans had ceased to be the party of small government and fiscal responsibility was reinforced by the mortgage bubble bursting in 2008 and the global financial crisis it precipitated.

Reflecting on this period, Dick Armey, former House Republican Majority Leader, and Matt Kibbe, both of the Tea Party organization FreedomWorks, wrote in their Tea Party manifesto that “we find it hard not to blame Republicans for

much of our current predicament. The Bush administration, aided and abetted by many Republicans in the House and Senate, virtually erased any practical or philosophical distinction between the two parties” (Armev and Kibbe, 2010).

With no independent or third-party figure like Perot to represent or give voice to anti-establishment protest, voters shifted overwhelmingly to the Democratic Party in 2008, sweeping Republicans out of the White House and further diminishing their numbers in Congress. The repudiation of Republican candidates was profound: congressional Democrats penetrated deeply into districts that had supported McCain in 2008 and Bush in 2004. When the new Congress convened in 2009, Democrats held 68 seats in the House that had a positive Republican Cook Partisan Voting Index (PVI) score.<sup>1</sup>

In January of 2009, with Republicans discredited and completely out of power in Washington, Democrats were faced with the unenviable task of finding a way out of the lingering economic crisis. The Bush administration had pushed through the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) the year before, authorizing up to \$700 billion in government funds to purchase the bad debts of banks, and had participated in various multi-billion bailouts of AIG, Bear Stearns, and other private companies during the onset of the crisis. Democrats, newly in power, weighed in with a stimulus package valued at \$787 billion in February along straight party line votes in the House and Senate, followed by an array of costly programs aimed at increasing consumption and employment, stabilizing the credit market, and arresting the flood of mortgage foreclosures.

By early 2009, the price tag for all these recovery programs had grown to an estimated \$2 trillion dollars. Rick Santelli’s now-infamous comments in February of 2009 on CNBC were a reaction to the government’s plans for economic recovery. He stated “the government is promoting bad behavior” and the Democrat’s plan was flawed because “you can’t buy your way into prosperity.” Santelli’s anger and frustration struck a chord with many Americans and his call for a “Tea Party” gave a name to what became a rapidly expanding nationwide protest movement. Just two months later, on Tax Day, April 15, 2009, over 750 “tea parties” protesting government spending were held across the country.

The ire of those grassroots groups about excessive government spending soon directed itself at the Obama administration’s proposed healthcare reform bill in the summer of 2009. Democratic and Republican congresspersons, visiting constituents during the August recess that year, found their town hall meetings

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<sup>1</sup> The Cook PVI score is calculated by averaging state and congressional district voting margins for presidential candidates in the last two presidential elections. For the 2010 midterm elections, the Cook PVI averaged margins for the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections. A score of R+1 would represent an average margin of +1 percent for Republican presidential candidates in a district or state.

filled with many constituents angry about the healthcare bill. Representative Brian Baird (D-WA) was so taken aback at the intensity of citizen anger that he canceled his town hall meeting, decrying “a lynch-mob mentality” among participants and the “brownshirt tactics” of protestors. Baird’s office had received death threats prior to his town hall, and he opted instead for a conference call where constituents could call in to voice their opinions.

On August 10, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Majority Leader Steny Hoyer published an editorial in *USA Today* calling the protests “un-American,” and the angry outbursts “an ugly campaign... to disrupt public meetings and prevent members of Congress and constituents from conducting a civil dialogue.” Pelosi had dismissed the Tea Party movement earlier in April, calling it “Astroturf,” that is, phony-grassroots displays organized by “some of the wealthiest people in America to keep the focus on tax cuts for the rich instead of for the great middle class.” By August, dismissing the outpouring of protest to healthcare reform as Astroturf was becoming difficult, and members of the Democratic caucus were taking note. In December, Baird announced his intention not to seek re-election, following many prominent Democrats facing tough re-election battles, including Senators Evan Bayh of Indiana and Byron Dorgan of North Dakota, and House Appropriations Chair David Obey of Wisconsin.<sup>2</sup>

In September, the Tea Party movement had its first nationally organized event, the “Taxpayer March on Washington,” a protest that attracted participants from all over the country. The number of those who attended is highly disputed, with estimates ranging from 70,000 by ABC News to over a million by organizer FreedomWorks. The event developed from the “9-12 Project,” promoted by Fox News personality Glenn Beck to gradually include all the major organizations that described themselves as part of the Tea Party Movement up to that point. FreedomWorks, Tea Party Patriots, and the Patriot Action Network served as the national coordinators. According to FreedomWorks, the only limitation to joining in the effort was a commitment to “individual freedom, fiscal restraint, and respect for our Constitution.” Furthermore, any elected official that had supported TARP or any of the bailouts of the Bush or Obama administrations was not allowed to join the march.

Matt Kibbe, FreedomWorks president and CEO, wrote that there was little formal organization at the event because organizers “wanted the event to reflect the ethos of the Tea Party, the leaderless nature of this spontaneous order.” The

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<sup>2</sup> Baird later criticized “an authoritarian, closed leadership” in the House in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in October of 2010. He went on to say that Democrats had lost touch with the voters: “Back in September, we had pollsters and strategists from my party tell members that the mass of people didn’t care about the deficit. The mind-boggling lack of reality coming from some of the people who give us so-called advice is stunning.”

description seems apt: the nearly three-hour procession included few speakers and little organized content. Most of the political statements made that day were contained on the plethora of handmade signs that participants displayed during the march, announcing patriotic slogans, decrying government overspending, or attacking the healthcare bill. The lack of focus or centralized leadership at the march reflected how the movement continued to resist limiting itself to specifics or uniting under a leader as it headed into 2010.

In November of 2009, Republicans won governorships in Virginia and New Jersey, and many commentators looked at the shift as a referendum on Democrat proposals on healthcare and spending. The most remarkable upset occurred in January of 2010, when Republican Scott Brown defeated Democrat Martha Coakley in the special election for Massachusetts' vacant Senate seat. It is not practically possible to credit the Tea Party movement with these Republican successes in late 2009 and early 2010, as the groups and major figures most associated with it only worked in the margins of these campaigns.

For example, Brown did not describe himself as a Tea Party member, nor did he seek the endorsement of Tea Party figures and organizations.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, when the Tea Party Express arrived in Boston Common in April of 2010, Senator Brown was nowhere to be found. However, the chaotic summer of Tea Party discontent did have an effect: the wave of opposition felt that summer and fall exasperated many Democrats and emboldened Republican candidates to focus their attacks on the healthcare bill and government spending. By the spring of 2010, a critical mass of groups and candidates had formed claiming to be part of the Tea Party, and their direct involvement in campaigns was felt during the Republican primaries for the 2010 midterm election.

### **Who Are The Tea Partiers?**

Early in its emergence as a distinctive political movement, the Tea Party was derided by Democratic Party leaders as "Astroturf," fake grassroots activism organized by traditional conservative groups. Mass protest gatherings like the "Taxpayer March on Washington" in September of 2009, or Glenn Beck's "Restore Honor" rally in August of 2010, suggested that it was instead a legitimate grassroots movement. The truth is somewhere in between. Experienced professionals behind organizations like FreedomWorks and the Tea Party Express

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<sup>3</sup> Massachusetts is clearly a very blue state, but it is interesting to note that while Bay State voters regularly turn out for Democratic candidates, state party registration figures show "unenrolled" voters—those who refuse to state a party preference—outnumber Democrats 51.6% to 36.5%. Brown's campaign was certainly aware of this fact and exploited the unease of these independents over the healthcare bill and government spending to overcome their traditional aversion to voting for a Republican.

helped to give the movement an initial boost and direction. Emphasis was placed on a community organization model by FreedomWorks, who encouraged citizens to be trained as activists and protest in their communities for political change. The Tea Party Express, a nationwide bus tour of celebrities, entertainers, and activists organized by Sal Russo & Associates of Sacramento, California, put emphasis on raising awareness and generating support for individual candidates running as Tea Partiers.

Both groups attempted to preserve the disorganized nature of the movement, and encouraged would-be supporters to band together in small local chapters. What has resulted from the emphasis among "Big Tea" groups on decentralization and grassroots legitimacy is a mass of largely inactive 'activists' who are uncertain about their goals. The political creed of the Tea Party movement, with its emphasis on promoting activism grounded in independence and atomism, has created something of a political chimera: a popular movement without leaders, focus, or direction.

The focus from FreedomWorks for the Tea Party was one of promoting citizen activism and organizing protest. In their "Tea Party manifesto", several positive references are made to Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (1971). President Obama himself was a community organizer in the style of Alinsky in Chicago early in his career, so the embrace by FreedomWorks of these methods for the Tea Party seems unusual. Yet their approach to organizing does have a strong antipathy for leadership and formal structure, with a preference for giving would-be activists the tools to protest as autonomous chapters. FreedomWorks thus devoted nearly half of its manifesto to a "Grassroots Activism Toolkit" that teaches the methods and techniques Tea Party activists need to form chapters and engage in protest. FreedomWorks holds that "a decentralized model for social change is most consistent with the values of independence, self-reliance, and personal liberty that embody America" (Arney & Kibbe, 2010).

The Tea Party Express began as a bus tour, paid for by the Our County Deserves Better PAC. The PAC was initially organized in 2008 to oppose the election of Barack Obama by Russo & Associates, a Republican political consulting firm based in California. The tour was the brainchild of Sal Russo, a former aide to Ronald Reagan and a longtime fixture in California Republican politics. Capitalizing on the power of the "Tea Party" label to generate popular interest, Russo's bus tour crisscrossed the country with a retinue of singers, entertainers, and keynote speakers like Sarah Palin.

Tea Party Express rallies consisted of patriotic songs led by conservative entertainers, voicing support for American troops, and promoting Tea Party candidates in a carnival atmosphere. The platform of issues the tour promoted was vague. For example, at a Tea Party Express stop in Boston in April of 2010, Sarah

Palin's keynote address consisted mostly of issues that harkened back to her 2008 race with John McCain, like increased oil drilling in America. Many who spoke at the rally celebrated the country, its culture, and its history without talking specifically about issues.

But the group did much more than hold rallies and celebrate America. Russo targeted races in small states like Alaska, Delaware, and Nevada, where Republicans were competitive statewide, to influence Republican primaries toward selecting conservatives who supported Tea Party issues. The rise of Sharron Angle in Nevada as a serious candidate for the Republican nomination for Senate started with endorsement by the Tea Party Express in April of 2010. Christine O'Donnell was likewise made a serious political force in Delaware with support of the Tea Party Express, and managed to defeat the preferred candidate of the Republican Party in the Senate primary. Joe Miller, another virtual unknown before involvement by the Tea Party Express, managed narrowly to defeat incumbent Senator Lisa Murkowski in a divisive primary race in Alaska thanks to its help: Russo's PAC spent nearly \$600,000 to defeat Murkowski.

FreedomWorks and the Tea Party Express were generating grassroots interest in the Tea Party nationwide. Local Tea Party groups simultaneously began to form in a spirit of decentralized, independent protest. There was a great deal of speculation on how these grassroots groups would affect the midterm elections or the fortunes of the Republican Party. While the Tea Party Express was undermining traditional Republican candidates in a conventional, professional campaign to nominate conservative candidates, these small groups were largely inert and confused when it came to how to engage in the political process. The internet site Tea Party Patriots gradually became a clearinghouse for various small groups that emerged during 2009, offering them a web presence and a means of networking with Tea Partiers around the country. Tea Party Patriots claims to represent 2,800 local groups around the U.S., though a canvass by the *Washington Post* showed that number to be greatly exaggerated.

The *Post* could only identify 1,400 unique Tea Party groups, and managed to contact only 647 despite repeated attempts. The picture painted by the responses of these groups shows an atomized, inexperienced, and leaderless movement with an ambivalence about government (Table 2). A plurality of Tea Party groups is unaffiliated with any larger movement, and the vast majority wish to remain a network of independent organizations. Only 4 percent of Tea Party groups want to form a third party. 86 percent reported that most of their members were new to politics. Tea Party Patriots was the organization most affiliated with, but this may mean little: the group has adopted a policy of not endorsing candidates and mostly facilitates networking between independent groups that share their core principles.

**Table 2: Characteristics of Tea Party Groups**

<b>Affiliation of Tea Party groups</b>		<b>National figure that represents the Tea Party movement</b>	
Unaffiliated	42%	Nobody	34%
Tea Party Patriots	32	Sarah Palin	14
Americans for Prosperity	4	Glenn Beck	7
FreedomWorks	4	Jim DeMint	6
Republican Party	3	Ron Paul	6
9-12 Project	3	Michele Bachmann	4
Tea Party Express	2	Other / DK / NA	29
Tea Party Nation	1		
Other / DK / NA	9		
<b>Important factors driving group support</b>		<b>Most important issue for the group</b>	
Concern about the economy	99%	Government spending / deficit	24%
Mistrust of government	92	Limited government / size of government	20
Opposition to Obama / Democratic Party	92	Protecting the Constitution	11
Dissatisfaction with mainstream Republican leadership	87	Voter education	8
		Other	37
<b>Purpose of the group is to</b>		<b>Size of group</b>	
Operate as a network of independent political organizations	57%	Fewer than 50 members	51%
Take over the leadership of the Republican Party	24	50 to 1,000 members	43
Don't Know	15	1,000+ members	6
Form a separate political party	4		

Source: Washington Post Tea Party Canvass, October 6 - 13, 2010. N = 649.

Survey data reveal that Tea Party groups and individual voters that identify with the movement are united around a nebulous set of principles regarding the size of government and fiscal policy (Tables 2 and 3). Most identify some combination of reducing the size of the federal government and lowering the deficit as their most important priorities. Distrust or a lack of confidence in government was also a common theme, and many groups and candidates put a libertarian emphasis on constitutionally limited government and individual

freedoms.<sup>4</sup> The distrust of government and focus on the Constitution felt among Tea Party supporters also relate to a perceived disconnect between what pollster Scott Rasmussen calls the "mainstream" and the "political class."

Rasmussen observes a divide of opinion in the electorate along lines of political elites versus average citizens during the 2010 election season. He writes that the "mainstream" distrusts political leaders, believes the government has become a special interest, and that business colludes with government at the expense of consumers and workers (Rasmussen & Schoen, 2010). The "political class" sees the opposite as being the case, but only makes up 7 percent of the electorate, compared to 55 percent for the "mainstream." Many of the issues that the Tea Party promotes, such as lower taxes and opposition to government bailouts, are shared by Rasmussen's "mainstream" and opposed by the "political class."

The few books written by Tea Party groups and supporters evince a sense of fighting against elite domination in politics and attempting to restore average citizens to the fore of American politics. Angelo Codevilla, professor emeritus at Boston University, makes the divide between elites and average Americans the central thesis of his book *The Ruling Class* (2010). He writes "As voters, we become less and less relevant. The letter of the laws and the Constitution itself are become subordinate to the willful reading of same by those in power" (Codevilla, 2010). Codevilla's tone is one of resentment against a conspiracy of elites to enforce a kind of deferential politics where experts and government actors impose their will upon average voters.

Beyond the strong aversions to big government, federal spending, and a celebration of the Constitution, there was little in the way of specific proposals or issues during the 2010 election season from Tea Party candidates or groups. It is certain that economic and not social issues were most important within the Tea Party movement. According to a CBS News / New York Times poll in April of 2010, 78 percent of those who identified as Tea Party supporters said economic issues were most important to them during the midterm election season. Tea Party supporters overwhelmingly describe themselves as conservative, and a majority also identify with the Republican Party. However, 41 percent of Tea Party supporters identify as independents, and many express antipathy toward *both* parties. While it may be expected that Tea Partiers are motivated by

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<sup>4</sup> The influence of Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX) is likely the source of the strain of Tea Party thought that emphasized the primacy of constitutionally limited government. Paul's 2008 campaign for president generated interest among some who eventually embraced the Tea Party movement. For example, Paul's son Rand ran and won as a Tea Party Senate candidate in Kentucky, and 6 percent of Tea Party groups identified him as the national figure that represented the movement. See Ron Paul, *The Revolution: A Manifesto* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2008).

dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party and President Obama, they are also unhappy with the Republican Party: 92 percent of Tea Party groups expressed dissatisfaction with both parties, and 43 percent of individual Tea Party voters reported an unfavorable opinion of the Republican Party.<sup>5</sup> Antipathy toward the Republican Party is also reflected in the desire of 24 percent of Tea Party groups to taking over the leadership of the Republican Party as their primary purpose.

**Table 3: Comparing Perot supporters with Tea Partiers**

<b>Perot voters – 1992</b>		<b>Tea Party supporters – 2010</b>	
<i>Party Identification</i>		<i>Party Identification</i>	
Democrat	20%	Democrat	5%
Independent	53	Independent	41
Republican	28	Republican	54
<i>Ideology</i>		<i>Ideology</i>	
Liberal	30%	Liberal	4%
Moderate	9	Moderate	20
Conservative	60	Conservative	73
<i>Federal deficit is</i>		<i>Which is more important?</i>	
Important	60%	Lowering the federal deficit	76%
Not important	40	Government spending to create jobs	17
<i>Government wastes tax dollars</i>		<i>The main goal of the Tea Party is</i>	
A lot	78%	Reducing the federal government	45%
Some	22	Creating jobs	9
Not very much	0.3	Electing their own candidates	7
		Something else	7
		Cutting the budget	6
		Lowering taxes	6
		All of them	18
Source: 1992 Pre/Post National Election Study		Source: CBS News/New York Times Poll, April 5-12, 2010.	

<sup>5</sup> CBS News / New York Times poll, April 5 - 12, 2010.

### Independents in the Attic

The atomized, leaderless, independent nature of the vast majority of Tea Party groups during the midterm election makes their impact on its outcome questionable. It seems that a few organized, professional groups like FreedomWorks and the Tea Party Express (not to mention the Republican Party itself) did much of the groundwork that is sometimes attributed to the Tea Party movement. Only 29 percent of Tea Party groups reported campaigning for candidates during the election season, and those who did worked through the organizations of individual candidates to assist get-out-the-vote drives. Putting aside the work of the Tea Party Express, candidates who associated themselves with the Tea Party movement worked within a traditional candidate-centered model of campaigning with minimal help from independent, grassroots, Tea Party organizations.

The true strength of the movement, then, had to lie in the interest it helped to generate among an alienated minority of independents, who gave Republicans a decisive advantage in the midterm. Exit polling indicates that the Tea Party's message resonated particularly with independents, as Republican and Democratic voters largely split the vote in their usual ways. Independents voted 56 percent for Republican candidates, and 41 percent of all midterm voters responded they supported the Tea Party movement. Its independent, anti-partisan nature suggests it will easily fragment and dissipate like previous independent movements such as the Reform Party of H. Ross Perot. If so, its legacy will be to have nudged Republicans slightly to the right on economic issues. In fact, Perot's 1992 campaign for president has many parallels to the Tea Party movement and to the uneven fortunes of non-partisan politics.

The origins of the Tea Party do begin well before Rick Santelli's impassioned call for a "Chicago Tea Party" in reaction to a succession of government bailouts and stimulus proposals in the heat of a global economic crisis. Or at least, there has been a continual, loosely unorganized undercurrent of distrust in government and anti-establishment protest dating back to the 1992 Ross Perot presidential campaign. Perot, an iconoclastic Texas billionaire, attempted to shake the foundations of the two-party system by offering himself as a pragmatic, independent alternative for president in 1992 and 1996. While his first campaign had the appearance of a third-party movement, there was little to suggest that his "United We Stand America" organization was a proper political party.

Perot's organization was commanded by him and paid for almost entirely through his personal fortune. Perot held no nominating convention, had no popularly voted platform, and promoted no other candidates. However, Perot's campaign did attract a great deal of popular support despite its lack of popular

input. Sounding alarms about the growing size of the federal debt, decrying the corruption and unresponsiveness of the two major parties, and promising to apply his pragmatic business acumen to the problems facing America, Perot led both Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush briefly in the polls before his untimely withdrawal from the race in June of 1992.

Perot himself ceased to be a viable national political figure after his quixotic withdrawal and subsequent reentry as a candidate in late 1992. However, despite his uneven campaign, his organization managed to place him on the ballot in all fifty states. Perot received nearly twenty percent of the popular vote, the most since Teddy Roosevelt's run as a Progressive Party nominee in 1912. An analysis of Perot supporters in a panel survey for the National Election Study from 1990 to 1992 showed them to be characterized by independent political attitudes, economic fears, and distrust of government (Koch, 1998). Perot's 1992 candidacy helped to polarize attitudes against the political establishment and engaged a select group of independent, disaffected citizens in elections.

The political effects of the 1992 Perot mobilization and polarization endured beyond his first campaign for president. For example, a movement promoted by Perot that met with greater success that same year was the campaign for state legislative term limits: voters in 14 states approved legislative term limits in 1992. In 1994, an additional six states passed similar initiatives with large majorities. That same year, Republicans seized control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 46 years, also recapturing the Senate. House districts that had significant turnout for Perot (between 25 and 30 percent) in 1992 tended overwhelmingly to support Republican candidates in 1994. (Stone & Rapoport, 2001) Significant margins for Perot in 1992 also correlate with higher turnout for Republican presidential candidates in 1996 and 2000.

In 1995, Perot and his supporters created the Reform Party to transform an ongoing yet uncoordinated protest movement into a third-party organization. It is telling that their first choice of name was the "Independent Party," an oxymoron that more truly represented the contradictory impulses it represented. The one significant electoral success under the Reform Party banner was to be the candidacy of Jesse Ventura for Governor of Minnesota in 1998. From its inception, the party was beset by internal strife over what leadership and issues would represent it, and it gradually factionalized or disbanded in the years following Perot's 1996 run for president. Ventura's own association would be short-lived: internal squabbles and disagreements caused the Minnesota state organization to break away from the Reform Party of America and factionalized into the Independence Party of Minnesota in 2000.

The Reform Party briefly provided a home for those dissatisfied with the two party alternatives, but was itself mostly an anti-party movement. Distrustful of leadership, platforms, and organization, this anti-partisan nature of the Reform

Party proved its undoing. Judging from the success Republican candidates found in districts and states that voted significantly for Perot during the 1990s, it seems that many Perot voters eventually decided to go Republican. In the wake of Perot's waning popularity and the failure of his Reform Party to organize effectively, many Perot supporters found a home within the Republican Party. Without the polarizing and mobilizing effects of Perot and his anti-establishment message, the Republicans' congressional victories or the spread of term limits in the 1990s would likely have not been possible.

The issues that were commonly expressed by the Tea Party movement echoed many issues of the Perot campaign: fiscal restraint, distrust of government, political independence, and a preference for political outsiders to established candidates. One important difference is that the Tea Party movement lacked any central figure like Perot to give it a single voice or coordinated organization. Perot's run for president was the catalyst for mobilizing dissent, and he was the initial architect of the movement that became the Reform Party.

The catalyst for the formation of the Tea Party movement was the financial crisis of 2008 and the growing conviction by Republicans and independents that the country was headed in the wrong direction politically. And while many candidates and political figures attempted to capture the movement, there was a steadfast resistance by the Tea Party to control or direction. The reason for these commonalities may relate to the high number of independents that affiliated with each movement. Independents accounted for 53 percent of Perot voters and 41 percent of Tea Party supporters (Table 3). The strong influence of independent voters likely also introduced a weakness in the ability of both movements to organize effectively.

The individualism that expressed itself through the Tea Party movement, particularly among supporters that emphasized personal freedom and political autonomy, was antithetical to the compromise and cooperation that organizing into a distinctive political force would have required. One could almost say that there was a "weightlessness" to being a Tea Party supporter. There was little or no commitment to a program or platform, only a shared sentiment relating to an aversion to big government. It is interesting to note that when questioned about the main goal of the Tea Party movement, a paltry 7 percent of supporters responded "electing their own candidates" (Table 3). The movement was more about voicing protest, not engaging in electoral politics.

Political scientist Nancy Rosenblum's description of resistance to organization by independent voters is particularly apt in also describing the mentality of the average Tea Partier: "The weightlessness of independence flows from its barely suppressed antipathy to being a part of a political organization. No 'third party' should come between the independent elector and his or her vote" (Rosenblum 2008). Much of the vagueness and varying intensity of the Tea Party

movement's focus on issues likely derives from the resistance of independents within their ranks to committing to a partisan agenda.

While there is a pronounced cast of Republican identification and conservative outlook among Tea Partiers, this did not extend to embracing partisanship. For example, the FreedomWorks "Tea Party manifesto" declares "political parties... are always intellectually and morally inferior to principles and good ideas. ... [They] are empty vessels, adrift on tides that can shift with the winds of political opinion." They go on to praise the lack of coordination or focus in the movement: "The Tea Party movement is decentralized. It is leaderless. No particular nominee, no executive director, no national chairman is in charge of this party" (Arney and Kibbe, 2010). As a consequence, Tea Party supporters behaved in the midterm as Rosenblum describes the typical activity of independent voters during elections: "atoms of the unorganized public bouncing off the structures of a party system" (Rosenblum, 2008).

The independent core of the Tea Party introduced volatility to the movement that kept it from forming into a distinctive political force. Certainly there was agreement among Tea Partiers—as there had been among Perot voters—that there was a fiscal crisis and a shared antipathy toward the federal government. But there were few specifics beyond these, and few signs that there was desire actively to campaign for candidates. The legacy of the Reform Party—its failure to effectively organize and agree upon a broadly acceptable platform, and its gradual disintegration and assimilation by the Republican Party—seems a likely fate for the Tea Party. If so, the ultimate beneficiary of the Tea Party movement was the Republican Party.

### **Conclusion**

At the core of the grassroots Tea Party movement was a fundamental misunderstanding of the American political process. A preponderance of Tea Party activists dislike party politics and refused to combine their grassroots energies into a coordinated electoral effort. Professional groups like Tea Party Express and FreedomWorks did the work of fundraising and organization, while the mass of Tea Party groups preferred to remain aloof from electoral politics and instead voice protest. The consequence was a windfall for the Republican Party, which now directs the political fortunes of the Tea Party.

To translate widely held political beliefs into government action requires a willingness to organize and associate as a political party. The Republicans, who understand this axiom of American politics, will in all likelihood leverage their experience, membership, fundraising power, and most importantly their organization, to keep the scattered Tea Party movement in check. The exigency of economic crisis may keep many Republican candidates attuned to the concerns of

the Tea Party movement for fear of a primary challenge. However, as soon as a recovery begins, it will be nearly impossible for Tea Partiers to find common cause to remain active in politics, and Republicans will complete their takeover of the movement.

For the many amateur democrats who joined the movement with high expectations, the result of policy disappointment in Republican hands may be to discourage further their interest and faith in politics. This would be a tragic and perhaps dangerous outcome for the future of American politics. The energy that the Tea Party movement produced this election was palpable: turnout in Republican primaries was the highest since 1970, and Republicans outnumbered Democrats in primary voting for the first time since the 1930s.

The anger and dismay that the Tea Party movement expressed, however disorganized, was also real and palpable. Reflecting on my research and experience, I believe it is a reflection of the frustration of a significant number of citizens at the diminished opportunities for average citizens to participate in the political process. Professor Codevilla's comment that "As voters we become less and less relevant" is indicative of the sentiment that the Tea Party movement was not just about the economy, but also about an impotence felt by many citizens to affect the course of their government.

If those Tea Party supporters who voted Republican in 2010 are disappointed at the results they observe, they should consider embracing political association and letting go of independence as a political creed. Rather than reading Saul Alinsky, the political observations of Alexis de Tocqueville would be of greater use. Tocqueville observed that "in democratic countries, knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all others," and commented on how Americans in the 1830s were unusually good at combining to effect political change:

As soon as several Americans have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce before the world, they seek each other out, and when found, they unite. Thenceforth they are no longer isolated individuals, but a power conspicuous from the distance whose actions serve as an example; when it speaks, men listen.

The Tea Party movement embraces protest over organization, and independence over party politics. However, in order to be felt as an enduring and relevant political force in democratic politics, individuals must unite and organize to win elections and ultimately to legislate. The lessons Tea Partiers would learn about organization in attempting to form a third party might serve them well in their efforts to become part of the American political process. There may yet be a future for the Tea Party as a distinct political movement, but it will take much

more effort and experience than was on display in 2010. After all, the Boston Tea Party of 1775 was only a first, spontaneous burst of revolutionary energy. It took a united people eight grueling and uncertain years of military and political organization to actually accomplish the political change those Tea Partiers in Boston Harbor only imagined.

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