



Tea Party Forces Still Control The Republican Agenda

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Is the Tea Party on its last legs or still a powerful force in the Republican Party? Preoccupied with this question, the Beltway political media has for months cycled through dizzying gyrations, all along managing to miss the big picture.

After Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell trounced his Kentucky Tea Party opponent, the "establishment" was declared by *Politico* to be back in charge of a Republican Party now ready to govern. Then, in mid-June, the Tea Party was pronounced suddenly resurgent after opulently funded House honcho Eric Cantor was defenestrated by an obscure Ayn Rand-touting professor in a Virginia GOP primary Cantor had been deemed certain to win. Yet again, just two weeks later, the adults were again said to be back in control after Mississippi's ultimate GOP insider Senator, Thad Cochran, eked out a run-off victory against a surging absolutist ultra-conservative. Now, at last, the Tea Party may be facing its "Alamo," suggested a June 25 headline in *The Hill*.

This is what I call the basketball finals approach to scoring a supposedly all out "war" between the Republican Party and the Tea Party. The focus is relentlessly on election outcomes and public popularity polls. Each big-deal primary is treated as a playoff game. If any evidence is considered about the larger political meaning of wins and losses, it comes from the latest ruminations of Hill staffers worried about jobs after next November's midterms or perhaps from staffers at the Republican and Democratic National Committees. They are the ones talking each day to the reporters from *Politico* and *The Hill*. Meanwhile, no attention is paid to public policy agendas, to what is happening, or not, in U.S. government as the country faces major challenges at home and abroad – challenges such as the need to reform the immigration system and cope with climate change, Congressional consideration of renewals for such mega-legislation as the agriculture/food security bill, the transportation bill, and No Child Left Behind. Sure, there are separate reports on the daily maneuverings about such legislation, but connections are almost never made to persistent ultra-right gains within the GOP and pressures upon it.

An obsession with toting up wins and losses in primaries completely misreads how Tea Party forces work, how they have moved the governing agendas of the Republican Party ever further right and maintained a stranglehold on federal government action. As Vanessa Williamson and I first laid out in our 2012 book, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, there is no unified center of control in charge of the Tea Party. Rather, it amounts to conjoined pressures from, on the one hand, hundreds of remarkably autonomous local groups run by volunteer activists and, on the other hand, top-down, professionally run policy advocacy groups and funders. Tea Party clout in and upon Republican officials, officeholders, and candidates is actually maximized by the dynamic interplay of top-down and bottom-up forces, both pushing for absolute opposition to President Barack Obama and obstruction of Congressional action involving compromises with Democrats. Tea Party forces are neither inside nor outside, neither for nor against the Republican Party in any simple sense, because they are sets of organizations and activists seeking leverage over the choices and actions of Republican leaders and candidates.

And Tea Party forces have done and are still doing remarkably well in pushing the GOP even further to the hard right than it was before Barack Obama moved into the White House. After years of moving rightward in what political scientists recognize as "asymmetric polarization" after 1980, the Republican Party as of the middle of the 2000s was *already* an extremely conservative operation – devoted primarily to pursuing tax cuts and weakening any and all regulations on business. Christian right groups, who made up much of the popular base of the party heard a lot of the anti-abortion rhetoric but got little in the way of desired legislative changes when GOPers took office, turned to pursuing their real pro-business agendas. Much of this changed after 2007. With the rise of Barack Obama, newly aroused grassroots conservatives organized themselves into hundreds of Tea Parties that place a priority on opposition to immigration reform and cuts in spending on any social programs that benefit low-income, younger, and minority groups. Christian conservatives continued to

be involved, but grassroots conservatism has taken on a more nativist and anti-redistributive edge – and these newly fired-up GOP ultra-conservative voters, about half of all Republican identifiers in national surveys, are by far the most attentive GOP citizens. They vote, including in primaries and off-year elections; they attend town halls and debates; they track bills and legislators' votes and let their representatives know their displeasure at any signs of compromise governing.

At the same time, ultra-right professionally run groups backed by billionaires not simply beholden to the Chamber of Commerce have jumped on the Tea Party bandwagon. Older groups like FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity and the Club for Growth have now been augmented by the Senate Conservatives Fund and Heritage Action. All of these see popular Tea Party arousal as an excellent way to augment their own pressures on Republican officials and candidates to a harder-right policy agenda.

To be sure, there are some differences and tensions on issues such as Social Security and immigration reform. Popular Tea Partiers are mainly older whites collecting retirement benefits such as Social Security or slated to do so before long; they do not favor big changes any time soon in such federal expenditures. And even though grassroots Tea Partiers along with Heritage Action hate the idea of any path to citizenship for undocumented Latino immigrants, another elite Tea Party aligned group, the Koch brothers-backed Americans for Prosperity, favors comprehensive immigration reform and is prepared to accept some drawn-out form of legalization. Overall, however, the parts of the Tea Party pincers operation are pushing Republicans in the same "just say no" directions – and they are very successful in that, even when blocking legislative action means saying no to the Chamber of Commerce and other traditional GOP business allies just as much as it means saying no to Democrats. And they succeed even when leaders like John Boehner or Mitch McConnell want the hard right to "cool it" long enough for many of their legislative charges to vote for measures popular with most Americans.

To see that the Tea Party remains supremely effective, just look at what Congressional Republicans are doing, or not doing. Eric Cantor's sudden defeat sealed the GOP House's determination to block immigration reform, but that reform was already effectively dead even before that one primary election happened. Republicans have pulled away from decades-old compromises to fund transportation systems, to support agricultural subsidies along with Food Stamps, to renew the Export-Import Bank that most U.S. business interests want continued. House and Senate Republicans are spending their time mainly on obstruction and media-focused investigations, anything to challenge and humiliate President Obama. In state houses, Tea Party-pushed Republicans are mainly passing anti-abortion restrictions and blocking the expansion of Medicaid favored by hospitals and businesses.

What do primary elections have to do with such effective agenda control? Not nearly as much as the basketball finals approach to tallying total wins and losses implies. In a way, unpredictable and somewhat random victories against fairly safe Republican power-brokers are the most effective outcomes for Tea Party voters and funders. Sure, the big Tea Party funders would like to have gotten a win for Chris McDaniel, their guy in Mississippi, and they are furious that they did not. But backing up and looking at the big picture, does anyone really imagine that nervous GOP officeholders are reassured that the Tea Party is dead or "under control" following a scenario in which old timer Thad Cochran had to raise millions for what should have been a taken-for-granted primary victory, and his allies had to orchestrate an all-out voter mobilization effort that even reached out to some African American Democrats? Cochran's near-death sends a powerful message that loudly hewing hard-right on policy issues and obstruction is the way to go. Similarly, Eric Cantor's huge defeat is even more frightening to many Republican politicians because it happened without big-money backing from the likes of Heritage Action. Cantor looked golden but, somehow, unpredictable Tea Party and Christian right voters in central Virginia turned out in surprisingly large numbers to hand him a defeat and, in effect, thumb their noses even at professional Tea Party organizations. What surprises from below could lurk for me, Cantor's Republican House colleagues in many apparently safe GOP districts must wonder.

After 2007, in short, top-down and bottom-up Tea Party forces formed an uncontrolled pincers movement to push already very conservative Republicans into obstructionist and non-compromising styles of governance. Primary election challenges matter in this effort, but (like shocks to experimental rats in mazes) outright wins need happen only very sporadically to keep the attention of Republican candidates and officeholders – whose ranks in any event by now include many quite sincere extreme ideologues. The hard truth the Beltway media tries to avoid facing is that the U.S. Republican Party has moved, and remains, far from where mainstream American voters stand on virtually all of the major public policy issues of the day. That matters hugely for what the U.S. federal and many state governments can and will do about major public policy challenges, because the Republican Party is one of just two major players in U.S. government. Popularity in national polls and a majority of election wins do not matter as long as Tea Party pincers keep a stranglehold on GOP leaders and legislative agendas. As of the summer of 2014, they are doing just fine at that – and almost certainly will continue to do so for some time to come.

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