



Making Sense of the Tea Party

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“Tea Party” protests erupted just weeks into the Obama presidency, and over the following months participants organized and gave money to help right-wing Republicans win victories in the 2010 elections. Tea Partiers hope to defeat Obama in 2012 and enable staunch conservatives to take full control in Washington DC and many state capitals.

What is the Tea Party – and how does it work? Some see it as a popular uprising, while others dismiss it as an “astroturf” movement manufactured by fat cat funders. Both views are too simple, as revealed by research drawing on both national evidence and local interviews. Tea Party dynamism arises from the interaction of three different forces:

- **Grassroots activism:** Protestors mounted demonstrations during 2009 and 2010. They also established about 850 to 1000 local groups spread across the country, where Tea Partiers meet regularly to plan activities, learn about issues, and monitor Republican candidates and officeholders.
- **Right-wing media cheerleading:** Conservative media hosts from Fox News, talk radio, and blogs spread the word at the formative stage, and then helped the Tea Party shift agendas of national political debate.
- **Money and ideas wielded by elite political operatives:** Wealthy funders and professional advocates are deploying millions of dollars to push Republican officeholders and candidates toward the right and promote longstanding extreme ideas such as abolishing government regulations, further reducing taxes on business and the wealthy, and privatizing Social Security and Medicare.

Grassroots Tea Partiers and Their Beliefs

As many as three in ten Americans have expressed sympathy with the Tea Party – but committed activists who attend meetings add up to about two hundred thousand people. Tea Party supporters and activists have long been conservative-minded. They hate Barack Obama, vote for Republicans, and share a determination to “take their country back” from Democrats. Tea Partiers tend to be middle-class whites, more economically comfortable and better educated than their fellow citizens. Most are over 45 years old, and many are in their sixties and beyond. At least half are socially conservative Christians. Contrary to public stereotypes, Tea Partiers have complex and ambivalent views about government:

- They oppose taxes and regulations on business, but favor draconian government steps to block illegal immigration and round up undocumented residents. Socially conservative Tea Partiers also want the government to shut down abortion and enforce traditional conceptions of marriage and sexuality.
- Although they call for big cuts in federal spending, many Tea Partiers collect costly benefits from Social Security, Medicare, and programs for military veterans. Most believe such benefits are legitimately “earned” by Americans who have worked hard all their lives. Anger focuses on “welfare” programs such as Medicaid, Food Stamps, and Pell grants (for low-income college students). In Tea Party eyes, “freeloaders” – such as immigrants, minorities, and young adults – “want something for nothing” at the expense of hardworking U.S. taxpayers.

Elites on the Tea Party Bandwagon

Although grassroots Tea Partiers provide volunteer energy, they do not vote for, or control, the nationally influential elites who have latched onto their movement in search of profits and heightened political clout.

- Conservative media moguls led the way in getting all media outlets to feature Tea Party demands. Dramatic coverage made for profitable TV and radio, and it helped Tea Party spokespersons influence national debates.
- Professionally run, lavishly funded right-wing organizations use Tea Party activism to boost the Republican Party and push it toward uncompromising stands. A long-established California-based GOP political action committee created *Tea Party Express* to run bus tours and raise millions for right-wing candidates. Funded by billionaires and industries opposed to taxes and regulations, the free-market advocacy groups *FreedomWorks* and *Americans For Prosperity* use ties to the Tea Party to promote their favorite ideas, beef up email lists, and gain media coverage for national leaders. *FreedomWorks* Chair Dick Armey presents himself as an insurgent leader, but he is actually a wealthy business lobbyist who once served as Republican Majority Leader in the House of Representatives.

The Tea Party Works through the GOP and Does Not Depend on Broad Popularity

Growing majorities of Americans say they do not approve of Tea Party tactics or goals. But most Republican politicians are afraid to cross the movement. About half of Republican primary voters favor the Tea Party; and Tea Party elites lobby Congress and contribute heavily to election campaigns.

If Republicans take full control after the 2012 elections, they will quickly ram through Tea Party measures unpopular with most Americans – such as cutting Medicare benefits, disabling unions, repealing new subsidies intended to help families afford health insurance, and dismantling regulations that protect the environment and promote health and safety. Tea Party elites have radical plans – regardless of what most Americans want. Republicans who take office with Tea Party support will carry out those radical plans.

Read more in Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford University Press, 2012).