

Assessing the Impact of the Tea Party on the Republican Party

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GUY WALFORD, NOV 28 2013

The Tea party was born in 2009 out of significant opposition to the newly-elected President Obama's stance on addressing America's fiscal crisis. Since its progressive founding, the Tea Party attained considerable status in the American political sphere (Arcenaux et al, 2012:700), preserving a robust conservative base that, amongst other values, called for a downsized government and strong military. These values, consistently voiced by its affiliates, resulted in a close association with the Republican Party (Tea Party.org, 2013), however, it is difficult to determine whether or not this association is one that should have been welcomed. The principal dispute centres on whether the surge of the Tea Party movement revitalised the Republicans, stimulating a new direction for the Party, or if, in fact, its powerful vocal support from a relative minority of citizens forced the Republican Party to move too far to the political right. This essay will argue that the birth of the Tea Party movement breathed new life into a jaded Republican party, which allowed it to recover from the loss of the 2008 presidential election. However, this essay will also argue that the initial impetus the movement provided was undermined by Tea Party extremism. Whilst the Republican Party and the Tea Party movement share much of the same orthodoxy, the Tea Party's plethora of extreme-right views and its stubborn refusal to compromise dragged the Republican Party to the right (Bailey et al, 2012:771). Furthermore, the movement may have indeed jeopardized Mitt Romney's ability to appeal to more centrist voters in the 2012 presidential election.

A crucial refinement for this debate is to highlight that the Tea Party is a movement, not an organisation. There remains no headquarters for the Tea Party, no leader, and no wholly accepted direction (Time, 2010:1). Propelled by the media and shaped by political elites – such as the charismatic former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin – in 2009, citizens across America began attending gatherings of varying sizes under the wider umbrella of the Tea Party (DiMaggio, 2011:111; 53). The Republican Party – then recently disgraced by the failings of the Bush administration – sought to latch on to the popular birth of this conservative movement by rebranding themselves as a “party of the people” (Di Maggio, 2011:101). The movement, albeit technically non-partisan with “a powerful current of ‘blame both sides’ [pulsing] through [it]”, seemed to afford an opportunity to the Republican Party to garner replenished electorate support. This was due to many, at least partly-, shared beliefs that Tea Partiers were echoing across the nation (Time, 2010:1).

Although the movement holds pockets of support stretching across the US, it is important to stress that it is a minority group (Williamson et al, 2011:27). Although their views are very vocal, and often amplified by conservative media sources like Fox News, the group predominantly represents the views of older, white, religious, conservative males (Arcenaux et al, 2012:701; DiMaggio, 2011:181). Despite representing a very specific demographic, the movement's heightened activism – relative to rank-and-file Republicans – has enabled it to have had a disproportionate effect on the behaviour of the Republican Party (Arcenaux et al, 2012:14).

From a Republican perspective, the movement's impact on elections has seemingly retrograded over time. The energetic support that the movement initially brought to the Republican Party's campaign was celebrated. As Hallow points out however, over a short period of time, the GOP grew anxious with its inability to control the movement (Washington Times, 2011). The 2010 Republican Primaries and the nature of the candidates who would go on as party representatives, marked of the movement's first opportunity to influence the Republican Party. Direct support

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from the movement, or willingness to affiliate with its principles, 'clearly improved a candidate's electoral prospects [in those elections]' (Karpowitz et al, 2011:306). It is apparent that in the 2010 mid-term election, several candidates backed by the Tea Party went on to win handsomely in strong Republican States (Williamson et al, 2011:36). However, aggressive Tea Party activism meant that hopeful-elects had to push their political stances to the right. This led to losing not only winnable seats – such as Delaware and Colorado – to the Democrats in 2010, but also the 2012 elections (NBC News, 2013). Among traditional Republicans, fears soon arose that the continuation of such aggressive activism from a minority group might risk pushing the Republican Party to the right permanently, potentially alienating other American citizens (SSN, 2013). Moreover, some politicians who won Republican primary elections – and subsequently general elections in strong Republican states – owed more to the activism of the Tea Party movement for their election than to the support of the institutional GOP (Williamson et al, 2011:36). There remains an uncertainty as to whether – even in instances where Tea Party activism technically helped Republicans win seats – that in the long-run, those elected will make decisions primarily in the interest of the Republican Party, or the movement itself.

'Like many other populist movements in American History, Tea Parties have become magnets for conspiracy mongers and nativists' (Time, 2010:3). The Tea Party attracted significant amounts of negative publicity due to some of the controversial views associated with their high-profile representatives. One of the more well-known examples is Todd Akin, a Tea Party-backed Republican candidate in Missouri during the 2012 elections, who was met with rigorous public scrutiny for suggesting that rape victims rarely become pregnant (The Economist, 2013). Controversial sound bites have been an all too frequent feature of the media discourse surrounding the Tea Party movement; more recent controversy with Judson Phillips' (head of *Tea Party Nation*) accusation that President Obama was to blame for the Boston Marathon attacks. (Hinterlandgazette, 2013). The proclivity of Tea Party elites to voice their aberrant views so frequently in the public has certainly led to the movement's decline in popularity (Fox News, 2012). Here, the danger for the Republican Party has been largely one of association. Firstly, Tea Party associates represent the Republican Party in government. Secondly, and perhaps more generally, over three-quarters of Tea Party supporters have identified themselves as Republicans, or independents that lean favourably toward the Republican Party (Abramovitz, 2011:9). The Republicans fear that persistent, deep-rooted association with the Tea Party could significantly damage their popularity. This has similarly been reflected by conservative media. Fox News, for instance, reduced their references to the Tea Party movement by more than two thirds in the six-month period prior to the 2012 general elections (SSN, 2013). The controversy built-up around the Tea Party movement is likely to have had a considerable effect on the electorate's view towards the Republican Party. Association, welcome or not, is evident: in order to prevent further jeopardy to their electoral campaigns, the Republican Party may seek to dilute their association with the movement, or endeavour to better control and screen Tea Party-backed candidates from regularly broadcasting their provocative opinions.

Jamelle Bouie contends that the political rhetoric attributing the Republicans' election problems to the Tea Party movement may have been overindulged (The American Prospect, 2013). He suggests that, whilst Tea Party candidates may have lost the Republicans 'icing on the cake' seats – such as Indiana and Missouri – in 2012, establishment Republicans lost seats in areas that were more important for the control of the Senate: Virginia and Dakota, amongst others (The American Prospect, 2013). Moreover, the Tea Party has bitten back at complaints from conventional Republicans that their strong views are making them less electable: 'thinking it a cover for Republicans willing to trim and compromise' (The Economist, 2013). Such conflict between establishment Republicans and the insurgent Tea Party has nurtured the rhetoric that the Tea Party is the primary cause of the GOP's pull to the right. Furthermore, DiMaggio insists this is not an accident (2011:219). He upholds that the Republican Party has been moving consistently to the political right for decades, and that the Tea Party phenomenon simply provided them with a scapegoat for their electoral issues (DiMaggio, 2011:216;219). Regardless of the accuracy of the rhetoric, establishment Republicans are empowering the notion that Tea Party insurgency is culpable for their push to the political right, and 'have begun an effort to recruit more pliable candidates' for future elections (The American Prospect, 2013).

A huge deal of the Republican Party's loss of appreciation for the movement has been linked to Mitt Romney's defeat in the 2012 Presidential election. Some felt that many of Romney's hard-line positions were adopted simply to appease the interests of rambunctious Tea Party activists, and were not views Romney held himself (SSN, 2013).

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Bernstein stipulates that Romney's affirming far-right positions on controversial issues, such as abortion and gay rights, as well as choosing Paul Ryan (a politician heavily associated with the movement) as his running mate, were decisions made in the pursuit of moulding his campaign to propitiate Tea Partiers (The Daily Beast, 2012). With a CNN poll around the time of the election depicting that 53 percent of Americans viewed the Republican's policies as "too extreme", it is apparent that Romney's endeavour to appeal to the interests of the Tea Party very likely lost him a great deal of support from the general public (The American Prospect, 2013). The principal difficulty for the Republican Party in the future will be presenting a Presidential candidate who appeals to the strong ideals of extreme-right activists, whilst also not overtly alienating the general public (Abramovitz, 2011:26).

Following the outcome of the 2012 presidential election, the future of the Tea Party movement is unclear. Williams, writing for Fox News (historically supportive of the movement), elucidates that with popularity now at extremely low levels, the Tea Party may be close to collapse (Fox News, 2012). Murray adopts a similar point of view, highlighting that only dozens of people attended a recent *FreedomWorks* (previously a key Tea Party faction) rally at the US Capitol in April 2013, suggesting that the movement 'is no longer a national force shaking American Politics' (NBC News, 2013). He is quick to adduce that initial Republican impulsion to co-opt the movement has been lost, and that this has likely appended to the lack of energy arising from the Tea Party in recent times. However, the movement's principals have very much been absorbed into Republican practices (NBC News, 2013). Consequently, whether or not the Tea Party is approaching the climax of its time in the American spotlight, it is important to recognise the lasting impact the movement is likely to have on the Republican's policy motivation.

The Tea Party movement exploded onto the American political scene in 2009 and seemingly offered the Republican Party a chance to connect with an active, public dissatisfaction at the fiscal plans of the new Democrat President-elect. Initially, the Republican Party invited the suggested concordance with the goals of the movement and the GOP itself, hoping to ride the torrent of publicity the movement had generated. The movement's ties to the Republican Party have conceivably been consistently dragging its political position to the right. Whether or not the GOP, with the help of conservative media, have turned to attribute their pull to the right too resolutely on the insurgency of the Tea Party, in order to condemn the movement for their disconnection with the American public, is difficult to affirm. What is clear is that provocative stances from influential Tea Party Republicans have only received minority support, serving to repel much of the general public. Association with the movement has definitively damaged Republican performance in important elections since 2010; and crucially may have served to drag Mitt Romney's political stance too far to the right in the 2012 presidential election to capture the confidence of swing voters. After November 2012, the Republican Party has elevated its effort to distance itself from the Tea Party movement. It remains to be seen whether the potential demise this will bring to the movement will allow the GOP to move closer to the political centre and regain the confidence of the electorate, after the 'broken crockery' of the Tea Party has been cleared (The Daily Beast, 2013).

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