

## The Tea Party and the Shift to “Austerity by Gridlock” in the United States

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After an initial effort at stimulative spending in 2009, the political agenda in the United States has turned towards deficit-cutting. What explains this shift in policy? First, the downturn coincided with the turnover of power from a Republican president to a progressive Democrat. The election of the United States’ first black president, at a time when the Republican Party lacked coherent leadership, was a political opportunity for Republican elites who could harness the reactionary popular response. The result has been an acceleration of the decades-long trend of increasing conservatism in the Republican Party. After 2010, Tea Party Republicans in the House of Representatives were both strategically and ideologically committed to preventing effective federal governance, a tactic that has contributed to “austerity by gridlock.”

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## *Introduction*

On February 27, 2009, the newly inaugurated President Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which he deemed “the most sweeping economic recovery package in our history,” a piece of legislation that would “create or save three and a half million jobs over the next two years” (White House 2009). Though Democrats were far from united behind a policy of strong Keynesian intervention, and even President Obama spoke regularly about “belt tightening” in Washington, it seemed that the U.S. response to the recession would certainly not be “austere.”

From the beginning, there were rumblings of opposition. The Republican leadership made clear that they had no intention of supporting any aspect of the Obama agenda (Berman 2012). Moderate members of both parties were only the most hesitant of Keynesians (e.g. Montopoli 2009). And the final price tag was not enough to please progressives within the Democratic party, and perhaps not enough to achieve the measure’s goals (e.g. Krugman 2009).

Nonetheless, the compromise investment represented a substantial commitment to the idea that government spending could jump-start a stalled economy. Moreover, “the Stimulus,” as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act became known, was accompanied by a continuation of the Bush-era bank bailout and an effort to salvage the American auto industry. None of these measures suggested that the politics of small government would soon top the national agenda.

But the turnover of power from a Republican president to a Democrat was sure to provoke a reaction from American conservatives, as the election of President Clinton had 16 years earlier. Moreover, the election of the United States' first black president, who as a candidate had committed to substantial progressive reforms, was likely to be especially mobilizing (Tesler and Sears 2010). At a time when the Republican Party lacked coherent leadership, there was a political opportunity for Republican elites who could harness the reactionary popular response.

Those looking to prevent President Obama from achieving his agenda benefitted from a substantial home-field advantage, even if their numbers did not approach a majority. Before the 2010 elections, the change-resistant democratic institutions of the United States offered the Republican minority substantial power over the policy-making process, particularly if their ends could be achieved through obstruction. Once Republicans retook the House of Representatives, the Tea Party faction within that party showed a remarkable capacity to control the party as a whole. Committed to the idea that government action could only impede the proper functioning of a free market, Tea Party Republicans' strategy of obstruction was not simply strategic, it was ideological. As long as their power over the Republican Party continued, and when inaction was enough to achieve their policy ends, the Tea Party showed remarkable capacity to impose "austerity by gridlock."

This paper traces the process by which the United States backed into austerity. I examine the motivations of Tea Party at the grassroots and elite levels, and the structural

factors that shaped the movement's rise to prominence. Finally, I discuss how American institutions shape the bounds of the Tea Party movement's substantial policy successes.

*The Tea Party: A conservative reaction to social change and the threat of redistribution*<sup>1</sup>

Right-populist movements have often found success in economic crises, and so it is perhaps not that surprising that, amidst a deep economic downturn and daily reports of corporate malfeasance, the most substantial social movement to arise in the United States in 2009 was a conservative one. The Tea Party banner brought together grassroots activists, conservative media, and a subsection of the Republican elite especially committed to extreme free-market policies. But the Tea Party mobilization should not be misunderstood as a response to economic conditions – at least, not directly.

To understand the motivations of the Tea Party, it is important to distinguish its elite and grassroots components (Bailey et al. 2012). At the elite level, those associated with the Tea Party are committed to what one might term “extreme capitalism,” including much lower taxes for the wealthy and much less regulation on big business. These views are not entirely aligned with those held by grassroots Tea Party activists, who numbered as many as 250,000 at the peak of the movement. Although grassroots Tea Partiers adopt the language of the free market, they are nonetheless supportive of regulations that fit with their stances on social issues, and are often beneficiaries of the major components of the American welfare state, including Social Security and Medicare.

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<sup>1</sup> In the following two sections, I draw heavily on Skocpol and Williamson 2012, as well as the 2013 afterward to that book, and Williamson 2012.

Republican elites who associated themselves with the Tea Party banner in 2009 and 2010 subscribe to an extreme version of free market economics, one that offers substantial profits to corporate interests and the wealthy. Among the most prominent organizers of Tea Party activism in 2009 were two national activist organizations, Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks, both spin-offs of the earlier libertarian group, Citizens for a Sound Economy. These organizations are funded by and represent the anti-regulatory interests of large corporations, particularly in petrochemicals, telecommunications, and tobacco (Fang 2013). As Fallin et al. note (2013), the elite Tea Party “developed over time, in part through decades of work by the tobacco industry and other corporate interests.” These organizations have sought not only to reduce taxes and regulations on large businesses, but to roll back popular components of the American welfare state supported by the Tea Party grassroots (e.g. Arney 2010, Kaeding 2012).<sup>2</sup>

Extreme free-market language pervaded the Tea Party at the grassroots level. At one rally I attended, a Tea Party member was doing a brisk business in shirts labeled, “Proud Capitalist.” Indeed, the catalyst for the Tea Party movement came directly from “the market” itself. A cable news business reporter on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange offered an impromptu analysis of the new administration’s housing policy plans. CNBC correspondent Rick Santelli, labelling those who faced foreclosure “losers,” called for a new “Tea Party” to oppose government protections for those suffering from the economic collapse. These policies, he claimed, were fundamentally un-American, and

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<sup>2</sup> The opposition to Social Security and Medicare is partly an ideological commitment to free market solutions, but also, plausibly, an effort to repeal the portions of the welfare state that are popular with most Americans and that mobilize constituencies in favor of social spending (Fang 2013, Campbell 2003).

would have the Founding Fathers rolling over in their graves. The symbolism of Santelli's "rant," as the speech became known, struck a chord with grassroots conservatives, who have long seen themselves as contributors in American society, unfairly saddled with taxes to support the undeserving poor.

But this rhetorical commitment to government non-interference was not consistent when it came to regulation of reproductive rights or immigration. At more than one Tea Party event I attended, activists supported new regulations to stifle family planning clinics that offer abortion services.<sup>3</sup> Tea Party activists were also opposed to more open immigration policies (Parker 2010), and many described the threat of immigration as a primary reason for their mobilization (Williamson et al. 2010). Tea Party members are not consistently in favor of reducing regulation; instead, they are willing to support government interference when it fits with their social preferences.

Moreover, Tea Party activists' concern about government spending was limited to certain kinds of social programs. Along with traditional conservative bugbears like cash welfare for poor mothers and their children, Tea Party members object to a number of social programs that had once received bipartisan support – including food stamps and Pell Grants. As one Tea Party blog post put it "Call me crazy, but when I needed money for college, I got a job." What unites these programs is the perception, among Tea Party

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<sup>3</sup> The priority placed on anti-abortion regulation is evident in the effect of Tea Party electeds in state legislatures. Since 2010, Republican state representatives elected with Tea Party support have worked to pass new abortion regulations in Virginia, Kansas, Utah, and Pennsylvania (Guttmacher Institute 2012), and to ban abortions after 20 weeks in at least ten states (Good 2013). The tendency for Tea Party groups to become involved in social issues was a source of substantial tension between religious conservatives and a minority of more libertarian-minded members. For more on the libertarian and religious leanings within the Tea Party, see Kirby and Ekins 2010 and Wilson and Burack 2012.

activists, that they benefit the undeserving, particularly ethnic minorities and immigrants (Parker 2010, Barreto 2011). The longstanding racial undertone to welfare opposition in the United States (e.g. Gilens 2000) has now extended to a somewhat wider swath of American social policy.

This rhetoric should not be taken as evidence that Tea Party members were opposed to all social spending. As a population of older, white retirees and near-retirees, grassroots Tea Partiers certainly did not oppose the big-budget components of the American welfare state, Social Security and Medicare – at least, not in the near term. Tea Party members deemed Social Security and Medicare “earned” benefits, and many were already receiving the rewards of their years of payroll taxes. According to the April 2010 CBS News/*New York Times* poll, about half of Tea Party supporters said someone in their household receives Medicare or Social Security benefits, and 62% of Tea Party supporters believed these programs are “worth the costs... for taxpayers.” When Tea Partiers expressed concerns to us about Social Security and Medicare, they focused on how to keep the programs solvent, and were surprisingly amenable to tax increases if the money could be assured to stay within the Social Security fund. Tea Party activists were not, then, knee-jerk supporters of austerity-esque policies.

Nor were they, despite some quantitative analysis to the contrary, especially hard-hit victims of the economic downturn. The coincidence of popular protests with plunging economic indicators makes this seem plausible, but studies noting that Tea Party events or groups are more common in areas with high rates of foreclosure suffer from substantial

ecological inference problems, and typically neglect to control for the urban density of the county or congressional district (e.g. Cho et al. 2012). That Tea Party members, like other older, white conservative Republicans, live in the suburbs of the South and the Sun Belt (Thompson 2012), where the foreclosure crisis hit especially hard, should not be taken as proof that activists themselves were facing foreclosure, or that their activism was motivated by a desire to prevent foreclosures.

In fact, as older, middle class, white people, Tea Partiers tend to be better cushioned against economic upheaval than younger Americans, especially minorities. They themselves were often quick to point out their own financial comfort. As one interviewee put it, “I’ve had such a good life, and I just want other Americans to have that life.” In interviews, Tea Partiers’ economic fears rarely focused on the possible loss of a job or a home; instead, they were almost exclusively preoccupied with the possibility that the Obama Administration might raise their taxes. What unites Tea Party members is not their economic condition, it is their political conservatism. As conservatives, they worried about a redistributionist response to the downturn.

It is impossible to rule out the possibility, of course, that Tea Partiers were given an extra prod from the downward-spiraling economy. For instance, the extent of the crisis may have convinced some Tea Party members that the Obama Administration would have almost unlimited latitude to achieve his progressive goals. But in interviews, even Tea Party opposition to redistribution took a backseat to larger cultural threats. Things have changed, Tea Partiers believe, since they were young. Worries about crime and

changing social norms, were interspersed with anxieties about immigration changing America's cultural make-up. For many Tea Party members, the election of President Obama represented a dramatic cultural shift – the movement of the political baton from their generation to a younger and more diverse America, an America that seemed foreign to them. These social and political fears motivated their activism, rather than personal economic stresses or a commitment to free-market fundamentalism.

### *Why the Tea Party?*

As we've seen, Tea Party activists held substantially different priorities than the elite organizations that promoted the "Tea Party" idea. The extent to which the Tea Party was unified by opposition to President Obama, rather than a coherent policy platform, is obvious in the wide array of 2012 Republican presidential candidates who received some fraction of Tea Party support, including everyone from social conservatives Mike Huckabee and Rick Santorum to libertarian Ron Paul.

But if the Tea Party movement was not galvanized primarily by the economic downturn, and was always relatively divided in its ideological leanings, what explains its remarkable success in 2009 and 2010? In my view, timing plays a crucial role in the explanation. The economic crisis coincided with an election that left the Republican Party leaderless. Ironically, it is the relative weakness of the Republican Party that allowed for a more successful mobilization of conservative activists.

In 2008, President Obama's victory had been decisive, leaving the Republican Party without an obvious leader. President George Bush left office with record-low approval ratings, and the defeated McCain-Palin ticket did not leave behind an effective campaign organization. By the end of 2009, the Republican National Committee was in near-complete disarray, struggling from the mismanagement of then-Chairman Michael Steele. There was, in the language of the social movement literature, a "political opportunity" that resulted from the conflict among various elite factions vying for dominance of the Republican Party (Tarrow 1983, 1989; see also Meyer and Minkoff 2004). Without an alternative source of organizing power, Republican elites, including many of the loudest voices in the conservative media, were quick to adopt the "Tea Party" rhetoric.

It should be noted that the "Tea Party" at its outset was not something planned and executed by groups like FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity, though they certainly tried to help. FreedomWorks, for instance, offered tip sheets on their website to help members plan a local Tea Party. But both FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity were, in 2009, organizations that operated primarily in Washington. They didn't have huge email lists or many local chapters – in short, they lacked the capacity to quickly mobilize millions of conservatives. Instead, major conservative media elites – particularly in conservative radio and on Fox News – helped build and spread the Tea Party idea. (For more on the role of the media in promoting the Tea Party, particularly prior to the April 2009 protests, see Media Matters 2009 as well as Street and DiMaggio 2011).

Rather than initiating it, FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity *benefited* from the early Tea Party mobilization, and moved quickly to take the helm of a somewhat fractious grassroots energy. Riding the Tea Party wave, the AFP ballooned its contact lists from about 270,000 in 2008 to 1.5 million in 2011, while also expanding its network of coordinators to reach 32 states. The result of the Tea Party movement, for organizations like Americans for Prosperity, has been an enormous boon in terms of direct connections to the Republican base – connections that could readily be parlayed into political power in 2010, an election year promising for Republican candidates. Within the upper echelons of the Republican Party struggling to find coherence after the 2008 defeat, those who could claim ties to the Tea Party were well placed to lead the party (e.g. Zernike and Steinhauer 2010).

It is worth noting that these opportunities on the right were simply not as available for potential social movements on the left. The Democratic Party after 2009 had a clear leader in President Obama, and was often loath to organize in ways that might be perceived as critical of the White House. Democrats also do not have the same level of unified and partisan media outlets to reach potential progressive activists (for more on the conservative media, see Jamieson et al. 2010 and Dreier et al. 2010). Not only did the policies and the person of President Obama spur grassroots conservatives, but the political structure of the Republican Party of 2009, combining a momentary lapse in leadership with a cohesive partisan media apparatus, put those adopting the Tea Party rhetoric in a powerful position to reshape Republican Party and limit the progressive policies of the Obama Administration.

In response not to the economic downturn, but to the potential for a progressive response to it, elite conservative activists benefitted from a power vacuum in Republican leadership to rally around the new banner, the Tea Party. Though grassroots conservatives do not, as a general rule, hold extreme free-market positions, they do express strong anti-tax sentiments, and oppose redistribution towards younger, more diverse generations, and felt deeply threatened by the election of Barack Obama. Republican elites in the media and in Washington who were able to quickly adopt the “Tea Party” rhetoric benefitted substantially from the right populist uprising, and could leverage the Tea Party message to fit their long-time goals.

*Tyranny of the Minority: Imposing Austerity by Gridlock*

The Tea Party banner helped increase the authority of a certain branch of the Republican elite, a group especially focused on extreme capitalist policies. To reshape one of the two major political parties in the United States is a remarkable achievement. But the Tea Party’s success in pushing the Republican Party rightward has not been matched by its electoral success outside of Republican bastions. Nonetheless, the institutions of the United States privilege minority interests, especially when those interests seek to prevent government action (Binder et al. 2002, Wawro and Schickler 2006). As a result, the Tea Party minority wielded remarkable authority over the federal government’s response to the economic downturn between 2010 and 2012.

Despite early gains in competitive states, the Tea Party's national electoral impact was almost exclusively limited to Republican strongholds. In 2010, the election of Republican Scott Brown in the Democratic state of Massachusetts, and the primary victory of Marco Rubio over the Republican establishment candidate Charlie Crist, cemented the Tea Party's reputation as an electoral force. In many ways, however, these elections were exceptional; as the fall 2010 midterms would make clear, Tea Party affiliated Republicans succeeded almost exclusively in conservative Republican districts (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2011). Even so, Tea Party –linked Republican candidates were ideologically to the right of many other Republicans, who suddenly faced a significant risk of a primary challenge. The effect of the “Tea Party,” therefore, was to accelerate a long-term shift of the Congressional Republican Party to the right (McCarty et al. 2006, Hacker and Pierson 2006).

That the Tea Party does not appeal to a majority of Americans has not prevented its impact on policy, however, because the inertial democratic institutions of the United States give minority interests a rare level of power over the policy-making process. Since 2010, the apparent willingness of the Tea Party-affiliated Republicans in the House of Representatives to bring the government to a halt has led to “austerity by gridlock,” achieving at least some of the aims of the Republican elite most associated with the “Tea Party” label.

Starting in 2011, House Republicans associated with the Tea Party refused to raise the debt ceiling, a previously uncontroversial aspect of federal government financing,<sup>4</sup> unless it was accompanied by dramatic cuts in spending and a balanced budget amendment. The unity of the Tea Party faction of the Republican Party was remarkable; Tea Party Republicans were unwilling to support an increase to the debt ceiling even at the urging of the Republican House Majority Leader, John Boehner (Murphy 2011). The move angered many more moderate Republicans, including former presidential candidate, Senator John McCain, who called the move “worse than foolish” (Condon 2011). But Tea Party groups committed significant resources to lobbying non-Tea Party Republicans, making a vote for the debt ceiling political toxic. FreedomWorks coordinated Tea Party actions at town hall meetings, targeting both Democrats and Republicans, to insist on a balanced budget amendment before the debt ceiling could be raised (Korte 2011).

Though the eventual passage of the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA) was not everything that Tea Party leaders wished for (Bodnar 2011, Americans for Prosperity 2012), it nonetheless met many Tea Party goals. The BCA included in it the automatic “sequester” process, broad-based cuts intended by its authors to act as an incentive for lawmakers to compromise and accept a deficit reduction plan put together by a bipartisan “supercommittee.” After the supercommittee failed to act, these cuts were set to be

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<sup>4</sup> Without a higher “debt ceiling,” the United States can exhaust its borrowing authority, leaving the government unable to make payments. This would, theoretically, result in either defaulting on government bonds or delaying other government payments (for instance, Social Security checks or salaries for federal employees). The debt ceiling was raised seven times under President George W. Bush, and eighteen times under President Reagan.

automatically implemented in January of 2013; a brief delay put off the sequester, but only until March. Though these cuts are not targeted as Tea Party leaders would prefer (Borowski 2011), they include some of the social safety net programs opposed by Tea Party activists, like public housing, Head Start, and WIC (e.g. Valdosta Tea Party 2013, Tea Party Patriots 2013, Tea Party Tribune 2012).

Moreover, debt ceiling fight showed that the Tea Party minority could force Republicans “into a defiant no-new-taxes position” and erect “a bulwark to federal spending” (Blackmon and Levitz 2011). Tea Party leaders were quick to celebrate the success. As Phil Kerpen, the vice president of policy at Americans for Prosperity, put it in a Fox News article:

It now appears the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction (the “Super Committee”) will deadlock, resulting in automatic spending cuts of \$1.2 trillion over the next 10 years. Some are decrying this as a failure; I’m celebrating it as a victory.

FreedomWorks agreed, urging Congress to “stand firm on the budget sequester” (Borowski 2011). It is worth noting once again what a remarkable shift of policy the Tea Party managed to achieve in only three years. “When Obama is talking about trillions of dollars in spending cuts,” said Matt Kibbe, the President of FreedomWorks, “we’ve changed the conversation” (Kurtz 2011).

While the shift in policy is remarkable, the Tea Party's power can easily be overstated. Much of the Tea Party's success came in instances where inaction itself helped achieve Tea Party ends. When inertia runs counter to conservative Republican preferences, the Tea Party minority does not have the power to prevent progressive outcomes.

This dynamic was made clear in the case of the American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012. With the Bush tax cuts set to expire, President Obama was in a considerably stronger negotiating position when it came to addressing the revenue side of the "fiscal cliff," as the January 2013 sequester and tax policy deadlines were known. In this case, the status quo threatened the Tea Party priority of low taxes on the wealthy, and so straightforward obstruction was no longer a winning strategy. The result was a compromise that included the repeal of the Bush tax cuts for the highest earners, an increase in the tax rate on capital gains, and a return to the estate tax.

A compromise on tax rates was aided by the change in Tea Party fortunes in the 2012 elections. Republican candidate Mitt Romney courted Tea Party voters actively during the primary, but found it difficult to return to middle ground in the general election. In fact, Romney lost by twenty points or more in almost every demographic category not strongly represented within the older, white Tea Party base. In Senate races in moderate states like Indiana and Missouri, the success of a "Tea Party" candidate in the Republican primary allowed Democrats to hold onto or even gain seats. The Tea Party brand was

simply not very popular in 2012, when a larger, younger, and more diverse pool of voters went to the polls.

In the wake of the Republican Party's 2012 electoral defeats, there are signs of decline in the Tea Party's strength within the Republican caucus. For instance, Speaker John Boehner moved to strip several Tea Party Republicans of their committee positions, a decision that provoked the ire of FreedomWorks (Terkel 2012, Kibbe 2012). In addition, Republicans have backed down from a potential repeat of the debt ceiling crisis, at least temporarily – though this may be a strategic move to keep attention on spending, rather than potential revenue increases (Kirschgaessner 2013). In any case, the likelihood of additional government spending to stimulate a still-struggling economy is vanishingly small, while future fights over social spending cuts seem all but guaranteed.

### *Conclusion*

The Tea Party opposition to President Obama was neither a response to the economic downturn, nor a grassroots movement committed to austerity policies. But the grassroots conservative opposition to Barack Obama was successfully harnessed by a wing of the Republican elite especially committed to free-market fundamentalism. Despite a limited appeal among the general public, this energetic minority's policy of obstructionism has reversed the policy response to economic downturn, turning the agenda from stimulative government spending to deficit-cutting.

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