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Tea Party Movement

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452244723.n518> *Flagler College*

The biggest story of the 2010 U.S. midterm election was the increasing influence of the Tea Party movement. Since their first rallies in early 2009, these vocal, visible conservatives have succeeded in shifting the center of American political discourse closer to the right than it has been in quite some time. The 2010 midterm elections showed the potential power of social media in American politics. Concerned with a looming financial meltdown, government stimuli, bailouts, and the 2008 election of Democrat Barack Obama as president of the United States, a movement of fiscally and socially conservative Americans calling themselves the Tea Party (for Taxed Enough Already) surprised the country by defeating a number of entrenched politicians. Beyond citizen attitudes toward government and alleged tax-and-spend liberals, many believe that social media was the vehicle that allowed the Tea Party movement to reach its full potential. As such, the Tea Party has been highlighted as an example of how social media can truly impact social change.

History

Only two years after Obama won the presidency and seemed situated to return Democrats to the forefront of national politics, Republicans roared back. But it was not only the typical Christian conservative voter leading the way. Instead, it was a collection of angry, middle-aged, white fiscal conservatives, many but not all of whom share the ideological agenda of the Christian Right, who took aim at national officials. Before turning on Democrats, they chose to turn on incumbent Republicans who they believed were too moderate in their beliefs. Even while President George W. Bush had been in the White House, many fiscal conservatives were unhappy with his administration's decision to give bailouts for banks and for propping up automakers. With Obama in office, these fiscally conservative Republicans grew more vocal about spending. Online networks permitted these individuals to come together across the country, also attracting supporters interested in advancing deeply conservative perspectives on a host of social issues, and their voices began to collectively resonate in a major way.

The initial foray of the Tea Party into social media was likely the Smart Girls Politics blog started by stay-at-home mom Stacy Mott. Mott had become fed up with how the federal government (in all branches) was handling the national economy, especially

governmental bailouts. Her blog and social network were aimed at [p. 1233 ↓] conservative women who shared her economic concerns. The content eventually caught the eye of Michelle Malkin, and began to gain readers.

On February 19, 2009, Rick Santelli, a CNBC commentator, was broadcasting live from the Chicago Board of Trade. He had doubts about the government's response to the economic meltdown. While on air, Santelli became increasingly angry, and indicated that he was planning a "Chicago Tea Party." After Santelli's rant, the Smart Girls Politics blog went viral, from approximately 400 viewers to thousands overnight. Santelli had struck a chord with the American public. At the same time, hundreds of new blogs began appearing, all focusing on the federal government's misappropriation of money and handling of the economy. A simple idea had quickly become a grassroots cry for something different.

A Tea Party member in early American costume waves a flag of protest outside of the U.S. Congress building on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., during a protest against President Barack Obama's health care reforms on March 20, 2010.



A few weeks earlier, on January 24, a few dozen citizens of Binghamton, New York, poured soda into the Susquehanna River. The familiar symbolism of the Native American headdress was utilized to protest a slate of taxes endorsed by Governor David Paterson, particularly a tax on soft drinks. Trevor Leach, a spokesman at the protest, noted: “We really want to see a sense of fiscal responsibility from the government and have them get their hands out of our pockets.” Recognized as the first Tea Party protest, the Binghamton demonstration exhibited an underlying current of dissatisfaction with the scope of government and resultant policies in a regional setting. However, these early scattered, disparate protests would soon coalesce into something closer to a national movement.

Social Media

Outside of the initial blogs, social networking sites became a key element of the Tea Party. Through these means, members were able to share videos and pictures of rallies, demonstrating to the world both their seriousness and following. Facebook pages were the first to emerge. Because the Tea Party has always prided itself on comprising a connection of local activities, rather than a top-down organization, these pages proved pivotal for coordinating activities. Shortly after the movement's emergence, Facebook was the central calendar for all group activities. Before the end of the first year, well over 3,000 Facebook pages were attached to the Tea Party.

Twitter was equally important for the Tea Party in its early days. A group of top conservatives using the hashtag #tcot began with only 25 members, but quickly grew to well over 1,000. Once membership expanded, the hashtag was used to organize town hall meetings, conference calls, and rallies, and to bring together citizens across the country in one place for the world to see. In order to make sure that information stayed in one place, organizers switched to utilizing wikis. Through this platform, they were more able to provide advice related to protest strategies and organization techniques.

In short order, the ragtag collection of complaints about government spending became a [p. 1234 ↓] cause. When Scott Brown successfully won Ted Kennedy's Senate seat in Massachusetts, it was clear that the Tea Party mattered. But not everything was perfect. Articles showed that the initial loose organizations created through social networks had begun to unravel as a result of fighting among groups. National organizations appeared and attempted to take over the ideology of the Tea Party movement. Closer scrutiny of the Tea Party's financial resources kicked off a debate over its self-description as a grassroots movement of "ordinary citizens." Increasingly inflammatory discourse on both sides of the issue heated up even further when the *New York Times* claimed that the movement's three biggest funders were media magnate Rupert Murdoch and Wall Street financiers David and Charles Koch, an allegation that was, subsequently, denied by the Kochs and others. Compounding these funding controversies were other issues.

As the initial euphoria around the movement's early momentum began to disappear, social networks were unable to keep the movement going. After all, the strengths of

social media lean toward bringing people together and sharing messages, not rectifying differences or working through political battles. Social media was not as successful as traditional media in bringing national attention to the organization. Fox News, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* took the time and energy to carefully study the movement and its followers.

A study by the University of Michigan zeroed in on the tweets of self-identified Tea Party members. Despite its grassroots nature, the Tea Party appeared to be running an organized campaign. Not only did members tweet more often, averaging 901 tweets during the study period, they exhibited behaviors suggesting a stronger community than their counterparts. Tea Party members retweeted one another more often, rebroadcasting a colleague's message an average of 82.6 times, compared with 52.3 retweets for Republicans and 40 for Democrats. They used hashtags (keywords preceded by the # symbol used to categorize tweets) an average of 753 times, compared with Republicans' 404 times and Democrats' 196 times. The researchers suggest this may be because the Tea Party members joined forces on Twitter to attack key Democrats. Among the party's most popular terms were "Nancy Pelosi," "Barney Frank," and "Clinton."

Characteristics

Prior to April 2010, many Americans, particularly liberals, operated on the belief that the Tea Party was the "flamboyant fringe" that David Brooks described. They were assumed to be uneducated, extreme right-wing patriots who opposed Obama on the grounds that he would bring socialism to America. The American media focused on the misspelled signs and apparent misunderstanding of government programs and economic decision making to paint the entire movement as more sizzle than steak in regard to the movement's potential.

In April, a combined CBS News/*New York Times* poll was released that directly refuted much of the general public's perception and helped show America who the average Tea Party supporter was. Many believed that the Tea Party solely emerged from dissatisfaction with Obama and Democrats, but the CBS News/*New York Times* poll

shows that 92 percent of Tea Party backers were at least somewhat dissatisfied with both traditional American parties.

However, Tea Party supporters, as suggested previously, are less likely to believe America needs a third party to compete with Democrats and Republicans than the average survey respondent, believing instead that the Republican Party has strayed too far away from its conservative roots and that government in general needs an infusion of new blood to counteract the complacency and cronyism that they feel has infected Washington politics. The one thing the media seemed to peg correctly was how the Tea Party focused far more heavily on economic than social issues, with 78 percent stating that economic issues were the most important considerations in the lead-up to the elections.

Tea Party supporters are educated and wealthy. They were called to action on the wings of the economic recession of 2007 and the election of a president who spoke of more government spending. They want to remain a network of independent organizations that primarily focus on pushing their issues, not individual candidates. However, they also realize that in many elections, the only way to do so will be by promoting candidates. [p. 1235 ↓] The Tea Party movement has succeeded by connecting local groups to the national conversation. Followers relied on new media sites like Facebook and Twitter to follow the movement especially in its infancy.

Because the localized groups were at best loosely connected, they were limited to social media to learn what was happening with similar groups across the country. While large umbrella groups, such as FreedomWorks, were occasionally accused of attempting to dominate the smaller groups, they also provided the needed social media training for groups to be successful in reaching followers. Grassroots groups were able to take off once localized chapters were given the proper tools to share their beliefs, methods, and results.

Impact

Contrary to the predictions of many, the Tea Party had a real impact on the 2010 elections. Whether it was by helping to unseat Democratic senators or forcing

moderate Republican hopefuls to become more conservative in their beliefs, the Tea Party showed the potential to be a lasting political force within the nation's politics. Considering that prior to the 2010 elections, the Tea Party had been referred to as a right-wing response to Obama, racist, unsustainable, or not fully committed to its beliefs, it is even more remarkable how the network of local organizations was able to prove naysayers wrong across the country about their possible electoral impact.

Originally deemed an un-American astroturf campaign by Nancy Pelosi, the Tea Party instead helped to usher in the era of Speaker John Boehner and the Republican Party in Washington, D.C. After the rank-and-file Tea Party members were largely dismissed as crazy ideologues, Tea Party candidates were dismissed in much the same manner by the traditional party establishment.

When the more conservative, Tea Party–supported candidates proved victorious in primaries across the country, moderate Republicans realized that they had been stuck in the middle to lose. Without social media, however, the organization may have never grown into the powerful political player it is today. While Barack Obama waged a successful social media campaign in 2008, Tea Party activities showed Republicans how they can do the same between his inauguration and the midterm elections.

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See Also:

- [Astroturfing](#)
- [Bachmann, Michele](#)
- [Boehner, John](#)
- [Bottom-Up Campaigns](#)
- [Campaign Strategy](#)
- [Campaigns, Congressional \(2010\)](#)
- [Campaigns, Grassroots](#)
- [Campaigns, 2012](#)
- [Christian Right](#)
- <http://ContractfromAmerica.org>
- [Political Base](#)

- [Political Parties](#)

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