

**CICERO FOUNDATION GREAT DEBATE PAPER**

**No. 14/03**

*May 2014*

---

**THE TEA PARTY:  
ROMANTIC REACTIONARIES  
OR GRASSROOTS POPULISTS?**

**NELLA VAN DYKE**

*Associate Professor and Chair of Sociology*

*School of Social Sciences and Arts*

*University of California*

*Merced, CA*

Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper No. 14/03

© Nella Van Dyke, 2014

All rights reserved

The Cicero Foundation is an independent pro-Atlantic and pro-EU think tank.

[www.cicerofoundation.org](http://www.cicerofoundation.org)

The views expressed in Cicero Foundation Great Debate Papers do not necessarily express the opinion of the Cicero Foundation, but they are considered interesting and thought-provoking enough to be published. Permission to make digital or hard copies of any information contained in these web publications is granted for personal use, without fee and without formal request. Full citation and copyright notice must appear on the first page. Copies may not be made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage.

## The Cicero Foundation

FRANCE

13, rue Washington

75008 PARIS

Tel. +33 1 45 62 05 90

Fax +33 1 45 62 05 30

Email [info@cicerofoundation.org](mailto:info@cicerofoundation.org)

THE NETHERLANDS

Hondertmarck D 45

6211 MB MAASTRICHT

Tel. +31 43 32 60 602

Fax +31 43 32 60 828

[cicerofoundation@gmail.com](mailto:cicerofoundation@gmail.com)

## **The Tea Party: Romantic Reactionaries or Grassroots Populists?**

Nella Van Dyke

The Tea Party movement exploded onto the American political scene in the spring of 2009, shortly after Rick Santelli's now famous rant on CNBC against the Obama administration's mortgage relief plan for homeowners, where he called for people to mobilize as a new Tea Party. On Tax Day that April, self-proclaimed Tea Party supporters held protests in dozens of US cities. By the end of the year, hundreds of Tea Party organizations had formed across the country. The Tea Party had an impact on the 2010 and 2012 Congressional elections, influencing some Congressional victories, and has continued to influence elections and dynamics within the Congress and Republican Party.

Many observers of the US political scene were taken by surprise by the rapid emergence of this new movement. However, while the movement did mobilize very quickly in response to contemporary political and economic conditions, it has long roots in American political mobilization and ideology. Drawing heavily on the contributions to my edited volume, *Understanding the Tea Party Movement* (Van Dyke and Meyer 2014), I will discuss the motivations for Tea Party mobilization, both in terms of political and economic conditions, as well as ideological principles. Is the Tea Party a response to contemporary social conditions on the part of romantics who feel that they are part of a long history of American revolutionary action, or do they represent a new push for democratic participation by grassroots populists? The answer, as I describe here, is more complex than it may appear at first glance.

### *The Tea Party: Grassroots Populists?*

Tea Party activists have presented themselves as patriots upholding a long tradition of American political action that opposes an unjust government. At the time of the movement's emergence, Tea Party activists argued that the Federal government was trying to tax American citizens and redistribute wealth unfairly by assisting homeowners in trouble with their home mortgages, providing expanded access to health insurance and health care, and instituting an economic stimulus program. They nostalgically hearkened back to an imagined US past where government was small and unobtrusive, the grassroots was mobilized and influential, and life was good. Displaying symbols from the American Revolution including "Don't Tread on Me" flags and tri-point hats, they have mobilized by creating an identity based on patriotism and grassroots populism.

Whether Tea Party activists represent the grassroots is debatable. There is little question that US citizens are frustrated with government and their elected political representatives. Recent polls by the Gallup organization show that only 13% of Americans approve of the way Congress is handling its job, close to all-time lows which occurred in late 2013 (McCarthy 2014). Both the Tea Party on the right and the Occupy Movement on the left in the US emerged partially in response to frustration with the political establishment and made arguments for increased citizen input, and in that sense, the Tea Party does represent a populist movement. However, traditionally populist movements in the United States, such as the farmers and workers that mobilized to form the People's Party in the late 1800s, have represented the interests of common people against economic elites. Research has shown that Tea Party members tend to be better educated and more economically well off than most Americans, and in this sense, the Tea Party is not a traditional populist movement. However, the US populace is diverse, and there is no question that American citizens are frustrated with the political elites governing the country.

The mobilization of the Tea Party was vastly assisted by substantial economic and cultural resources, to an extent that inspired some journalists to label the movement an "Astroturf" movement that does not represent true grassroots mobilization, but rather, a mobilization orchestrated by economic elites and falsely presented as grassroots. The movement's mobilization was aided by unprecedented media coverage by Fox News, which, unlike any media coverage of a movement in prior history, not only covered movement protest events as they happened, in a traditional journalistic model, but also announced events ahead of time and encouraged viewers to attend (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). In addition, an unusually large infusion of funding, in the form of a \$1 million donation to the organization FreedomWorks, vastly aided the movement's growth. FreedomWorks, a non-profit organization funded by the billionaire Koch brothers, used the money to found the Tea Party Patriots. The Tea Party Patriots immediately used its resources to establish a website that provided an easy means for individuals to connect with existing Tea Party organizations as well as with tools for creating new organizations. Thus, there is little question of elite involvement in the movement's mobilization. However, to characterize the movement as astroturf is not accurate. While elite resources facilitated the movement's growth, members of the grassroots make up the vast majority of its members. The movement thus represents both the grassroots as well as elite interests.

### *The Tea Party as a Reaction to Contemporary Social Conditions*

The timing of the Tea Party Movement's emergence is directly tied to political and economic conditions, and in that sense is reactionary. While Tea Party members are not necessarily among those most affected by the Great Recession, everyone in the US faced economic uncertainty during the time of the movement's emergence, and Tea Party members were unhappy with the government's response to the recession. In the face of economic uncertainty, many Tea Party members wondered why the government was offering assistance to corporations, and individuals who had made what they considered to be unwise choices in

financing their home, while offering nothing to people like themselves. Thus, in the absence of the recession, it is questionable whether the movement would have emerged when it did.

The movement also mobilized, as I and co-author Paul Almeida argue in the book, in response to political threats and the closing of opportunities. Conservatives, in particular, faced a difficult situation in 2009, being effectively shut out of institutional political power, with Congress and the White House both controlled by Democrats. Social movements typically emerge when citizens feel that they cannot exercise influence using traditional means. Social scientists who study social movements have argued that movements such as the Civil Rights Movement emerge in response to expanding political access, when members feel that they can finally exert some influence. However others, including myself (e.g., Van Dyke and Soule 2002) have argued that many conservative mobilizations represent a response to political threats and declining political influence. Similarly, Rory McVeigh's chapter in *Understanding the Tea Party Movement* argues that the Tea Party movement bears some similarity to the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, in that it emerged in response to similar social conditions perceived as threatening by relatively privileged citizens.

### *(Ideological) Roots of the Movement*

While there is little question that the Tea Party emerged in response to economic and political conditions, it nonetheless represents merely one episode in a long history of American political mobilization, and shows continuity with the past. Skocpol and Williamson (2012) argue that contemporary economic and political conditions presented right-wing elites, including the billionaire Koch brothers, Charles and David, with the opportunity to mobilize the grassroots in support of a conservative, free market agenda which they had been spending millions to promote for many years. The Koch brothers have been pursuing an agenda similar to that promoted by their father, Fred Koch, who opposed New Deal social welfare programs and government regulation as dangerous communist actions. Fred Koch helped found the conservative John Birch Society in 1958, which promoted an ideology that linked government

assistance programs to communism and questioned the patriotism and loyalty of those who supported the establishment and expansion of social welfare programs.

To characterize Tea Party mobilization as merely reactionary or grassroots populism glosses over the range of ideologies presented in movement discourse. Tea Party ideology is diverse, and there is variation in the ideas highlighted by different Tea Party organizations and individual members. *Understanding the Tea Party* contributors Scher and Berlet, drawing on interviews with Tea Party members in several states, identify a number of ideological elements to the Tea Party that have a long history in the US. These include fiscal conservatism, libertarianism, the Christian Right, Racism, the Patriot Movement, and conspiracy theories. In this sense, the Tea Party is just one in a long line of conservative mobilizations. One that presents itself in a new package, but in many ways offers up familiar conservative ideas.

In their research, Scher and Berlet found that although some Tea Party members espouse truly populist views and challenge the power of elites, others tend to side with economic elites and champion the free market. These activists view the federal government as a threat to business and America's future because of excessive taxation and the growing deficit. They feel that government programs unfairly redistribute wealth. These Tea Partiers represent traditional Republican fiscal conservatives who have turned to the movement because of their frustration with the Republican Party establishment. Scher and Berlet also talked to Tea Party members who are libertarian, and feel that government has become too big and bloated with regulations. These individuals call on an imagined romantic past, where government was small and unobtrusive. A significant portion of Tea Party members are Christian conservatives, who support restrictions on abortion and oppose gay and lesbian rights. They are part of what the Republican Party has come to depend on as its base, who have mobilized because they feel that Republicans in the government are not sufficiently upholding conservative principles.

While many Tea Party arguments are familiar and consistent with mainstream Republican philosophies, the Tea Party also includes ideological elements that are more radical, yet

nonetheless have a long history in American politics. Racism is a viewpoint shared by some Tea Partiers. In fact, researchers have found that Tea Party members tend to espouse racist viewpoints more than non-Tea Partiers, and racism is a common theme on Tea Party websites (Parker and Barreto 2013). Sometimes this racial antagonism is coupled with a sense of economic threat and the argument that immigrants take American jobs, or minorities take advantage of the system and receive an unfair amount of government assistance. Conspiracy theories are another ideological element with a long history which is found in Tea Party rhetoric. Some Tea Partiers believe that communists, socialists, or immigrants threaten the American way of life. Others take this view one step further, promoting views consistent with the Patriot/Militia movement by arguing that citizens need to arm themselves with guns to protect themselves and their families against threats from both outside and within.

The Tea Party includes a diverse array of ideological viewpoints, all of which have a long history in American political discourse. There is variation in the extent to which particular viewpoints are shared by Tea Party members. Perhaps the only consistently shared viewpoint is that government has over-stepped its bounds, and that established political leaders are failing to protect the economic and social health of the nation.

### *Conclusion*

The Tea Party Movement is a complex movement. Its members and organizations have mobilized in response to the economic recession and government policies, as well as frustration with political elites and Democratic control of Congress and the White House. Members call on a cherished, mythical US past where government was small and life was good. They see themselves as patriots who have the responsibility to fight for the life of their nation. Thus, its members can be thought of as reactionary romantics. The Tea Party movement is both a grassroots movement and one that represents elite interests, and therefore defies simple classification as a populist movement. On one hand, members call for more citizen input into the political process. At the same time, many Tea Partiers support a free market and anti-

taxation ideology that is consistent with wealthy interests, and the movement has funding ties to wealthy interests. Thus, the Tea Party includes grassroots mobilization by reactionary romantics, but its status as a populist movement is questionable.

The movement took many people by surprise and has some unique qualities, however, it has long ties to the past and represents continuity in American political ideology. There is no question that the Tea Party Movement has had an impact on American politics. However, the extent to which it continues to include high levels of grassroots citizen involvement remains to be seen. By early 2012, the number of Tea Party organizations in the United States had dropped by over 40%, and the frequency of protests on the part of members had fallen significantly (Arrillaga 2012). Scholarship on political organizations suggests that the movement will live on in some form (Taylor 1989; Wilson 1973). Once political organizations form, they are often very durable. However, given that many Tea Party views are out of step with majority opinion in the US, it is likely the movement will decline in influence.

## References

- Arrillaga, P. 2012. Tea Party 2012: A look at the conservative movement's last three years, *Huffington Post* [Online]. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/14/tea-party-2012\\_n\\_1425957.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/14/tea-party-2012_n_1425957.html).
- Parker, C. S. and M. A. Barreto. 2013. *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*. Princeton University Press.
- McCarthy, J. 2014. "No Improvement for Congress' Job Approval Rating," April 10, 2014, Gallup Inc. Accessed at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/168428/no-improvement-congressional-approval.aspx>.
- Skocpol, T. and V. Williamson. 2012. *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*. Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, V. 1989. "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance." *American Sociological Review* 54:761-775.
- Van Dyke, N. and D.S. Meyer (eds). 2014. *Understanding the Tea Party Movement*. Ashgate Publishing.
- Van Dyke, N. and S.A. Soule. 2002. "Structural Social Change and the Mobilizing Effect of Threat: Explaining Levels of Patriot and Militia Mobilizing in the United States," *Social Problems* 49(4): 497-520.
- Wilson, J.Q. 1973. *Political Organizations*. New York: Basic Books.