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The Tea Party: Burgeoning or Beaten?

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Philip Olsen and Alexa Robinson are sophomores at Florida Atlantic University and presented this paper at the 2011 NCHC conference in Phoenix, Arizona. Philip is continuing to pursue his bachelor's degree in English and philosophy and expects to graduate in 2014.
I. Introduction

The Tea Party is a grassroots political movement which has gained a considerable following since its inception in 2009. Its platform centers on a single issue — greater fiscal responsibility and conservatism on the part of each respective level of government. In this paper we examine the question of whether or not the Tea Party will develop into a viable political entity.

We concluded early on in the process of researching this paper that extensive statistical analysis would only be a fruitless endeavor because of the contemporaneity of the Tea Party movement. Any figures we might choose to use stood the chance of being superseded and made moot by the results of, say, the most recent Gallup poll. In performing our holistic analysis, we first examine historical precedent with regard to third parties in American politics, and determine that precedent does not indicate that the Tea Party, when considered as a third political party, will gain a significant amount of support. Although we recognize that the Tea Party is considered by many to be a social movement rather than a strictly political one, no one can deny that the Tea Party has had a significant impact on the polarization of politics in the United States. We then examine potential support for the Tea Party and directly juxtapose that with obstacles which the movement may have to overcome, because although the Tea Party has garnered a devoted following, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not these obstacles will outweigh the support. Finally, we look to the structure of the party itself, and argue that the Tea Party lacks a centralized structure conducive to success, and that its most visible and recognizable members are undeniably politically volatile. We strive to be as objective as possible in our analysis and maintain that we neither condemn nor condone any of the Tea Party’s policies or actions. The scope of our analysis is limited to simply ascertaining whether or not the Tea Party is politically viable.

II. Historical Precedent

Bluntly stated, history is not on the side of the Tea Party. Since 1990, 380 senatorial elections have taken place, and in only two cases, or 0.5% of the elections, has a third party candidate won. Furthermore, in the 302 gubernatorial elections since 1990, six third party candidates have won their elections, approximately 2% of the cases. Finally, no third party candidate has ever won a presidential election.

In this paper, we exclusively examine presidential elections in order to illustrate the principles governing third party politics in the United States. Some individuals may recall that the Tea Party movement is not, in fact, a distinct

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political party but claims solely to be a movement. For the purposes of this paper, “third party” refers to a distinct political entity with a platform that establishes it as separate from the two most powerful political entities in American politics at the time. We realize that this is by no means a complete or exhaustive analysis of third party politics, but we feel that our readers will be more familiar with presidential elections which have occurred than with elections on a smaller scale, and we also feel that the examples we present best capture the essence of the historical precedent regarding third party politics.

In 1860, the Democratic Party was split over the issue of slavery and became two separate entities, each of which nominated a candidate for president. The southern Democrats nominated John C. Breckinridge, a Kentuckian, as their candidate, and the northern Democrats nominated the Illinoisan candidate Stephen A. Douglas. Because the party was unable to resolve its internal difficulties, there were three primary candidates in the election of 1860, with Abraham Lincoln receiving the Republican nomination. Altogether, the Democratic candidates received 47.6% of the vote to Lincoln’s 39.8%. Had the Democrats been unified as a single entity, perhaps they would have been able to secure the presidency. However, Douglas alone received 29.5% of the popular vote, and Breckinridge only garnered 18.1% of the vote. Ultimately, Lincoln carried the most number of electoral votes and popular votes, and won the election.2

We can apply the paradigm derived from this example to the Tea Party. The movement has the potential to split the conservative vote between itself and the Republican Party since its single platform, fiscal conservatism, aligns most closely with the Republican ideology. If it were the case that the Tea Party placed its own candidate in an election wherein another Republican and a Democrat were also running it is conceivable that the Tea Party candidate would split the conservative vote and allow a Democratic candidate to gain a plurality of the popular vote, despite the fact that the conservative vote far outweighed the liberal vote. In this case, the Tea Party would fail to achieve its goals, as would the Republican Party.

In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt, fed up with his successor’s policies, decided to split from the Republicans and form his own political party, running against the incumbent William Howard Taft. Roosevelt named his party the Progressive Party, which quickly became known as the “Bull Moose” party. Though the Progressive Party took issue with many of the goings-on in the political sphere, its primary goal was “to destroy [the] invisible Government” and “to dissolve the unholy alliance

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between corrupt business and corrupt politics." On election day, the Republican candidate Taft received 23.2% of the popular vote to Roosevelt's 27.4%, but both were overshadowed by the Democratic candidate, Woodrow Wilson, who received 41.8% of the vote and won the election.4

Again, from this example it is apparent that a party which splits from a major political entity and runs on a platform based upon a single, broadly-defined issue, is bound to fail. This is not necessarily because of its single-platform but that certainly plays a part. More likely, third parties' consistent failure to succeed is due to the fact that the candidates split the vote of established political entities, thereby allowing a more established and stable party to gain a plurality of the votes and win the election.

Our final example is the presidential election of 1924. The incumbent president was Calvin Coolidge, a conservative Republican. The Democrats nominated the little-known John Davis, who too as a conservative. Many Democrats, reacting to the pervasive conservative zeitgeist, turned to the Progressive Party candidate Robert La Follette. The rift in the Democratic vote caused the same results as we have seen in the previous two cases: Davis received 28.8% of the popular vote to La Follette's 16.6%, and the election was won by Coolidge who received a massive 54.0% of the vote.5

This serves as a final example of a typical election in which a third party contends. If the party does gather enough support to be viable as a political entity, it almost always causes the popular vote to be split between itself and one of the already established political parties. With this rift, the established party which is not divided is able to capture the plurality and win the election. Therefore, the Tea Party will most likely split the conservative vote in the elections it attempts to win. This means that not only will the Tea Party lose the majority of the elections in which it participates, but it will also likely cause more liberal Democratic candidates to win elections, which would further work to the detriment of the realization of the Tea Party's political aspirations and goals.

We must note again that historical precedent does not, and cannot, in-and-of-itself negate any possibility of the Tea Party's viability. Certainly, in at least a few Senatorial and gubernatorial elections, third party candidates have won. Ultimately, though, precedent does not as a whole indicate that the Tea Party will be successful as a single-issue third party.

4 Please see note 2 above.
5 Please see note 2 above.
III. Potential Support

The Tea Party does have a degree of support, both public and political. Perhaps the most well-known example of the support the Tea Party has garnered is Rand Paul's winning of a Kentuckian Senate seat after being endorsed by members of the Tea Party. The Tea Party has also supported and endorsed other candidates who are not explicitly affiliated with the Tea Party and who nonetheless align themselves with the Tea Party's rhetoric. Scott Brown of Massachusetts, Dean Murray of New York, Christine O'Donnell of Delaware, and numerous others have received Tea Party support and have met with some degree of success in their respective elections.6

A Gallup poll conducted on Election Day of 2010 returned the following results: 73% of those polled stated that they believed the Tea Party had energized the political process and 54% stated that the movement has made political parties more responsive to public opinion.7 It is important to note that these individuals neither condemned nor condoned any of the Tea Party's actions; rather, they simply expressed their belief that the Tea Party has energized the political sphere. Nonetheless, such a favorable outlook on the ways in which the Tea Party has changed political culture in the United States supports the idea that the movement is making a good impression on the populace. If members of the public are comfortable in saying that the Tea Party has changed politics for the better, it is not too great a leap of faith to conclude that they must, at least in part, support the ideology of the party.

Furthermore, the movement has increased its support base, in both the public and political realms, in the recent past. A Gallup poll conducted in January of 2011 gathered data that suggested that 90% of those who self-identify as Republicans believe that elected members of the Republican Party should take the Tea Party movement's views into account when considering its policy moves,


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and another Gallup poll conducted in August of that same year noted that 25% of all Americans self-identified as Tea Party supporters. Thus one can see that the support for the Tea Party does not appear to be diminishing.

It is not difficult to understand why the public might support the Tea Party. Perhaps Michael Kazin, a Georgetown professor of history, best captures the essence of the movement’s popularity: “Whenever you have an economic crisis, if there’s a perception that the government is not doing enough for people, or people are afraid of what the government is trying to do for people, then you often have a populist upsurge.” The Tea Party, he says successfully portrays itself as “the virtuous common people against the immoral elite.” Since the Tea Party is able to cast itself in an us-versus-them light, it is met with support from citizens of the United States who have become disillusioned or disgruntled with regard to the political process. Populist movements have been met with some success. Theodore Roosevelt’s party conveyed its message in a similar way, and managed to garner a significant percentage of the vote.

Finally, the Tea Party may conceivably gain support from those American citizens who are influenced by the viewpoints of conservative pundits. Glenn Beck, Bill O’Reilly, and Rush Limbaugh all reach the homes of millions of Americans, and all have endorsed or been supported by the Tea Party. Regardless of their ideology, the fact that conservatism is linked with both these pundits and the Tea Party could indeed lead their viewers to vote for what they perceive to be the most financially conservative political entity.

The movement has been met with some limited success already, and it is difficult to quantify exactly what support the party can expect to receive in the future. However, our conjecture is that the party will continue to receive support from, in particular, individuals who already have conservative leanings, and those individuals who are disillusioned or disgruntled with regard to the political process.

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IV. Potential Obstacles

The Tea Party ultimately faces obstacles unique to its own established position. Without a doubt, the movement will be forced to deal with the same issues regarding public policy as do the Republican and Democratic parties, but the Tea Party faces three difficulties which are unique to its presence as a third party in the American political sphere. The first is that the rhetoric used by its members is often construed as being too far-right to appeal to the American populace. The second is that the party appeals to voters who already self-identify as Republicans; this presents the difficulty of the Republican Party strongly opposing the Tea Party’s stances in some instances. Third, the Tea Party has no well-defined stance on any issue except that of fiscal conservatism. With only one issue for voters to consider, the Tea Party does not appeal to a broad sector of the American populace.

According to Karl Denninger, one of the founding members of the movement, the Tea Party has moved away from the grassroots movement it once was and has devolved into a political entity which relies on inflammatory rhetoric to achieve, as he perceives it, next to nothing. The Tea Party, he says, is nothing more than “the Republican Party stealing the anger of a population that was fed up with the Republican Party’s own theft of their tax money.”12 For example, Rand Paul is well-known for his comment condemning civil rights, and Sarah Palin is equally notorious for her “blood libel” comment following the shootings of January 8, 2011, in Tucson, Arizona.13 The rhetoric used could prove to be damning; it is well known that to be politically successful one must be, above all things, politic. Furthermore, if it is indeed the case that the party has shifted its stance away from the original ideals of the grassroots movement which conceived it, the party could feasibly lose support from those who were involved in its inception.

A further obstacle the movement must overcome is the fact that it could potentially split the Republican vote. As we have shown in the section regarding historical precedent, not only do third parties nearly always lose elections, but they also consistently cause the ideologically opposed major party to win because of the divisive nature of the third party’s presence. The Tea Party must find some way to reconcile its stance with the Republican Party’s, or the divisiveness it causes may end up preventing fiscally conservative politicians from both the Republican Party


and the Tea Party from getting elected.\textsuperscript{14}

The party also is, above all else, a conservative one. It is defined by a single issue; it demands stronger fiscal conservatism from the government.\textsuperscript{15} While this does have broad appeal and exempts the movement from public scrutiny of a broad number of issues, it solely appeals to those members of the populace who care about and agree with the ideals of fiscal conservatism. Parties whose platform consists of a single issue rarely win elections, and in order for a political entity to become a viable institution, it must satisfy the demands of a population which has concerns that are broad in scope and not simply limited to one issue. This could prove to be damning to the movement. We assert that in order to attain its political goals, The Tea Party must address more than the single issue it currently does. At any rate, the Tea Party is seeing its support base within the public decline. Though 25\% of Americans still identified as supporters of the movement in August of 2011, that percentage is the lowest it has been since Gallup began recording the data.\textsuperscript{16}

Finally, it must be said that our examination of the potential support and obstacles the Tea Party must overcome is entirely holistic. Not only would it be impossible for us to quantify every piece of evidence for and against the Tea Party’s success, but it is also beyond the scope of our argument. It is our contention that the Tea Party will fail because of what we consider to be insurmountable obstacles, but our argumentation is based on conjecture and holism, not empiricism.

V. The Tea Party’s Structure

One of the greatest obstacles the Tea Party faces is the fact that it lacks a centralized structure. The party is not officially recognized, despite the fact that the movement has awarded itself the title of being a “party”. This lack of centralization could lead to its detriment. With no leadership, every member of the party is able to project his or her own political beliefs onto the movement itself, and in some cases this may lead to politically volatile statements being made under the guise of Tea Party rhetoric.

For instance, Rand and Paul’s now infamous remark claiming that the civil rights movement was nothing more than a mistake has worked to the movement’s detriment since the words first passed from his lips.\textsuperscript{17} Because Rand Paul is as much of a spokesperson for the Tea Party as anyone else who self-identifies as a

\textsuperscript{14} We acknowledge, of course, the victory of both mainstream Republicans and Tea Partiers in the most recent Congressional elections. We contend, however, that the rift the Tea Party causes within the Republican party will only worsen, to the detriment of both camps, unless some attempt is made to reconcile their differing platforms.


\textsuperscript{16} Please see note 9 above.

\textsuperscript{17} Please see note 10 above.
member of the movement, every comment he makes could be construed to be indicative of the movement's general and overarching policy standpoints by either the ingenuous or opponents to the party.

The same problem applies to the highly visible Sarah Palin, who remarked after the Tucson shootings that she was the victim of a "blood libel," and whose "don't retreat, reload" rhetoric was viewed by both Democrats and mainstream Republicans to be violent and volatile.\(^{18}\) Palin has aligned with the Tea Party on some issues and has rejected its ideology in other instances. However, because the party has no centralized structure which can admonish or laud Palin for her comment, it is left to the public to determine which of Palin's remarks are Tea Party rhetoric and which are of her own manufacturing and independent of the movement. Palin has, since removed herself (comparatively) from the public eye; her presence no longer has the same bearing on the movement's success as it did in the beginning of 2011.

Finally, there is Michelle Bachmann, a self identified Tea Party sympathizer, who has announced her candidacy for the 2012 presidential election. She appears to be in a prime position to assume some sort of leadership position within the movement. At the time of this writing, we have yet to see how Bachmann will treat her affiliation with the movement throughout the course of her candidacy. It seems likely, though, that with this many individual politicians competing for highest visibility in the movement, it will be difficult for the Tea Party to begin the process of formalizing and defining its structure.

The Tea Party's greatest problem with regard to structure is that, quite simply, it has no discernible form. There are now two factions within the movement -- the Tea Party Express and the Tea Party Patriots -- members of both of which have accused each other of accepting inappropriate donations from corporations. What is relevant to our discussion is not the ways in which the factions' policies differ from each other, but rather the fact that both of these entities lack central leadership and a clearly defined organizational structure. Without a central leadership to guide the movement and maintain consistency with its members' rhetoric, the Tea Party movement is bound to disintegrate.

A movement which is based on a single issue leaves the door wide open for its members to voice distinctly differing views on any matter, from public to foreign policy. With these contradictory voices competing for listeners, the issue on which they stand united becomes overlooked in favor of the marked differences amongst the voices. Unless the Tea Party organizes itself into a strongly centralized political apparatus, it is destined to fail.

\(^{18}\) Please see note 10 above.
VI. Conclusion

Our research for this paper began in early 2011, and at that time our findings suggested that the potential obstacles the Tea Party might encounter far outweighed any support it might garner. Our holistic analysis yielded the conclusion that the Tea Party would not develop into a viable and long-lasting entity capable of effecting change and notably influencing the American political sphere.

However, because of the movement’s status as a contemporary political apparatus, our initial conclusions had to be subjected to scrutiny once we took more recent evidence into account. Our analysis has attempted to refrain from making value judgments with regard to the Tea Party’s platform, and we hope to have been as objective as possible with our rhetoric. At the time of this writing, then, our conclusion is that there can be no definitive answer to the question of whether or not the Tea Party will survive the next few election cycles, let alone eventually find its place as a distinct and perennial political entity. Historically speaking, the Tea Party movement, as a third party, stands little chance of gathering a following capable of effecting any real political change. And though the Tea Party began as a grassroots movement, in order to secure popular support it must work to make its policies more accessible and reasonable to the public, and it must address the problems its lacks of centralized structure causes. We do feel, though, that we can make one final assertion with confidence: the Tea Party movement has produced certain effects upon the American political sphere whose reverberations will be felt for years to come, regardless of whether or not it is committed, eventually, to oblivion.
Works Cited


