



The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism

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This revised edition features a new afterword, updated through the 2016 election.

On February 19, 2009, CNBC commentator Rick Santelli delivered a dramatic rant against Obama administration programs to shore up the plunging housing market. Invoking the Founding Fathers and ridiculing -losers- who could not pay their mortgages, Santelli called for -Tea Party- protests. Over the next two years, conservative activists took to the streets and airways, built hundreds of local Tea Party groups, and weighed in with votes and money to help right-wing Republicans win electoral victories in 2010. In this penetrating new study, Harvard University's Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson go beyond images of protesters in Colonial costumes to provide a nuanced portrait of the Tea Party. What they find is sometimes surprising. Drawing on grassroots interviews and visits to local meetings in several regions, they find that older, middle-class Tea Partiers mostly approve of Social Security, Medicare, and generous benefits for military veterans. Their opposition to -big government- entails reluctance to pay taxes to help people viewed as undeserving -freeloaders- - including immigrants, lower income earners, and the young. At the national level, Tea Party elites and funders leverage grassroots energy to further longstanding goals such as tax cuts for the wealthy, deregulation of business, and privatization of the very same Social Security and Medicare programs on which many grassroots Tea Partiers depend. Elites and grassroots are nevertheless united in hatred of Barack Obama and determination to push the Republican Party sharply to the right. *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* combines fine-grained portraits of local Tea Party members and chapters with an overarching analysis of the movement's rise, impact, and likely fate.

The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism Details

Date : Published January 2nd 2012 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published December 2nd 2011)
ISBN : 9780199832637
Author : Theda Skocpol , Vanessa Williamson
Format : Hardcover 245 pages
Genre : Politics, Nonfiction, History, Sociology, Political Science

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From Reader Review The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism for online ebook

Jack Collens says

Very clearly biased, but an interesting, in-depth exploration nonetheless. The methods are reminiscent of Fenno's work and offer a refreshing detour from the tech-heavy books that dominate political science these days. Though I am a quantitative scholar, these types of studies are necessary and among the most illuminating in our discipline.

Carl says

In depth history and analysis of the Tea Party by 2 Harvard women political scientists with liberal leanings. Major focus is on the independent, local, "grassroots" organizations but networked aspects, overarching national and statewide organizations, self-appointed spokespersons, & major donors are also investigated. Tea Partiers are found to be largely white, comfortably retired working class, with above average educational attainment. Members are found to be remarkably knowledgeable and well-informed about the mechanics & processes of government including how bills are introduced, promoted & ultimately passed, how individuals can enter into & gain a foothold in politics & how influence may be exerted. At the same time & curiously these same people are found to be remarkably misinformed and/or uninformed about the actual intended effects of bills, issues & candidates. In other words, they are subject to egregious manipulation. This work was largely completed prior to the elections of 2012 & therefore its significant lacking is currency but it still is a great source for knowledge of the Tea Party & its activism.

Ravi says

An excellent, scholarly work on the history of the Tea Party and their influence on GOP. Through first hand interviews the authors detailed the the nature and composition the of Tea Party groups across the country, and their fears and beliefs.

They proved what I suspected all along: Tea Party folks are not really opposed to socialism; they do strongly support large socialist programs that benefit themselves like Medicare, government healthcare for veterans, Social Security, Medicare Part D, etc. But they are viscerally opposed to socialism that benefits others, esp. "out groups" like racially and ethnically diverse younger cohorts.

The authors also explore the generational divide that currently exists in the US and how ultra-right wing groups like Freedom Works, Heritage Foundation etc. are trying to exploit this divide to dismantle the social safety net built for the middle class in the 20th century.

Beth says

Why? Why do I keep reading books about these people, hoping to understand and maybe even relate to them, or at least be able to discuss things with them?

It is an exercise in futility.

Why do I continue to read about people who say "science has become a religion" in this country? Or people who worry about teachers "converting" their children to environmentalism?

WHY??

The hypocrisy of it all is mind-boggling. Like this:

"...the Tea Party attitude towards government regulation: regulations are GOOD to harass my enemies and reinforce my values, policy preferences, and preferred definitions of American social identity; but regulations are BAD for the kinds of businesses and endeavors me and mine are engaged in."

Or this: "Like earlier rounds of right-wing activism, the activism of Tea Partiers is driven by societal oppositions more than by detailed policy logic."

And this: "...it should be obvious that Tea Partiers have a self-centered understanding of democracy...Little thought is given either by local activists or by national advocacy groups to discussing vital national issues with people outside the Tea Party."

The bottom line is that there are three aspects to this so-called movement: grassroots activists, the millionaires who fund them, and the media that promotes them. We've seen the lessening of this group's influence in recent elections, but they have forced the conversation far to the right, and this influence will be felt for many years to come. The book is pretty fair in the beginning, but by the end, I think the authors were as exhausted by these people as I was, and their liberal views come through. That is reflected in their reviews on Amazon...there are some pretty unhappy teabaggers there! I feel that this is not a long-lasting group. It's just another iteration of hardcore, ultra-right wing conservatives that we've seen in the past with the likes of the John Birch Society or Father Coughlin's followers.

WHY do I keep reading about these people? One guy they interviewed in Arizona keeps a saddle on a sawhorse in his living room and SITS ON IT while watching John Wayne movies. Why? WHY??

[sobbing]

Mandy Havert says

I did not finish this. It was written alright, but it wasn't holding my attention the way it should have. I may pick it up again later.

Jennifer says

First, a true story. I was reading this book a few weekends ago while camping with my family, and the man who was camping one site over approached me as we were packing to go home. "I noticed you were reading a book about the Tea Party", he said. He was very friendly as he said it. "Are you a Tea Party supporter?". "Actually, no." I told him. "I'm just reading the book because I'm interested in the effect they're having on current affairs and politics". He stared at me for a minute, his demeanor noticeably changed, and he walked away from me. I have no idea if he was a Tea Party proponent, sympathizer, Facebook fan, whatever. But it brought home an observation the authors have in the book: outsiders' views don't matter. I'll read almost anything under the premise that if the book sucks, I'll just move on. After this encounter, however, I almost felt like a secret agent for the non-Tea Party population, going undercover to find out whatever sordid secrets they are hiding. Cue the 007 theme song!

It was difficult, when reading this book, to separate out my thoughts about the writing and how the subject is presented and my thoughts about the Tea Party itself. The authors, Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, try hard to stay neutral and present their research findings in a dispassionate way. But every now and then, a nugget of snark comes through; one of my favorites is on page 48, "...while in Virginia, the emphasis was on the state's capacity to opt out of health care reform. Of course, whatever any Tea Partier wants to do with his or her private property is everywhere justified in exalted Constitutional terms". I suspect, however, that the Tea Party is a difficult subject to write about in a neutral way; their positions are so incredibly polarizing, it is hard not to have a visceral reaction to some of the interviewees' opinions.

If you are interested in current affairs at all, I do recommend this book. Parts of it dovetail neatly with another book I recently finished, "Bad Religion". Both authors describe a reverent nationalism as religion attitude of certain segments of the population. It's unnerving to read how misconceptions inform much of the positions that individual members have taken on issues, and the intolerance that Tea Partiers generally have, according to the authors, towards any segment of the population other than fellow Tea Party members. The authors have done a substantial amount of fieldwork and research on the Tea Party phenomenon.

Andrew says

"...the two authors have attended many meetings of highly educated liberals in and around academic communities. In those meetings, detailed knowledge of public policies is common. People know exactly what is in Obama's health reform law, exactly how all kinds of taxes work, and can tell you who pays for and benefits from government expenditures. They can debate the intricacies of cap and trade versus carbon taxes. But even liberal PhDs are often extremely vague about how U.S. politics actually works. People will proclaim in meetings that President Obama should just give a speech on a particular priority - and act as if that would get it done, forgetting the complexities of Congressional rules and alliance-building. Opinionated, educated liberals often have no idea what happens in state legislatures, local government boards, or political party committees. Grassroots Tea Partiers, by contrast, know the rules and procedures for passing bills and advancing regulations in detail - for local, state, and national government. But at the same time, they hold wildly inaccurate views of what is in, or not in, public policies or legislative proposals. They know process, but flub content - the exact opposite of the academic liberals."

Written between the elections of 2010 and 2012 so fairly early in the Tea Party's history. There is more about the interaction between grassroots groups, activist billionaires, and conservative media, and less about the

actual views and activities of the grassroots groups than I was looking for. Still worth reading.

Theresa Leone Davidson says

My ongoing quest to find out how, politically, the United States wound up in its current odious state, with so much divisiveness, an ineffectual Senate that refuses to stand up to the horror show in the White House, etc., led me to this book. Based on a lot of interviews, this book offers at least a partial explanation, particularly regarding how adamant Tea Partiers were that they push their party to the far right. Yes, well, hope you are all happy with the morally bankrupt man running the show now. For anyone interested in politics, I would recommend this.

Colin says

I think the authors' assessment of the Tea Party's organization and motivations, which comes off as perhaps a bit overly defensive or deferential in parts of this book, has largely become accepted wisdom at this point and is now applied more broadly to many Trump voters, so in some senses most of this book ended up feeling fairly familiar. Tea Partiers were/are primarily older, relatively well-off, white Americans largely reliant on a closed conservative information ecosystem who became strongly aware that they were at risk of relative loss in status and political power following Barack Obama's election and mobilized at the grass roots level to oppose the redistribution of resources to groups that they viewed as undeserving, alien, or in some way "others". The movement was to varying degrees subsequently captured and co-opted by established elite conservative organizations who had sought to back up their de-regulatory and wealth transfer policy preferences with a grassroots movement. A similar phenomenon has also happened between the arguments made during the Trump campaign and the actual staffing and legislative priorities of the administration, and Trump's core nativist message clearly aims to the Tea Party base. Of course, I've-got-mine-and-keep-the-government's-hands-off-my-Medicare have been core themes and elements of the conservative movement for quite some time, which the book acknowledges, but does not belabor the longer history of. One interesting point noted in the book, and something to explore in further reading, was the suggestion the Tea Party emerged in part to fill a void left by the collapsing organizational infrastructure of the Christian right / Moral Majority.

Ricky Rovelli says

The book, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, written by Theda Skocpol, accurately and analytically describes the Tea Party movement and its uncertain position in history. The book covers the efforts of grassroots Tea Party supporters coupled with the contributions of unknown organizations and their effect on the Republican Party as a whole. This book also provides both positive and negative aspects of this movement, making the whole idea of the Tea Party extremely transparent and truly open to the public.

The greatness of this non-fiction work lies with its unbiased theme. The author of this book truly presented both sides of the argument when it came to the Tea Party, and this sort of attitude really allows the book to flourish as a source of information. The personal accounts and interviews presented in the book served to bring a personal feeling and identity to the Tea Party, only helping to buttress the eccentricity of this work of

literature.

The only large weakness that can be found in this work is its repetition. In an effort to push across the main points of the book, the author, in many instances, repeated many key phrases and ideas. This resulted in very long and boring chapters, chapters which could have been shortened and infused with much more rigorous and diverse information.

My affinity for politically-based books drew me to read this book, and I'm pleased to say that it's one of the best political books I've ever read. If you're looking to brush up on some modern day history, this book is the exact work you're looking for!

David Joseph says

The Tea Party is unreasonable. This book did not change my mind on that point. But are they good for democracy? I guess the answer is mostly yes. How can it not be good to have engaged citizens (even if the quantity of said citizens is a LOT less than what one might think. The coverage the Tea Party received makes one think they are an ocean, when they are more like a pond--albeit a very noisy, angry pond). At the same time, this complete unwillingness to compromise does a lot to increase partisan gridlock not just in Washington but at every level of politics. Maybe this doesn't matter to the engaged citizen, but for the majority whom look at politics with indifference, all it does is increase their cynicism and unwillingness to enter the fray. The Tea Party also is not very fact-friendly.

Kay says

This book has a lot of valuable information about the tea party, but it suffers from a couple of things. First, it's an academic account, which means that it's written in an incredibly dry way. It's easy to imagine them retelling some of the interviews or tea party meetings they attended around the country in a much more compelling way. Second, this book suffers from the first draft of history problem. It's a bit too early to tell if the tea party movement will continue to have a lasting impact on American politics. At least for now, it appears to be on the wane in influence among national politics. Some of its biggest stars, Bachman and Palin, have departed from public life, and it's clear that the national Republican Party finds its tea party caucus more and more difficult to control. (The researchers also wrongly predict the GOP would retake the Senate in 2012, a move that clearly overestimated the tea party's influence in a presidential election year.) Also because the events described are so recent, I didn't learn that much new information. The 2010 midterms are still fresh in my mind.

Still, I'm sure this book provides a foundation for further research and it's an area of study worthy of attention.

Kathleen says

It's astounding to me how kind and generous Skocpol and Williamson are to the Tea Party activists. I'm not sure that I could maintain that kind of generosity for approximately 250 pages. One thing that I find a bit

troubling with this book is that Skocpol and Williamson really downplay the extent to which lobbying groups are influencing the views and activities of the "grassroots" activists. They go to great pains to show that the elite advocacy groups and the grassroots groups are separate and have separate policy preferences. However, what they don't pay adequate attention to (in my view) is the way in which Tea Party projects predated the 2009 emergence of the grassroots organizations and the role that advocacy groups played in training people to become "grassroots" organizers. Essentially, tea party activists act like corporate America's "street team" which is a much more intimate connection than Skocpol and Williamson describe. But a fantastic book either way.

Alex Nelson says

The authors try very hard to give a dispassionate, neutral overview of the formation of the Tea party.

It is difficult not to "read in" various implications, e.g., the numerous Birchers and "Oath-Keepers" populating the Tea Party seems to support the hypothesis that racism, not economic concerns, spurred the creation of the Tea Party. But at other times, the authors use cold, hard data to support alternate hypotheses.

For example, the Tea Party consisted of mostly middle-aged and older, middle- to upper-class White people living comfortably but not in luxury. People in this economic class would be concerned when there is a huge recession (c.f., the Great Recession) as it drained their retirement accounts and made their homes (another investment) less valuable. Economic pressure is undeniably one of the factors in its creation.

But on the flip side to this point, where were the Tea Partiers when President Bush started 2 wars and (in a historically unprecedented maneuver) had tax cuts throughout his presidency?

A solid point they raise, that I think needs more historical context, is the outcome of the 2008 presidential election left the GOP "leaderless" -- or in their words, "Outgoing Republican President George W. Bush was extremely unpopular, and the failed presidential campaign of John McCain left the GOP without a clear leader". It would have been nice for the authors to compare this to 1996, when Dole lost to Clinton, or 1976 when Ford lost to Carter. Why was there no Tea Party *then*? Again, I have a hard time believing this doesn't lend support to the Racism hypothesis.

Racial beliefs are discussed in a couple pages (pp. 68--77 are dedicated to the Tea Party's social beliefs, with the first couple pages dedicated to Racism in particular).

Even supposing racism had no part in the Tea Party formation, the narrative is fairly pitiful (if true): the Tea Party was formed out of fear. Fear of losing what comfort middle-aged Whites *had*, fear of losing what they associate with "America", fear plain and simple. I suppose this is the real explanation the book gives, fear created the Tea Party --- and this fear stems from multiple causes.

The dynamics *after* the Tea Party was created is, I think, undeniable...even among Tea Partiers. The movement was "hijacked" by rogue billionaires, and like any James Bond movie we know it cannot end well.

Blair says

Here is an honest attempt by two liberal academics to understand the emergence of that conservative political movement known as the Tea Party. It contains some high level analysis of the organization, but its strength comes from the in depth personal conversations with ordinary Tea Party members. The book explores how the opinions of individual members are often different than those of the lobby groups that seek to influence and control them. In fact, one could say this entire work is a study of contradictions.

The book examines the connection between conservative lobby groups, Fox News and the Tea Party. The usual conspiracy crowd will make much of this and see little else. But the authors make it clear that the Tea Party is a genuine grassroots movement, not simply a fabrication by Big Money. On the other hand, it is easier to sustain a movement with lots of money available and a TV network dedicated to your cause.

The demographic of Tea Party members can be described as older, whiter, more affluent, better educated (please lose the ignorant red-neck image) and more religious than other Americans. For a movement based on self-reliance and small government, is it surprising how many members depend on their social security payments. This is symbolized by the slogan, "Keep the governments hands off my Medicare," but they actually do know where the money comes from. They distinguish between programs whose recipients (people like them) have earned the benefits from handouts to freeloaders (people not like them).

Tea Party is about preserving what they see as the greatness of America's past. Its members have great reverence for the U.S. Constitution, giving it almost the same status as the Bible. They have transferred their Bible study techniques directly to the constitution. And like the Bible, they interpret it liberally (if you forgive the irony of using this word) according to their pre-conceptions, for example ignoring the separation between church and state. The authors point out that the Founding Fathers were mainly Deists, far from being fundamentalists, and Tea Party positions resemble those who fought against the constitution, and secessionists during the Civil War.

As individuals, Tea Party members are kind and considerate with those whom they personally encounter. But everyone else is subjected to crude stereotyping, including their own children who are seen as lazy and entitled. Unfortunately the Revealed Truth of their religion leads to absolute certainty about everything else, so they see no need to reach out and understand other viewpoints. Thus the people who do not trust government spend all their time trying to influence that same government, often to coerce the people they disagree with.

The Tea Party phenomenon strikes me as a right wing version of the 1960's. There is the same insular self-righteousness attitude, while it is really our interests (as we pretend to care about the greater good) attitude, and even some of the same tactics. The authors report, "Indeed, some Tea Party members are explicit about borrowing from the left. A number of our interviewees cited the work of Saul Alinsky, the famed community organizer and author of Rules for Radicals." The difference is the hippies believed in a fantasy future, while the Tea Party longs for an idealized past.

Read this book to understand the people who make up the Tea Party movement as decent, intelligent, well-motivated individuals. It is very difficult to shift the thinking of a group of people with mutually reinforcing beliefs. But the information in this book suggests that people can be reached on a personal basis, if approached with respect and a genuine attempt to understand where they are coming from.
