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Tales of the Tea Party

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ABSTRACT

Liberals are desperate to find a storyline that explains the right-wing resurgence, and then explains it away.

FULL TEXT

A month ago, a U.C.L.A. graduate student named Emily Ekins spent hours roaming a Tea Party rally on the Washington Mall, photographing every sign she saw.

Ekins, a former CATO Institute intern, was examining the liberal conceit that Tea Party marches are rife with racism and conspiracy theorizing. Last week, The Washington Post reported on her findings: Just 5 percent of the 250 signs referenced Barack Obama's race or religion, and 1 percent brought up his birth certificate. The majority focused on bailouts, deficits and spending - exactly the issues the Tea Partiers claim inspired their movement in the first place.

The easy thing would be to take them at their word. But for liberals, that would be too simple. The Democrats are weeks away from a midterm thumping that wasn't supposed to happen, and the liberal mind is desperate for a narrative, a storyline, something to ease the pain of losing to a ragtag band of right-wing populists. Something that explains the Tea Parties - and then explains them away.

The "Tea Partiers are racists" theory is the most inflammatory storyline, but there are many more. Let's consider them, in order of increasing plausibility:

The Tea Parties are driving Republicans off a political cliff. This has been a common assumption since the Tea Parties first sprang up, and in some cases - Christine O'Donnell; Carl Paladino; and Rich Lott, the Nazi re-enacting House candidate - it has been vindicated. But just as often, the Tea Parties have elevated smooth-talking, eminently electable candidates, from Pat Toomey in Pennsylvania to Marco Rubio in Florida and Ken Buck in Colorado.

Liberals insist that the cliff-plunge is still coming - it's just been postponed until 2012. O'Donnell's primary victory, for instance, was hailed as proof that Republicans would inevitably nominate Sarah Palin for president, dooming their party to a devastating defeat. But the Tea Partiers may prove more pragmatic than their critics hope. In a recent Virginia Tea Party straw poll for 2012, the surprise winner wasn't Palin: it was New Jersey's governor, Chris Christie, nobody's idea of an unelectable extremist.

The Tea Partiers are puppets of the sinister rich. They're an "Astroturf" movement, this theory goes, rather than a real grass-roots uprising - a narrative that got a boost this summer when The New Yorker's Jane Mayer published a much-discussed takedown of the Koch brothers, billionaire libertarians who have financed groups that organize and strategize for the Tea Parties.

But the Kochs have been seeding libertarian causes since Barack Obama was a community organizer, without ever conjuring up anything remotely like the Tea Party. Attributing the anti-Democratic backlash to their

machinations is a bit like blaming George Soros for Bush-era opposition to the Iraq war: In both cases, it's more likely that the money is following the public mood than the other way around.

The Tea Parties are just the John Birch Society all over again. In a recent issue of Mother Jones magazine, Kevin Drum argued that the Tea Parties are nothing new: Whether the president is F.D.R., L.B.J. or Bill Clinton, a batty conservative populism flourishes "whenever a Democrat takes over the White House." Writing in The New Yorker, the historian Sean Wilentz made a similar point, linking Glenn Beck's daffier ideas (and the Tea Parties who love them) to the Cold War-era paranoias of the John Birch Society.

These parallels are real. But there's a crucial difference. The Birchers only had a crackpot message; they never found a mainstream one. The Tea Party marries fringe concerns (repeal the 17th Amendment!) to a timely, responsible-seeming message about spending and deficits. Which is why, for now at least, it's winning over independents in a way that movements like the Birchers rarely did.

The Tea Partiers are hypocrites. That is, they say they're for small government, but they don't want anyone to touch their Social Security and Medicare. This is by far the most persuasive liberal storyline. Poll after poll suggests that Tea Partiers are ambivalent about trimming entitlements, even though that's the spending that will ultimately send either deficits or taxes through the roof.

On the other hand, some Tea Party-backed candidates have been refreshingly courageous on this front - whether it's Rand Paul telling Fox News that he'd support higher deductibles for seniors, or Buck apologizing to Michael Bennet, his Senate opponent in Colorado, for Republican demagoguery on Medicare.

So the jury is still out. If Tea Party standard-bearers end up being as hypocritical on entitlements as most American politicians, then this liberal narrative, at least, will have been vindicated.

But for the sake of America's finances, liberals should hope that the Tea Party proves their most convincing story wrong.

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