



Tea Party's hot mess: Inside a noisy, disenchanting movement

After Chris McDaniel's unlikely defeat in Mississippi last night, an angry movement is about to get even angrier

By: Elias Isquith
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In Mississippi on Tuesday, U.S. Sen. Thad Cochran defeated state Sen. Chris McDaniel in a runoff election to determine who would be the state Republican Party's nominee for Senate in the extremely conservative state. Despite the fact that the two men were more or less indistinguishable on issue positions, the race was remarkably contentious and largely defined by dueling allegations of impropriety and fraud. Indeed, while non-conservatives may consider the differences between the so-called establishment and Tea Party wings of the GOP to be slight, the primary battle that reached its culmination last night is clear evidence that Republicans themselves strongly disagree.

On that front, if nowhere else, Mississippi GOPers have themselves an unlikely companion: University of Washington associate professor Christopher Parker, who is the author of 2013's "Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America" and is a firm believer that the divisions within the GOP are significant and likely to endure. Hoping to gain a keener insight into the Tea Party mind, Salon recently called Parker to discuss his research, his recent Brookings Institution paper on the Tea Party and why he doesn't think the kind of bickering and dysfunction we saw in Mississippi as of late is likely to go away any time soon. Our conversation is below and has been edited for clarity and length.

You make a distinction between Tea Party conservatives and establishment conservatives, even though they often support essentially the same policies. How come?

There are a couple of really key differences, one of which has to do with change. An establishment conservative doesn't necessarily embrace change of any kind; in fact, there's a reason they cling to conservatism, because they prefer stability. So they don't necessarily embrace change, but what they do do is they know that [change is] necessary in order to maintain a stable society over the long haul ... What they want is, if a change is going to take place, they prefer to have organic, controlled change versus revolutionary change. In other words, *evolutionary* versus *revolutionary* change. You can see that in the works of Edmund Burke, who railed against the French Revolution because it was such a drastic change and [because] he would have preferred more evolutionary change, not something so drastic that it completely

overturned the foundations of society. The difference between these establishment conservatives is that they see change as a necessary “evil,” if you will, in order to maintain a stable society over the long run.

Now, a reactionary conservative, they don't want change at all. In fact, they want to look backwards in time to a time during which their social group — their power and cultural hegemony was unquestioned. Beyond that, they will do anything they can to protest social change of any kind, up to and including breaking the law ... That's what the Klan did; that's what the Tea Party has done on a couple of occasions with their violence. It's not as much violence as you saw with the Klan in the 1920s, but you do see some of the ways in which they break law and order. If you're a real conservative, you're supposed to be all about law and order. But these reactionary conservatives — they're not completely about law and order if it means capitulation and the loss of their social prestige.

Let me just tell you one second point: Another axis of difference between the two is that an establishment conservative will see policy differences or policy preference differences between them and progressives as merely *political* differences. But these reactionary conservatives see policy differences, or differences of policy preferences, as a contest between good and evil. They have this Manichaeian way of looking at politics, this apocalyptic way of looking at politics. Therefore, compromise cannot be [allowed]. Compromise will not be tolerated whatsoever, because they see it as concession to evil, whereas an establishment conservative knows that compromise is necessary.

Could you expand a bit on the point you just made about Tea Party lawlessness, because one of the common claims the right makes in defense of the Tea Party is to contrast its supposed law-abiding nature with the — again, supposedly — more anarchic behavior of the Occupy Wall Street crowd.

Think about what happened in Arizona, with the attack of some of the Arizona representatives' offices that voted in favor of the Affordable Care Act. Some of their offices were vandalized by Tea Partiers — that's one example. A more recent example, quite honestly, is what recently happened in Nevada, those people that went on that shooting spree that killed those cops ... those people were linked to the Tea Party. I'm not saying they were members of the Tea Party, but they were Tea Party sympathizers. As a matter of fact, [their victims] were draped in the Gadsden flag. So, I'm just saying ... [Tea Party supporters are] not above breaking law and order. They're not above challenging law and order.

What are some other popular conceptions about the Tea Party that you think are mistaken?

The bottom line is that a lot of people assume that the Tea Party people are just crazy ... but that's not the case. I mean, that's really not the case, and I want to dismiss that misconception as soon as I can ... Another misconception [is] that the Tea Party is really just a bunch of racist people and that their movement is about racism — and it's really not ... It's bigger than racism. People who tend to support the Tea Party, they tend to be sexist, they tend to be homophobic, they tend to be xenophobic; so it's not just about race. It's about *difference*. It's about anything

that violates their phenotypical norm of what it's supposed to mean to be an American: white, mainly male, middle-class, middle-aged or older, heterosexual, and native born. Anything that falls beyond that description is considered not to be a true American and therefore ... these groups are encroaching on what they see as the "real" America, the America that they've come to know and love through their lifetime.

Would you include Christian among those things a Tea Partyer is likely to think an American is *supposed* to be?

Christian, writ large, yeah. I would definitely say that.

To that point, though, what would you say to Tea Party folks who would point to the popularity of women like Sarah Palin — or people of color like Ben Carson — as proof that charges of bigotry are unfounded?

They would say people like Ben Carson and Herman Cain [are] these sort of "silver-minded Negroes." They're the exceptions. Now if we want to talk about looking at black folks as a whole, no — they're racist. There are some exceptional people that agree with their views whom they like and whom they want to hold out there to blunt any claims that they're racist; they're going to pick a couple token people. But that doesn't absolve them of racism.

OK. So what was your other point about Tea Party misconceptions?

My other point was that [Tea Partyers are] not crazy. People want to say that they're crazy, and they're really not. They want to maintain their social position, their social prestige; and as Frederick Douglass once said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will." So it's rational to want to hold onto your position; it's completely rational. It's about the means through which [Tea Partyers] do that — that's what the problem is.

One could say, "Maybe they need to be more educated!" But that's another fallacy as it pertains to the Tea Party: People think they're dumb. They're not dumb. Twenty-six percent of all strong Tea Party identifiers have at least a bachelor's degree. People think they're poor, or that they're working-class. No, they're not. Twenty percent of all Tea Party households have at least a \$100,000 of income. So they're not dumb, and they're not working-class or poor — and this has been the case with Birchers, this was the case with the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, this was the case with the Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s. Same demographic group, every time.

Another problem is just the double-talk that they use. They claim they're about small government; they're really not. They claim that they don't like Barack Obama cause he's a progressive; have they really looked at his legislative record? He governs as a centrist, regardless of what they believe his beliefs to be. On that, if you look at what happened on George Bush's watch — I mean, let's be for real: the deficit on George Bush's ... expanded 104 percent ... If you look at Clinton's tenure, it only expanded about 14 percent. If you look at the national debt, how much that expanded on George Bush's watch; if you look at the extent to which discretionary spending in George Bush's first term expanded — I think it expanded by like 48-49 percent. I mean, come on! We didn't see any Tea Partyers out there at the time. We saw nothing

when George Bush was doing all this stuff. George W. Bush got TARP passed. We saw nothing. Now we get Obama in, and *now* the world is going to shit ...

If I could play devil's advocate here, what about the argument that many Tea Party types — like Glenn Beck, for example — like to make that says George W. Bush was bad, and they didn't like him either, but that Barack Obama's taken everything about Bush that was bad and made it even worse?

Was there a Tea Party when Bush was in office? No. [Laughs] All right? I'm not saying that it's not possible; all I'm saying is that, to the extent to which there was some sort of tangible push-back or counter-mobilization [on the right] against Bush, we didn't see it when he was in office. So there might have been some people at the Heritage Foundation or the Cato Institute, and there were — especially at the Cato Institute — who had serious issues with Bush's policy. I'm not saying that there weren't. But we didn't see any mass movement. We didn't see any mobilization of this kind. Not even close to the mobilization of the Tea Party. Think about the number of people that are Tea Party members, just at the national level: We're talking maybe 700,000 people. But if we're talking about Tea Party *sympathizers*, people who strongly identify with the Tea Party, we're talking about 45-46 *million* people ... We didn't see anything like this when Bush was in office, period.

That ties in with another one of your arguments, which is that the Tea Party is, fundamentally, *not* an astroturf phenomenon but rather a legitimate grass-roots movement.

It's not the astroturf movement that a lot of people think it is. I said that in that Brookings piece and I've backed that up with some evidence. Now, we saw what happened in Virginia, right? You had this guy, Brat, who got almost zero support from national Tea Party organizations — and look what happened. So I think there's really valid data showing that the Tea Party movement is not the astroturf movement that people think it is.

You've argued before that we shouldn't expect to see the Tea Party movement dissipate so long as Barack Obama — or even Hillary Clinton — is president, because it's fundamentally a reactionary movement driven by people who are afraid of losing privileges. That makes sense, but at the same time, if their complaints are so much about power and station rather than more abstract ideological disagreements, that doesn't leave those of us who aren't conservative may options when it comes to negotiating with these people. So while I get that establishment Republicans will make their peace with the Tea Party because their differences are relatively minor, what are the rest of us supposed to do?

What happens with these reactionary, right-wing movements, historically, is that they tend to coalesce whenever [the people involved] believe social change is happening too fast ... So if there's no threat to the "American way of life," these people will go underground, as people say. But that doesn't mean they'll necessarily go away. For a while, they will go underground and we won't have to deal with them. But as soon as they perceive another existential threat, then they will reappear again. It happens all the time, historically.

Something I'm wondering is, since reactionary conservatism is so tied-up with identity — specifically, a white, mostly male and Christian identity — does this mean that we can expect to see movements like the Tea Party disappear in the future, when the U.S. is projected to no longer be majority-white? (I know the whole question of what is whiteness is loaded and the definition has changed throughout American history, but let's table that element, if we could.)

I think it's possible, but I don't think it's going to happen in the near future. Maybe in 50 years ... But when you see these voter-suppression efforts, and the ways in which [voter ID proponents] continue to move the goal posts in order to ensure that they get the [voters] who are, for lack of a better term, more pro-status quo ... and if they continue to move the goal posts, then they will continue to extend this sense of cultural entitlement and the hegemony they feel they are supposed to have.

But they're losing and [that dominant position] is slipping away, little by little ... They're prolonging their cultural hegemony through these shenanigans that they've been conducting for the last four or five years, and it's going to continue to be that way until the demographics in this country change sufficiently so that Republicans [have] more of an incentive to start listening to the policy preferences of people that don't look like them ...

That makes me wonder something that, in all honesty, makes a me a bit uncomfortable but: If you're correct and it's the case that these people won't ever back down so long as they feel their social placement threatened, would it be possible to argue that Democrats would be better off nominating candidates who are not superficially threatening — i.e., who are white guys — while still pushing the same policy goals as they would under Obama or Clinton?

It doesn't make sense logically because — you see what the Tea Party is doing to the Republican Party right now? It's tearing it apart. So if I were a strategist, I'd continue to pick candidates that make the Tea Party group want to remain politically viable because it's ripping the Republican Party in half.

But what about the idea that though the Tea Party has unquestionably hurt the GOP in some ways — they'd probably control the Senate by now if not for the Tea Party, for example — it's also helped them gain a real iron hold over the House of Representatives and many state governments? Might their effect on the Republican Party not be quite so uniformly negative, then?

I think that's a legitimate argument ... Short of having some election reform ... then that's going to continue to be the case ... That's a tough question, Elias. I think you're right, I think it could continue to muck up the world before we can get legislation passed; and if that's the case, then we have to get a strong president in there that's not afraid to pass an executive order, if it comes to that.

As Obama is doing now, with his strategy of doing as much via executive order as possible.

Right. We're probably going to have to resort to something like that.

Last question: Were you surprised to see Rep. Kevin McCarthy beat out Rep. Raúl Labrador in the vote for a new House majority leader, now that Rep. Eric Cantor is stepping down? Labrador was generally seen to be the Tea Party's preferred candidate, but McCarthy won. Do you think this is surprising and does it mean the establishment within the GOP is more powerful than conventional wisdom implies?

To the extent that the Republicans still run the House and Boehner's speaker of the House, I'm not surprised at all that the establishment is starting to exercise a little more of their power. Boehner has the control; he's the speaker of the House. He has a lot of discretion and a lot of power. So while these folks are sitting in the House right now, and they know that the Republicans are more than likely to win the House again in 2014, they don't want to run against Boehner. I don't think they want to do that. So I'm not surprised in the least that an establishment person won. Now, we're going to see what happens in the continuing primary season as they continue to roll along, because I think the Tea Party is going to be around and I think they are far from finished. So we'll see. I think the real litmus test is going to be what happens in the next Congress. That's going to be the real litmus test.