



The Tea Party–Trump Decade

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In the 2010 off-year elections, the Republican Party achieved a once-in-a-century electoral triumph. They picked up sixty-three House seats, the biggest midterm gain since 1938, and six senators, which allowed them to filibuster all Democratic initiatives. They gained six governorships and occupied the executive branches of government in 60 percent of the states. The Republicans gained 675 state legislative seats and won control of both legislative chambers in twenty-nine states. After the 2014 off-year sweep, the GOP picked up more than three hundred legislative seats and had total partisan control of nearly half the states.

President Obama described the 2010 defeat as a “shellacking,” but he surely would have used even more graphic terms had he realized the defeat was just the sound of the starter’s pistol for a decade of anti-government fervor, national gridlock, and Tea Party–Evangelical rule in most of the states.

Academics and pundits wrote of the scale of the 2010 electoral victories and the conservative swing in Congress, but they did not realize then that this sweep would lock in a decade of an escalating conservative war against Democrats and democratic governance that would allow Donald Trump to become president of the United States without winning the popular vote or a conservative mandate. That was before they realized this Tea Party–Evangelical domination was inspired to stomp out any effort by the Democrats to use the government for any public purpose.

This historic but deep and prolonged political moment was produced by the rebellion of the conservative, antiestablishment wing of the Republican Party, which deeply feared a socialist Obama presidency, fueled by a genuine grassroots resistance that brought 250,000 into membership and organized rallies and marches, the work of the Koch brothers, far-right billionaire allies, and Fox News, which devoted itself to promoting the Tea Party resistance.

Ultimately, 400,000 to 810,000 people joined 542 rallies across the country and 250,000 would join one of the Tea Party groups—Tea Party Patriots, ResistNet, Tea Party Express, Tea Party Nation, FreedomWorks Tea Party, and 1776 Tea Party. Some of the groups were genuinely local and decentralized, and the Tea Party Patriots led the membership growth after the Tax Day rallies in 2009. The average congressional district had 402 Tea Party members. At the core were the 250,000 activists and 150,000 who posted personal profiles on Tea Party sites in 2010.

None of this mobilization would have been possible without Fox News. Three in five Tea Party supporters watched Fox News, and its coverage of the Tea Party grew in the month leading up to Tax Day and continued at a respectable level in the month afterward.

The Tea Party wave election created a Republican Congress and the freshmen class was determined to disrupt regular order in the House and President Obama's plans on increased government spending, above all else.

With such an ideological wave, Theda Skocpol wrote, the Tea Party freshmen had a mandate "to demand immediate measures to slash public spending and taxes," "go nuclear," and "refuse compromises with Democrats over the funding of government." They were acutely conscious of the Tea Party protests to stop the Democrats from moving their agenda on the economy, health care, and climate change. They had a mandate to repeal Obamacare, slash government spending, and block "cap and trade." Sent by the Tea Party and Evangelical base, the legislators were determined to stop immigration and abortion, too.

From Keynes to Austerity

The Tea Party mandate was to stop President Obama's efforts to address the financial crisis and deep recession.

President Obama took office in a maelstrom. The economy shed 650,000 jobs a month during his transition to the job and 780,000 a month after he was inaugurated. People faced massive financial destruction in the devaluation of houses, stocks, and securities.

President Bush, President Obama, the U.S. Treasury, and the Federal Reserve battled to enact and implement the bailout of the eight Wall Street banks. They were focused on restoring stability to the financial system, which was successful, though little was done to restrain executive bonuses or give the taxpayers ownership in the banks going forward.

People were in pain, angry about the greed that had sunk the economy, though equally angry about the bailouts of the irresponsible and the lack of accountability.

President Obama went to the Congress to pass an economic recovery program costing \$888 billion, which was unprecedented at the time, though liberal economists publicly and privately said it was not big enough to get the wrecked economy moving again.

Unemployment was nearly 10 percent for much of 2010. All the seeming government activism left the economy well short of its capacity, and with 8.8 million people unemployed at the end of 2010—two and a half years after the financial crash. Clearly, America needed a federal government willing to spend and invest much more heavily in infrastructure and other job-creating programs that the private sector would and could not do.

Conservative economists allied with the Republican Party argued that "public spending would be offset by a fall in private consumption and investment." They argued too that fiscal restraint gives private businesses the confidence to grow investment.

So, at this fragile juncture "the very serious people" talked about "growth-friendly consolidation," "cutting the welfare state in the name of producing more growth," and "preemptive tightening." The German elites believed wrongly that fiscal recklessness had produced the financial crisis, so "fiscal prudence" made this a morality play in which austerity is

“penance,” even if it made no economic sense. The new GOP House had their mandate to stop the spending and get to the budget austerity that America needed.

Unemployment was stuck at 7.8 percent at the end of 2010 and the economic stimulus of federal spending and tax cuts was set to expire in the coming months, yet the Tea Party candidates ran on a “Pledge to America” that committed them to cut federal spending by \$100 billion.

The U.S. Treasury announced that August 2, 2011, was the deadline when the United States would begin defaulting on its debts, unless the debt limit was raised.

The Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and Vice President Joe Biden reached a deal that ended the Bush tax cuts for those earning over \$450,000 per year, but two thirds of House Republicans voted no. This Congress was set to be the most unproductive Congress in history, but that missed the real story. The Tea Party members and activists cut federal spending and pushed America into a period of austerity.

The White House and Congress were at an impasse with just days left before a potential default and government shutdown. Again Biden and McConnell reached an agreement. The president got the debt ceiling increase, but to get it, spending was cut by \$1 trillion over the next decade, as Congress created annual spending caps on discretionary federal spending.

They successfully produced a decade of federal budget austerity, when the economy desperately needed investment spending.

And do not lose track of the assault on spending in the states after 2010. All but four states in the country cut state spending and public services when the financial bubble burst, the economy contracted, and jobs disappeared. The Republican-controlled states led the way, slashing spending beyond what was needed and declining to use their “rainy day” funds to forestall cuts.

While education spending was cut almost everywhere to balance budgets, twelve states simultaneously cut corporate taxes and taxes on the wealthy, ensuring spending cuts would be larger than necessary.

In this brave new world, unemployment insurance—a state-administered, contributory program that provides workers up to twenty-six weeks of benefits if they lose their job without cause—was now seen as “welfare.”

Deconstructing Government

The Tea Party-Evangelical-dominated GOP disrupted and shifted the ideological posture of the House members to the right in unprecedented fashion, yet Democrats still controlled the White House and the U.S. Senate, though no longer with a filibuster proof majority.

The states, however, were very different. After 2010, the GOP gained enough governors, executive branches, and legislatures to move the Tea Party’s anti-Obama and anti-government agenda. They passed immediate sweeping tax cuts for corporations, the energy companies, and the wealthiest, which were paid for with major cuts to public services. They relished cutting the largest state expenditure, education and teacher salaries, which meant breaking the power of the education unions.

The GOP won a deeper wave in 2014 when President Obama tried again to convince working people and the Democratic base that his administration had created millions of jobs and the

economy was moving in the right direction. That out-of-touch strategy gave the GOP control in half the states and enabled them to escalate their efforts to deconstruct government.

This effort got a lot of help from the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which was funded by the Koch brothers and other conservative philanthropists, like the Coors, Olin, Scaife, Milken, and Bradley families. It was supported by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers, tobacco and pharmaceutical companies, and the fossil fuel companies that evolved over time. They got policy support from the Cato Institute, Mercatus Center, the Heritage Foundation, and Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform. And Americans for Prosperity helped mobilize in constituencies, buttressed by the Tea Party activists in 2010.

Reform states. The Koch brothers and their allies prioritized deconstruction of the government in Wisconsin and North Carolina because those states were key to unpicking the Democrats' Electoral College majority, but, just as important, their leaders had once led efforts to reform politics and check corporate power, led in adapting to big social changes, and made deep investments in education and the university system.

What happened to Kansas? The Koch brothers and Koch Industries made sure their home state was a model that would get the nation's attention, and Sam Brownback's 2010 election as governor of Kansas and the 2014 credit downgrade of the state by Moody and Standard & Poor did just that. The Koch family was the biggest contributor to this Tea Party favorite in Congress and uncompromising pro-life conservative. "Our dependence is not on Big Government," Brownback declared, "but on a Big God that loves us and lives within us."

The Rust Belt states. The Kochs got their 2010 Rust Belt opportunity in Pennsylvania and Michigan—and with the latter, home of the progressive labor movement and the American labor movement and the United Auto Workers, becoming a right-to-work state.

Stopping Universal Health Insurance in GOP-Controlled States

After the 2010 election, stopping the implementation of the Affordable Care Act became a litmus test for the Tea Party groups. Federally, the Tea Party bloc in the House and Senate would not entertain any "fixes." And in the states, they stopped it in its tracks, even though nationally, the ACA had dropped the proportion of uninsured from 16 to 11 percent between 2011 and 2017.

The GOP governors were under pressure from state businesses and civic groups to participate in the health program and to accept the expansion of Medicaid in their states, but the Tea Party fought them for taking even a planning grant. The Tea Party governors proudly announced their refusal to cooperate in any way.

Fully twenty-four states where the GOP had effective control refused to set up health care exchanges to allow people to select private health insurance plans and joined the suit to get the Supreme Court to rule that the ACA was unconstitutional.

In 2019, the Trump administration Justice Department decided to join the suit brought by thirteen Republican attorneys general contending the ACA mandate that health insurance policies must cover anyone, regardless of preexisting conditions, is unconstitutional. If they succeed, the ACA consumer protection guarantees, including the ban on using preexisting conditions as a factor in health insurance, will be history.

Achieving an End to Abortions in GOP-Controlled States

The Tea Party movement and activists in 2010 were vehemently hostile to government, but they were socially conservative as well. So, fully half of the GOP members were determined to end legal abortion, and their pro-life elected leaders pressed for changes in law and regulations that would mean women could not get a legal abortion in GOP-controlled states.

The Supreme Court in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* maintained the legal standards of *Roe v. Wade*, but allowed the states to regulate access to abortion, as long as no “undue burden” was placed on women. Well, the Tea Party wave in 2010 was the firing of the starter pistol in the GOP-controlled states to push the limits of “undue burden.”

This strategy of what pro-life groups called “Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers,” or TRAP, laws, has radically changed the abortion landscape. Fully twenty-six states now require that clinics be turned into mini surgical centers at very high cost; four of the states require abortion providers have admitting privileges at a local hospital, which they never get. This process has left six states—North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Kentucky, Mississippi, and West Virginia—with one clinic.

Suppressing the Vote

The GOP governors in the 1990s led the battle to bar undocumented immigrants from getting public services, particularly education. The House Republicans in the Tea Party wave would follow that by focusing on preventing undocumented immigrants from getting welfare, food stamps, and access to federal health care programs. With Obama’s election, the Arizona governor led the state effort to enforce America’s immigration laws, but lost in the federal courts in 2012. President Obama was in charge of America’s immigration laws for the time being.

But after the Tea Party wave elections in 2010, the governors moved to enact laws requiring voters show photo IDs at the polls, supposedly to discourage illegal voting, particularly by undocumented immigrants. Some added proof of citizenship requirements.

Immigration was the entry point, but there was no limit to how far the governors were willing to go.

The Tea Party governors moved to reduce the participation of minority and younger voters by requiring a government-issued photo ID at the polls, ending same-day voter registration, reducing early voting by one week, and requiring university students to vote where they had registered their car.

America Gagged on Climate Change

In May 2014, the National Climate Assessment concluded, “Climate change is already affecting the American people in far-reaching ways,” including the “extreme weather events with links to climate change.” The report said, expect “prolonged periods of heat, heavy downpours, and, in some regions, floods and droughts,” which “have become more frequent and/or intense.” Sea levels were rising, oceans becoming more acidic, and 2012 was the hottest year on record in the United States.

GOP leaders were silent or rejected the conclusions. They didn’t need to be reminded that three quarters of Tea Party and Evangelical Republicans rejected any role for humans or fossil fuels in

climate change. They didn't need to be reminded how big a role the Koch brothers and the oil and coal industry played in their campaigns.

Almost immediately after the release of the National Climate Assessment, the House Republicans, with near unanimity, barred the Defense Department, against its wishes, from using any funds to implement the report's recommendations.

When candidates began auditioning for the 2016 presidential race, every one affirmed the new GOP orthodoxy on climate change: no human causation and therefore no reason for government action.

Then, *The New York Times* displayed a graph across two thirds of the front page above the fold showing in as dramatic a way as possible that 2016 was the fourth hottest in 140 years. Those government scientists at NASA found "the five warmest years in recorded history have been the last five, and that 28 of the 19 warmest years have occurred since 2001." What was so striking and surprising to the scientists was "the relatively sudden rise in temperatures and its clear correlation with the increasing levels of greenhouse gases."

Yet America was under the control of the Tea Party-dominated GOP that kept America gagged and powerless.

Inequality and Middle-Class Decline: "The Cupboard Is Bare"

In the spring of 2014, Thomas Piketty published the U.S. edition of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, which used global economic data over centuries to establish definitively America's soaring economic inequality, indeed, a "second Gilded Age," where, Paul Krugman writes, the "incomes of the now famous 'one percent,' and of even narrower groups, are actually the big story."

Piketty demonstrated that American inequality today "is quantitatively as extreme as in old Europe in the first decade of the twentieth century," but he also acknowledged that "the structure of that inequality is rather clearly different." Two thirds of the top Americans' wealth was from current income, not capital accumulation. Today's economic titans are the CEOs and senior executives "earning" their "super salaries," not rentiers living off inherited wealth and capital gains.

The ratio between the compensation of the average worker and the CEOs of the top 350 American firms (ranked by sales) began to surge in the mid-1990s, interrupted dramatically by bursting bubbles, but headed to an unimaginable gap. The ratio in 2013 was 295.9 to 1.

Nobel economist Joseph Stiglitz concludes in *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* that the 1 percent is able to use government to "write the rules of the economy" to benefit themselves, while middle-class incomes have stagnated. They have stagnated because of the broken link between the rising productivity of American workers and wage gains. That lack of connection symbolizes almost more than any other emerging fact about the economy the centrality of government policy.

Conservatives universally downplayed the worry about inequality, the top 1 percent, and middle-class decline, and argued, critically, there isn't much the country can do about them anyway. What we can do is address the most important economic problem, people pulling out of the labor force, which is produced by government policies that encourage idleness.

The truth is GOP leaders think the decline of the family and the growth of dependence on government are the real problems facing the country, not the decline of the middle class or growing inequality. Liberals grew “the welfare state” and created a growing “mass dependence on entitlements” that produced pathologies in so many areas. The answer is to provide less security and comfort, so people will become more self-reliant and seek out work. Working people and the poor benefit from a government that provides less, not more.

So, the debate over inequality and the middle class ended in this period of Tea Party dominance with governments shredding the social safety net and slashing tax cuts for the super rich and corporations. And it welcomed the 1 percent and corporations spending increasing millions to ensure that they would keep getting a government that writes the rules of the economy to work for them.

No one imagined that a Tea Party-Evangelical–dominated GOP would get a whole decade to suppress any consideration of the building problems facing the country and so much time to destroy the government’s capacity to act. But America today looks like some kind of wind-up spring toy that has been turned and turned while someone uses all their strength to hold down the coil to keep the toy from suddenly spinning wildly and flying up to the ceiling. What happens now that the man holding it is gone, swept away by the elections of 2018 and, soon, 2020?

How long will it take Democrats to regain their innovative public spirit and willingness to use government to tackle problems that have only gotten dramatically worse?

Democrats know how to grow an economy that creates better paying jobs, how to make health care universal and dramatically reduce climate risk. They know greatly increased investment in education and infrastructure must no longer be stalled.

Are people really ready to clean the swamp that this Tea Party period took to shameless levels?

Are people ready to restore democracy?

Do elites understand how desperate the country has been to address these collective problems?
Are Democrats ready to use government after this decade of anti-government tyranny?