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Why the Tea Party's Waning, Not Winning It strayed from its original focus on economic issues, and became just the far right wing of the GOP.

By Michael Tanner

As the Tea Party celebrates its five-year anniversary, many commentators are asking whether the grassroots anti-Big Government movement is still relevant.

In some ways, this seems a silly question. The Tea Party has been enormously successful in changing the terms of the national debate on issues such as debt and spending. And, while its favored candidates have suffered some high-profile defeats, it has also won important victories. The Republican midterm sweep of 2010 would not have been possible without its energy and enthusiasm.

Yet it's also true that the Tea Party's clout is waning. According to the most recent Gallup poll, just 30 percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of the movement, the lowest level in its history. This seems particularly unsettling when polls also show that the public still overwhelmingly supports the Tea Party objective of limited government. In fact, a recent Gallup poll shows a record 72 percent of Americans feels that big government is the greatest threat to the future of the country. Voters who feel that way should be flocking to the Tea Party in droves.

They are not.

Some of it might be a question of tactics. Americans tend to dislike confrontation from their political leaders. Certainly, things like the government shutdown tended to turn off some voters, especially when misrepresented by a biased media. The overheated rhetoric of some tea-party leaders may also drive away otherwise sympathetic voters. Calling every dissenting Republican a RINO or inferring that President Obama is some sort of crypto-Muslim Communist is not going to win friends or influence people. Some tea-party activists definitely come across as a bit over-caffeinated.

But there is also a more fundamental issue at play here: Is the Tea Party still the Tea Party?

Sparked by outrage over the Wall Street bailouts, the original Tea Party was motivated by an opposition to Big Government. The motto of the Tea Party Patriots, one of the largest and most influential groups, was "fiscal responsibility, limited government, and free markets." The Tea Party's core issues were the skyrocketing national debt and opposition to Obamacare.

Social issues were not part of the platform. In fact, Jenny Beth Martin, leader of the Tea Party Patriots told the *New York Times*, “When people ask about [social issues], we say, ‘Go get involved in other organizations that already deal with social issues very well.’ We have to be diligent and stay on message.”

In an April 2010 CBS News/*New York Times* poll, barely 14 percent of Tea Party supporters said social issues were more important to them than economic issues.

As a result, the group was able to build a broad coalition of economic conservatives — traditional Republicans, of course, but also libertarians, and fiscally conservative socially tolerant suburbanites who had drifted away from the GOP in recent years. In national surveys, roughly 40 percent of Tea Party supporters once described themselves as libertarian or libertarian-leaning.

These disparate groups might have disagreed about whether Adam and Steve should be able to get married, but they agreed that both Adam and Steve were overtaxed and being spent into bankruptcy by an out-of-control federal government.

But the Tea Party has drifted away from its strict economic-conservative origins. Yes, opposition to Obamacare and government spending remain priorities. But increasingly issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and immigration have become the tail that wags the dog.

Thus you now hear Judson Phillips, the head of Tea Party Nation, a group that once said social issues were “just not something that is on our radar,” denouncing gay marriage as “a freak show, involving 3 men, 5 women, 2 dogs, and a Bengal tiger.” Or Scottie Neil Hughes, of the Tea Party News Network, suggesting that women who have abortions should be jailed. And, during last summer’s congressional town-hall season, Tea Party Patriots was organizing not against Obamacare or raising the debt ceiling, but against immigration reform.

According to the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, Tea Party members are now farther to the right on social issues than Americans as a whole or even the Republican party. For example, while the public now narrowly approves of gay marriage, Tea Party members disapprove by nearly two to one. The public is largely split on abortion, but 60 percent of tea partiers believe it should be illegal in all or most cases. Tea Party members are roughly 20 percentage points more likely than the general public to oppose a path to citizenship for illegal aliens. A majority of Tea Party supporters now say that their religion is the most important factor in determining their opinions on issues.

As a result, economic conservatives, libertarians, and anti-tax moderates are leaving the movement. Fewer than a quarter of tea partiers now describe themselves as libertarian-leaning. In last fall’s Virginia gubernatorial election, socially moderate suburbanites overwhelmingly backed Democrat Terry McAuliffe over tea-party favorite and arch-social-conservative Ken Cuccinelli.

The tea party has begun to look not like a broad-based coalition of economic conservatives but simply the most conservative wing of the Republican Party. The tent is getting smaller. As Steve Billet, professor of political management at George Washington University, noted, “The polls

suggest that where the Tea Party has failed is when they tried to expand their agenda beyond the explicit budgetary issues, and got much more involved in some other social issues.”

It's not as though the issues that first sparked the Tea Party have gone away: TARP itself may have been largely repaid, but the culture of crony capitalism behind it still thrives. Deficits are in temporary decline, but the national debt continues to grow and the unfunded liabilities of Social Security and Medicare continue to mount. Obamacare, if anything, is proving to be an even bigger disaster than anticipated. The need for a strong voice in opposition to Big Government is as great now as it has ever been.

And the Tea Party is far from powerless. It continues to tap into grassroots mistrust of the Washington establishment. Its ability to mount primary challenges will keep Republicans from straying too far from its agenda. But if it hopes to regain the power it once had to reshape the American political landscape, it should remember why it started in the first place.