



Tea parties fail to stop food bill

Leaders struggled to rally the grassroots around niche policy issue.

By **Ambreen Ali**

The tea parties are having trouble channeling their grassroots base.

While tea-party leaders have been able to get activists fired up about protests and elections, it has been much harder to incite that same fervor over niche policy issues.

That could undermine the movement's ability to channel its electoral gains into a policy force and hold accountable the lawmakers activists helped elect.

The struggle played out this week as several tea-party groups and conservative commentator **Glenn Beck** failed to stop the Food Safety Modernization Act (**S. 510**) in the Senate.

"Enough phone calls were not made," Debbie Dooley, a Tea Party Patriots national coordinator, said.

Only six of the 18 Republicans Tea Party Patriots targeted voted against the bill. It sailed through the Senate 73 to 25 Tuesday with a broad coalition of bipartisan support that included the powerful **U.S. Chamber of Commerce**.

"It was not like Obama-care," Dooley said. "This was not a high profile issue like the health care bill was."

Tea Party Nation, a separate group, also **urged** its members to call Congress against the bill. The tea parties opposed the \$1.4 billion bill over its price tag and "government intervention" with private industry.

The legislation gives the Food and Drug Administration the authority to recall food and requires it to inspect farms and food processing facilities. It also puts greater responsibility on manufacturers and farmers to prevent food contamination.

A spokeswoman for Sen. John Barrasso (R-Wy.), who was on the tea-party hit list, attributed his nay vote to concerns about the bill, not influence from tea-party activists.

"Senator Barrasso voted against S. 510 because it gives the F.D.A. far-reaching new powers and discretionary authority to regulate small farms and producers," she said.

The quiet response from the grassroots on this issue may come as a surprise given the Patriots' success on other fronts.

Earlier this month, the group received an **overwhelming response** when they called activists to action against newly elected members accused of choosing an "establishment" event over one being hosted by tea partyers.

In that instance, so many activists responded that the group's leaders sent multiple requests asking them to stop calling the soon-to-be lawmakers.

"It's time to turn off the heat," they wrote, but the calls kept coming in.

This time, the leaders struggled to turn the heat on.

Tim Chapman of **Heritage Action**, the grassroots arm of the conservative think tank by the same name, said part of the problem is that food safety falls below the radar for most Americans.

"But grassroots groups certainly can make an impact," Chapman said. "It would be wrong to suggest the conservative grassroots cannot engage on highly technical, seemingly minor issues."

In addition to the tea parties, the food bill faced opposition from small farmers, organic growers, and urban foodies concerned about its effect on local food movements.

In the end, some believe the support of big business and industry groups simply outweighed opposition by the smaller groups.

"The tea party movement has often proceeded from an accurate view that Washington does what some of the population, that which has lobbyists, wants done," Walter Olson of the libertarian Cato Institute said. "You could see that play out here."

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