



## How the Tea Party Plans to Put the Pressure on the GOP

*The grassroots, fiscally conservative movement has put Republicans back in power, but how will it get them to cut spending?*

by [Ben Adler](#) November 04, 2010



Justin

Lane / EPA-Landov

Robert DeMarco holds flags during a Tea Party rally in White Plains, NY, in late October.

For a grassroots insurgency whose core activists say was started in opposition to a proposal by President Bush—the TARP programs to rescue the nation’s major financial institutions—the [Tea Party](#) movement has ended up in a strange place: helping to elect Republicans. To be sure, Tea Partiers have moved the Republican caucus to the right, especially on fiscal issues, but first and foremost they have returned to power a House Republican leadership that was complicit in Bush’s free-spending, interventionist ways. The likely next speaker of the House, Rep. John Boehner of Ohio, supported Bush’s most expensive and activist government initiatives: the Medicare prescription-drug benefit, the invasion of Iraq, No Child Left Behind. Veteran congressmen—and pork procurers—are poised to take control of powerful committees. The Tea Party-backed victors, by contrast, will be relatively powerless freshmen.

What You Missed: Midterm Elections in 7 Minutes Haven't been paying attention this election season? Here's everything you need to know in brief

Tea Partiers recognize the distance between the victories they won Tuesday night and their goals, readily admitting, for example, that repeal of health-care reform is more of a symbolic issue than anything that will happen before the 2012 election. “It’s just the first step,” says Tea Party national coordinator Debbie Dooley. And they suggest that “the Republicans may have come to their senses,” according to Dooley, “but don’t think for a minute that we trust them.”

So, will the expanded Republican caucuses in Congress pursue fiscal restraint? Grassroots conservative activists and small-government advocates all say the same thing: not unless the public in general and the right-wing base in particular holds them to it. “The heavy lifting will take place after the election,” says Don Todd, research director at Americans for Limited Government and a former research director at the Republican National Committee. “The public makes it feasible for Congress to do the things they want it to do.” That’s why conservative activists say the plan is to provide positive as well as negative reinforcement. “When they do the right thing we give them a hats-off, and when they do the wrong thing it’s important to note that too,” says Tim Markey, Virginia director of Americans for Prosperity, a national organization promoting fiscal conservatism that worked closely with Tea Party activists in battleground districts.

This applies to Democrats as well as to Republicans. The sentiment is echoed by Jenny Beth Martin, national coordinator for the Tea Party Patriots, a national network of hundreds of local Tea Party groups. The Patriots, it is clear, do not put much stock in the notion that the Republican leadership will pursue their agenda, but they hope to have a reliable caucus within the GOP. “If [new Republican members] vote to uphold our core values, against pressure from their party leadership, we can give them the political backing they need,” says Martin, vowing that the Tea Partiers’ frantic pace of calling, e-mailing, rallying, and lobbying Congress will not slow.

They’re likely going to have a lot of opportunities to protest. Past Republican takeovers of the federal government have led to conservative activists feeling betrayed by concessions to political pragmatism and policy necessity: Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and the last Republican Congress abandoned various pledges to cut spending and ultimately accrued massive debts. The same political and mathematical realities apply today: Social Security, Medicare, and defense spending are popular among the [older voters upon whom the GOP relies](#). If you do not cut those programs, and you do not raise taxes, you simply cannot balance the budget—even if Republicans fulfill their campaign pledge to cut domestic discretionary spending down to its 2008 levels. “People think the two parties argue about government spending, but they’re really arguing over a very small piece of government spending,” says Scott Lilly, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think tank, and a former staff director for the House Appropriations Committee. Even Tea Partiers who would be willing to see spending cuts to defense or entitlement programs are being set up for unavoidable disappointment, because Republicans did not even propose any such cuts in their campaign platform.

And even the cuts Republicans say they will make might prove difficult: the GOP “Pledge to America” did not specify which domestic discretionary programs would be cut, and when it comes time to choose, the choices will be risky. “It’s not the appropriations process as much as the real-world impact of the cuts,” says Lilly. “No one is advocating cuts in the Department of Homeland Security, which is a big piece of the domestic discretionary budget. No one is advocating cuts in Veterans Affairs. The FBI, [Drug Enforcement Agency], [Department of Justice], all that infrastructure is huge and no one wants to touch it. If you cut the FAA you’ll have to reduce the number of takeoffs and landings. Cut the number of prison guards, and

you'll have to release more prisoners. You're left with education and what's left of poverty programs. There's not much money there."

When it comes to even those programs, it remains to be seen whether the conservative activists will apply the pressure they say they will. If supporters do not show legislators that a politically risky proposal—for Democrats it was overhauling the health-insurance system; for Republicans it will be making painful cuts to domestic spending—enjoys public support, they will be afraid to enact it. "Instead of expecting [politicians] to ride off a cliff, you make it so it's not a cliff," says Todd. As President Obama, America's last politician brought to national power by grassroots energy, could testify, the activists' energy often dissipates after Election Day. People who spend 30 hours per week doing unpaid political activism on top of their day job may want to take a break eventually. When Obama took office, the press debated just how much force his 13 million-person e-mail list would bring to bear on Congress in support of Obama's priorities. The answer? Not much. Instead, it was opponents of health-care reform who dominated town-hall meetings with congressmen and senators in the summer of 2009. Democrats struggled to keep their caucus together in support of the legislation through a series of compromises with their more conservative members on removing funding for abortion, eliminating a public option, and other components.

One possible sign of hope for Tea Party purists is the unusual nature of this incoming freshman class. Whereas the Democrats won in 2006 and 2008 by pragmatically recruiting conservative candidates in conservative districts, this GOP class is filled with insurgents who toppled the party establishment. "The 2006 election was more about George W. Bush than anything else," says Lilly. This is about much broader dissatisfaction with Washington. According to Lilly, a freshman class of this nature and size has entered the Capitol only once before in recent decades, and that was the post-Watergate Democratic class of 1974. It instituted a host of procedural changes to roll back the power of committee chairmen and increase its own power. If the GOP freshmen can be organized, they can do the same. But that is far from assured. "There are a lot of new people who are not very experienced in dealing with a legislative body and practical governing," says Lilly. "It will be absolute chaos for a period of time." But, he adds, if the freshman class anoints capable leaders, it will be able to achieve real accomplishments.

In pursuit of exactly that goal, the Tea Party Patriots group is hosting a freshman orientation for all new members of the House and Senate. On Nov. 14, Tea Party leaders from across the country will go to Washington to explain their values. Sympathetic experts will articulate their view of constitutional governance, and Tea Partiers will make sure the freshmen meet local coordinators. The idea to hold the event was provoked by former Senate Republican leader and current corporate lobbyist Trent Lott, [who told \*The Washington Post\*](#), "As soon as [Republican freshmen] get here, we need to co-opt them."

Creating more conservative gadflies like Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) is what Tea Party leaders hope to do. Matt Kibbe, the president of FreedomWorks, a fiscally conservative activist organization that has been essentially incorporated into the Tea Party movement, cosponsoring rallies and working to support candidates, says its top priority in the coming weeks will be to identify leaders in Congress who can push its key proposals, such as measures to repeal or slow implementation of health-care reform. Health-care repeal is another promise Tea Party activists may be frustrated to watch when it comes to deliver—there is [no way](#) a Democratic Senate or president will undo the Democrats' domestic-policy achievement. But, when more plausible legislation comes up, it may not be the inside game it once was. "The Internet levels the playing field," says Kibbe. "When I was on the Hill [circa 1990] we had one newspaper, *Roll Call*, and it was covering stuff that had already happened. That was a big advantage for a lobbyist walking

the halls. Now a well-paid lobbyist doesn't know that much more than a blogger. You have the opportunity in advance of a vote to call or e-mail your representative."

Organizing for America, the Obama campaign spinoff, lost a lot of its momentum because it was built around a candidate as much as an ideology. So the Tea Party may have greater potential to stay lively as the issues and players change, but it will require energy. "The Tea Party has to be a community," says Kibbe. "It has to be fun." Will rallying in favor of, say, cuts to food stamps be fun for your average tricorne-hat-sporting activist? We will soon see.

If the Tea Partiers don't show up, or if they do and are not heeded by their new friends in Washington, they will have the opportunity to punish them in just two years. "If [Tea Partiers] don't hold the Republicans accountable, they'll regret it in the future," predicts Richard Rahn, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. "And if the Republicans go back to old form, they'll suffer the election consequences Democrats are suffering right now."