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The Tea Party Got What It Wanted

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A couple weeks ago, the *New York Times* commemorated 10 years of the tea party by being very wrong about it. In the newspaper's portrayal, the movement seemed like nothing so much as an uprising of principled libertarians wearing tricorn hats made out of folded Cato Institute white papers. According to the *Times*, their concerns were the national debt and deficit, and the fiscal imprudence of big government in general—priorities that have been abandoned by Republicans under Trump. Maybe there was a little racism involved, the *Times* allowed (in a grudging update to the story after an outcry on Twitter), but that was a case of certain bad actors showing up at rallies “waving signs with racist caricatures and references.”

“Even if the Tea Party's ideas are dead,” wrote Jeremy W. Peters, “its attitude lives on.”

The *Times*' rendering of the tea party was credulous “nonsense.” That's the verdict of Harvard professor Theda Skocpol, who along with Brookings Institution fellow Vanessa Williamson wrote the book on the movement. Their analysis, first published in a 2011 paper, put immigration at the center of the tea party counterrevolution. The protests were an eruption of the same welfare chauvinism—*big government for me and not for thee*—that drives the Trump phenomenon today.

I spoke with Skocpol last week about what really fueled the tea party, how (contra the *Times*) the movement got exactly what it wanted, and why people who should know better have gotten the story wrong.

That *New York Times* article defined the tea party as “a mass uprising based on notions of small-government libertarianism.” Your thoughts?

Oh, that's nonsense.

Why?

It's taking the spin of one or two of the kind of very elite, big-money advocacy groups that tried to jump on the popular-revolt bandwagon at face value. The research on ordinary tea partiers—the kind who formed about a thousand regularly meeting local tea parties all over the country and who were the real force behind this movement to pressure Republicans not to compromise with Democrats, with Barack Obama—the major force behind them was anger about the kinds of people who were getting certain kinds of public spending. There was a belief among grassroots tea partiers that the Affordable Care Act, Obamacare, was benefiting illegal immigrants. Probably the number-one passion at the grassroots was opposition to immigration into the United States—and a vast overestimation of how much of it was undocumented.

But we also know that the national surveys that ask people whether they support the tea party, which means not necessarily being active in one but supporting it, show that what differentiated them from other Americans, and other Republicans, was a greater belief in racial and ethnic stereotypes. This was definitely a movement of people who are anxious about racial changes in the country, anxious about immigration, and were, in some cases, also Christian conservatives who felt very passionately about homosexuality and abortion and having laws against those.

When Vanessa and I interviewed grassroots tea partiers, we deliberately asked about whether they opposed Social Security and Medicare, and veterans' benefits. They didn't. They were mostly on them. They considered those to be the kinds of benefits that "real Americans" had earned.

I think that *New York Times* article is by no means alone, but it is interesting that until it was updated, it made no mention of race or immigration. And it does seem like there can be a collective amnesia about that issue. Do you have any thoughts on why that aspect of the tea party movement is so often glossed over or left out?

If I can just speak as a social scientist: I've done work that compares the tea party upsurge that happened in 2009 with the resistance now against Trump. These both happened at moments when a president who was horrifying to partisans on the other side was elected, along with the Congress of the same party. So that's a very threatening moment in the political system. But it presents different threats and opportunities to elites versus ordinary, grassroots Americans. And in both cases, you've had movements that are easy to mischaracterize because what they really are is vast collections of organizations that are mutually pushing in the same direction to some degree, but also stand for different things.

And there's a definite split in the tea party from the very beginning between the national professional-type organizations backed by big money, like Freedom Works, or Americans for Prosperity, or eventually the Tea Party Patriots, which was an umbrella organization, or Tea Party Express, which was a converted Republican PAC. They always claimed it was about cutting public spending. So they were in many ways channeling well-established elite opposition to government taxation and spending. But what gave them the chance to claim anything at all in front of the TV cameras was the fact that there were mass demonstrations. Those people were never on board with the idea of cutting public spending across the board. There just is no evidence for that. Not in surveys at the time, not in work that journalists did if they occasionally went to some of the demonstrations, or the work that Vanessa and I did in going out and meeting people organizing those groups, which was unique work. I mean, I think our book has been read by many, many journalists. And so I don't know what's the problem at the *New York Times*, except that, you know, the *Times*, from time to time, assigns articles to people who are really pushing a certain partisan perspective, and that clearly happened here.

So I don't think that either the academic consensus or even the journalist consensus has been that the tea party was about cutting governments overall. I just don't think so. I mean, they find it easy to quote somebody like Rand Paul, but Rand Paul was always his own thing. He and his father were doing their own thing long before the tea party. They just associated themselves with the tea party and anger against Obama.

I visited eight counties around the country, and two of those counties still have active tea parties where they are actually meeting. That's pretty remarkable, a decade later. Those people are

definitely not mainly exercised about cutting spending. They're not with the Koch brothers, let's put it that way. And in most cases, they're not libertarians, either—they're Christian conservatives.

Do you find that their perspectives are still the same?

Oh, yes. And they are the core of Trump's support. People who identified with the tea party in the past, if they are still with us—these are older people, so they're not all still with us—are the core of the most adamant of Trump's supporters.

Do you find that race and immigration are top of mind among them as well?

Immigration above all. More than anything else: immigration. We found that at the time, and I still think that's true. The fear and hatred of particularly Hispanic immigrants is very, very strong. Vanessa and I were interviewing tea partiers in the spring of 2011, when Donald Trump came out with his "birther" stuff. And at the time, most of the grassroots tea partiers that we interviewed would have backed Trump if he had run. They were looking for a non-Mitt Romney. They cycled through a bunch of non-Mitt Romneys in those primaries. And Trump would have just shot right to the top, just like he did in 2015.

You've written about how the tea party was mobilized by these elite, big-money corporate institutions, and I wanted to ask you about similarities between tea party mobilization and what we're seeing now with conservatives and those on the far right. Are you seeing similar things with who's getting organized today? Are some of the same actors involved, and some of the same tactics?

The grassroots is Trump. I've got a paper about this. It's about to come out in a book collection that will be out in December. Basically, Trump borrowed networks. Like I say, any surviving tea partiers, they're gonna call for Trump. His major networks of popular support are Christian evangelical, white churches, gun groups, and gun networks, which isn't just the NRA. These are the mainstays of local life in a lot of places.

Nobody should underestimate the powerful, organized grassroots support that Trump has—he has a lot. But it doesn't have to be assembled from above. It's there. Trump's gun message, Trump's "us versus them, defend the Christian conservatives" message is maybe fake on Trump's part, but it's worked.

Tea partiers who are still around are just totally gung-ho for Trump. He's a hero to them. A tea partier I interviewed a year ago told me that building the wall was the number-one thing.

And where was this?

In North Carolina. But I also talked to tea partiers in Ohio. They're not the major organized groups out there now on the popular side on the right, because they've sort of taken over the Republican Party in a lot of places. The other thing they like about Trump very much is that he "kicks ass," that he makes people on the left angry and upset. They love that.

I imagine the sort of relentless covering of him, his actions, what he says, and what he tweets is probably only fueling that fire?

They're all signed up on his Twitter, and they watch Fox. And I have to say—I'm speaking as a social scientist—I don't find this all that surprising. Look at the Democrats who were thrilled when the Democratic presidential nominees show some fire.

Sure. Yeah.

We live in a very aggressive and polarized time right now, and I'm not saying Democrats are as extreme in their direction as Republicans are in various ways in their direction right now. What's a little bit special with Trump's case is that none of his core supporters care that he lies. They just care if he delivers, and some of them, particularly tea party people, have always liked the style of politics that's no-holds-barred.

Going back in time a little, can you talk about what mistakes have been made by taking the tea party at their word, that this was all about fiscal responsibility.

I don't really think many people have made the mistake that the *Times* made. The reason the *Times* article is so odd is that nobody believes any of that. And they haven't for a long time. The real question is where in the world that *Times* article came from. I think it comes from interviewing some of the few remaining people in Congress who claim they're libertarians, and they want to cut federal spending. But most Republicans aren't even faking it on that anymore.

I'm thinking about Obama's spending caps, for example—things that were maybe happening in the moment to appease or respond to this movement or its influence.

I'd be very surprised if the Obama people were trying to appease the tea party. They were probably trying to appease the middle-of-the-road moderates and conservatives who always want to limit spending when Democrats are in power. They've been there. They were there before the tea party. They're still there now. There certainly were plenty of people in the media who mistook the tea party early on because they'd do an interview with somebody in one of these national advocacy groups who would say, "Oh, it's horrible that all this money is being spent."

You mentioned Fox News, and I have a quote from your paper that I want to read to you: "The conservative media has played a crucial role in forging the shared beliefs and the collective identity around which tea partiers have united. This community-building effort has been led by Fox News, with a strong assist from talk radio and the conservative blogosphere. Fox is the primary source of political information for tea party activists." That stuck out to me because it seems familiar in our current times as well.

Yeah, it hasn't changed.

Tactics are the same now as they were before, in your view?

I don't watch Fox myself. Back then it was Vanessa who did most of the empirical work, but evidence shows that older, white conservatives, who were the pool from which tea partiers came, and they're the pool from which Trump supporters come, tend to watch only right-wing media. They watch a lot of it. I remember in our interviews, one man said to me—when I got to question No. 7, which was, "Where do you get your news?"—he looked at me and says, "Not where you do." And since he watched Fox News about six to eight hours a day, he was right about that. There are powerful tribal and generational effects in media watching. And they still are there. I think they're a little attenuated, but they're still there.

Now, it's not correct, though, to portray grassroots tea party people back then, and I would say most Trump supporters now, as mindless automatons who've been brainwashed. They don't get an accurate picture of certain kinds of information, that's true. And they're not going to hear very much that's critical of Trump. But these people know what they care about and they do really live their lives in certain kinds of jobs, middle-class jobs for the most part. They attend certain kinds of churches, where their social life and moral beliefs are anchored. And they're angry about the changing generational and ethnic dynamics of the country and feel threatened by them. So they're not being irrational, and there's a tendency on the left, I think, to treat people as somehow irrational because they don't believe what we think they ought to believe economically. Well, that's just not the way politics works. Politics—a lot of politics—is about “who *we* are” and “who *they* are.” And these people know who they are, and they know who their enemies are.