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# Gene Healy: Talking with the Tea Partiers

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When tens of thousands of Americans marched on Washington last month to protest President Obama's ongoing power grab, many liberals dismissed them as a horde of partisan, crypto-racist cranks.

But a new study from a prominent Democratic polling firm shows that the Tea Partiers are neither racist nor particularly partisan. What's more, they genuinely support smaller government -- and they're not going away anytime soon.

Last week, Democracy Corps, founded by Clinton vets James Carville and Stanley Greenberg, reported on a recent series of focus groups they held with GOP base voters and conservative-leaning independents.

Hard-core conservatives in the groups expressed an "apocalyptic" view of Obama's agenda not remotely shared by the swing voters. According to Carville/Greenberg, the Republican base stands "a world apart from the rest of America," and that will make it hard for the GOP leadership to appeal to mainstream voters.

Whether that's true or not, the Democracy Corps report provides valuable insight into what's motivating the Tea Party movement: "Fear of government control is at the heart of virtually all of the concerns raised by these voters about Obama's agenda."

True, when President Bush pushed for Medicare Part D, the biggest victory for American "socialism" in nearly 50 years, we didn't see droves of Republicans marching on D.C.

But conservatives in the focus groups said they were "embarrassed" by Bush's presidency, in large part because of "the prescription drug benefit and his failure to rein in spending or the size of government." They had "virtually nothing positive to say about the Republican Party."

One of Carville/Greenberg's main "findings" is that hard-core anti-Obamaites aren't racist -- they're just crazy. (Uh, thanks, I guess). On the first point at least, what they report rings true.

"Get over it," they tell liberals who think racism explains vehement opposition to Obama. "Race was barely raised" in the focus groups, except when some conservatives expressed "feeling some pride at

[Obama's] election," and others complained about being labeled racist just for criticizing the president.

That's a legitimate complaint, given some of what's been written about the 9/12 march. In a recent fundraising letter, the Nation described "tens of thousands waving Confederate flags ... and shouting 'White Power!'" Anyone who spent any time at last month's protest knows that's a vicious lie.

Carville and Greenberg score some points when they catalog the silly theories embraced by some conservatives in the focus groups. Some participants obsessed over Obama's birth certificate, suggested that Bill Ayers wrote Obama's books, and insisted that Obama was a "puppet," whose election was engineered by "a hidden set of liberal elites."

At the same time, they complained about a media campaign to "discredit attacks on Obama." But when conservatives traffic in wacky conspiracy theories, they make it easier to discredit legitimate criticism.

Yet some of what Carville and Greenberg offer as evidence of nuttiness makes Tea Partiers seem far saner than the political center. For example, "they believe Obama is pushing his agenda at record pace because he does not want the American people to know what he is doing," and "reject as laughable" the notion that Obamacare won't result in "a government takeover of all aspects of health care." Crazy talk!

Like the song says, "just because you're paranoid/don't mean they're not after you." Given that Obama's chief of staff and his secretary of state have publicly delighted over the fact that a crisis atmosphere makes radical initiatives easier, maybe conservatives can be forgiven their suspicions about the pace of change.

So, too, with their fears of a health care takeover. In a rare candid moment on the campaign trail two years ago, Obama said that he favored "a single-payer system. ... Over time it may be that we end up transitioning to such a system."

Carville and Greenberg think the GOP's hard-core base presents a major problem for the party. But you can draw other conclusions from their report. According to their data, the conservatives they talked with, who worry about overweening government, represent "almost on in five voters in the electorate." They're here, they fear, get used to it.

And as Obama continues to push for bigger government in the midst of rising opposition, their ranks are likely to grow.

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