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An ongoing discussion on the health care debate

Nov. 05, 2009

### Driving the Conversation:

Arena Ref: [Fred Barbash](#)

## Is Tea Party conservatism a help or a hazard to Republicans returning to power?

Noon live reader chat on healthcare with Heritage Foundation's Stuart Butler

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### Roger Pilon

Vice President for Legal Affairs, Cato Institute :

Let's start with some clarity: "Tea party conservatism" stands for several things, but it is not the caricature one often finds in the mainstream media, to say nothing of the left wing blogs. It is a movement with deep historical roots, drawing its name and inspiration from the Boston Tea Party of 1773. As with that event, taxes brought it to the fore -- on Tax Day, April 15. But taxes are simply the most obvious manifestation of modern government run amok, insinuating itself into every corner of life. Trillions of dollars of debt for our children, out-of-control government budgets, massive interventions in private affairs -- the list of wrongs is endless, and under Obama has exploded. He stands for nothing if not for making us all dependent on the government he has promised us. That's not America. That's a foreign vision, which over the centuries countless millions have fled, searching for freedom.

To be sure, the tea party movement has its fringe elements, as did the revolt against British tyranny, which the establishment of its day disparaged. So too does the Obama administration, some of whom have already resigned. The basic question, however, is what does the movement stand for? What are its principles?

And on that, the contrast with the Obama vision is stark: However much confusion there might be on specific issues, which is to be expected, the broad principles are clear. The tea party movement stands for limited constitutional government. At its rallies, on hand-written sign after sign, that was the message repeatedly seen. These are ordinary Americans -- Republicans, Independents, and even Democrats -- who want simply to be left alone to plan and live their own lives. The don't want "community organizers" to help empower them to get more from government.

But they do need to be organized to bring that about -- to get government off their backs. And the Republican Party should be the natural vehicle toward that end -- the party, after all, that was formed to get government off the backs of several million slaves. But today's Republican Party is a mixed lot: Some understand those principles; but others, as in the NY

23 race, are all but indistinguishable from their counterparts in the party of Obama. The problem in NY 23 was not that a third party entered the race. Rather, the party establishment botched things from the beginning, by picking a nominee who properly belonged in the Democratic Party, as her pathetic last-minute endorsement indicated, and that's why a third party entered the race -- with a novice of a nominee who nearly won despite the odds against him.

The question, therefore, is not whether tea party conservatism is a help or a hazard for Republicans seeking a return to power? To the contrary, it is whether the Republican Party is a help or a hindrance to the tea party movement? It will be a help only if it returns to its roots. The mainstream media, overwhelmingly of the Democratic persuasion, will continue to push Republicans to be "moderate," of course -- meaning "Democrat Lite" -- to which the proper response is: Why would voters go for that when they can get the real thing on the Democratic line? If Tuesday's returns showed anything, it is that Independents, a truly mixed lot, are up for grabs; but at the same time, they are looking for leaders who promise not simply to "solve problems" but to do so in a way that respects our traditions of individual liberty, free markets, and limited government. When Republican candidates stand clearly and firmly for those principles, they stand a far better chance of being elected than when they temporize. That is the lesson that Republicans must grasp -- and not forget -- if they are to return to power.

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