

Understanding the Tea party Movement

How Gay Rights and Racism Overweighed Tux-cut Politics of Tea Party

Salome Gogberashvili*

Abstract

The Tea Party Movement emerged as an important player on the American political and social stage in the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Although a new movement, it gained on the one hand a political, social and media attention and on the other hand, financial as well as political support of the current and former Republican leaders. The Tea Party Movement started as an “angered” response to the economic stimulus package and stood for fair taxes, healthcare and a smaller government. However, in this paper I will argue that in the recent period its concentration on its founding principles such as lower taxes and smaller government. For example “general or economic liberty” was overshadowed by too much attention on racism and gay rights that could be put under “individual liberty”, thus contradicting with the main principles and ideology of most of the American people, that of freedom and equality. At the same time this paper will suggest that the Tea Party will likely expire if it does not change its strict attitude towards the above mentioned ideology and politics and will remain only as a movement which lasted for a little amount of time in the American history.

Keywords: The Tea Party Movement, The Republican Party, racism, same-sex marriage

Introduction: The Emergence of the Tea party and its relationship with the Republican Party

The Tea Party Movement emerged as an important player on the American political and social stage at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Although a new movement, it gained political, social and media attention. The Tea Party Movement is an antigovernment, grass-roots movement which started in 2009 by ordinary Americans who were concerned with the direction of their local and national government and the politicians running the government. (National Coalition of Tea Party Affiliates, 2013) The first big and well-organized “Tea Party” protest took place in February 2009 as a response to the bailout bill known as the Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP) and the stimulus bill known as the American Recovery and Investment Act (ARRA). (Sutton, 2009)

However, the bailout and stimulus bills were not the only, and I would say the main reason of the emergence of such a wide scaled protest and movement. One of the main discontents of those people who gathered under the Tea Party was the election of the Barack Obama as the president of the United States.

Nancy Pelosi, former speaker of the house, for example, refers to the Tea Party not as a grass-root party, but as “Astroturf”, an appendage of the Republican Party and its well-financed conservative interest groups, opposed to President Obama and his policies. (Arceneaux, Nicholson, 2012) Though Nancy Pelosi is not the only person highlighting the tight relationship of the Tea party with the Republicans, the main failed opponents of president Obama, other scholars, such as David Kirby and Emily Ekins, also mentioned the Tea Party’s relationship with the Republicans. As they argue in their work “Tea Party is a functionally libertarian influence on the Republican Party” and they refer to the Tea Party supporters as the representatives of more than half of all Republican primary voters. (Kirby, Ekins, 2012) As for Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin,

in their work they name the Tea Party nothing more than a re-branding of the conservative Republicanism. (Arceneaux, Nicholson, 2012)

Moreover, The Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll found that 71 % of Republicans describe themselves as Tea Party supporters, announcing they had a favorable image of the movement. (Wallsten & Yadron, 2010) The result of the election of 2010 was that out of the Tea Party endorsed 129 candidates for the US House of Representatives and 9 candidates for the Senate, 39 won in the House and five in the Senate. (Moe, 2010)

1. Main supporters of the Tea Party Movement

When talking about the Tea Party, it is important to mention what the tea party stands for and who represent the main supporters of the movement on both the local and national level. Before directly discussing the supporters it should be mentioned that the Tea Party represents a movement without any dominant central leadership, which they consider to be:

“one of the strong points of the Tea Party movement ensuring its grass-roots nature that is built from the bottom up by regular citizens becoming civically involved in maintaining their quality of life in a fair and equitable manner free from overly oppressive government interference. “ (National Coalition of Tea Party Affiliates 2013)

As for the supporters of the Tea Party Movement, according to the New York Times/ NBC News Poll, as well as Gallup, they tend to be Republican(60-65), white (80-90%), male (55-60), married and older than 45 (70-75). The Tea Party supporters also tend to be more educated and wealthier than the general public and mainly full-time employed. (Zernike, Theebrenan, 2010)

However, the support of ordinary Americans is not

* Ph.D. student, Faculty of Humanities, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia.
E-mail: salomegog@yahoo.com

enough for any kind of movement, especially when talking about such large scaled movements such as the Tea Party. On the national level the movement relies and draws its recourses from a small number of conservative business elites and organizations, concerned by Obama policies and seeking the reduction of government oversights and regulations (Williamson et al., 2011). Among several organizations the main advocacy organizations of the Tea party Movement is considered to be the Tea Party Express (TPE), project of the Republican-run political action committee “Our Country Deserves Better” and Tea Party Patriots (TPP), which operates under the motto “Fiscal Responsibility, Limited Government and Free Market”. (Williamson, Skocpol & Coggin, 2011)

However, the role of the conservative media in the promotion of the Tea Party Movement should not be omitted. Conservative media, lead by the Fox News, has played a crucial role in forming the shared believes, collective identity and community-building. Fox came out to be the primary source of political information for Tea Party supporters as well as the source of massive mobilization. Moreover, increased CNN level of coverage may also be an effect of Fox News coverage, as suggested by some scholars (Williamson et al., 2011).

2. Future of the Tea party Movement

Alongside the above mentioned information, concerning the foundation and main supporters of the Tea Party Movement, discussing the main goals and principles of the movement represents a crucial point in fully understanding the essence of the Tea Party as well as predicting the possible outcomes of their actions and the overall future of the movement. When talking about the future, it should be mentioned that there are many controversial anticipations about it however, in my paper I advocate for those scholars who predict to the movement a limited life expectancy, such as Edward Ashbee (Ashbee, 2011) or Arlington Va (Mayer, 2012) for instance. Therefore I argue that the Tea Party Movement will likely expire if it does not change its politics and will remain as short lasted movement in the history of the United States. However why would I argue as such? The answer is embodied in mainly the heterogeneity on some aspects within the movement, shifting from the founding principles of the movement, such as limited government or market liberty and too much concentration on racial and gay problems, advocating for one kind of liberty and contradicting the other kind, i.e. being in favor of more economic liberty but rejecting the liberty of some individuals and their wishes such as gay or same-sex marriage, abortion, racism. In the following part I will more thoroughly discuss these above mentioned issues.

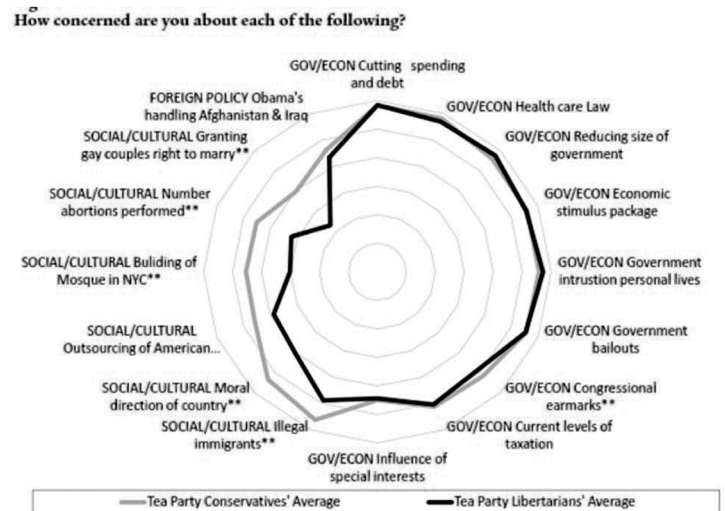
3. The Tea Party and racial concern

First of all, as already has been mentioned several times, let us focus on the main reasons to create the movement. As Arlington Va claims the Tea Party movement emerged as an “angry” response to the person and policies of Barak Hussein Obama. (Ashbee, 2011) Being fiscally conservative, the movement favors a decrease in taxes and government spending, riddance of budget deficit and national debt and a limited government i.e. decrease in the presence of government in the affairs of the lives of ordinary law-abiding Americans who are free to enjoy ““life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as provided for in the Declaration of Independence and guaranteed by the

Constitution of the United States (National Coalition of Tea Party Affiliates, 2013).

Although all these demands were common for all the Tea Partiers, actually helping to gather Americans concerned with above mentioned aspects of American politics, existence of other claims found controversies within the movement. David Kirby and Emily Ekins found that the Tea Party is united in economic issues but split on social issues. At the same time they have discovered that about half of the Tea Party is socially conservative and more Republican while the other half is libertarian and more independent. According to their findings, the level of the concern with issues such as government size or government spending and depth is the same in both parts of the Tea Party, though conservative the Tea Partiers found themselves more concerned with Social issues such as illegal immigration, abortion or gay marriage. See the figure below. (Kirby, Ekins, 2012)

A problem with heterogeneity within the movement is ob-



Source: Entrance poll conducted by the Cato Institute at the Virginia Tea Party Convention, October 9, 2010. **Differences between tea party conservatives and libertarians were statistically significant at the .05 level.

served by other scholars also regarding the racial attitudes of the Tea Party supports. For example, at the Tea party Convention in 2010 it was noted that although many attendees seemed motivated by racial animus, many in the crowd were repulsed by it. When during the speeches some presenters claimed that the President Barak Obama was born outside the United State, claims were met both with cheer and “unresponsive faces”. While some presenters talked about Obama’s race in negative terms, others behaved in ways antithetical to racial prejudice. (Arceneaux, Nicholson, 2012)

Moreover it is also important to mention that some scholars, like Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin, found the strong opposition against racism in the Greater Boston Tea Party. When racist messages appeared on the Boston Tea Party Meet Up site, Massachusetts Tea Party members showed that these kinds of messages were not welcomed. In addition, Boston Tea Party members were concerned that outsiders could bring inappropriate or racist signs to the protest and wanted to be sure to remove those signs and people if it would occur. (Williamson et al., 2011)

As we can see, some scholars observe clear heterogeneity within the Tea Party in several issues, among them racial, but what makes these people to be concerned with racial problems? As Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin claim “ racial resentment

stoke Tea Party fears about generational society change and fuels the Tea Party’s strong opposition to President Obama” (Williamson, Skocpol & Coggin, 2011) For Tea Partiers, as well as many other Americans, the election of Barak Obama, nation’s first black president, symbolized the culmination of generation’s societal change, provoking deep anxiety. (Berlet, 2011) As Chip Berlet mentions: “racist attitudes towards Blacks and

Latinos/Latinas are significantly more pronounced among Tea Party supporters than the general population.” (Berlet, 2011) In this respect radical Tea Partiers show their anxiety about immigration, especially that of colored and Latino immigration. Unfortunately due limited time and space, I am not able to fully analyze this issue.

4. Gay marriage issue in the Tea Party Movement

Nonuniformity is also observed in connection with social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. As we have already seen, conservative part of the Tea Party movement is more concerned with the issue of the gay rights than its non-conservative part. The same heterogeneity issue was revealed in Kevin Arceneaux research. (Arceneaux & Nicholson, 2012) Among the conservative part of the tea Party movement 72.8% support a gay marriage ban while only 41.2% of the non-conservative part of the movement share such strong position (see figure 2). However, it ought to be mentioned that according Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin, most Tea Partiers do not see social issues like abortion and gay marriage as central to their current political activism.

Religiosity also represents a distinguishing feature of the Tea Party movement, though differences among conservative and

Table 2
Abortion and Gay Marriage Attitudes among Conservatives and Nonconservatives by Tea Party Support

	STRONG TEA PARTY SUPPORTERS			EVERYONE ELSE		
	Nonconservatives	Conservatives	Total	Nonconservatives	Conservatives	Total
Abortion						
Never Permitted	5.05 (5)	25.43 (118)	21.85 (123)	4.72 (51)	26.59 (67)	8.85 (118)
Rape, Incest, Health Exceptions	34.34 (34)	47.2 (219)	44.94 (253)	18.32 (198)	31.35 (79)	20.78 (277)
Exceptions + Need Established	26.26 (26)	14.01 (65)	16.16 (91)	14.25 (154)	15.87 (40)	14.55 (194)
Always Permitted	34.34 (34)	13.36 (62)	17.05 (96)	62.72 (678)	26.19 (66)	55.81 (744)
Total	100 (99)	100 (464)	100 (563)	100 (1081)	100 (252)	100 (1333)
Gay Marriage Ban						
Yes	41.18 (42)	72.82 (343)	67.19 (385)	22.62 (245)	66.54 (169)	30.96 (414)
No	58.82 (60)	27.18 (128)	32.81 (188)	77.38 (838)	33.46 (85)	69.04 (923)
Total	100 (102)	100 (471)	100 (573)	100 (1083)	100 (254)	100 (1337)

Column percentages in cells and number of observations in parentheses.

nonconservative part of the movement is also revealed. According to statistics, conservative the Tea Party supporters are twice as likely to attend church at least once a week (about 45%) than nonconservative supporters (22%). (Arceneaux & Nicholson, 2012)

Conclusion

As we can see the Tea Party represents a movement without central leadership. Although almost all Tea Party supporters share the same attitude towards economic issues and a limited government, the view on social issues, mainly that of gay marriage, abortion and racism and accordingly immigration, differ. Heterogeneity among the Tea Party supporters can be considered to be the weak point of the movement. In many cases, when discussing the concerns of the Tea Party, the conservative part of the movement concentrates too much on same-sex marriage, as well as on racial issues, which in general does not represent the overall interests of the nonconservative part of the movement thus causing irritation in some cases.

Nonetheless, as this article reveals that the Tea Party Supporters contradict with their main principles themselves by radically (by some of the supporters not all of them as mentioned) asking for banning same-sex marriage, or showing a negative attitude towards blacks or Latinos, thus themselves interfering in the life of American people or maybe immigrants, who are

free to enjoy “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as provided for in the Declaration of Independence and guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States. (National Coalition of Tea Party Affiliates, 2013)

Therefore I would like to argue that if Tea Party does not change its politics, it will likely expire and become just another short-lived movement in the history of the United States. This trend has already been felt. According to statistics, conducted by Gallup in 2011, an unfavorable image of the Tea Party movement has increased reaching 47 %. (Newport, 2011) After the reelection of Obama and the defeat of the Republican Mitt Romney, supported by the Tea Party, the number of unfavorable image of the movement has even increased and the Tea Party movement is referred as “dead and gone” widely by different authors and press in different contest, though.

References

Arceneaux, K., & Nicholson, S. P. (2012). Who Wants to Have a Tea Party. The Who, What, and Why of the Tea Party Movement. *Political Science & Politics*, 45(04), 700-710

Ashbee, E. (2011). Bewitched Tea Party Movement: Ideas, Interest and Institutions. *The Political Quarterly*; 82(2), 157-164

Berlet, C. (2011). Taking Tea Parties Seriously: Corporate Globalization, Populism, and Resentment. *Perspectives on Global Development & Technology*, 10 (2011), 11-29

Kirby, D., & Ekins, E. (2012). Libertarian Roots of the Tea Party. *Policy Analysis*, 705, 1-52

Mayer, J. D. (2012). Why Democrats have the tea party to thank for their win. *The Christian Science Monitor*, Retrieved March 29, 2013, from: <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2012/1108/Why-Democrats-have-the-tea-party-to-thank-for-their-win-video>

Moe, A. (2010). Just 32%of the Tea Party Wins. *NBC*. Retrieved March 5, 2013, from http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2010/11/03/5403120-just-32-of-tea-party-candidates-win?lite

National Coalition of Tea Party Affiliates, (2013). . Retrieved April 5, 2013, from: <http://www.teaparty-usa.com>

Newport, F. (2011). In U.S., Negative Views of the Tea Party Rise to New High. *Gallup Politics*. Retrieved March 15, 2013, from: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/147308/negative-views-tea-party-rise-new-high.aspx>

Sutton, A. (2009). American's Tea Party Protests Against Fraudulent Bank Bailouts and Stimulus Spending. *The Market Oracle*. Retrieved April 13, 2013, from <http://www.marketoracle.co.uk/Article10096.html>

Wallsten, P., & Yadron, D. (2010). Tea-Party Movement Gathers Strength, *The Wall Street Journal*

Williamson, V., Skocpol, T., & Coggin, J. (2011). The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservative. *Perspective on Politics*, 9(1), 25-43

Zernike, K., & Thee-Brenan, M. (2010). Poll Finds Tea Party Backers Wealthier and More Educated. *New York Times*