

Boiling Point: The Tea Party from 2009-Present

Richard Santelli is a former Chicago financial executive, a business analyst for the Consumer News and Business Channel since 1999, and known to a segment of the white, conservative, middle class Americans as a revolutionary. His revolution, the Tea Party, expresses a nostalgic yearning to return to a period of fiscal responsibility and constitutional absolutism that substantiated the supremacy of a white, male elite in post-1787 North America.

The movement began with one of Santelli's many television appearances. In February 2009, CNBC hosted a roundtable on the Great Recession: a 2008 financial crisis which saw the nation's largest mortgage lenders foreclose millions of homes due to their own insolvency. During the segment, Santelli railed against the Obama administration's Homeowner Affordability and Stability Plan, a stimulus package component that passed the day before. The pundit felt the plan was fiscally irresponsible for distributing taxpayer-funded subsidies to alleviate cumbersome mortgage payments among the neediest homeowners. He inflects his voice as much as his hands during his speech, often sweeping away from the camera to seek the approval of the white, male financiers lining the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. Futile attempts to wrangle the talking head meet with even more rancor about Obama's stimulus package. Although Santelli had always been a staunch, antigovernment conservative, he left an indelible mark on the American sociopolitical reality with a brusque call to action. Santelli thrust his finger into the camera's lens and exclaimed, "We're thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party" (The Heritage Foundation).

The name “Tea Party” is an allusion to the Boston Tea Party of 1773, a seminal event in the fight against monarchical taxation. The Tea Party movement, for all intents and purposes, is a revolution. Much like the original Tea Party’s insistence on a return to a confederal system, the contemporary movement generally advocates for a retrogradation of American federalism in order to achieve the republic that the Framers would have advocated. The Tea Party movement concerns itself with federalism-linked policies such as increased taxation, court rulings in favor of marriage equality, immigration reform, and the prohibition of state-sanctioned Confederate memorabilia. For example, many constituents who resonated with Santelli’s rant staged Tea Party protests across the United States on April 15, 2009 — Tax Day. This symbolic protest reflected the party’s rejection of big government and their rejection of taxation altogether. From then on, the Tea Party’s anti-government creed consolidated the diehard fringes of the conservative base so as to combat an increasingly diverse, irreligious, and open-minded nation.

Ironically, the methods with which the Tea Party rose to prominence do not reflect revolutionary tactics. After Santelli’s blustering rant on CNBC, the large number of people who mobilized around the cause reflected, “the coincidence of more than a decade of investment by well-heeled conservative interests” (Van Dyke and Miller 1). Essentially, they have formed a symbiotic relationship pejoratively known as “astro-turfing” (Choi 67). The poor, working, and middle classes have decidedly associated with *grassroots* organizing to further progressive causes. Grassroots organizing comes from the people rather than the officials or the already powerful. Astro-turfing, on the contrary, implies that the grassroots organizing behind the Tea Party movement is an artificial, top-down imposition of powerful conservative economic and cultural actors. Powerful conservative donors are central to the movement’s continued viability.

The wealthy's correspondence with the economically comfortable white population is not accidental. Choi's assertion explains that well-heeled conservative sponsorship of Tea Party conservative middle class interests such as over-taxation and constitutional absolutism intends to garner popular favor for the wealthy's aggrandizement. As a result of this prolonged sponsorship, many middle class supporters can drum up popular favor through astro-turf organizing — leaving men like the multi-billionaire Koch brothers to conduct suspect practices. For example, these men are able to buy influence among elected officials due to the 2010 Supreme Court decision *Citizens United*, which allows corporations to donate unlimited amounts of money on account of the act's designation as "free speech." Consequently, benefactors disproportionately fund state electoral campaigns so as to ensure that hand-picked state officials will gerrymander (improperly draw) congressional districts to guarantee victory for that political party. The conservative media is an integral vector for this entire "astro-turfing" process. Platforms such as Fox News project these power plays as heroic, which then imbues the same feelings of heroism and patriotism among the white middle class who agree. In short, this triad between wealth, votes, and the media has created a masterful takeover of the American political landscape.

Another method linked to their fundamental beliefs is that Tea Party congressmen rarely compromise. The strict intransigency among Tea Party Patriots, politicians or otherwise, is attributable to a deep reverence for the United States Constitution. That is to say, if the Constitution does not enumerate a sovereign right, that right should not exist. Members apply this ideology to most facets of the American sociopolitical reality: foreign policy, national security, fiscal responsibility — to name a few. Furthermore, if the government should expound upon a nonexistent right in one of these policy arenas, the people have a civic obligation to return

to the nation's proper course. At their rallies, Tea Party speakers often dress up in 18th-century garb to demand the restoration of foundational constitutional principles while others distribute complimentary Constitution pamphlets (Goldstein 1). This Tea Party standard initially motivated the elderly white base to label Obama's stimulus package as unconstitutional. Through a strict constructionist lens, their contention with Great Recession relief does have some merit. One point in this credible argument is Article I, Section VIII of the Constitution. This historic section vests any and all pecuniary affairs with the most powerful branch of government — the Congress. Yet, President Obama apportioned tax monies under executive authority. To most Tea Party subscribers, this is an executive overreach (Skocpol and Williamson 46). On the other hand, Tea Party conservatives have a proclivity to cherry-pick constitutional interests.

Mainly, Tea Party conservatives lack ethos on a great number of issues because the desire for their implementation is based in nostalgia. The Constitution requires equal protection, but they do not focus on states' discrimination against particular groups. Politicians nostalgic for Tea Party aims will often invoke code words such as "religious freedom" or states' rights" to sanctify discrimination as a civic duty. These thinly veiled calls to action inspire nostalgic individuals to commit horrific acts of ethnoviolence, such as the two Tea Party-aligned Bostonians who beat a Mexican man within inches of his life in 2015. Specifically, the wealthy's sponsorship of the frustration with a politically correct federal government hearkens to the white, male economic and social control that the Constitution protected during the late 18th century in America. One example of this predominance is slavery. Slavery directly contradicted constitutional values; yet, slaves built the White House, the Capitol building, and did not receive their freedom until 1863. The Tea Party movement strings up popular movements and the Founding Fathers as a façade to

shield their reverence for radical nativism. This nostalgia effaces the systemic genocide and chattel slavery that provided a base for white privilege.

Protecting native-born interests, or radical nativism, is a gross misinterpretation of American patriotism. Contrary to the Tea Party's fundamental belief that its members invoke the Forefathers' intellectual will, the party's stance on immigration incorrectly appropriates radical nativism among America's founding political beliefs. Truly radical nativism, an intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its allegedly un-American characteristics (Hingham 4), first emerged with the waves of Catholic Irishmen immigrating to the United States in the 1820s. Most Forefathers were racists; but, they were not radical nativists. The Founding Fathers practiced nativism as, "a way of defining American nationality in a positive sense, *not* as a formula for attack on outsiders" (emphasis added, 9). In other words, the American Revolution and its strongest proponents were nativist insofar as that the movement expressed Anglo-Saxon solidarity from European powers. The Tea Party movement provides the latest example. Graduate student Albert Choi asserts in his Master's thesis from the City University of New York that the Tea Party movement is, in actuality, a modern incarnation of nativism. Choi makes the sound assertion that the religious right and their self-described nativists share key similarities with the modern conservative off-shoot. Therefore, Tea Partiers are nativist. He summarizes his main argument in three succinct points:

However, the "religious right" and the Tea Party movement could be seen as having stemmed from the same lineage of nativist politics in the United States in that both movements 1) received support from the same demographics in white, native, Protestants who were resentful of the societal changes in the 1960s, 2) framed themselves as the defenders of what they perceived was the "American" way of life while accusing others of being a threat to that way of life, and 3) subscribed to the notion of conspiracy against the United States allegedly plotted

by whoever they perceived as a threat to the existing order in the United States. (Choi 28)

Since the religious right and the Tea Party draw critical similarities between one another, the objectivity of Tea Party immigration policy is dubious. The more likely conclusion, based upon the evidence provided, is that the nativist principles present within the Tea Party's ideology and the political platform from the religious right descend from a common ancestor: xenophobia, or the fear of foreigners. Tea Party politicians, such as Gov. Robert J. Bentley of Alabama, further corroborate this fear's existence with their vehement insistence on prohibiting Syrian refugees on account of Syria's ties with radical jihadi terrorists (Kopan CNN). Syria is a new and relevant example of the Tea Party's fear-mongering policy as well as their racial/ethnic prejudice. Three white supremacists from Virginia were arrested for conspiring to firebomb African-American churches on November 19, 2015. Not a single Tea Party candidate released a response condemning these white domestic terrorists, while all of them continue to humiliate the brown Syrian refugee. Since fear disproportional to public sentiment has clout in the Tea Party political ideology, one can conclude that its subscribers are aligned away from the public good.

Absolutist Tea Party politicians do not believe in bipartisanship. They do not compromise often enough because they revere the Constitution's purity as if it were scripture. To change it would amount to blasphemy. Jonathan M. Goldstein wrote an article for the *Denver Law Review* which best illustrates one of the Tea Party's most remarkable traits as a compulsive desire to attack their opponent's character (574). Despite the reader's urge to categorize this as hyperbolic language, Goldstein is summarizing the majority of Tea Party critiques. He used some verbatim when he mentioned Hitler. The Donald Trump campaign fired an aide recently for calling Obama

an “Islamo Fascist Nazi Appeaser” on Twitter (Lerer, Associated Press). The vilification of the enemy is not in keeping with a Constitution meant to protect multitudes of people. As American history shows, vilification of fellow citizens often instigates popular support for the curtailment of civil rights (e.g., Japanese internment, the PATRIOT ACT, the Jim Crow South). The idea that constitutional principles must remain unchanged is apocryphal, as well. Upon the Constitution’s ratification, James Madison passed ten amendments known as the Bill of Rights. Oddly, Tea Partiers continually perceive constitutional absolutism as the biblical fight of good versus evil.

Ever since 2009, one case study is necessary to understand the intertwined relationship between the congressional gridlock and Tea Party’s constitutional absolutism: the 112th Congress (House Majority: Republicans, Senate Majority: Democrats, and this session lasted from 2011-2012). Many United States historians consider the 112th Congress to be the “worst Congress.” Criteria for this distinction typically amounts to cataloging the frequency with which Congress produces laws. That session saw the lowest amount of legislation passed in modern history. Of the laws President Obama signed, 283, about 22 percent designated names for post offices, natural landmarks, and courthouses (Library of Congress). Political scientists Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal attribute this development to a 25 year acceleration of partisanship — in the House especially (Poole and Rosenthal Voteview). Thus, the “worst Congress” ever is not entirely the Tea Party’s doing. The built-up animosity between party politicians and the decrease in moderate politicians provided an excellent medium for the ideology’s propagation. The natural erosion of cooperation in government provided a natural entry point for the Tea Party to not only become a part of government, but to usurp its power.

In conclusion, the Tea Party’s true intentions are not a return to the virtuous

republicanism in early American government; they intend to return to a system with a lacking social justice element. The Tea Party wants to do away with taxation, which is a necessary source of revenue for minority communities on welfare, for crumbling infrastructure, and for public schools. The Tea Party wants to create a strong border defense mechanism, which spurns the rich and textured immigrant legacy the United States has had since the 18th century. Most crucial to the Tea Party ideology is the overthrow of the federal government. The overthrow of the federal government, rather than ensure individual autonomy, will ensure that Tea Partiers will supervise continued subjugation over the voiceless and the downtrodden.

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