

## I

## The Tea Party

### *An Insurgent Social Movement*

In the wake of what threatened to be a major economic depression, nearly one million frustrated citizens banded together in communities across the US in the spring of 2009, calling for a reduction in federal taxes and government spending. They were motivated, in part, by newly elected President Barack Obama's proposal for federal stimulus legislation to revive the deteriorating economy. The economic upheaval amounted to a deep recession, but one with profound, lasting effects. The activists met, they organized, and they protested. On April 15, 2009, the deadline for filing federal income taxes, adopting the mantle of the "Boston Tea Party" rebels, Tea Party activists rallied in more than a thousand communities. By 2010, the Tea Party had achieved a series of remarkable victories. The Tax Day rallies happened again in 2010, this time with over one million activists turning out. Local Tea Party chapters<sup>1</sup> were popping up across the country to sustain and support these efforts. The Tea Party had also made significant inroads in reshaping the Republican Party. By 2010 many Republicans aligned themselves with the Tea Party. Few episodes of contentious political activity in American history have been so consequential, especially considering how quickly the Tea Party came to dominate politics.

Multiple indicators show that grassroots Tea Party activism had almost completely disappeared less than a decade later. By 2015, the candidacy of Donald Trump remade the Republican Party in ways that deviated sharply from the core principles promulgated by the Tea Party. The hope of a more fiscally responsible Republican Party, a cornerstone of the original Tea Party

<sup>1</sup> We use the terms groups and chapters interchangeably throughout this book in reference to the local social movement organizations that were formed by Tea Party activists. We do not intend to imply any strong and stable relationship with an umbrella organization by our use of the term chapter.

orthodoxy, lay in ruins. Matt Kibbe, President of FreedomWorks, a major conservative advocacy group and organizing hub for the Tea Party, lamented in early 2018, “Republicans, now controlling both the legislative and executive branches, jammed through a ‘CRomnibus’ spending bill that strips any last vestiges of spending restraint from the budget process” (Kibbe 2018). The bill that had so disheartened Kibbe was the Trump administration’s Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. It reduced tax rates for businesses and individuals, increased the standard deduction and family tax credits, reduced the alternative minimum tax for individuals, eliminating it for corporations, and more than doubled the taxable threshold for the estate tax. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated that implementing the Act would add an estimated \$2.289 trillion to the national debt over 10 years, or about \$1.891 trillion after taking into account macroeconomic feedback effects (Congressional Budget Office 2018). After regaining control of the levers of power, the Republican Party spent like the proverbial drunken sailor.

And it continued to do so. In the wake of the several trillion-dollar 2020 bipartisan federal legislative response to the raging COVID-19 pandemic, eventually signed by President Trump, a leader of another major Tea Party group vacillated in her support. Jenny Beth Martin, the founder and decade-long president of Tea Party Patriots sent the following appeal for guidance to the group’s email list, asking supporters:

We need to know where you stand so that we can reflect your thoughts in our response to these policies. In light of the public health crisis that is occurring due to the Coronavirus, the federal government has been proposing many responses to try to relieve the American economy. However, many of these solutions are the very types of things that inspired the protests that launched the tea party movement. We would like to know your thoughts on these proposals as well as if you have any ideas on how the government can help in this time of crisis. We support President Trump and want to do everything we can to help him succeed, but many of these policies go against everything we’ve stood for since the beginning of our movement – i.e., bailouts, stimulus packages, and reckless government spending. (Martin 2020)

After this last halting nod toward fiscal restraint, Martin’s appeals to her electronic mailing list wholeheartedly continued its support of the erratic trajectory of the Trump administration, despite her acknowledgment of its fiscal irresponsibility. A decade after the Tea Party had begun, one of its few remaining national leaders caved on its most cherished principle: fiscal responsibility.

What happened to the Tea Party, and why was its vision lost so quickly? Tracing the movement back to its beginnings, in this book we assess the trajectory of the Tea Party and its political consequences. Much of the earlier research on the Tea Party emphasized its initial phase of mobilization (DiMaggio 2011; McVeigh et al. 2014; Skocpol and Williamson 2011), its early maturation (Brown 2015; Westermeyer 2019, 2022), and its relationship to the Republican Party (Blum 2020; Gervais and Morris 2018). The best of the

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existing research record on the Tea Party is outstanding and robust, but, nevertheless, incomplete. Surprisingly, any systematic research examining the subsequent obvious signs of the Tea Party's decline is almost entirely absent, except for work by Berry (2017). The full story of the Tea Party movement has yet to be told, but its details are essential to understanding the current state of American democracy. It is a story we endeavor to tell in great detail in this book.

In the remainder of this chapter, we provide a general summary of the Tea Party, then outline the key components of the theoretical arguments we develop to explain its rise, fall, and political consequences. Next, we ask seven substantive research questions that together motivate our work, and briefly summarize our answers. We then highlight the unique body of evidence we accumulated for this book. The extent and quality of that body of evidence, we believe, establishes the credibility of our empirical claims. We conclude by summarizing each of the chapters and our major conclusions.

WHAT WAS THE TEA PARTY? AN OVERVIEW  
OF ITS DEFINING FEATURES

Since its origins, researchers and journalists have struggled to classify the Tea Party, which we characterize as an *insurgent social movement*. Some have suggested that the Tea Party was heavily dependent on the elite manipulation of conservative citizens (e.g., Fallin, Grana, and Glantz 2014), with some claiming that it was entirely driven by elite actors without any tangible grassroots base (DiMaggio 2011). Others have treated the Tea Party as a party-movement hybrid existing within the Republican Party. For example, Blum (2020) treats the Tea Party as an insurgency, as we do, but she emphasizes that it was an insurgent party faction within the Republican Party (or “Grand Old Party” [GOP]). Blum argues that the Tea Party aimed to take over the GOP from within by any means necessary. Another group of scholars have framed the Tea Party as a hodge-podge of mostly disconnected grassroots activists, elite conservative activists and media stars, GOP leaders, and billionaire financiers of a variety of conservative causes, the Koch brothers (Gervais and Morris 2018:3; Skocpol and Williamson 2011:11). We are most sympathetic with the latter group, though caveat that the grassroots activists who comprised the primary manifestation of the Tea Party generally maintained few sustained ties with the elite conservative facilitators.

We conceptualize the Tea Party movement as an *insurgency* rather than a social movement because it turned out to be so fragile. This is not to deny that the Tea Party was a social movement; it categorically was and emerged within a swelling of conservative grassroots enthusiasm. Certainly, the Tea Party was a vigorous insurgency while it lasted. Yet as we will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, the outburst of grassroots activism was short and by 2014 only a few local groups remained, those organizations having virtually no public

protest presence. Durable organizations and the sustained and wide use of disruptive tactics are two of the most important characteristics of sustained social movements (della Porta and Diani 2020; Tarrow 2011).

The Tea Party emerged in early 2009 and substantially demobilized by the end of 2014. Its first actions occurred in February 2009, when leaders staged about 20 coordinated protests that expressed an anti-tax, anti-spending vision in response to the Great Recession that was ravaging the American economy. These events were organized by a coalition of conservative advocacy groups who had similarly tried to stoke a mass movement several times previously, with little to show for it. This attempt was different because it worked. The rest of this section will provide executive summary of the Tea Party's main features, including its origins, main actors, message, tactics, and eventual decline. We also introduce the distinctive conceptual language we use for the different factions of the Tea Party.

### **How Did the Tea Party Start?**

The forceful opposition to Barack Obama, the newly elected Black president, and his economic policies resonated with conservatives during a time of widespread economic precarity and White animosity. Elite conservative groups were instrumental in launching the Tea Party. These included Americans for Prosperity and its spin-off, FreedomWorks, along with DontGo, Smart Girl Politics, and the American Liberty Alliance. The coalition of conservative groups seized the moment, setting up a website, [taxdayteaparty.com](http://taxdayteaparty.com), encouraging another set of rallies on April 15, 2009. Because it marks the final date for Americans to file their federal taxes with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), April 15 is symbolically powerful. The groups provided primary messaging, set the tone of the rallies, and created the online infrastructure for local activists to stage events. The website was essential to the Tea Party's origins, as it provided the tools for disconnected activists nationwide to independently plan and stage a protest. More than 1,000 protests occurred on Tax Day, jump-starting the Tea Party into motion as a national force.

### **What Was the Tea Party About?**

The Tea Party's primary claims focused on federal economic policies, taxation, and government spending, as already mentioned. Activists proposed a variety of policy solutions, including significant cuts to corporate tax rates, ending the estate tax, and reducing rarely specified bloat in government programs. These positions were far from novel, and indeed, a direct extension of decades of anti-tax mobilization funded by rich conservatives and elites. A main reason that the Tea Party became such an important political force was that its elite-driven claims were uniquely connected to a credible mass movement of grassroots activists.

Alongside the anti-spending and anti-tax rhetoric was a logic of racialized resentment animating the Tea Party, giving voice to White Christian trepidation about their perceived decline in social power. Though the Tea Party's economic arguments were on the face of it race neutral, they embedded a logic claiming that government spending disproportionately benefited "undeserving" minority groups, and that these groups were responsible for the Great Recession. Such views were rooted in a longstanding campaign by conservative politicians and activists linking government spending and the social safety net to racialized groups. The Tea Party adopted a form of exclusive patriotism, where they claimed to represent the silent majority of Americans whose livelihoods were threatened by reckless spending aimed at helping those responsible for the Great Recession.

#### Who Were the Main Actors in the Tea Party and What Did They Do?

After the 2009 Tax Day rallies, the three core constituencies of the Tea Party came into focus. First, the *elite facilitators of the Tea Party*, comprising several national Tea Party umbrella groups, emerged in 2009 and early 2010. They formed an elite-led "Astroturf movement" – so-called as participants were deemed to represent manufactured grievances rather than authentic ones emerging from aggrieved communities themselves. Tea Party umbrella groups emerged in 2009 and early 2010. They built and maintained the Tea Party's websites, created its core messaging of tax minimization and spending reduction, and provided logistical assistance in the first wave of protest events. These national groups each claimed to speak for the grassroots Tea Party and included the 1776 Tea Party, FreedomWorks, Patriot Action Network, Tea Party Nation, and Tea Party Patriots. With rare exceptions, the national groups subsequently provided no resources to local activists. Nor did they help link the local groups to each other, making sustained regional or national coordinated activity quite infrequent.

Second, *the Tea Party was a grassroots insurgency*, comprising somewhere between 140,000 and 310,000 dedicated activists, 1–2 million protest participants, and several thousand local chapters at its peak. These activists staged protests, organized town halls, held meetings, and mobilized for change. By the end of 2009, close to 1,000 local Tea Party groups had formed, a number ballooning to more than 2,000 by the end of 2011. Groups were forming and disbanding from the beginning of the insurgency in 2009 through 2014. We identified more than 3,500 groups that were active at some point between 2009 and 2014. Nearly all the groups were independently organized by local activists, exhibiting only loose ties with the national Tea Party umbrella groups.

Last, the Tea Party was an intraparty faction within the Republican Party (Blum 2020; Rubin 2017), which we refer to as the *institutionalized Tea Party*. Several political leaders loosely adopted the aggressive style and main policy

agenda of the Tea Party. After the 2010 election Michelle Bachman, an incumbent Representative from Minnesota, helped found the Tea Party Caucus in the House of Representatives. We identified 71 Republicans who joined the Tea Party Caucus, only a small minority of whom were first elected in 2010. The Tea Party Caucus emphasized fiscal restraint, strict constitutionalism, and small government, making its rhetoric consistent with the other constituencies of the Tea Party. Members of the Caucus pursued a non-compromising and obstructionist, “take-no prisoners” legislative style. The Caucus was effectively defunct by 2014.

The three components of the Tea Party were loosely connected but operated largely as independent entities. The local chapters and activists used the web platforms created by the elite actors, but the ties between the two were quite thin. Similarly, the elite actors provided the main framing for Tea Party politicians but provided only marginal financial support of the insurgency’s agenda in Congress. The politicians who adopted the Tea Party name had few strong ties to the grassroots activists who mobilized across the country.

### What Did the Tea Party Do?

The Tea Party rose to prominence as a protest movement. After the successes of the 2009 Tax Day rallies, activists continued staging events maintaining the momentum of the movement. Between 2009 and 2014, we identified almost 20,000 protests, rallies, meetings, and other events staged by Tea Party groups. A notable example of such mobilization was the town hall protests that occurred in the summer of 2009. These were characterized by Tea Party activists attending and disrupting the gatherings staged by political leaders to oppose the health care reform legislation being drafted by the Obama administration. By 2010, activists staged a second set of Tax Day rallies. This time, 674 protests took place – a decline from 2009 – with over one million activists turning up to demonstrate. Over time, Tea Party activists concluded that protests were ineffective and were reluctant to stage future rallies or demonstrations. Instead, they focused on hosting meetings, book clubs, and discussion groups that were highly localized. This tactical decision further removed the Tea Party from the public eye, making it increasingly difficult to sustain mobilization.

As the protests staged by the grassroots Tea Party activists declined, the elite facilitators did little to restart mobilization or to actively expand the Tea Party’s organizational network. While these umbrella groups maintained their websites for the local Tea Party groups, they otherwise remained at arm’s length from the grassroots activists. Though the institutionalized Tea Party achieved little in terms of major legislative victories, affiliated politicians gladly took credit for obstructionist tactics aimed at slowing down or stopping the Obama administration’s policy agenda.

### Is the Tea Party Still Active?

The main period of Tea Party mobilization occurred between 2009 and 2014. After that, the insurgency effectively ceased to exist as a significant force in American politics. We use several related measures to make a case for the Tea Party demobilization. By 2014, fewer than 300 local chapters showed any signs of activity, and street-level protests had almost completely vanished. The annual Tax Day rallies that initially demonstrated the Tea Party's strength had dwindled to just 22 events nationwide by 2014. A similar trajectory was evident in the institutionalized Tea Party, which significantly declined in power and influence. By 2015, the Caucus officially dissolved, although it had been mostly inactive for several years preceding its formal demise.

Small remnants of the Tea Party's elite facilitators persist, maintaining websites, sending out emails, and serving as fundraising vehicles for the broader conservative movement. The mobilizing structures built by the facilitators have nearly entirely disappeared. To the degree that any grassroots Tea Party activism persisted, it was largely the result of the efforts of a small number of independent activists rather than any semblance of an active national coalition. Though the Tea Party now shows few signs of life, we argue that its political legacy altered the course of American democracy. The Tea Party's aggressive, uncompromising approach to politics has become mainstream in the Republican Party, further widening the divide between major political parties.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE TEA PARTY

Our theoretical approach to understanding the Tea Party draws heavily upon the *resource mobilization* (McCarthy and Zald 1977) and *framing* perspectives (Snow et al. 1986). We also emphasize more recent work on the role of social movements within *institutionalized politics and political parties* (McAdam and Tarrow 2010, 2013; Tarrow 2021). Our perspective is also grounded in the view that social movements are composed of citizens acting collectively in attempts to bring about social change. Accordingly, it is essential to emphasize the dual importance of *structure* and *agency* in generating social change (Sewell 1992). These ideas are central to our account of the timing, extent, and location of collective action. We distinguish theoretically between the Tea Party's emergence, maturation, and decline. Given these areas of focus, we concentrate on explaining the Tea Party's demands, the grievances that motivated activists, and the tactical and organizational decisions made by movement leaders.

The first theoretical building block to our analyses is *sentiment pools*, or concentrations of individuals supportive of a movement's goals but inactive in mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 2002). Movements that emerge with preexisting, widely available support for their goals are advantaged. Lacking such blessings, movements must accomplish the hard work of what Klandermans (1997) calls consensus mobilization. The goals of the Tea Party – lower taxes

and reduced government spending – had already found wide support among conservatives ahead of the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Elite conservative groups and activists had done the hard work of consensus mobilization around these issues for several decades. Due to these efforts, broad swaths of American conservatives believed that government spending primarily benefited the “undeserving” poor, who were widely understood to be members of racial minority groups, and that White, middle-class economic hardship was primarily the result of high taxes and reckless spending.

The mobilization of citizens out of a preexisting sentiment pool rarely occurs without agency. Organizers, whether organic or elite, are often regularly trying to mobilize sentiment pools without success. This was true for the Tea Party too – elite actors had attempted to foment something like the Tea Party several times, none of which had been successful. Sometimes historical circumstances help organizers succeed in their mobilization efforts. Such historical opportunities are most impactful if they succeed in creating mass disruptions of the quotidian or “the threatened interruption of the taken-for-granted routines of everyday life” (Snow and Soule 2010:36). We treat such disruptions as *suddenly imposed grievances*, which were essential to understanding the Tea Party’s emergence. We particularly emphasize the role of *material threats* and the *status threats* in shaping collective action. These threats were linked to two historical occurrences. First, we argue that the Great Recession created a looming sense of economic precarity as its effects spread. These material threats were powerful motivators of Tea Party activism. Second, we turn to the election of Barack Obama in November 2008, which hastened a growing sense of status threat for White, conservative Christians, as they became alarmed that their social power was in decline. This was further exacerbated by the Obama administration’s call for a massive spending bill to blunt the effects of the Great Recession, legislation that was widely opposed by conservatives.

The third component of our theoretical argument emphasizes the role of the *organizational and mobilizing structures* activists choose, and the consequences of these decisions. For the Tea Party, elite facilitators disseminated an organizational template that was widely adopted by grassroots activists, resulting in the rapid proliferation of local groups. These efforts spawned a mass insurgency, but one where local chapters were not connected in any coherent way with one another, or to the elite facilitators that put the Tea Party into motion. The organizational and mobilizing structures chosen by activists laid the groundwork for the Tea Party’s rapid decline. We draw from scholarship emphasizing the *tactical decisions* (Tilly 2006) made by activists and how movements *frame their grievances* (Snow et al. 1986). The decoupled mobilizing structures made it difficult for local activists to coordinate broadly when planning events or honing their political messaging. Over time, the Tea Party’s message became increasingly unfocused, and activists became steadily more disconnected as local organizations ceased their activities.



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Last, our theoretical account seeks to describe and explain the Tea Party's impact on electoral politics, and the Republican Party more generally. The Tea Party was not a political party, but a social movement linked to a *Republican intraparty faction* (Blum 2020). Grassroots Tea Party activists were quite hostile to Republicans, and GOP leadership particularly, who were derided as weak politicians who routinely caved to Democratic demands. The emergence of the Tea Party Caucus in the House by 2010 created what Tarrow (2021) calls a *blended hybrid* form of movement-party interaction. We extend Skocpol and Williamson's (2011) argument that the Tea Party served as a *watchdog* for congressional Republicans. Activists used a variety of tactics to pressure politicians to act in accordance with the movement's goals, including threatening to support primary challengers to incumbents and actively opposing any semblance of Republican compromise with the Democrats. The cumulative result of these activities, we argue, was that Tea Party activism hastened radicalization within the GOP.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Insurgencies occur unevenly across local communities (Smelser 1962), a pattern also true for the Tea Party. Community conditions become more or less conducive to generating activism, and in some cases help to sustain it (Cunningham and Phillips 2007; McVeigh 1999; Snyder 1979). For several decades, scholars deemphasized the role of grievances as precursors to collective action. More recently, grievances have received renewed attention (Simmons 2014). Our research questions build on these insights by emphasizing how local social structural characteristics enabled Tea Party mobilization by helping the movement's activists make their grievances more relevant to their immediate surroundings. The local contexts where a disproportionate segment of residents share the grievances articulated by a social movement should see heightened levels of activism. Importantly, we argue that the individuals most likely to become active, due to a perception of heightened risk, need not be personally affected by the social forces motivating their activism.

Seven questions shape the intellectual backbone of the chapters that follow. We emphasize the central importance of local community characteristics where Tea Party mobilization occurred, along with the significance of time in understanding evolving patterns of activism. This strategy affords us a unique ability to engage in a granular examination of the evolution of the Tea Party from its genesis, into its maturation, and through its eventual decline. No other research has examined both the spatial and temporal dynamics of the Tea Party, particularly over an extended period of time. As a result, our findings generate important new insights into existing questions about the Tea Party, and provide answers to new questions that remain unasked or unresolved. The research questions are: Why did the Tea Party emerge when it did? Who were the Tea Party activists and what were their motivations? Was the Tea Party an

Astroturf movement, a more organic grassroots insurgency, or something else? What tactics did the Tea Party use? What were the consequences of the Tea Party's mobilizing structures? What became of the Tea Party? What were the political consequences of the Tea Party? We now elaborate each question in more detail.

### Question 1: Why Did the Tea Party Emerge When It Did?

Episodes of collective action do not appear randomly and are almost never completely spontaneous. Developing a comprehensive analysis of the Tea Party therefore requires consideration of the longer-run social, political, and economic developments along with the occurrence of any suddenly imposed conditions that together may have facilitated its mobilization. From its earliest moments, the role of elite conservative advocacy groups and activists in putting the Tea Party into motion was heavily scrutinized by both researchers and observers. The insurgency's elite facilitators, however, had been proselytizing a variety of conservative causes for decades. This importantly explains the substance of the Tea Party's anti-tax, anti-spending platform, but cannot account for its timing.

We argue that the timing of Tea Party insurgency requires deliberate attention to the local social, economic, and political contexts where mobilization occurred. National conservative elites had been attempting to spark credible grassroots mobilization like the Tea Party for some time, but with little success. Scholars have already noted that while elite facilitation of the Tea Party did take place, it was relatively thin and fleeting (Skocpol and Williamson 2011). We move beyond the Tea Party's elite facilitators and focus on areas where the Tea Party idea disproportionately resonated. These were communities that were more profoundly impacted by the economic upheaval of the Great Recession, and those areas where there were larger populations of would-be activists, especially White, conservative, evangelical Christians. Both factors are essential to understanding the spatiotemporal dynamics of Tea Party activism.

### Question 2: Who Were the Tea Party Activists and What Were Their Motivations?

Many earlier studies on the Tea Party sympathizers suggest they were generally White, older, Christian, and quite conservative politically (Arceneaux and Nicholson 2012; Maxwell and Parent 2012; Perrin et al. 2014). Others have noted the importance of race and racism in motivating Tea Party support (Parker and Barreto 2014), which became particularly pronounced in the ferocious, sometimes explicitly racist rejection of Barack Obama that animated conservative opposition (Barreto et al. 2011). Supporters of a social movement, however, are not necessarily the same as a movement's activists. Some research using ethnographic methods to study Tea Party activists appears to affirm an