

The Rise, Fall, and Influence of the Tea Party Insurgency

Emerging in 2009, the Tea Party movement had an immediate and profound impact on American politics and society. This book draws on a decade's worth of original, extensive data collection to understand why the Tea Party emerged, where it was active, and why it disappeared so quickly. Patrick Rafail and John McCarthy link the Tea Party's rise to prominence following the economic collapse that came to be known as the Great Recession. Paying special attention to the importance of space and time in shaping the Tea Party's activities, the authors identify and explain the movement's disappearance from the political stage. Even though grassroots Tea Party activism largely ceased by 2014, they demonstrate the movement's effect on the Republican Party and American democracy that continues today.

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Preface

This book began as an innocuous email conversation between the authors in early April of 2009. We had learned that a coordinated set of conservative protest events was planned for April 15, and they immediately caught our eye. After reviewing internet listings for the rallies, we decided to index and download the website that had appeared to assist local activists in staging events. At first, our goals were quite modest, and consisted of only writing a single study on the spatial distribution of the Tea Party's first major coordinated effort. The success of the rallies caught us off guard, and our instincts told us that we should try to capture the Tea Party phenomenon more thoroughly. We started a research project, finally culminating in this book, in the following days.

At the time Rafail was a graduate student and McCarthy was well along in his career. Rafail is now an Associate Professor on the cusp of promotion to Full Professor and McCarthy is retired. If the Tea Party had remained a vital insurgency, now well on course to becoming an established social movement, like the Pro-Life movement for instance, the story we have to tell would probably not have been anywhere near as interesting or as theoretically revealing as it has become. That it intersected with the emergence of the Trump phenomenon gave us the opportunity to nest it in what became substantially more interesting theoretical conversations. We never imagined we would take so long to tell the story in the granular detail we eventually achieved, or even that we would persevere in our commitment to capturing it.

We began by scraping newspaper databases for reports of Tax Day protests, quickly developing a codebook to systematically record the details of the protests. We had each separately (McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Rafail 2010) and together (Martin, Rafail, and McCarthy 2017; Rafail,

Soule, and McCarthy 2012) used newspaper data to study protest, so we began with what we knew how to do, following Abraham Kaplan's (1998) dictum:

Give a small boy a hammer, and he will find that everything he encounters needs pounding. It comes as no particular surprise to discover that a scientist formulates problems in a way which requires for their solution just those techniques in which he himself is especially skilled. (p. 28)

The "Tea Party Project," as we called it, was not an immediate priority for either of us at the time. But we plugged away, keeping old web crawlers running, building new ones, and planning some new papers to assess the social and economic characteristics of communities that witnessed high rates of Tea Party activity. Given the scale of data that we were collecting, it became clear that we needed research assistant support. We wrote a successful National Science Foundation (NSF) proposal to extend the project and work with the hundreds of gigabytes of unstructured data that we had assembled (NSF awards SES-1322568 and SES-1321802).

By then enterprising colleagues employing the same well-worn methodology as we were using had begun publishing analyses of the social and structural variation across US communities that predicted variation in Tea Party strength (e.g., McVeigh and colleagues (2014) and Banerjee (2013)). For the most part, these studies seemed to have gotten the story right. So, we did not pursue publication of our parallel analysis of the Tea Party origin story since we didn't believe it made much of a theoretical or methodological contribution.

This was before we fully grasped how central the Great Recession was to the Tea Party's story as we began digging more deeply into our data. It was also before we appreciated the accuracy of Skocpol and Williamson's (2011) claims about the insurgency's mobilizing structures and that its local groups were by and large such modest affairs. We began to think about the entire trajectory of the Tea Party as a puzzle larger than just its emergence. By then our data collection efforts strongly indicated that the Tea Party was in rapid decline. Temporal variations within the Tea Party's decline as well as what kinds of effects it had on electoral political processes quickly came into focus as guiding questions as we continued our data collection and analyses. We dramatically widened our theoretical approach, coming into dialogue with scholars who began vigorously addressing how social movements and political parties interact, particularly the work of McAdam and Kloos (2014), Tarrow (2021), Blum (2020), and of course, the original work of Skocpol and Williamson (2011).

Many students and colleagues helped us in the more than a decade we pursued this project. At Penn State, Ashley Gromis heroically coded the original data on the 2009 Tax Day protests. Ashley went on to earn a PhD in sociology at UCLA and is currently employed at the RAND Corporation. Kevin Reuning and Hyun Woo Kim joined the team and led the construction of our web survey of Tea Party activists. Kevin received his PhD in Political Science at Penn State and is currently an Assistant Professor at Ohio University. Hyun Woo received

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his PhD in Sociology from Penn State and is currently an Assistant Professor at Chungbuk National University. Claire Kovach did much of the detective work on the Tea Party Caucus and the careers of its original members. Claire finished her PhD at Penn State and is now a Research Analyst at the Keystone Research Center in Harrisburg, PA. Finally, Kerby Geoff provided assistance with analyzing our web survey. Kerby received his PhD from the Sociology Department at Penn State and is currently Associate Director of Research for the Boniuk Institute for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance at Rice University.

In 2012, Rafail took a position in the Sociology Department at Tulane University where he began extending the event database beyond the Tax Day rallies. His research team included Isaac Freitas, Cate Irvin, Victoria King, and Prisha Patel who worked for several years collecting newspaper data on Tea Party events, coding and annotating it, and creating coordinates for where events were occurring. Isaac is now a Senior Data Developer and Cate is Director of Economic Development in Pittsburgh. Victoria works for the New Orleans government and Prisha is attending medical school.

This work has benefited tremendously from the advice and criticism of several colleagues. We thank the two anonymous reviewers who gave us generous feedback both large and small. Their comments significantly strengthened this book. We are particularly indebted to Sidney Tarrow, who enthusiastically gave incredibly helpful feedback on nearly the entire manuscript, one piece at a time. His sharp insights and commentary significantly shaped our core arguments, broadened our theoretical scope, and helped us better conceptualize the importance of status threats. Participants in Penn State's Social Movements Reading Group gave helpful feedback on Chapters 3, 6, and 8. Doug McAdam's feedback on Chapter 8 allowed us to better locate and contextualize the Tea Party's political legacy. Our sincere thanks to Michael Haney, who shared his interview transcripts from his discussions with Tea Party activists. The interviews provided essential context that helped us connect the ecological patterns of Tea Party activism with the individuals who took part. We also thank Rachel Blafeder and David Meyer at Cambridge University Press for their enthusiasm and for helping us see our project through.

This work would not have been possible without the support of our families. Pat thanks Katie, Una, and Miriam for their patience and support during the late nights and early mornings of writing, or more often, frantically fixing a web crawler. John cannot thank Pat enough for her unwavering moral and intellectual support for the project throughout.