Tea Party Decline

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Abstract

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Since its birth in 2009 the Tea Party has been a controversial force in American politics. Here we look at the life cycle of the Tea Party, asking how it has fared over time since its initial street protests and congressional town hall confrontations. Drawing on a unique data base of interviews with 95 Tea Party leaders conducted between 2011 and 2016, we are in a position to compare chapter births and deaths. Of these 95 chapters most were founded in 2009 and only a handful after 2011. None of the chapters we examined formed after 2013. The mortality rate of chapters appear high as we are able to confirm that close to 40 percent of these chapters are dead or on life support. We link each organization's internal capacity to whether chapters still exist in 2017 and find a powerful relationship between low capacity and death. Traditional social movement theory and interest group scholarship provide effective frames for understanding the downward spiral of the Tea Party.

The Tea Party's stunning emergence in early 2009 reshaped American politics and its impact continues to reverberate today.[1] Yet the Tea Party today is dying, off stage and unnoticed perhaps, but dying nevertheless. The Tea Party's organizational base is shrinking year by year and there is no evidence of rebirth or renewal. The data we have collected is quite striking and unambiguous: of the 95 Tea Party chapters we interviewed between 2011 and 2016, many are already dead while, ominously, new chapters are no longer forming. Tea Party is in a downward spiral and we argue that its structure made it difficult for the movement to grow into a more stable, more mature political entity.

Evolution of the Tea Party

The role of the Tea Party in American politics is a topic of some scope and by way of overview, it might be useful to outline what is and is not covered in this paper. What this paper is not is a study of people who support the Tea Party (see Parker and Barreto, 2013; Perrin et al, 2011; Abramowitz, 2012; Rohlinger et al, 2014). Nor is it a study of how the Tea Party was first organized, though we touch upon that briefly (Lepore, 2010; Zernike, 2010; Formisano, 2012; Skocpol and Williamson, 2012, Brown, 2015). And this is not a study of policy influence (Berry and Portney, 2017). In short, there is an impressive body of work already on the Tea Party and it is much too broad to summarize here. What is central to this paper is the life cycle of the Tea Party. It began to foment in the first months of the Obama administration and is now more than eight years old. During this period the Tea Party has gone through some distinct stages of development.

This paper looks at the Tea Party as a large set of individual organizations. As Skocpol and Williamson note, "most local Tea Parties were freshly created organizations launched by self-appointed organizers" (2012, 94). Contemporary conservatism stands under the shadow cast by President Trump, whose iconoclast beliefs both challenge and embolden right-leaning groups. What role the Tea Party plays in the future of conservative philosophy and activism are chapters yet to be written. Yet no matter how Trump changes conservative politics or how much the Tea Party might decline in the Trump years, its legacy is secure: it has pulled the Republican Party to the right and it has worked to further polarize America.

With eight candles on the cake, enough time has certainly passed to begin measuring the evolution of the Tea Party's organizational life. There are different ways to approach this but here we ask about the chapters at the state and local level as they are the sources of activism that animated the Tea Party movement. There are no high functioning national Tea Party organizations and chapters are wholly independent entities. Their activism at town halls in 2009 and then in the

2010 election was enormously consequential. But how have these building blocks of the Tea Party fared over the years? If the chapter structure of the Tea Party has declined, then conservative activism will surely emerge elsewhere, in different forms and with distinct impact.

We examine the life cycle of Tea Party chapters by drawing on a unique database of interviews conducted by the author and research assistants between 2011 and 2016. These are elite interviews. Basic questions were asked of subjects but the interviewing was not designed to test tightly developed hypotheses. Instead, we look at broad dimensions of organizational maintenance and quantify the respondents' answers in varying ways.

Our understanding the life cycle of the Tea Party draws on a number of theoretical perspectives. Most obviously, perhaps, is social movement theory. The term "social movement" is a commonly used colloquialism but social scientists conceive of it in a more precise manner. Sidney Tarrow distinguishes a social movement as "sequences of contentious politics that are based on an underlying social networks and resonant collective action frames, and which develop the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents" (1998, 2). The Tea Party has clearly excelled at contentious politics using collective action frames that resonate. It sustained challenges, at least for a time against powerful opponents (both the Republican and Democratic parties). Its networks are perhaps looser than the definition holds as there were plenty of newcomers as chapters formed. Still, the Tea Party seems the epitome of a social movement.

At the same time, the success of movements varies considerably and while some change society—the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, the women's movement for example—others die on the vine. A cottage industry within Sociology is dedicated to determining the correlates of success and failure. One the earliest such approaches is resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). It directs scholarship away from the social psychology of the angry and disaffected who are attracted to a social movement toward an organizational perspective. The anger of dissidents needs to be channeled in ways in which it can sustain the movement and invested in ways that expand its notoriety and influence (Staggenborg, 1988). This is an inviting avenue for Tea Party research as chapters assiduously rejected scaling up into a federated structure and avoided a professionalization of their operations (Fetner and King, 2014; McCarthy 2005). The data we've collected offers a window into each chapter's resources and we are able to relate such organizational behavior to mortality.

Social movement scholars refer to "social movement organizations" while political scientists talk about "citizen groups." The substantive difference between the two seems elusive but the two disciplines do ask different questions about what's essentially the same phenomenon (Burstein, 1995). Increasingly, political scientists treat interest groups as businesses that vary in their skill in converting resources provided by their constituents into lobbying effectiveness (Drutman, 2015; LaPira and Thomas, 2017). There is no less a focus on lobbying effectiveness for citizen groups. Citizen groups are frequently pitted against business interests and each all draw on their own unique resources to maximize influence.

Lobbying takes many forms and the initial burst of Tea Party anti-tax demonstrations and histrionics at congressional town halls only lasted for a short period. Advocacy needed to turn in other directions, less demanding on the organizations' ability to engage followers in highly intense forms of participation. With an eye toward the choices made and the strategies pursued, the interviews conducted for this research probed for information relating to the forms of Tea Party lobbying in the period after the protests.

Social movement and interest group frames are very traditional ways of looking at an emergent set of advocacy organizations. Perhaps they're not the best approaches to studying the Tea Party as the movement appears on the surface to be a blend of various kinds of political organizations. Although the Tea Party certainly has traits in common with social movements and interest groups, it may transcend conventional ways of looking at politics. At the time it emerged, it was widely seen as something new, shocking in its willingness to trample on bounds of propriety (like protestors shouting down a member of Congress at a town hall). The Tea Party arose at a time of substantial yet growing partisanship, while a newly emergent media outrage industry provided nonstop coverage and a good amount of cheerleading to egg the movement along.

It could be that the Tea Party represents what Goss and Heaney (2010) refer to as organizational "hybridity." As such it mixes collective action frames and membership incentives in novel ways that attract different constituencies. They argue that hybridity is an effective means of understanding organizational adaptation and innovation. This may be particularly useful in assessing the Tea Party as it has never fit neatly into the boxes we typically draw in our minds when we think about American politics. Alternatively, doing things differently may be doing things that over time have proven to be less effective. If so, we might find that traditional perspectives such as social movement theory and interest group scholarship provide greater insight into the life cycle of the Tea Party.

Data and Methods

This paper draws on lengthy elite interviews with 95 Tea Party chapter leaders. These are elite interviews—interviews that use a limited number of open-ended questions to elicit information from notables. In political science we are well attuned to survey research interviewing and our discussion of survey methodology is usually limited to esoteric matters of sampling strategy and question wording. Elite interviewing is quite a departure from random sample surveys and structured questioning. Thus, it's important to detail exactly how the research was designed as there is no simple template of questions to refer readers to. The discussion here focuses on how the interviews were conducted, the selection and recruitment of subjects, and the coding of the data into a quantitative database.

ELITE INTERVIEWING

Elite interviews do not follow a systematic path, asking each respondent the same questions in the same order. On the contrary, elite interviews are intentionally conversational, reaching instead for a broad understanding of the topics at hand rather than relying on short, direct answers to single,

narrow questions asked robotically one at a time. Subjects are allowed to talk at length and interviewers are encouraged to probe to draw out additional information where it seems opportune. Questions can be reordered on the fly if the subject leads into a question that was intended to be asked later. Similarly, questions can be skipped if the material has already been covered in a previous response. Questions can also be repeated later in the session (with different wording) if the subject didn't adequately answer it the first time it was posed. As I've noted elsewhere,

> Open-ended questioning—the riskiest but potentially most valuable type of elite interviewing—requires interviewers to know when to probe and how to formulate follow-up questions on the fly. It's a high-wire act (Berry, 2002, p. 679).

The conversational nature is highly advantageous. It is particularly helpful at putting people at ease, communicating an inquisitive but open interaction where the respondent is free to say what he or she wants (Leech, 2002). We worried that Tea Party leaders might be suspicious of a university-based research project based in very blue Boston. To put respondents at ease, we began with a "grand tour" question, which was some conversational variation of "We're always interested in how people become active in public affairs. Could you tell me a little bit about your own background and then how you came into a position of leadership in your chapter?" Respondents typically responded at length and in this first question they were not cut off nor interrupted with a probe. The questioning became more pointed after that. For example, we asked respondents if they had met with government officials on a policy matter. We asked them to describe their chapter meetings and then followed-up with questions about frequency and average attendance. We asked about the racial and ethnic make-up of the chapter, working with coalitions, media strategy, and other topics as well.[2]

Since questions were not always asked in the same order and interviewers interjected unscripted probes, concerns may arise about both the validity and reliability of the entire enterprise. Yet validity and reliability score well when the questions are designed to fit goals that are tailored to what this analytical approach offers. It is not merely a good strategy for interpretive work but can also be used for positivist, hypothesis testing when broad answers can adequately convey the necessary information (Lynch, 2013).

Moreover, validity and reliability can be strengthened by elite interview strategies (Berry, 2002). Validity in interviewing—are you measuring what you think you're measuring?—is reinforced by a strategy where the same topic is approached with different wording and in different contexts. Are the answers still patterned or are they all over the place? For this project, fortunately, it was the former. Moreover, probing allows the interviewer to uncover evidence that broadens the understanding we have of a complex pattern of human behavior. Allowing respondents to speak at

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[2] Some of the questions changed over the years but in this paper we stick with those questions that touch on subjects we asked about each year. This modular format allowed for questions that seemed pertinent at some point in the six year period to be swapped out when they became less relevant. Some years we added questions for specific projects and then subsequently removed them after the appropriate data was collected (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014; Berry and Portney, 2017).

length takes the interviewer down paths that might not have been anticipated. If the ultimate truth is the goal, this kind of broad inquiry is appropriate.

Reliability may be a more challenging standard to meet. How can measurement be consistent if the questioning does not always follow the same wording and order? One advantage is that elite interviewing allows looping back to an ambiguous answer or one that reflects a misunderstanding of the initial question asked. Also, the elaboration of answers increases the chances that what's central to the story at hand emerges. At the same time, not every kind of semi-structured question lends itself well to reliability standards and those analyzing the completed interviews must keep this in perspective. Asking lobbyists, for example, to assess their impact on policymaking leads to inflated assessments (no matter the format of the questioning) and interpretations of such responses must keep this in mind.

None of this is to say that interviewing Tea Party chapter leaders is not without its challenges. As we'll discuss, these leaders tended to be old and many struck us as quite naïve about how national politics works. They could be quite discursive, a tendency further enabled by the open-ended questioning. However, most were quite cooperative and did not seem to shy away from any of our questions.[3]

SUBJECTS

Given the Tea Party's omnipresence in American political life in recent years, its leadership is actually quite difficult to identify and contact. We were interested in talking to the heads of local or state chapters, but identifying who that person is at any one time and finding accurate contact information turns out to be demanding and time consuming. There are no master lists of Tea Party chapters and while some have web sites or Facebook pages, that's not true of all and many such sites are not regularly updated. Some identify a person as their head who has not been their leader for a time.[4] News stories on various Tea Party chapters often provided names of leaders, though it was not uncommon for them to describe someone as head of the local Tea Party who, upon investigation, was just an activist at a city council meeting or some such.

In short, identification of Tea Party leaders over this six year period was a painstaking process. When we did find someone we believed to be a chapter president and we had an email address, we approached that person through email with an explanation of what we were doing. They

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[3] All interviews were conducted over the phone and most lasted in the neighborhood of 45 minutes to an hour. Notes were taken contemporaneously and then filled in immediately afterwards. Typed transcripts typically ran five to six pages single-spaced. Subjects were told that their interviews would be held in confidence and that we would never identify them or their chapter name. We said we would use the information they gave us in more general ways (what reporters call "on background") for academic publications. Although it's impossible to know for sure if potential interviewees who dodged us are distinctively different than those we did interview, the large number of interviews we conducted, the strong patterns that emerged, and the confirmatory evidence from other research and journalism, give us confidence that we have captured a roughly representative set of Tea Party leaders.

[4] The national organization, Tea Party Patriots, does identify its chapters on its national web site <teapartypatriots.org>, but year after year we found it to be outdated and of limited use. We found some other lists but they were equally inaccurate.

were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed at a time of their convenience. If they didn't respond we approached them again with a second email. It's impossible to calculate our response rate as some initial approaches had to go to an anonymous "inquire here" box on the chapter's web site or Facebook page. Many such sites were left up long after the chapter folded. Other times we received a response but were told by that person that they weren't president any longer but would forward our letter to the person who was in charge (and then, frequently, did not hear from that second person).

Life Cycle

As we think of the Tea Party as a set of organizations rather than as a large and indeterminate "movement," the most fundamental question concerns its life cycle: have these chapters survived? Viewed as a social movement, have they successfully mobilized resources to move beyond the initial protest phase? Have they built organizations to facilitate more sustained advocacy?

THE MYTH OF NATIONAL ORGANIZING

Narratives about the birth of the Tea Party usually begin with the famous rant by CNBC reporter Rick Santelli who, a month after President Obama took office, expressed outrage over what he saw as a bailout for irresponsible home owners: "How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills? . . . We're thinking of having a Tea Party in July" (YouTube, 2009). The Santelli rant went viral and served as a call to arms to conservatives. Although Santelli did bequeath a name to the movement, there was already conservative organizing underway, for example Glenn Beck's 9/12 Project, and grassroots advocacy aimed against Obama would have emerged without a temper tantrum from a bond analyst for a stock market cable channel.

More complex narratives examine the Tea Party as an extension of Republican Party activism supported by billionaire donors. Jane Mayer traces money from the Koch Brothers to Americans for Prosperity which, in turn, used the funds to promote the Tea Party. Other conservative institutions, such as the Bradley Foundation and Freedom Works, have been tied to the early childhood, if not the birth, of the Tea Party (Mayer, 2016, 193-197).

Yet our Tea Party interviews tell a different story about the early development of the Tea Party. We only heard a single example of a chapter that received any financial support from national conservative organizations—a modest one time grant. Nor did chapters receive much in the way of other forms of support. All we heard in this vein was that some were supplied speakers for their monthly meetings by the national Tea Party Patriots, one of the umbrella groups that tried to scale up the movement from the grassroots. Their speakers may have served as a small boost for attendance but this aid was a far cry from providing seed money, sending political consultants to work with a chapter board, or creating a secure electronic means to enable online fundraising.

Why didn't what might be termed "national money" make its way down to the state and local chapters of the Tea Party, either in cash grants or in other forms of assistance? At the height of Tea Party mania, in the first years of the movement, there were a lot of ostensible Tea Party chapters. In 2010 the *Washington Post* found 1400 "possible groups" and contacted leaders of 650 of them (Gardner, 2010). Skocpol and Williamson found online evidence of close to 1,000 groups (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012, 90). Given these numbers, it understandable that building a field operation to service and coordinate that many organizations would have been a daunting challenge. Much of this difficulty was finding out which organizations were really operating and which were aspirational and didn't consist of more than a modest web site, if that. As we noted above when we followed up press references there was often "no there there" when we tried to find the chapter. Heath Brown notes, "It takes minutes, and nearly no money, to establish a social media and name it "The Tea Party of [fill in your city or county name]'" (2015, 21). The computer scrapings in others' research designed to determine the number of Tea Parties chapters exaggerated the actual presence of an actual organization and, we believe, were off by a substantial magnitude.

Thus, if national organizations had actively wanted to put money into local organizational development they would have found it challenging to make wise investment decisions. While there was Tea Party passion at the grassroots, organizations were still embryonic. As will be elaborated upon below, there was little in the way of money being raised by the state and local groups. Analogizing to venture capitalists listening to business plans being pitched, we believe relatively few chapters were capable of making a convincing case to a panel of executives at Americans for Prosperity they that were worthy of significant investment.

It seems as though funders such as the Koch Brothers and by Washington-based organizations like Freedom Works and Americans for Prosperity, assumed that there would be a natural evolution from the grassroots into national, federated, structures. This sort of magical organizing failed to materialize not only because the national organizations made insufficient investments but also because local group leaders preferred not to scale up. This inclination toward independence from national organizations may have grown out of a belief by the activists in chapters that they were rebels, pitchforks in hand, working to crush Washington, not work with it. As one chapter leader told us, "there's no national network. . . there's no formal organization." Early on we heard of coordination in the form of conference calls, mostly surrounding the 2010 election, but in later interviews we didn't even hear about this. As we'll discuss below, links to political networks or lack thereof were consequential for Tea Party chapters, just as they are for local groups in any national movement (Heaney and Rojas, 2015; Walker and McCarthy, 2010.)

INTERNAL RESOURCES

Tea Party chapters are, in every way, volunteer run organizations (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012; Zernike, 2010). Chapters do not have paid employees—we didn't hear of any organizations that weren't entirely run by volunteers. As we know as social scientists, fully volunteer organizations quickly begin swimming upstream as enthusiasm wanes and it becomes more difficult to engage activists. The matters that catalyzed organization can be eclipsed by new issues, making the mission

seem less urgent. Over time it's easier to become a free rider, believing that others are doing what's necessary to carry the cause forward. Alternatively, frustration with the lack of progress or the lack of direction can sap energy from such groups. Occupy Wall Street comes to mind.

The Obama administration, which was the proximate cause of the Tea Party movement, was in power during the entire length of this project and we found sustained outrage toward the liberal president for the six years of our interviewing. Even with the continuing stimulus of having a liberal president who provoked the far right with his policies, Tea Party chapters still faced the tests of attracting and maintaining enough volunteer labor to keep the organizations functioning. As we argue throughout, part of the solution to this was essentially to do little so a great deal of labor was not needed. After the labor intensive period of political protests ended, the most typical activity remaining was a monthly meeting.[5] This was usually held at a restaurant or civic space that could be reserved ahead of time. One group met at a gun club. Outside speakers were common at first, some of whom were sent to the groups from Washington, some of whom asked to come (i.e., candidates for office, authors plugging a book), and some were recruited by the chapter.

In terms of financial resources, minimal fundraising was the modal organizational characteristic among chapters. We saw not one that had a well-developed (much less sophisticated) fundraising operation. Even more remarkable, perhaps, is that no leader mentioned limited funds as a serious problem; it was as if they held a religious belief that God will provide. That hasn't happened yet and what little money chapters raised tends to come from passing the hat at chapter meetings. The president of an Idaho chapter told us proudly that "We take an offering at every meeting and currently our budget is about $350. [That's what is] in our bank account." This we live-of-the-land defense of not doing significant fundraising surely reflects the reality that their constituencies would probably not put up with substantial membership fees. Not surprisingly, "membership" is a figure of speech in Tea Party chapters and few have ever assessed annual membership dues. There are not fundraising drives in Tea Party chapters either. Or annual dinners. Or auctions. Or benefit concerts. Or any of the other standard tools of nonprofit fundraising.

In turn, the lack of funds creates rather serious limitations on chapter activities. Most obviously, for an interest group, it constrains their advocacy (Berry, Sobieraj, and Schlossberg, 2012). The ways in which members are mobilized and new members or donors recruited becomes limited. For example, we found that chapter web sites were primitive by contemporary Internet standards. It costs money to create a strong web presence and it costs money to maintain and improve it over time. A lame web site that has provided little or no new material in recent months sends a very powerful, negative signal about organizational vitality. Since no real money is raised by chapters, there is no rented office and typically, no phone for the organization. Some web sites do list a number that is the personal phone of the president (and this is sometimes out of date on the web sites).

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[5] We are unable to judge the labor provided by Tea Party chapters for these protests as they were largely over by the time we began interviewing. The protests during 2009-2010 involved activists from other conservative groups and local Republican organizations.

All of this places an enormous amount of responsibility on the leadership of local chapters. Leadership is important in all organizations but, again, Tea Party chapters have no staff to move the ball forward on a day-to-day basis. Chapters are loosely overseen by a board, usually enabled with bylaws that prescribe basic rules of governance. We didn't ask about tax status though some subjects volunteered that their chapters had applied for 501c3 status. All chapters have a president, though the nomenclature varies. There appears to be great variation to the degree that the governing board is involved and our judgment is that this has more to do with the degree to which board members are willing to spend time than a reflection of presidents trying to marginalize their board's role.

We didn't ask specifically our respondents whether they were retired but about half referenced their work status in responding to our initial question of how they became involved in the Tea Party. Overall, 28 percent were still employed while 21 percent were retired. The remainder did not mention their work status but if the volunteered information is representative, then a little over half of chapter presidents are employed. And of those who said they were working, many indicated that they were part time or winding down or, vaguely, were consulting. Leaders were 57 percent male and 43 percent female; 15 percent said that they ran the chapter with their spouse.[6] Roughly half said that the Tea Party was their first real experience in being active in politics. To the Tea Party's credit, it is open to new people who have little previous political experience but are committed to doing what they can to solve America's problems. This is not out of line with other social movement organizations but, nevertheless, is impressive in its own right as it has engaged people across the country in large numbers and in meaningful ways.

Our sociological understanding of volunteer organizations leads to expectations of an iron law of oligarchy forged by leadership (Michels, 1911). Interviews with chapter presidents would surely not provide an accurate assessment of how they may have pushed people aside or seduced their boards. But the essential point about people who are willing to do the work rising to the top is highly characteristic of Tea Party chapters. Many subjects had only recently ascended to the presidency. It's not clear to us how long tenure in the top position in Tea Party chapters compares to other volunteer organizations. What we did hear, in more than a few instances, was that it was difficult to find someone who was willing to step in to replace a president who was stepping down. A Florida leader told us, "Quite honestly, after the [2014] election I got burnt out after doing it for three years. I let [another] guy take it over. He had a few meetings and he got tied up." He added, "We haven't met in an over a year." We took note of a statement on the Bedford County Pennsylvania Tea Party's web site that it "has disbanded effective immediately. An urgent meeting was held on May 4 [2017] regarding the future of the group. No one was willing to step into vacant offices or board positions." It went on to note that the remaining $300 in its bank account was split between Toys for Tots and a disabled veterans group.

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[6] In some of the interviews where a spouse also ran the organization, both participated (at their initiative). For the questions concerning leadership, we have coded only the person we called. On the role of women in the Tea Party, see Deckman, 2016.

Our overall judgment from reading the transcripts is that Tea Party leadership is unimpressive. After the protest and activism of the first couple of years subsided, many individual chapters failed to develop a second act. Some leaders, notably those we believed were younger and still working, offered a solid interpretation of current trends in politics and policymaking in the United States. Broadly though, we didn't perceive that their chapters were moving forward to respond to the ongoing challenges of organizational development. Among the remaining leaders, we often heard wild conspiracy theories or Fox-eseque sound bites too distant from mainstream debate to offer any realistic guide to advocacy. One chapter leader told us that President Obama was "a Muslim because he's passing Muslim laws. . . We want U.S. laws. If I wanted Muslim laws, I'd move to a Muslim country." Another told us that the "VA is being rewarded for killing people," explaining that it was doing so by spreading cancer. A California chapter head asked us,

> Do you know what the Bilderberg Group is?
>
> *No.*
>
> It's a group that meets secretly off the coast of Georgia and they're trying to make everyone equal so that there are no richer so that there are no richer countries and no poorer ones. All the presidents [of the U.S.] belonged to it.

In one year's interviewing we included a subset of questions about sustainability. In return we received an education about the power of the United Nations. A Kansas respondent told us that Agenda 21 "says that humans are parasites and a plague on this Earth. The population needs to be reduced 85 percent and the rest of the people need to live in reserves." This point of view of sustainability was common among chapter presidents.

These wild conspiracy theories suggest less than sterling competencies in Tea Party chapter leaders. This kind of world vision cannot help chapters build bridges to more conventional conservative groups or local Republican Party organizations. To be clear, there were chapters that continued to operate well, holding regular meetings and engaging is at least limited advocacy. Those that were active tended to direct their lobbying toward state and local institutions.

Although it was difficult to code, our reading of the interview transcripts chronologically leads us to conclude that subjects from the past two years of interviews offereda less coherent vision of the political system than the earlier respondents. These chapters appeared to be unimaginative, repeating the same organizational routines of episodic or monthly meetings and not too much more.

BIRTH DATES, DEATH DATES

Our time series data allows us to examine the birth rates of Tea Party chapters and, correspondingly, chapter mortality. Short histories of the chapters were usually volunteered before we had to ask and since no respondents had to go back much in time to identify the birth of their

organizations, we have dates for 93 of our 95 chapters. As we see from Figure 1, two thirds of the chapters formed in 2009, the first year of Tea Party activism.[7]

[Figure 1 Here]

During the explosive period of protests against the Obama administration, the Tea Party quickly became the face of conservative opposition, a finger in the eye of the President. Since these chapters required no money to start up, they were able to organize lightening quick. Tea party protests were so galvanizing that other conservative and Republican organizations set up tables adjacent to protest sites to recruit members (Almeida and Van Dyke, 2014, 59).

What may be less intuitive is that organizing new chapters largely cease to form after 2011. We have only four births in 2012 and just one in 2013. There are none thereafter. There are many reasons for this. Most obviously, over time the Tea Party could not sustain its protest orientation and it became less central to the narrative about opposition to the Obama administration. We examined Lexis-Nexis to see if its news worthiness in the nation's newspapers reflected what we see in our birth data. The pattern is a bit different with a stable flow of news stories across American newspapers until a downturn in 2016. Although we have only a half year of 2017, extrapolating that data to a full year shows continued decline. When we look more contextually at the actual stories, though, we typically see modest coverage announcing local meetings rather than feature stories emphasizing the role of the Tea Party in state or local politics.

[Figure 2 Here]

What interest the Koch Brothers, their Washington minions, and the national Republican Party had in the Tea Party seems to have declined over time as well. Once the Tea Party became less a disruptive force, it offered less to the Party and to conservative organizations. Candidates in GOP primaries continued to be concerned about Tea Party support but most candidates were sufficiently conservative to pass a threshold of acceptability. Still, GOP primaries continue to be the sweet spot for state and local chapters as candidates work assiduously to be recognized as a Tea Party candidate. House GOP Majority Leader Eric Cantor's defeat in a 2014 primary was an emphatic reminder that an "establishment" conservative can be vulnerable to a Tea Party conservative.

More broadly, in terms of a political opportunity structure, the ease of organizing was highest in the early years, not only because of the novelty and news worthiness of the Tea Party but also because there was less competition (McAdam, 1982). Successful as it was at the beginning, the Tea Party quickly became "old hat." For young conservative activists in particular, it surely appeared to be a movement of the immediate past than the immediate future.

We recently conducted research to see which of the 95 Tea Party chapters were still in existence. We found that 29 organizations have died, 7 others are likely deceased but we cannot say so definitively, 2 have merged with another Tea Party chapter, and 57 remain alive. Deaths were

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[7] For 2009 we include six chapters that were actually formed as other organizations in earlier years but changed their affiliation to the Tea Party when it emerged.

determined primarily by looking at chapter Facebook pages, their web sites, and news stories.[8] As shown in Figure 3, the mortality rate varies some year by year but there is no reason to assume that deaths would be equally dispersed across time. *What does stand out is the simple fact that chapters continue to die at a significant rate while no new chapters are being formed.* Deaths and likely deaths constitute 38 percent of our set of chapters. As a matter of population ecology, this is surely a worrisome death rate that undermines the viability of the Tea Party.

[Figure 3 Here]

Tea Parties as Interest Groups

The viability of Tea Party chapters is also related to their advocacy efforts. They promise their adherents that they will be part of a crusade to save America, and while that might be an outsized standard to hold the movement to, it is fair to ask about what they do politically. Above we documented the thin material resources of the Tea Party but the fervor and enthusiasm of its volunteers may compensate for modest organizational structures.

The explosive rise of the Tea Party certainly suggests it can have an outsized impact, far beyond what material resources can offer. The protests at congressional town halls in 2009, which were stimulated by national activists as well as local ones, were nevertheless largely attributed to the Tea Party. Even if they only merit partial credit, these town hall histrionics fundamentally reoriented the national narrative about the proposed Affordable Care Act. Members of Congress were shouted at and sometimes shouted down. The electric atmosphere was gladiatorial. At the end of one meeting, Mississippi Representative Glen Taylor was escorted out of the hall by eight uniformed officers. At another meeting, a Rabbi rose to give the invocation and was booed (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014, 167).

The combative town halls were catnip to the cable news channels and they covered them intensely. And for good reason, the American public found them compelling. A Gallup Poll in August of 2009, after the sudden rise of these combative meetings, showed that 69 percent of respondents said they were following the town halls "closely" or "somewhat closely" (Gallup, 2009). Given that most people, most of the time, are only paying marginal attention to politics, this is a robust attention cycle. Disturbing, perhaps, is that the lack of decorum at the town halls, of incivility, struck a chord with a sizable segment of the population (Gallup, 2009).

A more enduring impact of the early Tea Party efforts came from Republican primary contests for House and Senate in 2010. Much like the Trump candidacy in 2016, the degree of political resentment among America's conservatives was underestimated by pundit and political operatives alike. The number of competitive primary challenges (defined as a race where the incumbent was held below 75 percent of the vote) surged in 2010. Only once since 1970 was the

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[8] In the case of the seven organizations we put in an indeterminate category we found a faint voice of activity. This was most typically a Facebook posting by someone who was a member of the chapter. However, beyond this faint voice there was no other evidence of the chapter's continuing existence. We know that Facebook sites sometimes continue after a chapter has stopped holding meetings.

number of significant challenges higher (Sobieraj and Berry, 2014, 173; Boatright, 2013). Very few incumbents actually lost but in some races long shot candidates emerged as the Tea Party candidate and won open primaries. In a Kentucky Senate race, Rand Paul won an upset over the GOP establishment's candidate, State Treasurer Trey Grayson. In 2012 Ted Cruz beat another conservative candidate, Texas Lt. Governor David Dewhurst, by claiming against all objective standards that Dewhurst was a moderate. Paul and Cruz understood the power of talk radio and used it to appeal to the conservative grassroots of their party. Although many candidates have come to be known as the Tea Party candidate in their race, it is more accurate to view them as contenders who recruited the Tea Party rather than the other way around.

It is beyond the scope of the data assembled here to fully assess the electoral impact of the Tea Party on the Republican Party. Clearly, though, the potential of primary challenges in generally low turnout elections makes deviation from the orthodoxy of Tea Party conservatism dangerous to incumbents. This dynamic has endured since the 2010 primaries.

What we can assess is how chapters prioritized their advocacy efforts as the Tea Party evolved out of its protest cycle and after its initial success in the 2010 primaries and general election. A first step is to think about the potential for mobilization by examining respondents' estimates of attendance at chapter meetings. The data indicate that chapters vary considerably in the degree to which they hold meetings (Table 1a). Around one in five chapters don't even hold a meeting once a quarter while a little over half have monthly meetings. We caution that the overall results for 2017 may imply a more active organizational profile than what is warranted by the frequency distribution in Table 1a. These responses are frozen in time at the point at which we did each interview. If chapters in the aggregate are deteriorating over time, then some chapters from earlier years in the interviewing have surely moved down the scale from monthly to quarterly, or quarterly to irregularly, or from whatever frequency, to extinction.

[Tables 1a and 1b Here]

In a similar vein, we asked about membership trends (Table 1b). The results here offer additional insight into the significant mortality rate documented above. Over 4 in 10 chapters acknowledge decreasing membership, a worrisome trend. Although a third of respondents say membership is increasing, the pool of prospective members does not appear to be sufficient to generate new chapters. This may be a natural incline for voluntary organizations but decreasing numbers of participants saps the potential to mobilize.

To assess how active the chapters are in trying to influence government, we turned the extensive discussions of advocacy in the interviews.[9] We did not ask respondents to go through a checklist of different lobbying and electoral tactics as the conversational tone of the elite interviews mitigated against such laundry list sequences of questioning. As a result the frequencies reported in

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[9] We do not undertake the question of influence here but have done so in another paper that draws, in part, on the interview database. See Berry and Portney (2017). Focusing on city-level politics, we do not find a distinctive impact from Tea Party advocacy.

Table 2a are not as precise as we might like. We coded responses liberally so any reference to advocacy was included in the figures, including what appeared to be exaggerations of what was truly undertaken.[10] In one year's cohort of interviews we pressed respondents to be specific about their interactions with policymakers. We found that in their references to advocacy, just 37 percent said they met face-to-face with someone in government over the issue they were working on. The remainder who were active wrote, emailed, or phoned an office (Berry and Portney, 2017). What these aggregate figures suggest is that when the chapters participate in advocacy, they focus on more permeable structures of government. City councils and the state legislature are sensibly the most frequent targets.

[Tables 2a and 2b Here]

We did hear descriptions of lobbying that demonstrated sustained effort as well as sophistication. A Florida leader told us that the chapter began lobbying on transportation when "Governor Scott was facing the high speed rail issue. We managed to get a half hour to speak with him, which is supposed to be a lot and he listened. We came together [with other groups] on high speed rail as an alliance." Generally, however, what we heard was of scattershot approaches and little direct engagement with policymakers. In sum, lobbying levels tended to be shallow.

We coded campaign-related activity separately and found that while no one tactic was highly utilized, close to three quarters of chapters had been involved in campaigns in some fashion (Table 2b). Again, the coding is generous and the magnitudes are imprecise. As with Table 2a, we do get what should be a relatively accurate ordering of the preferences for engagement among the alternatives. Given the Tea Party's initial success in the campaign arena, involvement in elections makes great sense. Unfortunately, the interviews don't reveal how many members of the local chapters were involved in any of these tactics, many of which (canvassing, GOTV, running candidates) were likely led by other organizations.

Although there is some advocacy and election activity undertaken in varying degrees by Tea Party chapters, our overall assessment is that the level of such activity is modest at best. In reading the full transcripts of all the Tea Party interviews in this study, one comes away with a sense the chapters engage in meaningful collective action only sparingly. These are political organizations, with angry, politically aware members. One might think that they'd be active on an ongoing basis. They're not.

For those chapters engaged in little or no advocacy, the question emerges as to what they do, in fact, do. What their leaders said in our interviews is that they are educating their members. This focus is evident in the structure of their meetings, with a guest speaker or a report from an internal committee placed at the center of the agenda. Such activity is a form of civic engagement as members certainly leave a meeting feeling that they've become more educated on the issues that were on the docket. There are Q&As and open discussion after presentations so members are

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[10] By exaggerations we generally mean that while the chapter might have been engaged in an activity, there was clear hyperbole, sketchy or discursive narratives, or unrealistic assessments of impact.

interacting intellectually as well as socially. Still, a focus on educating members is a relatively passive orientation and such chapters consign themselves to the sidelines of the policymaking process.

Capacity and Mortality

The previous discussion of leadership ties Tea Party organizational vitality to the dynamics of choices and incentives. Here we want to push further into a broader analysis of chapter organizational design and behavior. This examination bridges social movement theory and interest group research. If we think about resource mobilization, what are resources being converted into? What do Tea Party organizations do to develop the traits that lead to longer chapter life? Along the same line, as interest groups, what political practices tend to increase the life span of chapters over the long term?

We begin with an assessment based on an organizational capacity scale. After describing the contents of this scale we'll explore the resulting relationship between capacity and mortality. Next we'll delve deeper to look at some of the individual variables embodied in the scale to assess their relationship to chapter mortality. This detail should provide an even firmer grounding for the argument we make about strengths and weaknesses of Tea Party organizations.

Capacity is conceived here as the potential ability of an organization to utilize its resources to accomplish its goals. Tea Party chapters have little in the way of financial resources but they can draw on other important resources, especially activism by volunteers, connections to other political elites, and knowledgeable and strategic leadership. Coding of our data is based on review of the entire transcript as pertinent information appears in the responses to a variety of broad questions. The scale itself draws on 10 variables grouped into three clusters of related organizational characteristics. The membership retention and engagement grouping includes variables on *membership trends, meeting frequency, Facebook presence, web site presence*, and *news coverage*. Demonstrated involvement includes *interaction with office holders* and *campaign activities*. Finally, organizational development draws on three variables: *coalition activity, political experience of the president*, and *organizational development sophistication*. It's difficult to know which variables should be weighted the most, particularly since weakness in one area can be compensated for by strength in another. Each, thus, is weighted the same in an additive scale.[11]

[Figure 4 Here]

In Figure 4 we graphically represent the relationship between organizational capacity and the likelihood of continuing operation or of death. As evident, a higher score on the capacity index makes it much more likely that a chapter is still operative in 2017. Conversely, a low capacity score is linked to death. Expressed in statistical terms, the bivariate relationship between the capacity scale

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[11] Each variable is rated between 0 and 2. But to ensure that individual chapters were not punished in an aggregate score for missing information, each overall score is computed as the maximum for only those variables we had data on. To standardize the scores with these varying ceilings, each was converted to a percentage of the potential maximum score given the information we had. It is these percentages that appear in Figure 4.

and exist/no longer exist is very strong (.69).[12] This overall finding is intuitive and yet it's important to fill out our conception of organizational vitality and to move away from a general claim that good leadership is key to keeping organizations afloat. We find, emphatically so, that deaths are not random or idiosyncratic. Although not fully predictable, we can identify variables that promote a chapter, generate political capital, and make it more attractive to potential members and potential political partners.

The availability of time series data allows us to see if organizational capacity increased over time. One might hypothesize that groups we interviewed more recently, 2015 and 2016, would score better on this scale. The assumption is that their longevity would reflect dynamism in organizational development. Having continued to survive in a Darwinian political environment, these longer-in-the-tooth groups may have figured out through experience how to better enhance their capacity. This hypothesis, however, doesn't bear out: the more recently interviewed groups are no more likely to score high than earlier ones. The chapter scores, as calculated by interview year, bounce up and down in no predictable fashion and the variation observed is contained within a relatively narrow band on the scale. In other words, there doesn't seem to be a mastery of a learning curve by the older organizations in the pool. In insurance terms, we don't see reduced risk among the chapters in the more recently interviewed cohort.

A finer-grained analysis of these data adds to our confidence in understanding Tea Party chapter vitality. One of the ten variables we used in the capacity scale, organizational development sophistication, is built on a number of indicators. We judged groups as more or less sophisticated in their development based on variable such as a well-defined leadership structure, a functioning board, articulated bylaws, 501c3 status, and low turnover in its leadership. To be judged as higher in sophistication, a group did not need to possess all of these characteristics; rather it just needed to show some significant evidence of some of these traits. This was a relatively low threshold as our goal was to simply know if the chapter was operating in a stable, consistent fashion guided by stipulated rules of internal governance. Conversely, less sophisticated chapters are more characterized by an amorphous leadership structure, ambiguous governance, and high turnover in their leadership. As Table 3 indicates, a majority of chapters are coded as having a firmer organizational structure. In turn, those that cross this bar are much more likely to still be in operation.

[Table 3 Here]

As volunteer organizations untethered to a federated, national structure, Tea Party chapters are free to structure themselves in any they want. Chapters don't make conscious decisions to hang loose, taking things as they come up; yet for some chapters that is what developed in terms of organizational behavior. For other chapters, as the fervor and protests of the early days diminished, they responded with more structured and self-conscious organizational development. As chapters

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[12] We included the small number of merged and faint traces of existence chapters to fully populate the graphic. However, those two categories do not fit into a scale and we removed them from the correlation calculation.

faced the challenge of making the transition from a protest group to a more mature political organization, some chapters did considerably better than others.

Conclusion

The Tea Party movement has played a central role in the political history of the first part of the 21st Century. It changed the course of Republican Party politics and added fuel to the polarization trend that increasingly defines our politics. The emphasis in this paper on organizational decline is not intended in any way to shortchange the accomplishments of the Tea Party. The data offered here may be evidence of an army that won the war a few a years ago but is now losing individual battles.

The battles it is losing are the struggles of chapters to stay afloat. The findings here suggest that as an organized entity, the Tea Party finds itself in a slow death spiral. Almost all the chapters we studied were formed before 2012 (and the vast majority in 2009). No new chapters formed between 2014 and 2016. Since the chapters continue to die, the future looks bleak. Around 4 in 10 of the chapters are confirmed dead or, in a few instances, on life support. Conservatism today is vibrant but organizing on behalf of the cause seems to be developing elsewhere outside of the Tea Party. Perhaps the ambitious Koch network is supplanting the Tea Party. In striking contrast, it's well funded and run by a professional staff (Mayer, 2016; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez, 2016).

The quick ascent of the Tea Party was aided by a low barrier to entry. A national communications network in the form of talk radio and Fox Cable helped to initiate organizing, and the mainstream media, most notably CNN, publicized the compelling protests in 2009. Communications within chapters were done through email, a free tool, with mailing lists built by volunteer labor gathering addresses at initial protests and meetings. With no office or paid staff, there was no need, or so it seemed, to build a financial foundation. Followers had no dues to pay and expressive and solidary incentives were strong enough initially to pull enough people to the monthly meetings.

In its early years the Tea Party seemed to offer a new path, with powerful collective action frames, a blend of membership incentives, and skill that enabled it to lower the barriers to entry into the political process. There was something truly original about the Tea Party and its hybridity gave scholars a great deal to consider in evaluating it. Over time, however, the Tea Party has become something all-too-familiar to scholars of social movements and interest groups: a set of independent voluntary and amateurish organizations that failed to professionalize, failed to expand, and failed to escape their initial naïve paradigm. Many chapters at least created structures of governance that helped them survive the vicissitudes of volunteer labor. As we've demonstrated, though, higher capacity increases chances of survival but does not guarantee it. In our interviews we heard too many stories about chapters that were operating in a stable fashion only to be undone by a leader stepping down without a capable replacement. All volunteer groups are, in last analysis, all volunteer groups and the Tea Party cannot escape the limits of such organizations.
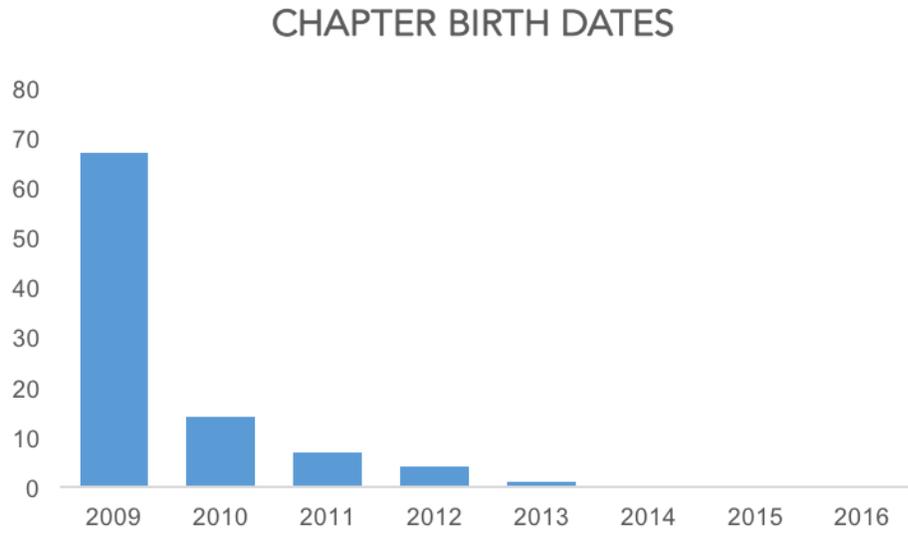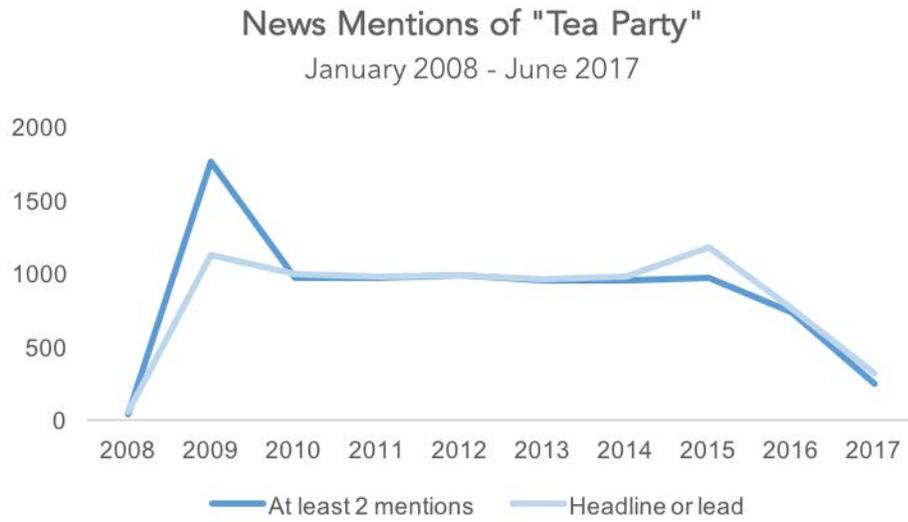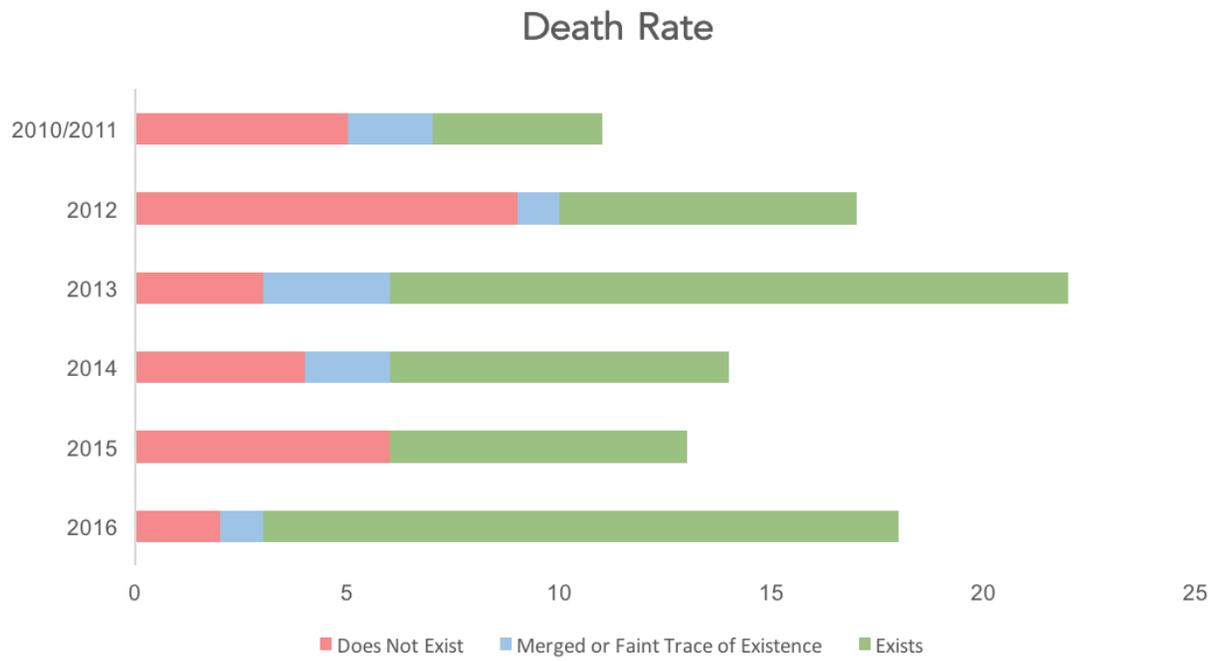
Figure 1

CHAPTER BIRTH DATES

Figure 2

News Mentions of "Tea Party"
January 2008 - June 2017

Source: Lexis-Nexis

Figure 3

Table 1a

Chapter Meeting Frequency

	Percent
Less than once a quarter	21
Once a quarter	20
Generally once a month	53
NA	6
	100 (n=95)

Table 1b

Chapter Membership Trend

	Percent
Decreasing	42
Increasing	33
Stable	11
NA	15
	101 (n=95)

Table 2a

Have you met with . . .

	Percent
Mayor	8
City Councilor	25
State representative	35
Governor	2
Member of Congress	15
Any policymaker	46

Table 2b

Campaign Activity

	Percent
Endorse candidates	13
Canvassed	27
Participated in GOTV	11
Attended state convention	6
Run candidates	28
Invited candidates to meetings	29
Any campaign involvement	72

Figure 4

CAPACITY 2011-2016
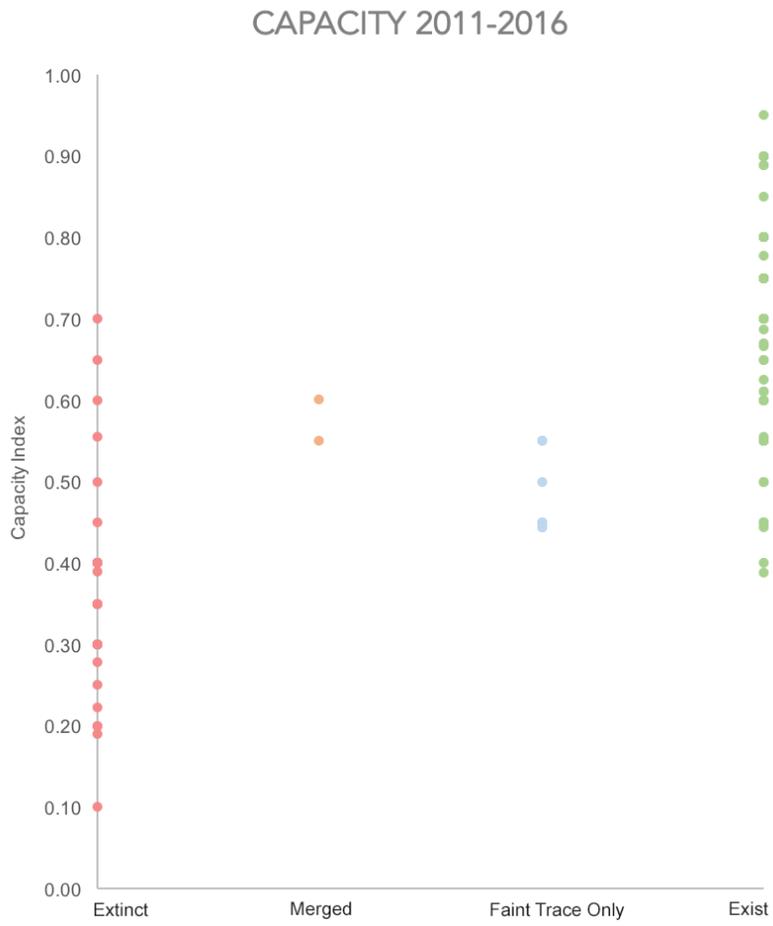
Table 3

	%	N
ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT		
Still exist and have sophisticated operations	74.6	44/59
Still exist and did not have sophisticated operations	25.4	15/59
Do not exist and had sophisticated operations	30.6	11/36
Do not exist and did not have sophisticated operations	69.4	25/36

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