Tea Party Mobilization

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Abstract

Although we usually refer to the “Tea Party,” this movement is made up of hundreds of highly independent “Tea Parties.” Our paper explores the impact of this local control over the development of the advocacy that has emerged in the years since the movement began to take shape in the spring of 2009. Here we examine the localism of the Tea Party movement, looking at 1) organizational leadership and control, 2) the utilization of “outrage” language, 3) the role of the Tea Party in Republican congressional primaries, and 4) the emergence of a new path to recruitment for running for Congress.

The paper is built upon two original databases. The first is a set of elite interviews conducted over the past year with the leaders of various state and local Tea Parties across the United States. The second database contains systematic examinations of every House and Senate race where an incumbent was being challenged or where there was an open seat. In many ways we find that the advocacy choices made by Tea Parties are closely linked to the autonomy of these individual organizations. The refusal of local Tea Parties to “scale up” has profound implications for the continuing development of the movement.
Over the course of American history numerous ideological movements have attempted to pull one of the major parties to its own positions. In this respect the Tea Party stands out. Few internal insurgencies have risen to the level of offering a large number of alternative candidates to the target party’s establishment choices for Congress. It’s hard to think of other insurgent movements other than the Tea Party that succeeded in having the mainstream party move toward it with little internal opposition. In the 2012 Republican presidential race, all the candidates (with the possible exception of Jon Huntsman) pledged fidelity to the hard core conservatism represented by the Tea Party. The Tea Party also stands out as no previous movement was aided by a new media technology, in this case political blogs, which serves as a popular alternative source of information to those following politics. Consider, for example, the anti-Vietnam War movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. What passed for an alternative media (periodicals like the Village Voice for example) reached a rather limited audiences and by and large, the movement relied on the mainstream media for getting its message out.

The Tea Party movement has attracted considerable attention from scholars and journalists and a not-so-small literature has already emerged.¹ There has also been considerable polling that gives us a detailed portrait of the movement’s adherents.² Yet neither this literature nor the polling has adequately focused on this fundamental question: how do we explain mobilization, the process by which Tea Party adherents came together in ways that generated advocacy and candidates for office? In short, how did it become organized for action?

This paper addresses four questions about the Tea Party. First we turn to the structure of the movement. Commonly referred to as a singular organization, it is
anything but. “Tea Parties” is a much more accurate label but, even so, the singular noun has become the vernacular.3 What is important in this line of inquiry is determining how this array of different and highly independent organizations around the country has affected the broader movement’s influence. *We find that the lack of a centralized national organization with authority over chapters has had a profound impact on the ways in which state and local Tea Parties have mobilized and on the types of advocacy that have materialized.*

Second, we ask how did the Tea Parties come to rely so heavily on outrage rhetoric and tactics? By “outrage” we refer to “a particular form of political discourse involving efforts to provoke visceral responses.” 4(We will elaborate on this definition of outrage below.) The Tea Parties’ mobilization began with marches and protests of various kinds but after these initial efforts, the Tea Parties moved to even more aggressive attacks on the political establishment. *We argue that the template that emerged around outrage in the summer of 2009 led to an outsized impact on the Republican primaries in 2010.*

Our third line of inquiry analyzes both parties’ primaries in 2010. In particular we look at the number of contested primaries and make some comparisons between the parties and between this election and earlier ones. With our own data on the number of candidates running and the results, we are able to analyze how many incumbents faced serious challengers. *We document a sharp rise in the number of contested primaries and in the case of the Republicans, we draw a direct connection to Tea Party inspired mobilization.*
Finally, we ask how recruitment for office is being affected. Political scientists define quality candidates as those who have political experience and are adequately funded. Yet we found numerous candidates possessing neither quality who became credible contenders. The 2010 campaigns suggest another route to nominations that, if sustained, could change the way we understand quality challengers.

Methods

The research for this paper was built upon two original databases. The first is a set of 28 elite interviews, some of which were conducted in August of 2011 while others were completed during June of 2012. The subjects all held leadership positions in their local or state Tea Party organization and were generally either the founder, president, or coordinator. The names of those we approached were derived from lists of Tea Party leaders published by national coordinating bodies, from newspaper articles quoting individual leaders, and from utilizing various Internet search procedures. An effort was made toward stratification as we tried to achieve some rough balance between different regions of the country and among the various national Tea Party labels. Subjects were initially approached by email and all interviews were conducted over the phone.

The interviews were done on background so no names are used here. The open-ended questioning relied on a small number of different templates but no attempt was made to ensure that all questions were asked of all respondents or even that questions followed the wording or sequence in our protocols. Rather, interviewers were free to probe when subjects started down an interesting path. As Berry notes, this method carries some risk:
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.6

The interviews were conversational in tone and subjects were allowed to talk at length if they chose to. What is lost in terms of systematic comparison is more than made up for in the richness of the detail. Most subjects talked volubly and with real passion about their cause and they raised matters we had not thought to ask about. Their comments were often hyperbolic and their descriptions of America were frequently at odds with what most dispassionate observers would say. At the same time, they offered real insight into the thinking of Tea Party activists and many answers about internal operations were thoughtful analyses of the challenges faced by their local or state organization. Most interviews lasted about 45 minutes and, cumulatively, have generated hundreds of pages of transcripts.7 (Another set of interviews is tentatively scheduled for next summer and will address post-election developments.)

The second data set, the 2010 Congressional Primary Database, contains systematic examinations of every House and Senate race where an incumbent was being challenged from within his or her own party. It also includes all primaries in districts or states where there was an open seats. As seats opened through retirements, incumbents declaring for other offices, or other reasons, we began to monitor them. Through a variety of web sites that cover Congress in great detail, we identified races where primary challenges to incumbents emerged. Once a race made it onto our list, we began to monitor it closely. Although most of the news coverage of the 2010 primaries has centered on the Republicans, our research covered Democratic races as well.
The election research focused on amassing a representative sample of both conventional news coverage and blog postings about each contest. This data gathering was directed at media coverage in an attempt to learn about how candidates for party nominations build support for themselves. More specifically, in this new media environment, have recruitment patterns changed? In addition to those candidates who work their way up on the party ladder, running for lower office and/or working for the party, and those candidates who are wealthy and can self-finance their campaigns, is there now a third route to nominations? As alluded to above, can “outrage” candidates rely heavily on political blogs that identify them as the purest candidate, the ones who deserves support because they adhere most closely to ideological correctness?

This approach had its share of challenges. Coverage of congressional primaries by conventional media is spotty at best, even among high quality newspapers with ample resources. In the present media environment with newspapers in decline and their news holes shrinking, there is opportunity for other media to fill some of the vacuum in terms of coverage of congressional primaries. To this end we followed the coverage by political blogs and in most cases, these were state and local blogs. (The coverage by national blogs was limited to a small number of races.) Small blogs are ephemeral and posts can be sporadic. Nevertheless, we persisted and our continuing monitoring throughout the primary season yielded a set of articles from both conventional newspaper and various blogs for each seat.

**Loosely Structured**

The origins of the Tea Party are often shrouded in a gauzy romanticism of a call to arms that aroused ordinary citizens—people unschooled in politics and whose
amateurism led to thinking outside the political box. Although this history plays well, it’s a bit misleading. When CNBC Chicago Merc reporter Rick Santelli’s told viewers that “We’re thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July,” he may have bequeathed a name to the movement, but political organizing against the Obama administration was inevitable and took other forms as well, such as Glenn Beck’s 9/12 Project and mobilization by the Koch Brothers to stimulate conservative opposition. The amateur nature of the Tea Party embellishes its image but surveys show that those involved are a mixture of those new to politics and those with previous political experience.

LOCAL CONTROL

What does stand out as accurate from the romantic history of the Tea Party is that there was a spontaneity and independence in the formation of the local and state chapters. As a result the Tea Party is striking in its degree of decentralization as it operates without direction from any one national Tea Party organization. National Tea Party organizations do exist; five organizations emerged out of the quick burst of local organizing that gave life to community-based Tea Parties across the country. Most local Tea Parties have come to identify with one of three Tea Party brands: Tea Party Nation, Tea Party Express, and Tea Party Patriots. We refer to these as brands because the formal structure of these federations is rather loose. Local groups are not chapters in the classic sense as the relationship with other local groups and coordinators at the national level is rather casual. Two other organizations, Freedom Works and the National Tea Party Federation have tried to act as coordinating bodies for any and all local Tea Parties but have experienced only limited success. The national organizations have provided some resources and coordination for events, but they have yet to build a national structure of
like-minded chapters.\textsuperscript{11} One local Tea Party Patriot leader we spoke with said simply, “there’s no national network. . . there’s no formal organization.” Many of the original Tea Parties failed or merged into stronger chapters. Still, local Tea Parties remain plentiful.\textsuperscript{12} In Iowa there are more than 50 groups around the state that call themselves a Tea Party but no statewide unifying structure.\textsuperscript{13} The more than 50 Tea Parties in South Carolina have warred openly with each other.\textsuperscript{14} This overlap, competition, and lack of unity didn’t seem to bother the activists we interviewed. “I don’t see it as competing. I look at it as the free market,” said one leader.

Although there are conference calls and various electronic means of sharing information, the Tea Party movement is not much more centralized today than in the early months of organizing in 2009. On the surface this may seem to be a shortcoming, with the enormous base of activists failing to come together to push forward in a unified manner. It may be just the opposite though: a real strength of the Tea Party appears to be that it has so many local organizations, all of which are independent of any larger authority structure. Surely a major appeal of the Tea Parties to their followers is that they are volunteer organizations that are controlled by the activists of each chapter. These local structures offer many channels for participation and rank high on any scale of civic engagement.

The differences among the three grassroots confederations are not deeply philosophical. They’ve feuded some but these rivalries at the local and state level have to do with territoriality and ego rather than any fundamental ideological differences. The chaotic character of the movement has worked to the advantage of the Tea Party and in its own accidental way the organizational structure has accentuated the image of the Tea
Party as a genuine grassroots movement. One important consequence of its loose structure is that the Tea Party can’t be persuaded to compromise on matters before the Congress because there is no one who is empowered to negotiate on its behalf.

What has emerged is a “wiki” structure composed of a headless but energetic set of ideologically compatible organizations. Political scientists do not have a convenient conceptual pigeonhole to place the Tea Party in. It is part interest group, part social movement, part intraparty insurgency. In this context it is a hybrid organization—one representing different elements of existing modalities. It is particularly interesting how it sits astride the Republican Party, using the Party to put forward its candidates but running against the Party establishment at the same time. If the Tea Party continues over time in its present form and its present level of effectiveness, it has the potential to reshape what we think of as political party organization.

By avoiding formal organization within larger federated structures, local Tea Parties have minimized organizational maintenance costs. Little effort or time is spent on fundraising as without an office, paid employees, or dues to pay to a national organization, the financial resources necessary to keep a local Tea Party afloat are modest. The leader of a local Tea Party group in Idaho told us proudly, “We take an offering at every meeting and currently our budget is about $350. [That’s what is] in our bank account.” For voluntary organizations fundraising can become a preoccupation. The flip side of this, of course is that without a paid staff, these organizations are subject to the vagaries of key volunteers’ lives. Although the Tea Parties at the community level have been participatory, they are still subject to the iron law of oligarchy.
Despite the grassroots nature of the movement and the lack of strong national leadership, the Tea Parties around the country have had little difficulty in staying “on message.” Our interview subjects told us they weren’t led by the media but they did acknowledge that they follow it closely. In the end, although local chapters lack a media staff or even a media strategy, local Tea Parties do form a true national movement with sufficient commonality when it comes to messaging.

The rapid and extensive mobilization of the Tea Party movement raises the broad question of leadership skills and organizing tactics. Our research suggests that a combination of digital tools, community organizing, and support of outrage-based media laid the groundwork for the movement’s early success. For example, by web-based conference calls eliminated the long distance calling and helped geographically dispersed activists “meet.” During the early throes of intense Tea Party organizing, “The weekly conference calls grew so large, phones sometimes crashed.” One of the organizers we interviewed said she relied on “Smart Girl Politics, #tcot [Top Conservatives on Twitter], and ResistNet.” A reporter for the National Journal recounted one conference call among 200 leaders prior to the 2010 election where a “coordinator gives an update on an iPhone app for Tea Partiers who will be going door to door this fall to talk to voters (It will use Global Positioning System technology to download walking lists and upload voter data in real time.).”

Nevertheless, the tools that have received the most use tend to be less sophisticated than GPS apps for mobile phones. Email has been the workhorse as it is the easiest way for organizers to get the word out quickly. As we’ll discuss later in this paper, blogs were critical communication networks during the 2010 congressional campaign.
contrast social networking has played a limited role. Even though some Tea Party leaders
use social networking, only 11 percent of all Tea Party supporters have used Twitter or
Facebook. In the last analysis, though, the Internet lowered the barriers to entry for
those who wanted to organize and those who wanted to be involved in some way in the
political process.

In sum, the structure of the state and local Tea Parties has been primarily shaped
by low barriers to entry, negligible organizational maintenance costs, and energetic
volunteer leadership. What is particularly significant is that local control has been
maintained. The indigenous leaders, often retired or those otherwise not working outside
the home, have fiercely resisted efforts to bring them under the wing of Washington-
based federations. “We don’t need an umbrella alliance to be effective,” one Ohio leader
told us. Tea Parties represent localism, not national mobilization and this, in turn, affects
the structure of advocacy.

EARLY MOBILIZATION

The earliest visible manifestation of the Tea Party were old-fashioned political
protests. At the outset this might have seemed improbable as in the United States
demonstrations have largely been a tool of liberals, the young, and organized labor. The
older conservatives who are the core constituency of the Tea Party wouldn’t seem to be
the best candidates to be drawn to this tactic. And yet the early demonstrations drew
supporters and played a critical role in establishing the Tea Party’s image. Tax day
demonstrations on April 15, 2009 were held in hundreds of cities and the Taxpayer
March on Washington on September 12th of that year drew tens of thousands of
protesters. These were not massive outpourings, but they gave journalists a concrete
evidence of movement politics and produced intriguing photos and video supplements for the stories that followed.

Demonstrations are demanding forms of participation, requiring time, physical stamina and, if they take place in Washington, a willingness to endure what could be a long bus ride. But demonstrations work well when people are so angry that they become motivated to ride the bus and stand for many hours awaiting and then listening to speakers. The great value to participants is that demonstrations build social solidarity with “rewards arising out of the act of associating.” Meeting others who share your political views and engaging along with them in aggressive political action validates one’s values and sense of outrage. The extensive press coverage of these early rallies was also a reward as it gave participants of sense of collective identity and accomplishment.

Since most demonstrations are built upon the anger of participants, protests sponsored by a political movement generally diminish in number and size as the fury abates. Not surprisingly, over time the Tea Party protests in Washington dwindled and have become rare. A few weeks before the ultimate vote on the federal budget in March 2011, which was broadly seen as the first real legislative test of the movement’s prowess since the 2010 elections, a Tea Party rally at the Capitol in Washington attracted a group of under 200 participants.

Protests are far from the only means of building solidarity within the local Tea Parties. At the local level there are open meetings for those interested. More imaginatively the local groups have utilized a range of activities designed to engage followers. One of our interviewees noted that “We’ve had constitutional classes, book study classes, [and] street protests.” Another respondent emphasized that “We’re having
fun. We enjoy being together [and we have] events at least twice a week.” The frequency of social events and classes have surely decreased over time but this early interaction helped to build the Tea Party as personal contact created bonds with fellow participants and with leaders.

Still, in the wake of the demonstrations in April of 2009, there was the question of the Tea Party’s second act. At some instinctive level leaders of the Tea Parties recognized that sustaining the movement through marches and demonstrations was not a viable long-term strategy. And no matter how enjoyable constitutional classes are, some effort at actually changing the system was necessary. Learning about the need for change was not enough.

**Outrage Advocacy**

As the summer of 2009 approached the Tea Party movement had yet to demonstrate any real influence in the political world. Liberals derided it as a creation of Fox Cable News and the nation’s political leaders were far more focused on the nation’s shaky financial structure. But the next step by the Tea Party movement was a stroke of genius that established it as a force to be reckoned with. The disruptive behavior of Tea Party and other conservative activists at town hall meetings held by congressional Democrats during the summer of 2009 grabbed the nation’s attention and conveyed a startling image of anger and resentment toward President Obama. The rudeness at these open meeting was regarded as justifiable by most conservatives, believing that the stakes were so grave that shouting down members of Congress was acceptable behavior. As one Tea Party activist we spoke with put it, “This will be seen as the turning point in history. Just keep that in mind.”
We view the town hall disturbances as a form of outrage politics. In the larger work from which this paper is drawn, we apply a framework of outrage rhetoric to political opinion media (cable TV, talk radio, and blogs) as well as to efforts at outrage-based advocacy. Outrage discourse involves efforts to provoke emotional responses (e.g., anger, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and belittling ridicule of opponents. Outrage sidesteps the messy nuances of complex political issues in favor of melodrama, misrepresentative exaggeration, mockery, and hyperbolic forecasts of impending doom. It can take the form of verbal competition, political theater with a scorecard. What distinguishes this type of discourse is not that it seeks to evoke emotion in the political arena. On the contrary, emotional speech has an important place in political life, and many emotional appeals are not outrageous. What makes outrage distinctive are the tactics used in an effort to provoke the emotion. Our research shows that outrage discourse has become pervasive in the political opinion media and its use is increasing over time.

The town halls reflect the adaption of this approach to real world events. Although protests periodically emerge, they are usually self-contained as opposed to direct confrontations intended to incite protestors and targets alike. When they protests do turn to confrontation (such as the marches in Selma, Alabama), they have the potential to attract considerable media coverage and provoke national dialogue. Democratic incumbents had already been questioned aggressively as the outlines of President Obama’s proposal on health care emerged in the spring of 2009. As spring turned to summer, however, the town hall meetings turned unruly in a number of locations across
the country. In his Long Island district Tim Bishop found his June meeting different from the other 100 or so he had held over his career in Congress. The shouting and hostility of the crowd was such that police were called in to escort him safely to his car. Eighty-three year old Michigan Representative John Dingell was shouted down at a health care town hall meeting by demonstrators yelling “shame on you.” A fight broke out at a town hall hosted by Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter when a critic started to shout at Specter and another attendee, angered at the conservative protester, began to shove him. A local chapter of Glenn Beck’s 9/12 Project overwhelmed a town hall in Moss, Mississippi and incumbent Gene Taylor was escorted out of the meeting by “a protective phalanx of eight uniformed Jackson County Sheriffs.”

As this turbulent political summer wore on, Obama supporters started to show up in significant numbers at town halls to try to counter the impression that the whole country was against the President’s health care proposal. This strategy misfired as it simply made crowds more unruly when the two sides taunted each other. In Reston, Virginia, a town hall hosted by Representative James Moran and Democratic National Party Chair Howard Dean took on the character of a sporting event. Thirty minutes before Dean and Moran arrived, “hundreds of people on one side of the gym began chanting: ‘We can't afford it!’ Hundreds more on opposite bleachers began their own chant: ‘Yes, we can!’ deploying Mr. Obama's campaign slogan. ‘No, we can't! No, we can't!’ people chanted back from the first side of the bleachers.” When a local rabbi offered an opening prayer, he was booed.26

The town halls were extraordinary political theater. It was a striking breach of civility for participants to speak out of turn, ignore requests to follow a line of speakers,
and yell at incumbent members of Congress. No matter how much we disagree with those on the other side, Americans typically abide by common rules of courtesy at such events. These scenes were also compelling because many of those yelling were visibly enraged and appeared out of control. The legislators on stage seemed helpless to stop the disruption since those shouting at them wanted to attract attention with their aggressive behavior. When Gallup asked Americans about the town halls and whether “making angry attacks,” “booing members of Congress they disagreed with,” and “shouting down” opponents were examples of “democracy in action” or an “abuse of democracy,” only shouting down opponents was frowned upon by a solid majority (see Table 1).

Those who participated believed that the urgency of the nation’s problems warranted such behavior. Yet participants’ fury also seemed driven by a sense of being marginalized, being ignored by those in Washington. A northern California Tea Party organizer said that whenever she attends a town hall “the condescension [is] palpable and the stonewalling frustrating. . . They lie to you, bs you.” In another interview a Tennessee leader justified the shouting down at town halls this way:

> When it comes to the federal government, citizens’ access has gradually disintegrated to the point of standardized emails and robo calls. This disengagement from the Republicans and Democrats has created a tremendous gulf between local citizens and those in the ivory towers. That access is completely opposite to what I think of in a constitutional republic. The Tennessee constitution says that citizens should instruct their representatives. Think about that: instruct their representatives. And I’ve seen it at Democratic and Republican meetings, and the response was [due to] frustration at not being heard. . . You go to a meeting and a representative speaks the whole time while citizens sit in stalls like animals and are forced to listen.

Unfortunately for the Obama administration, coverage of the disruptions at the town halls were of enormous interest to the broad public. Gallup found that fully two-
thirds of respondents said that they were watching the news about the town halls either “very closely” or “somewhat closely” (see Figure 1). This level of attention compares favorably to the percentage of people following the health care debate itself.\(^{27}\) It was relatively easy for citizens to follow the town halls as media coverage was ubiquitous. Skocpol and Williamson show that when the town hall disruptions exploded during the August congressional recess, CNN’s level of coverage of the Tea Party shot upwards.\(^{28}\) We are unable to separate out the impact of the town hall disruptions from other causes, but this activism certainly enhanced the Tea Party’s reputation when opinion polls showed opposition to the President’s plan climbed in the wake of the protests.\(^{29}\)

Liberal critics tried to debunk the idea that the town hall protests represented authentic grassroots activism. The liberal blog Talking Points Memo noted sarcastically, the Tea Party protests are “just a spontaneous groundswell of populist opposition to health care reform. Right? Riiight.”\(^{30}\) Freedom Works and business oriented lobbies like Conservatives for Patient Rights were certainly active in disseminating advice and encouragement to local Tea Parties. Yet it’s hard to make the case that the disruptions followed a nationally coordinated plan of attack. The simple template for disruptions became immediately and vividly apparent when the first protests emerged. The town hall protests that followed needed little coordination or direction, just small groups of activists which were easily roused by Tea Party email lists. Whatever help national organizations provided, the initial protests were grassroots actions.

In the last analysis the protests made for great TV. The propulsive effect of the coverage by cable, talk radio, and blogs helped to build a fervor among conservatives,
and, in this case, outrage rhetoric contributed to outraged mobilization. The mobilization did not merely result in protest but in startling confrontation between members of Congress and apoplectic constituents who combined boorish manners with vitriolic language.

The success of the town hall protests left progressive activists scratching their heads, as many left leaning groups have summoned large numbers of people and staged remarkably creative events but earned little attention from the mainstream news media. Sobieraj’s research on the relationship between movements and the news media offers some insight. She demonstrates that journalists have an appetite for activist stories, but that they have a very clear idea about what makes activism newsworthy: authenticity.31 Authenticity can be communicated to journalists in a variety of ways including emotionality, spontaneity, and originality, all of which the town hall meetings possessed in excess. We believe that the local, independent structure of the Tea Party was key to its authenticity. The protests looked anything but scripted. The seeming unpredictability of the scenes and the novelty of a very unfamiliar breed of activist, worked to make these meetings perfect fodder for the 24 hour news cycle.

From Protest to Electoral Politics

With the town halls over, the various Tea Parties faced an uncertain agenda as to what to do next. This choice as to their next step was influenced by three significant factors. First, the local Tea Parties continued to resist scaling up into real national federations. This worked against the development of a unified Washington-based Tea Party lobby. Second, the success of the Tea Parties’ disruptive behavior was striking evidence that confrontation and unbending commitment to principle can be an effective
strategy. Harsh rhetoric, in-your-face activism, and an uncompromising stance raised their visibility through extensive press coverage. Third, a strategy of having activists act out and scream at congressmen at events or to continue to come to marches and rallies was not sustainable. Thus, with the unusual cycle of town halls completed the local groups needed appropriate opportunities where the resources at hand could be effectively applied. Surprisingly, perhaps, the new targets weren’t Democrat office holders but Republicans incumbents running in their party’s primaries. With a few notable exceptions, it wasn’t moderate Republicans that the Tea Party went after. Rather, the wrath of the Tea Party was visited upon conservative Republicans.

PRIMARY STRUCTURE

As the 2010 primary season approached Tea Party activists increasingly turned their attention to Republican primaries for the House, Senate and governorships. Some local Tea Parties became involved in lobbying at the state and local level, but with mixed success. The slow process of writing legislation worked against angry, impatient activists who quickly abandoned the long slog of legislative advocacy. Party primaries, however, worked to the Tea Parties’ strengths. At its core the early Tea Party movement was a rebellion against the status quo, which included the existing Republican establishment. Many Tea Party activists had experience in Republican politics but were not empowered within the party at the time they joined the movement. A great structural advantage to insurgencies is that primaries are open to all who can meet their state’s ballot requirements. As a practical matter what is required of viable candidates is money, volunteers, and name recognition. Local Tea Parties were a good fit for primary candidates who could not rely on the GOP establishment or its large donors. These local
Tea Parties offered a communications network, including their own email lists and websites. In addition, local and statewide political blogs helped build the candidate’s name recognition among activists. Fundraising potential varied widely across local Tea Parties but their mailing lists offered insurgent candidates at least the possibility of quickly building a small donor base. Best of all, perhaps, is that overall local Tea Parties didn’t have to do much mobilizing to become involved—the candidates did most of the work—but were able to take credit for fielding Tea Party candidates.

The Tea Party electoral uprising went against the long-term historical trend of a decline in the number of competitive party primaries. In some recent election years there have been fewer than 20 primaries where the incumbent received less than 75 percent of the vote.\(^3\) It seems likely that the increasing costs of campaigns coupled with the incumbents’ greater ease in raising money has deterred many a would-be challenger.

Our congressional primary database shows that the number of competitive primaries for the House surged in 2010, with 57 incumbents receiving less than 75 percent of the vote in their primary. This is higher than any congressional primary season since 1970 save one (1992).\(^3\) Given the fury on the right during this election cycle it is somewhat surprising that there were only a few more Republican than Democratic cases where the incumbent was held to below 75 percent (see Table 2). Following Robert Boatright’s classification of primary challengers, we determined how many were motivated by ideological or issue-based concerns.\(^3\) Depending on their own ideology, incumbents may be challenged from the left, right, or moderate center. Alternatively, challenges can also arise for reasons having nothing to do with ideology. Incumbents may have ethical problems, be viewed as too old, had a close call in the last election, or have
been redistricted in a way that significantly alters the composition of their district. The Tea Party insurgency was ideologically driven and candidates who identified themselves as Tea Party adherents strongly emphasized their overall issue orientation and contrasted it to that of the incumbent. As Table 2 demonstrates most House challengers, Republican and Democrat, were motivated by ideology.\textsuperscript{35}

[Table 2 Here]

Despite the large number of challenges on the Democratic side, they did not reflect any national-level movement against incumbents who had strayed from the party orthodoxy. There was nothing comparable to the Tea Party insurgency and no widespread dissatisfaction with the Obama administration. Even though there were almost as many challenges to Democratic incumbents to Republicans, they largely flew under the radar of the national media which focused far more on Tea Party.

Given the enormous news coverage of the Tea Party challenge to Republican incumbents, it may seem as though there was a wholesale sweep in the GOP primaries, but just four Republican incumbents actually lost, two in each house. On the House side Parker Griffith of Alabama (a party switcher new to the GOP) lost as did South Carolina’s Bob Inglis. Incumbent senators Bob Bennett of Utah and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska lost as well, though Murkowski came back to win running as an independent in the general election. The most shocking primary defeat on the Republican side came in Delaware where there was an open Senate seat. Mike Castle was not technically the incumbent but had been the sole Delaware representative in the House for 18 years. In the GOP primary he lost to Tea Party upstart Christine O’Donnell by 6 percent.

OUTRAGE AS SIGNALING
With a mere four Republicans defeated despite the surge in primary challengers, 2010 seems to fit easily into the sleepy historical pattern of party primary outcomes. As Stephen Ansolabehere and his colleagues noted in 2006, “If elections are like single-elimination tournaments, then almost all incumbents draw a bye in the first round. Given the utter lack of competition in primary elections it seems unlikely that incumbents are ‘running scared’ that they might lose the next primary.”

Nevertheless, this small number of electoral defeats for Republican incumbents shook the foundation of the party. The defeats of Bennett, Murkowski, and Castle signaled a shifting electoral landscape. The three were widely viewed as responsible, hard working, and attentive to their states. None were seen as in trouble until the Tea Party rebellion emerged. What was truly startling was that Bennett and Murkowski were conservatives beaten by candidates who ran at them from the right. Castle was widely seen as a moderate, though in a state where the GOP is thought to be moderate. Tea Party backed nominees in Alaska (Joe Miller) and Delaware (O’Donnell) were by any standard, weak candidates. Miller, endorsed by Sarah Palin, self-destructed in the general election. At one point he refused to answer questions by journalists about his past (he had been disciplined in his work as a government attorney). O’Donnell became a national laughing stock for running a television commercial where she declared “I am not a witch.” She had little in the way of work record, had experienced serious financial problems (including defaulting on her mortgage), and showed an unusually weak command of the issues.

Every election has its share of weak candidates and it’s not clear that 2010 had any more than the normal distribution. Yet Miller and O’Donnell weren’t perceived so much as oddballs but as a reflection of the strength of the Tea Party undertow. What
stood out about the Republican Party in 2010 was the breadth and ferocity of the Tea Party electoral involvement. Other Tea Party identified candidates, including Marco Rubio in Florida, Sharron Angle in Nevada, Ken Buck in Colorado, and Rand Paul in Kentucky defeated strong conventional Republican opponents in open Senate primaries. Many Republican gubernatorial candidates in open primaries who identified themselves as Tea Party supporters, such as Rick Scott in Florida, Nikki Haley in South Carolina, and Carl Paladino in New York, won their GOP nomination fights. It is difficult to accurately count how many Tea Party candidates ran in 2010 because the vast majority of challengers to incumbents presented themselves as affiliated with the movement (even if they had no formal support from one of the Tea Party organizations). If it was an open seat, then all candidates typically claimed to be the most conservative and most committed to Tea Party principles.

Instrumental in the distinctiveness of the 2010 primaries was the coverage by outrage oriented cable shows, talk radio programs, and political blogs. This is no small sector of the media world. For example, there are approximately 3800 radio stations that run talk shows 24/7. The vast majority of these run conservative programs, either nationally syndicated shows such as those hosted by Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, Glenn Beck, and Mark Levin, or programs hosted by local talent.37 Our estimate of the daily aggregate audience for outrage oriented cable, talk radio and political blogs is 47 million people.38

For some of the challengers, large national outrage-based venues brought favorable coverage to their campaigns. Glenn Beck ridiculed South Carolina incumbent Bob Inglis for using a phrase Beck associates with African Americans (Inglis is white).
While speaking on his radio show with one of Inglis’s challengers, Beck said “Everybody from Washington’s black. So Bob Inglis, I guess the latest addition to the African-American community, is speaking here and saying that we tea partygoers, we racists, I guess, need to stop listening to Glenn Beck.” During the primary season the popular blogger Michelle Malkin hammered away at those she regarded as Republican apostates, including Mike Castle and Mary Bono Mack from California. After their vote in support of cap-and-trade Malkin wrote “Congrats, congresspeople, you helped the Democrats pass a junk science-based, massive national energy tax. Headed to Disney World now?” She added, “We still want to know: What were your payoffs/earmarks?”

For those challengers whose campaigns didn’t attract the attention of leading conservative media figures, state and local political blogs and web sites often played a similar role. Our extensive monitoring of the blogging related to congressional races with primaries revealed some common patterns in the attacks on incumbents. Most conspicuously, the attacks focused on a select vote or two. Like the Michelle Malkin passage above, even the most barbed criticism focused on concrete votes on significant issues. The blog Seeing Red AZ took Arizona incumbent Jeff Flake to task for working “on behalf of the costliest of measures. . . granting tuition and other benefits, while extending amnesty for illegal aliens living in our country.” Another readily apparent pattern was a rejection of the pragmatism that argued that it was better to elect a not-absolutely-perfect Republican than to endanger the seat by nominating a more conservative challenger who might give the Democrats an opening to capture the seat. For those who worried that nominating Christine O’Donnell could give the seat to the Democrats, the Delaware blog Politically Frank said there was something much larger at
stake: “If the GOP does not cleanse itself of these moderates, it will doom itself to history and will have no future.”

We are unable to quantify the exact amount of coverage by blogs as despite our ambitious data gathering on the state and local blogosphere, it was not practical to try to monitor all relevant political blogs. Nor was it possible to systematically monitor local talk radio. What we can say that the blog coverage we found was characterized by abrasive, angry, and uncompromising language. Commentary was uniformly antagonistic toward one of more candidates and emphatically in favor of another. Our canvassing of conventional news coverage of congressional races turned up rather modest coverage, whether it be on a newspaper or newspaper web site or (infrequently) from an independent and nonideological web site. For those interested in a congressional race, turning to state and local blogs was the quickest and easiest way to access information, albeit highly ideological in nature.

The general election offered the Tea Party had another opportunity to demonstrate its prowess. With the Republican pickup of 63 seats in the House and 6 in the Senate, the Tea Party crowed loudly as to its impact. Clearly the Tea Party helped to swell enthusiasm among conservatives and brought volunteers into local campaigns. The various Tea Parties formally endorsed 282 Republican candidates for the House in the aggregate while 156 of those candidates were endorsed by only a single Tea Party organization. Three separate statistical analyses of the 2010 election by political scientists revealed no independent electoral impact of these endorsements. Gary Jacobson concluded that for Tea Party endorsed candidates “neither their vote share nor probability of victory differed significantly from that of other Republican challengers.” Although
this careful research by political scientists suggests caution in interpreting the election as an affirmation of the Tea Party, the popular perception is that the Tea Party was instrumental in accentuating the nationalization of the election and delivering a devastating defeat to the Democrats.

Credible Signaling

State and local Tea Parties have become preeminently important for signaling whether or not candidates are true enough conservatives to deserve nomination. All the more remarkable is that this takes place without formal processes whereby a Tea Party organization vets candidates and then endorses one. Rather, it’s an informal process by which various candidates claim that are the truest conservative in the race and one emerges informally but often decisively as the Tea Party favorite.

This process may be altering the very structure of the GOP nominating process. Take the example of Rand Paul, the Kentucky ophthalmologist, who ran for the Republican nomination for an open Senate seat in 2010. He rattled the state’s Republican establishment with his insurgent campaign against party favorite Trey Grayson. Grayson, the incumbent Secretary of State, was a proven vote getter and party leaders were unified around his candidacy, including support from the state’s senior senator, Republican Minority Leader Mitch McConnell. Grayson was also a proven conservative in a conservative state and by no means could not be called a moderate or RINO (Republican in Name Only). Paul ran as a Tea Party supporter and while he had done little for the state’s Republican party, he was able to build his candidacy around his appearances around the state, his work as Chair of the Kentucky Taxpayers Association, interviews with local talk radio, and through his appeal to conservative political blogs.
Another interesting case is that of Texas Republican Senate candidate Ted Cruz. Cruz won a 2012 party runoff against Lt. Governor David Dewhurst in a race that developed into a narrative of the Tea Party vs. the establishment. Like Trey Grayson, Dewhurst had the whole state party hierarchy in his camp, including Governor Rick Perry, and outspent Cruz by a margin of three to one. There were no ideological differences between the two candidates—both are highly conservative. Dewhurst won 45 percent of the vote in a nine person field in the May primary but was crushed by Cruz in the late July runoff. The only difference between the initial primary and the runoff was that Cruz became increasingly identified across the state as the Tea Party candidate.

But how does one become the Tea Party candidate? Is there a credible and easily visible signal that one candidate represents the Tea Party? There certainly seem some obstacles to such a signal. Although far from a random or sufficiently sized sample, most of the Tea Party leaders we spoke with said their organization did not endorse candidates. As noted above, there were some Tea Parties that endorsed in 2010, even if that endorsement was not always a clear signal since multiple candidates often claimed to embrace the Tea Party. There is also questions about the communications network for a Senate race. Although local chapters can get the word out to some local activists, we have not seen evidence of effective statewide communications networks. Statewide Tea Parties do not encompass all local Tea Parties within their state and we have not come across strong statewide mobilization of resources on behalf of a favored candidate like Cruz. Still, the message that he or she is “the one” somehow gets out.

All of this remains to be comprehensively researched but the work we have done suggests a role for local talk radio and state and local political blogs. In the case of Senate
races (and occasionally House races), national talk radio and national blogs can play an important role and act as a significant “signaler” for the ideologues who play a disproportionate role in primaries. They are especially important early on when the underdog candidate, running uphill against a better funded establishment candidate and possibly many other challengers, has little money and limited name recognition. In Cruz’s case, for example, well-known conservative blogger and CNN commentator Erick Erickson, advocated on behalf of Cruz for months on his widely followed Red State. His passionate blog posts followed a common script in these fights, with David standing up to Goliath despite the seemingly insurmountable odds. Although Sarah Palin and South Carolina Senator Jim DeMint would eventually come to Texas to campaign for Cruz, they did so after the race had narrowed. Erickson had been on the case for months, deriding Dewhurst for months as a “squishy moderate.” \(^46\) He portrayed Cruz in heroic terms, claiming he would give the GOP some “testicular fortitude” in the Congress. \(^47\)

Although some of the local Texas Tea Parties may have formally endorsed Cruz, and many surely let their members know that he was their man, what was important was not any endorsements but that Cruz was identified as a Tea Partier. The localism of the Tea Party made it impossible for a participatory endorsement process to proceed statewide. Nevertheless, the work of blogs like Red State and, presumably, the many local conservative radio stations that dot the state, got the word out. In short, the signaling was credible to the audience it was directed at. By the time the state’s newspapers began to draw the runoff in Tea Party vs. the establishment terms, Cruz was already anointed.

Another aspect of this process of Tea Party anointment is that it is reshaping the manner in which candidates compete for party nominations. Competitive primaries have
long been fought around ideological purity so that is not what is distinctive about Tea Party anointment. And candidates like Paul and Cruz are not classic amateurs running against those who are experienced—both had been active in politics in different ways. What is distinctive is that their route to running for office was a strategy of working for this signal of “he’s our man” from blogs, talk radio, and the Tea Party. They worked at it, effectively so. Cruz was rewarded by RedState because he earned its gratitude and established his street cred by going to a number of RedState Gatherings, Erickson’s conference for conservatives. After Cruz appeared at the Value Voters Summit in Washington, he became known as a passionate defender of religious liberty. For neither Paul or Cruz or many other Tea Party anointed candidates, their passage to Republican respectability came not from K Street fundraisers or the RNC, but from a newly emerging and loosely structured communications network that anoints those candidates who are the most passionate, most convincing, and most uncompromising conservatives.

**Conclusion**

It is too early to conclude anything about the long-term impact of the Tea Party—there is no “long term” yet for the Tea Party. At the same time, even though it is sure to evolve over the years to come and may not even survive over the long term, its three and one half years of activism gives social scientists much to chew on. At the outset of this paper we briefly outlined four arguments about the Tea Party. Let us return to each of those arguments and reflect a bit about the evidence we have presented to support them.

At the outset we noted that the localism of the Tea Party, with its refusal of individual organizations to scale up in a meaningful way, has had a powerful impact on nature of its advocacy. The lack of a unified structure has made it difficult to establish a
national lobbying apparatus with an office in Washington and a network of activists linked to it for grassroots mobilization. Although there is some lobbying at the state level, our research (not elaborated upon in this paper) demonstrates that it has had only a modest impact in selected states. The Tea Party’s influence comes instead from legislators’ weighing of public opinion within their state or district and their sense of the Tea Party’s role in shaping such opinion.

The structure of the Tea Party also led it to a heavy reliance on outrage rhetoric. Although the Tea Party narrative would argue that it is the nature of our decaying democracy that demands outrage, this approach has managed to work for them for other reasons. The shock and awe value of the town hall outbursts was perfectly tailored to the 24 hour news cycle and the proliferation of political opinion media outlets desperate for interesting material. The histrionics at the town halls were not exclusively Tea Party inspired but were so simple in their structure that they demanded little in the way of planning or mobilization. The effectiveness of these protests taught the Tea Party that it wasn’t necessary to engage in large scale mobilization to be successful but, rather, that America was in an uproar and that it didn’t need to do much to catalyze a revolution to take down the Obama administration. The GOP landslide in 2010 election only confirmed to the Tea Party that its loose organizational structure was working.

The structural impediments created by the lack of scaling made elections an attractive alternative. It may seem that the lack of unifying structures and the unwillingness to scale might hamper the Tea Parties, especially in Senate races. The real amount of mobilization by Tea Parties has tended to be modest. They have not been the financial backbone of insurgent candidacies and the candidates have worked more for the
credible signal of informal endorsement than for any particular forms of campaign assistance. As noted in Table 2, the supply of candidates seeking such a signal in their primary challenges to incumbents was particularly impressive. And that signal did not come exclusively from Tea Parties as outrage media were important communication nodes.

Finally, patterns of recruitment for office on the Republican side may be undergoing a transformation. (There is no reason why this model could also be adapted to the Democratic primaries but this process has not yet developed for that side.) We now have two elections where candidates identified with the Tea Party have surged to the front of Republican politics. In the 2012 Senate elections Ted Cruz, Richard Mourdock (Indiana) and Deb Fischer (Nebraska) have all rode their Tea Party identifications to win upset victories over other strong conservatives who were not as closely identified with the movement. In the Missouri race for the GOP Senate nomination to run against Democratic incumbent Claire McCaskill, all three candidates have aggressively sought to claim the mantle of being the Tea Party candidate. Is it the case that fidelity to the RedState Gatherings or the Value Voters Summits has become a more important credential than traditional party work?

Looking to the future, it’s conceivable that the Tea Parties will scale up and generate different forms of advocacy. For example, if a widely accepted federated structure was created with the intention of endorsing a Republican presidential candidate prior to the party primaries, that could have a strong impact on the selection of a nominee. Nevertheless, the disincentives to scale up remain strong. In business terms,
businesses scale up when such reorganization offers added value. Such added value might typically come from economies of scale. For example, brand development costs can be reduced by spreading such expenditures across more units. The Tea Party brand, however, is already well understood and highly visible. Another reason businesses search for economies of scale is to share data acquisition costs. Enhancing their knowledge base to achieve a more precise understanding of their market appears of little value to a highly ideological organization where fundamental truths trump the latest data.

In the end what appears to be of the greatest value to local Tea Parties is their own independence. Especially among the leadership, saying what they want and doing what they want seems prized most prized. The Tea Party remains distinctively a real grassroots movement that recognizes that being unconventional and uncontrolled is a key to its success.
Table 1
Public Opinion on Tea Party Town Hall Disruptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>Dems</th>
<th>Ind.</th>
<th>GOP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making angry attacks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy in Action</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse of Democracy</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booing Congressmen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy in Action</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse of Democracy</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shouting down opponents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy in Action</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse of Democracy</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

QUESTIONS:
Generally speaking, do you consider each of the following actions at town hall meetings to be an example of democracy in action (or) an example of abuse of democracy?

- Individuals making angry attacks against a healthcare bill and what it might do
- Booing when members of Congress make statements that the opponents disagree with
- Shouting down supporters when they speak in favor of a healthcare bill.

Figure 1

Interest in Town Hall Meetings

- Very closely: 32%
- Somewhat closely: 37%
- Not too closely: 18%
- Not at all: 13%

Table 2
2010 Congressional Primary Challenges

Primaries where the incumbent received less than 75 percent of the aggregate vote.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for challenge</th>
<th>Ideology/Issues</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Unclear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>House</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOP Primaries</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2 (n=30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Primaries</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Senate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOP Primaries</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Primaries</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0 (3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: 2010 data from the Outrage Industry project.
Endnotes


3 We’ll use both terms here, utilizing “Tea Party” when referring to the national movement and “Tea Parties” when discussing individual state and local organizations.


7 The interviews were not recorded but contemporaneous notes were taken and then filled in as soon as the session was terminated. These fuller notes were then typed up and the result are close to verbatim transcripts.


12 Web-based research conducted by Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson in the spring of 2011 documented 804 “currently active Tea Parties.” This is less than the 1400 that the *Washington Post* identified in October of 2010. The Post was unclear as to how many were functioning. Clearly, whatever the appropriate number, the movement remains vibrant. Skocpol and Williamson, *The Tea Party and the...*


17 There was a great deal of optimism among progressives that they were initially better suited to take advantage of the Internet than were conservatives. See Matthew R. Kerbel, Netroots (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009).

18 Blackmon et al, “Birth of a Movement.”


20 Zernike, Boiling Mad, 219.


24 Sobieraj and Berry, “From Incivility to Outrage”; and Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, The Outrage Industry (forthcoming).

25 Sobieraj and Berry, “From Incivility to Outrage.”


34 Boatright, “Getting Primaried.”

35 The number of challengers motivated by ideology also appears to be up sharply from previous elections. Precise numbers from early elections are not available. Robert Boatright has used various editions of the Almanac of American Politics to calculate ideological or issue challenges. However, the Almanac’s coding is unclear and it appears that it undercounted the ideological challengers in the 2010 elections. Our data on 2010 and Boatright’s own separate data collection on 20101 show relatively similar results. Personal correspondence, August 9, 2010.


38 This does not adjust for multiple exposures. Thus, someone who watches Rachel Maddow and reads Talking Points Memo during a 24 hour period is counted twice. See Berry and Sobieraj, The Outrage Industry, Chapter 1.

39 Http://www.glennbeck.com/content/articles/article/198/30689/, as of May 23, 2011.


