



The Tea Party Tactic

What it Could Do for Liberals

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September 2024 (*Revised 7 March 2025*)

The Tea Party (TP) has most commonly been accepted and referred to as a movement, but that is not a correct designation anymore. The Tea Party was incorporated into the wider Liberty Movement. Many sources examined for this essay noted the TP's lack of structure and leadership. That may have been true at one time, but they are clearly organized now. The TP has a president/CEO (chief executive officer), expansive infrastructure, and most importantly, power. One article even suggested that the Congressional Tea Party Caucus functioned as a third party within the Congress. Under that auspice, the TP has constituted a political party, an interest group, and a social movement at various times.

The TP certainly started as a movement, a reactionary one at that, in response to the election of Barack Obama in 2008.¹ Analysis of the socio-political shift after Obama's victory, through the lens of United States (US) history, motivates one to jump to the conclusion of racism. I will admit to that emotional jump, but I immediately understood there was more nuance and that such a conclusion was wildly reductive. In the late 2000s, I aligned with the TP, particularly the organization's branding as patriotic, and committed to America's founding principles. I too was radicalized by Obama's election, but it was not because I was a racist. There was an observable reactionary uprising and national schism after the 2008 presidential cycle. I now realize it was about Obama's Blackness, but much more than melanin, he



represented a shift in established culture, a threat to the status quo.

The conservative wave of authoritarian, faux-populist, nationalism the US is currently experiencing is not unique to the country. Vladimir Putin, Victor Orban, Marine Le Pen, Boris Johnson, and Donald Trump are (or were), far right nationalist leaders, and that is far from an exhaustive list. This trend is a reactionary response to progress and the rise of multiculturalism, more often than not, based on migration.

The immigration crisis European countries and the US are facing are the residual effects stemming from half a millennium of colonialism. That is an oversimplification that could be viewed under a microscope for nuance but illustrates the overall picture. Per Democratic Peace Theory, the post-World War II liberal world order has persisted for just 2 decades short of a century, though some estimates argue it began with the fall of the Soviet Union. This demarcation makes more sense after Donald Trump's first fifty days back in office, where he has disrupted US unipolar hegemony and aligned with Vladimir Putin and Russia. Evidently, some authoritarians hold the idea that the answer to imperial fallout is a new era of colonization.

The so-called Liberty Movement has long angled to shift the Overton Window, back in time. They say this, out loud, and now the Oval Office is as well. US society has a penchant for changing the meanings of political terms, the words liberal and conservative are no exception. The left/right paradigm was born from the choice between the norm and revolution. Make no mistake, conservatism seeks to preserve the status norm. Conservatives fight against *progress*, and Obama was the first

Black president with a campaign slogan "Change". His presidency posed the greatest challenge to the status quo since Civil Rights, left versus right, progressive versus conservatism, and the future versus the past.

The TP was a reactionary movement that mobilized to preserve the status quo. It did not stop there but expanded, most importantly, forming coalitions with other republican, conservative, libertarian, and like-minded right-wingers. Despite being firmly right on the paradigm, the TP still claims to have independent *and* democrat supporters.² Their page even likens their protests to "Tienanmen Square where a few stood to defy tyranny and demand liberty and democracy."² Not only did they spell it wrong, but they also fail to recognize that Tiananmen was the *left-wing* protesting against authoritarianism. The TP claims solidarity with a democracy they no longer believe in either.

Regardless of their self-identification as a party, the definition of an interest group is more fitting. The organization's declared intent is to preserve the "Judeo-Christian values" that they assert are "embedded" in the nation's founding documents.² While the TP seeks to influence policy on interests they have identified as Christian, conservative, and based on liberty, the reality is they demand the protection of the status quo.

Just as the TP encompasses characteristics of both a social movement and an interest group, Jordan M. Ragusa and Anthony Gaspar exposed how the Tea Party Caucus functioned like a party within Congress.³ More notably, they started an ideological realignment of the Republican Party (GOP) that is observable now

that MAGA (Make America Great Again) has concluded it. The TP made the GOP into what they wanted, the GOP *is* the Tea Party, it *is* MAGA. Those factions consolidated and usurped the majority power of the party, forcibly reforming it. Today the GOP is a big tent home to Tea Partiers, MAGA, Libertarians, Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, and the like. These organizations coalesced in order to suppress the patriotic fundamentals of progress, multiculturalism, and liberalism.

Ragusa and Gaspar's article was published in 2016 and reading it today, they are akin to Nostradamus. The pair recognized that there would be consequences and predicted a dismantling of the two-party system. Unfortunately, a multi-party state has not resulted, but the landscape has certainly adjusted. The US two-party system persists not because only two sides exist, but rather because Americans are more comfortable choosing between two banners. Ragusa and Gaspar stated this as well, "the modern two-party system was defined by realignment *within* existing party structures."³ Their calculation that "a major realignment or split within the Republican Party would not be surprising" was positively clairvoyant. Alas, they were too optimistic, in both the TP's capability to dismantle the system and their prediction that Americans were more likely to build new parties than to reform one. Ragusa and Gaspar also suggested that the Freedom Caucus would mimic the TP. Instead, the Freedom Caucus absorbed the TP while conglomerating into the greater Liberty Movement. Ragusa and Gaspar's article got some things shockingly right, some things close, and some things may still come to fruition, just like the 16th-century seer.

The Tea Party is self-identified and commonly referred to as a movement. I have no argument it started as a social

movement and its members still peddle the preservation of archaic cultural norms that are patently false. The TP is definitely an organization, and still a PAC (Political Action Committee), but they have acquired and yielded tangible political power through the GOP. I consider the TP a part of the Liberty Movement and view the GOP as the banner tent under which far-right elements consolidated to oppose natural social progression. The Tea Party cannot be categorized as either a political party, interest group, or social movement. The organization approached these machinations in the most effective way possible, they utilized all three.

The Liberal Party USA, Project Liberal, New Liberals, Bernie Bros, and other left-of-center organizations should seriously examine the Tea Party's strategy. Consolidation of these energetic and youthful groups could very well be the only way to counter the far-right status quo that is devastating the nation. Everyone need not be a Democrat to rally in the tent, only possess the fortitude to protect democracy. We only need enough voices to overpower the aged, out-of-touch, establishment 'democrats.'

1. Williamson, Vanessa, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin. "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism." *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (March 2011): 25-43. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s153759271000407x>.
2. Eichler, Steve. "We Are The National Tea Party." Tea Party, October 6, 2023. <https://teaparty.org/about-us/>.
3. Ragusa, Jordan M., and Anthony Gaspar. "Where's the Tea Party? An Examination of the Tea Party's Voting Behavior in the House of Representatives." *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2016): 361-72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44018016>.