

## The Tea Party Movement: Leftist Attacks Fail to Stop its Growing Influence

By Elizabeth Klimp

*Summary:* In February 2009, a new force emerged in American politics. Alarmed at the rapid expansion of the federal government and frustrated by the Obama administration's fiscal policies, Americans took to the streets in protests they called "Tea Parties." This was a reference to the Boston Tea Party of 1773, which was the American colonists' protest against excessive taxes imposed on them by an unrepresentative government. Since the Tea Party protests first attracted widespread public attention, liberal advocacy groups and media commentators have tried to deny that it is a genuine grassroots movement. They charge that it is under the control of big money corporate donors and say it is motivated by race hatred rather than dedicated to limited government. Tea Party opponents are trying to discredit the movement and have disparaged Americans who are troubled by skyrocketing public spending. But their attacks are failing.



Costumed Tea Party activists in an undated photograph. (photo: Huffington Post)

On Feb. 19, 2009, CNBC correspondent Rick Santelli was boiling mad. Standing on the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, Santelli was asked about a proposed \$75 billion government bailout program for home mortgages. Santelli charged that "the government was supporting bad behavior" and he proposed that the Obama administration create an online "referendum to see if we really want to subsidize the losers' mortgages or would we like to at least buy cars and buy houses in foreclosure and give them to people who have a chance to actually prosper down the road and reward people that could carry the water instead of drink the water."

Santelli denounced continual rounds of federal bailout aid and, as traders on the exchange floor began applauding him, he wondered aloud, "How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgage who has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills?" Addressing the CNBC studio news anchors, Santelli announced "We're thinking about a Chicago tea party in July. All of you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I'm going to start organizing it."

Santelli's outburst struck a nerve. Videos of Santelli's "rant" were posted on YouTube almost immediately and quickly spread across the Internet. Within 12 hours of the CNBC

broadcast, a ChicagoTeaParty.com website began coordinating "tea party" rallies. Within weeks, there were more protests against out-of-control federal spending, the growing national debt, and the Obama administration's spendthrift policies. On "Tax Day," April 15,

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thousands gathered in Chicago and across the United States to protest Obama policies and warn against tax increases and infringements on property rights and civil liberties. Sparked by Rick Santelli's impromptu op-ed on cable TV—dubbed the “Rant Heard 'Round the World”—thousands of citizens demanded a return to fiscal sanity. The modern Tea Party movement was born.

## Tea Party Basics

What's called the Tea Party movement began as isolated groups of local citizens who wanted to find ways to protest the growth of government and public spending. But during the past year and a half these small groups have become a nationwide grassroots movement. Surveys show that those who identify with the movement are a heterogeneous mix of people committed to common objectives. According to a CBS News poll conducted in April 2010, approximately 18% of Americans identify themselves as Tea Party supporters. Approximately one half were never involved in politics before 2009. Almost all cite a “boiling point” moment when their frustration, anxiety and anger at the government's policies pushed them into action.

Americans living in the South and West are more likely to endorse the Tea Party move-

ment, but the uprising is a truly national with supporters in all 50 states. The majority are white and Anglo-Saxon. However, about one quarter are Hispanic, Asian or African-American. A poll conducted in April by the New York Times and CBS News found that compared to the electorate overall, self-identified Tea Party activists are more likely to be male, slightly older, married, better-educated and have a higher than average household income. They also are more likely to attend religious services weekly.

Like other grassroots movements, the overwhelming majority of Tea Party activists are volunteers who are organizing activities around issues and candidates in their local communities. A typical Tea Party organization has a small organizing nucleus, or board of trustees, that oversees a larger number of volunteers. The board handles the group's communications, fund-raising and logistics, usually without any direction from a larger state, regional or national organization. Individual groups develop their own platform, objectives, and plans of action, generally without input or assistance from larger state or national coordinating bodies. The typical group is independent, but shares with other Tea Party groups a common platform of reverence for the Founding Fathers and the U.S. Constitution and support for fiscal responsibility, limited government, and personal liberty.

There are state and national Tea Party organizations, but typically they facilitate communication among Tea Party groups and serve as networking agents rather than try to stage or direct local grassroots activities. These larger organizations also try to attract national attention to the movement. They organize its larger rallies or series of rallies, train activists on practical aspects of organizing, and propose themes or platforms that can galvanize Tea Party support.

For instance, Ryan Hecker, leader of the Houston-based Tea Party Patriots, issued an online “Contract from America” on April 12, 2010 that urges Americans to come up with policy ideas that can guide the movement and be used to evaluate political candidates. Hecker described the project to the New York Times as “an open-sourced platform” for the movement.

Items in the platform include:

- \* Require that bills submitted to Congress identify the specific provision of the Constitution that gives Congress the power to do what the bill proposes;
- \* Pass a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution that requires a 2/3 majority for any tax hike;
- \* Enact a flat tax system, abolish the Internal Revenue Code and replace it with one that does not exceed the length of the original Constitution (4,543 words);
- \* Create a taskforce to audit all federal agencies and programs to assess their constitutionality and identify waste and duplication;
- \* Enact a statutory cap that limits the annual growth of federal spending to the sum of inflation plus the percentage of population growth;
- \* Repeal and replace “Obamacare” with free-market health insurance reforms unrestricted by state controls;
- \* Reduce regulatory barriers to increased energy exploration and reject cap and trade legislation;
- \* Impose a moratorium on earmarks until the budget is balanced and then require a 2/3 majority to pass any earmark;
- \* Permanently repeal all tax hikes currently scheduled to begin in 2011.

While Tea Party members espouse free market economic views, they do not all identify with the Republican Party. According to an April CBS News Poll, 54% of Tea Party members describe themselves as Republicans while 41% identify as Independents, and 5% as Democrats. Tea Party members consider their movement a forum for any reform-minded individual without regard to party affiliation. The majority of Tea Party activists have no desire to form a national third party.

As accountant and Tea Party supporter Jason Hoyt told Human Events: “The Tea Party movement is not about a party ... it's about finding candidates who are constitutionally minded and fiscally responsible ... and helping them win.”

## Tea Party Leadership

The Tea Party movement has no central leadership or headquarters organization. Activists sometimes cite a 2006 book, *The Starfish*

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*and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*, to explain the strengths of their movement. Still a number of organizations have taken on leadership roles and prominent individuals endorse or espouse Tea Party principles.

## Organizations

\* **Tea Party Patriots** [www.teapartypatriots.org]. Based in Houston, Tea Party Patriots is dedicated to providing “logistical, educational, networking and other types of support to over 1,000 community based tea party groups around the country.” The organization promotes public policy ideas based on the core values of constitutionally limited government, fiscal responsibility and free markets. It helps coordinate multi-state Tea Party events and assists grassroots protesters to connect with their local tea party organizations. In conjunction with Glenn Beck’s “Restoring Honor” event at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. on August 28, Tea Party Patriots hosted a Recycle Government rally on August 29.

\* **Tea Party Nation**. [www.teapartynation.com] Nashville attorney Judson Phillips organized the first national tea party convention on Feb. 4-6, 2010 at which Sarah Palin was the keynote speaker. Some Tea Party activists criticized the group’s \$549 registration fee. A second conference planned for October 14-16 at the Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas will be co-sponsored by the Leadership Institute and World Net Daily, among others, with a registration fee of \$399.

\* **National Tea Party Federation** [www.thenationalteapartyfederation.com]. The Federation was created on April 8, 2010 to “act as a clearinghouse and prepare leadership to promote the Tea Party movement’s objectives of Free Market, Constitutionally Limited Government and Fiscal Responsibility.” It has about 85 member organizations and affiliates and claims over one million individual activists, but has no controlling leadership. The Federation was in the news in July after it expelled Mark Williams, leader of the Tea Party Express, for publishing a letter that mocked the initials of the NAACP and characterized slavery as “a great gig.” Williams subsequently resigned from the Tea Party Express.

\* **Tea Party Express** [www.teapartyexpress.org]. Last spring it sponsored a national bus tour punctuated by rallies across America. Sarah Palin spoke at the March 27 kickoff rally in Searchlight, Nevada, hometown of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, as well as at a Boston rally on April 14. The Tea Party Express message: “You, the politicians in Washington, have failed We the People with your bailouts, out-of-control spending, government takeovers of sectors of the economy, Cap and Trade, government-run healthcare and higher taxes! If you thought we were just going to quietly go away, or that this tea party movement would be just a passing fad, you were mistaken. We’re taking our country back!”

\* **FreedomWorks** [teaparty.freedomworks.org]. A membership organization with state affiliates, FreedomWorks was founded in 1984 and is chaired by former House majority leader Dick Armey. It “recruits, educates, trains and mobilizes hundreds of thousands of volunteer activists to fight for less government, lower taxes and more freedom.” In early 2009 it began helping to organize tea party groups. Its 25-city “Tea Party Tour” trains activists and helps organize citizen rallies.

\* **Americans for Prosperity** [www.americansforprosperity.org]. President Tim Phillips heads this low tax, libertarian advocacy group based in Washington but sponsoring state affiliates and a national membership. Along with FreedomWorks, it has helped nurture the Tea Party movement.

\* **Congressional Tea Party Caucus**. An informal House of Representatives group that debuted on July 21, it is championed by Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.). It has about 50 House members, all Republicans, including: Mike Pence and Dan Burton (Indiana), Paul Broun (Georgia), Pete Hoekstra (Michigan), John Carter (Texas), Todd Tiahrt (Kansas), and Cliff Stearns (Florida). It serves as a forum and does not claim to speak for local Tea Party groups.

## Individuals

\* **Sharron Angle**. She won the Nevada

Republican primary for U.S. Senate and will challenge the Democratic incumbent, Harry Reid. She is endorsed by the Tea Party Express.

\* **Dick Armey**. The former Republican House Majority Leader (1995-2003), now co-chairman of FreedomWorks, says this on the group’s website: “This is now the biggest swing movement on the field of American politics. It is also the only movement that has any energy or sense of purpose. Liberals are confused ... [and] conservative Republicans have gone through another identity crisis and they are trying to find themselves. These [tea party] folks have a cohesive understanding of who we are and what do we want for our country.”

\* **Michele Bachmann**. Bachmann represents Minnesota’s 6<sup>th</sup> district in the House of Representatives and created the Congressional Tea Party Caucus, which intends to spread the Tea Party message to members of Congress and defend the movement against critics.

\* **Glenn Beck**. The conservative Fox News Channel host has been very supportive of the Tea Party movement since its inception. His “Restoring Honor” rally at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, featuring Sarah Palin and Dr. Alveda King, niece of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. will be followed the next day by a rally sponsored by Tea Party Patriots.

\* **Jim DeMint**. The South Carolina’s junior Republican senator told Fox News that the Tea Party movement is “just the tip of the iceberg of an American awakening.” He has attended several Tea Party rallies.

\* **Judge Andrew Napolitano**. A former New Jersey Superior Court judge, Napolitano is a legal and political analyst for Fox News Channel and hosts the show “Freedom Watch.” The first episode, airing on June 12, 2010, was called a “Tea Party Summit” because the featured guests were Ron Paul, Rand Paul, Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, and Dick Armey.

\* **Grover Norquist**. As president of Americans for Tax Reform, a board member of the American Conservative Union, and a

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preeminent Republican strategist, Norquist is very supportive of the Tea Party movement, telling Jim Meyers of Newsmax that: “The Tea Party movement is best understood as millions of Americans who have not been involved in politics for most of their adult lives but in the last two years got scared straight by Obama’s debt — trillions in higher taxes, higher debt, higher spending, and trillions more being threatened. And because they’re involved in politics, if the Republicans come back into power they will be a different party than they were in the past, because there are these new troops that have arrived with one thing on their mind— spend less.”

\***Eric Odom.** The executive director of American Liberty Alliance, Odom is credited with building much of the online infrastructure that allows hundreds of grassroots Tea Party activists to network and communicate. He helped organize the first Chicago Tax Day Tea Party.

\* **Sarah Palin.** She was keynote speaker for the inaugural Tea Party convention in Nashville, Tenn., as well as the speaker at the Searchlight, Nevada kickoff rally for a Tea Party Express bus campaign.

\* **Ron Paul.** Paul represents Texas’ 14<sup>th</sup> district in the House of Representatives and has been a staunch Tea Party supporter. His successful online fundraising during his 2008 presidential campaign inspired the movement. In one day, Dec. 16, 2007, the 234<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Boston Tea Party, Paul raised \$6 million, an event called Ron Paul’s “Tea Party.”

\* **Rand Paul.** The son of Ron Paul, he was founder and chairman of Kentucky Taxpayers United before winning his state’s Republican nomination for U.S. Senate.

\* **Mark Williams.** The former chairman has left the Tea Party Express, which was expelled from the Tea Party Federation. He has started a new organization called the Citizens Reclaiming Constitutional Liberties PAC.

## Criticisms of the Tea Party Movement

Left-wing commentators have tried to

undermine the legitimacy of the Tea Party movement, ridiculing activists as “knuckle-dragging hillbillies” and “neo-Klansmen,” and describing them as racist and uneducated. However, three accusations have dominated mainstream media headlines: 1) Tea Party members encourage violence; 2) the Tea Party movement is a front for wealthy corporate interests and not a true grassroots movement; and 3) the Tea Party movement is racist.

**Violent.** Some critics assert that Tea Party rhetoric about Democratic healthcare proposals has created a “climate of violence.” They cite emails sent to Congress and the White House, false allegations that protesters spit on a member of Congress, and point to signs carried at Tea Party rallies: “*I Came Unarmed [This Time],*” “*If You Want A Civil War Just Keep Assaulting Our American,*” and “*Ram It Down Our Throat in '09, We'll Shove It Up You're A\*\* in '10.*”

Former President Bill Clinton appeared to equate the Tea Party’s rhetoric with the hatred that inspired the Oklahoma City bombing. In an April 18 New York Times op-ed published on the fifteenth anniversary of bombing, Clinton warned against “crossing the line” that separates anti-government protest from advocacy of violence. Clinton wrote, “In the current climate, with so many threats against the president, members of Congress and other public servants, we owe it to the victims of Oklahoma City, and those who survived and responded so bravely, not to cross it again.”

Some leftist activists have even engaged in “tea party crashing” to incite disruptions at Tea Party events. For instance, Oregon teacher Jason Levin urged left-wing activists to sneak into Tea Party rallies holding signs with violent, abusive messages. He hoped the mainstream media would focus on the signs to tarnish the Tea Party reputation.

While some Tea Party supporters undoubtedly have made inflammatory statements, they are hardly representative of the movement. Peter Hart, activism director for Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, told Fox News in April: “I think there are always going to be people at the fringes of any movement that

express themselves like this. The question is how much attention is paid to those people.” Said Tea Party strategist Sal Russo, “They went out and found almost every crackpot that attended the rally and used them as a symbol for the entire Tea Party movement.”

**A Corporate Front.** Then there are the accusations that the Tea Party movement is a corporate front. An August 19, 2009 Washington Post article on FreedomWorks attacks on Obamacare and cap and trade legislation implied that the group was a front for Philip Morris, MetLife, and the Scaife family foundations. Other news stories try to link the Tea Party to the Koch family and its foundations. Bill Press, author of *Toxic Talk: How the Radical Right Has Poisoned America’s Airwaves*, claims the Tea Party movement is a creation of Fox News.

Tea Party activists acknowledge that FreedomWorks and other organizations have provided technical assistance and training, but they insist that their movement is a true grassroots movement. In “It’s My Party and I’ll Cry If I Want To,” blogger Dan Riehl writes, “Tea Party protestors aren’t being bused in by the likes of ACORN. They’re showing up because they care about their country and they’ve seen enough over recent years to start doing something about it.”

**Racist.** Perhaps the most damaging and headline-grabbing allegation is the claim that Tea Party protests against the Obama administration are motivated by racism. News stories that Tea Party supporters used racial slurs and spit at members of the Congressional Black Caucus during a rally against the Democrats’ massive healthcare takeover have fueled charges that the Tea Party is a refuge for bigots. The NAACP passed a resolution to “repudiate the racism of the Tea Parties” and condemned the movement’s effort to “push our country back to the pre-civil rights era.” NAACP President Benjamin Todd Jealous declared: “What we take issue with is the Tea Party’s continued tolerance for bigotry and bigoted statements . . . The time has come for them to accept the responsibility that comes with influence and make clear there is no place for racism and anti-Semitism, homophobia and other forms of bigotry in their movement.”

Countering these charges, Tea Party leaders adamantly deny that the movement is racist. Mark Williams and the Tea Party Express were rebuked and removed from positions of responsibility after the widely reported racially charged incident. And even Vice President Joe Biden cautioned against resorting to allegations of racism. He said that although the Tea Party movement has “very different views on government and a whole lot of things ... it is not a racist organization.”

What’s behind the charge of racism against the Tea Party movement? Many believe it is a disguise for the Left’s frustration with its own failures. Despite the election of Barack Obama to the presidency and the passage of many big spending bills by Congress, the so-called “progressive” Left has failed to create a mass movement to transform American politics. Instead, the nation appears poised to swing back to conservative ideas and to reward Republicans with increased political power.

That’s the view of Mary Frances Berry, former chairman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and a real leftwing firebrand. Berry told the Politico newspaper that allegations of racism were an attempt to smear the Tea Party movement for strategic reasons. Said Berry, “Tainting the tea party movement with the charge of racism is proving to be an effective strategy for Democrats. There is no evidence that tea party adherents are any more racist than other Republicans, and indeed many other Americans.”

Deneen Borelli, an African-American who is a fellow at Project 21, a black leadership group sponsored by the conservative National Center for Public Policy Research, agrees with Berry’s assessment: “Race card politics is the last-ditch effort to shift the debate away from President Obama’s harmful policies such as the government’s takeover of health care and his failure to create jobs – both of which are having an impact on his popularity.”

### Backfire

While the Left is expending time and energy trying to discredit the Tea Party Movement,

its strenuous efforts belie its assertions. If Tea Party supporters really were violent and racist extremists, the reality would be obvious. Instead, leftist politicians and commentators work overtime attempting to demonstrate what they want to believe.

Writes blogger Dan Riehl: “If serious people on the Left weren’t concerned over the Tea Party movement, their new media apparatus wouldn’t be trying to dismiss, or marginalize it by falsely claiming it’s being sponsored by Fox News, or some dangerous Right Wing fringe.” Conservative journalist Andrea Billups agrees: “The hurling of vitriol from opposition groups shows the intensity many are investing in taking Tea Partiers down ... It is the runaway vilification that speaks loudest to the Tea Party movement’s amassing power.”

By rejecting the Tea Party movement, Democratic Party candidates and officeholders risk alienating moderates and independents. An July ABC News/Washington Post voter opinion poll found that 6 in 10 registered voters do not have faith in the president’s handling of the economy and decision-making capabilities. Similarly, 7 in 10 voters lack confidence in Democratic lawmakers. Two-thirds say they are angry or dissatisfied with recent actions of the federal government and 62% are not inclined to support their incumbent U.S. House member. Since January 2009, the Left has seen its once strong support crumble. All indications are that it is about to lose its stranglehold on legislative power.

By contrast, the Tea Party movement has considerable public support. A Rasmussen poll this summer found 41% of those polled had a favorable impression of the movement; 46% believed it was beneficial for the United States, while only 31% believed it was harmful. Tea Party-backed candidates have done well in recent GOP primaries. Winners include Paul LePage, Maine GOP nominee for governor; Rand Paul, Kentucky’s GOP Senate candidate; Anna Little, GOP nominee in New Jersey 6<sup>th</sup> congressional district; Kristi Noem, GOP nominee for South Dakota’s at-large congressional seat; Tim Scott, Republican nominee in South Carolina’s first congressional district; Sharron Angle, GOP nominee for the Nevada Senate seat;

and Nikki Haley, GOP nominee for South Carolina governor.

Insulting the Tea Party movement by charging it with racism, violence and corporate control will not help those who want to defend the policy agenda of the Obama administration and the Democratic Congress. Instead of listening to the Tea Parties, leftist advocates discredit their own claims to represent the American grassroots.

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Many thanks.

Terrence Scanlon  
President

# Briefly Noted

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit has reinstated a congressional ban on federal funding of **ACORN**. ACORN had argued that the suspension of taxpayer funding amounted to a “corporate death sentence.” The circuit court disagreed, citing a study indicating only a tenth of the group’s budget came from federal sources. “We doubt that the direct consequences of the appropriations laws temporarily precluding ACORN from federal funds were so disproportionately severe or so inappropriate as to constitute punishment,” the three-judge panel found. The decision came months after the U.S. Department of Justice filed an appeal of U.S. District Judge **Nina Gershon**’s ruling that cutting off funding of ACORN was an unconstitutional bill of attainder.

Meanwhile, Nevada’s Democratic attorney general, **Catherine Cortez Masto**, is moving forward with a criminal prosecution of ACORN even though the financially anemic group has dissolved its national structure and reportedly slashed its workforce from 250 to four employees. Trial has been scheduled for Nov. 29. The charges relate to ACORN’s crime of choice: election fraud. **Conrad Hafen**, chief deputy state attorney general, was quoted in a news report saying neither bankruptcy nor dissolution would “necessarily protect (ACORN) from prosecution” in Nevada. If ACORN is convicted it would send shock waves through leftist organizing circles across the nation and might embolden more prosecutors to take on ACORN and similar groups.

A federal grand jury indicted California businessman **Samuel “Mouli” Cohen** in a \$30 million investment scam whose victims reportedly included leftist actor and **Hugo Chavez** collaborator **Danny Glover** and the far-left **Vanguard Public Foundation**, the San Francisco Chronicle reports. The victims were allegedly lured by Cohen into buying shares in his technology company, **Ecast**, which he claimed was on the verge of being purchased by **Microsoft Corp.** Glover and Vanguard president **Hari Dillon** filed a lawsuit against Cohen in 2009 claiming Vanguard “has been effectively destroyed” by Cohen’s activities.

Nonprofit groups and charities that rely on states for funding are facing hard times because two-thirds of states are projecting budgetary shortfalls in 2012 that may exceed their collective \$84 billion shortfall for 2011. The biggest funding gaps in 2011 belong to Nevada (45%), New Jersey (28%), Arizona (27.2%), and Maine (26%). In California Gov. **Arnold Schwarzenegger** has proposed zeroing-out funding for **CalWorks**, which gives cash and employment assistance to low-income families. In Arizona voters will be asked in November to vote on Proposition 302 which would kill **First Things First**, which was created in a statewide referendum in 2006 and is supported through a tax on tobacco. Critics say the group hoards money and isn’t spending enough on programs for children.

In Portland, Ore., state health inspectors forced seven year old **Julie Murphy** to shut down her lemonade stand or face a \$500 fine because she had not paid the \$120 fee to have her stand inspected. The county later apologized. The **Nature Conservancy** in Oregon also sponsors child lemonade stands. No word on its reaction to the crackdown.

Former **Service Employees International Union (SEIU)** president **Andy Stern**, a longtime practitioner of **Saul Alinsky**’s in-your-face style of advocacy, accepted a plum post as “senior research fellow” at **Georgetown University’s Georgetown Public Policy Institute**.