



Original research article

## Education, political affiliation and energy policy in the United States: A case of Tea Party exceptionalism?

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## ABSTRACT

The Tea Party political movement began in the United States in 2009, driven by opposition to the presidency of Barack Obama. Prior research has shown that Tea Party Republicans differ from mainstream Republicans on a range of attitudes, such as belief in climate change and attitudes towards immigrants. However, it is unknown if Tea Party affiliation is consequential for energy policy. In this paper, we use an array of dependent variables related to a number of different energy policy options and find substantial differences between Tea Party Republicans and mainstream Republicans. In particular, Tea Party Republicans are much more supportive of increasing energy supply via fossil fuel extraction and less supportive of regulating power plants than mainstream Republicans. We also find that political affiliation is moderated by education, in which more educated Tea Party supporters are more resistant to energy regulation and more supportive of fossil fuels than Tea Party supporters with less education. Implications for future research and the energy policy regime in the United States are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

The United States has recently experienced a largely unprecedented boom in oil and gas production and increased deployment of renewable energy resources. Most of the U.S. public and many political leaders support an “all of above” approach to energy policy that includes a move away from traditional fossil fuels towards unconventional extractive techniques (e.g., fracking for natural gas), coupled with renewable energy sources like tidal, wind and solar [1–4]. Currently, an array of potential energy policy options are available to policy-makers at the federal, state or local level [5,6]. Despite broad support for an aggressive move away from traditional fossil fuels and towards unconventional fossil fuels—and ultimately renewables—energy policy reforms have been relatively modest. Moving forward, it is important to understand the factors which explain public support (or lack of support) for energy policies.

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Political affiliation is one of the most consistent predictors of a range of environmental attitudes and support for environmental policy—indeed, studies from several decades ago [7] and more recently (e.g. [8–10]) have found that political conservatives or self-described Republicans are less concerned about environmental issues, less supportive of environmental policy and less likely to engage in individual environmental behaviors. Further, the effect of political affiliation is moderated by education, in which more educated conservatives are less supportive of environmental policy or less concerned about environmental problems [11–14].

Spurred by opposition to the Affordable Care Act and the election of Barack Obama, conservative activists and media figures helped foment a new, ideologically driven movement within the Republican Party; this movement became known as the Tea Party. Hamilton and Saito [15] conducted one of the few studies to consider Tea Party affiliation and environmental issues and concluded that there are “four parties” with regards to public perceptions of environmental issues—Tea Party Republicans, mainstream Republicans, independents, and Democrats. These authors report that Tea Party Republicans exhibit lower environmental concern than their mainstream Republican counterparts. With the exception of Leiserowitz et al. [73], remarkably little is known about how Tea Party affiliation might impact support for specific energy policies. This paper addresses this gap in our knowledge by using nationally-

representative survey data and a number of dependent variables related to energy policy.

## 2. Background

In this section we review the sociological and social psychological literature on the social nature of political affiliation. Then, we turn to literature on the Tea Party and its policy implications in the United States.

### 2.1. Group affiliation and public opinion

Partisan differences in environmental attitudes are well documented. There are several processes which create partisan polarization on public issues. Political affiliation can be understood as a type of group-based social identity—during times of uncertainty, individuals may rely on this social identity to make sense of the world or social changes [16–18]. People reconcile their personal attitudes with the beliefs of their group [19–21], and strong partisan affiliations make people more receptive to cues [22–24].

Group-level cues often come from ideological elites, and polarization among partisan elites often leads to public polarization [25]. This phenomenon—called party sorting—can create an environment of extreme polarization as individuals align with parties which reflect their beliefs and, in turn, individual beliefs are shaped by partisan elites, creating political parties which are sharply divergent on a range of issues [26–28]. Highly partisan individuals rely on a type of motivated cognition in which new information is interpreted in a way that confirms pre-existing beliefs; thus, empirical scientific information is unlikely to shift public attitudes [29–31]. For instance, conservative think tanks, PR firms, religious leaders and media outlets shifted public opinion on climate change among conservatives [32–36]. As a result of the mobilization of Republican party and conservative elites, there are pronounced differences between conservatives and liberals on the issue of climate change [37,14,38].

Hence, the literature on polarization indicates that people rely on their partisan identities to make sense of the world and to form the basis of their views on a range of issues. Some of the sharpest polarization has been observed on climate change. However, the degree of polarization on energy issues is somewhat less clear. For instance, Coley and Hess [39] and Hess et al. [40] demonstrate the Republican politicians often vote for a range of environmental and energy regulations—even though they may hold an ideological opposition to regulation. Elite cues may guide individual attitudes on certain high profile topics (e.g., the Affordable Care Act, climate change), but for more specific policies (e.g., energy efficiency standards), elite cues may be less salient and partisan differences may be less pronounced.

Informed by the notion of elite cues, McCright [14] suggested that education might moderate the effect of political affiliation. Lower education individuals are less receptive to elite cues for a number of reasons—for example, they might be less apt to invest large amounts of time into consuming partisan political media. Typically, education raises awareness of environmental problems and more educated individuals are more likely to support environmental policy [41,42]. However, education has the opposite effect among conservatives, whereby more educated conservatives are less concerned about environmental problems. This moderating relationship has been observed for climate change [11,13,14] trust in science with regards to vaccination [74], though it has not been tested in the area of energy policy.

### 2.2. The rise of the Tea Party

The Tea Party arose within the Republican party in late 2009, mobilized in large part by the looming passage of the Affordable Care Act, bank bailouts and other real or perceived policy changes subsequent to the election of Barack Obama and the economic uncertainty of the global recession of 2008 [43]. The Tea Party and sympathetic media outlets were key to the Republican Party success in the 2010 midterm elections [44–49]. As of October 2015, around 17% of the public identifies with the Tea Party, with nearly all Tea Party supporters also identifying as politically conservative [50].

Socio-demographically, Tea Party Republicans tend to be more affluent, skew Christian Evangelical and are more likely to be male and white than mainstream Republicans [51,52,48]. Tea Party members tend to hold negative views of immigrants and non-whites [53,48,54]. Tea Party identification is also associated with a rather rigid “free market”, fiscally conservative ideological belief system [45,51,52,48]. Several studies have connected free market ideological beliefs to disbelief in climate change [55–57], though it is unclear if these findings should be generalized to energy policy preferences.

The implications of the Tea Party for environmental or energy issues has received less study than other policy areas—such as healthcare. Hamilton and Saito [15] report that mainstream Republicans and political independents have roughly the same degree of belief in climate change, but Tea Party Republicans are extremely unlikely to believe that climate change is occurring and caused by human activity. Hamilton and Saito’s [15] analysis suggest that polarization does not always occur along familiar Democrat-Republican battle lines, but that there can be significant within-party variance. More specific to energy policy, Leiserowitz et al. [73] found that Tea Party supporters were more opposed to renewable energy policies than other Republicans and more supportive of nuclear energy and increased fossil fuel drilling. While Hamilton and Saito [15] observed an interaction between education and political affiliation, this relationship has not been tested for energy policy.

Thus, we believe that more research in this area is needed as the Tea Party is a powerful movement that has impacted policy in other areas, particularly healthcare and immigration [58–60]. Secondly, as noted earlier, political affiliation is one of the consistent predictors of energy policy preferences and environmental attitudes (e.g. [8–10]). In this manuscript, we address this gap in the literature using two nationally representative data sets from Pew Research for a range of energy policy options.

We expect that Tea Party Republicans differ from mainstream Republicans across a range of energy policy preferences—we also expect to observe differences between mainstream Republicans, Independents and Democrats. Motivated by the prior literature (e.g. [15,14]), we expect that these preferences will be moderated by educational attainment. That is, as education increases, Tea Party Republicans’ support for extractive energy policies will also increase and opposition to environmental/sustainable regulations will increase. The next section describes the data, variables and statistical models utilized for this analysis.

## 3. Data, measures and methods

### 3.1. Data

For this project, we rely on two random digit dial studies conducted by the Pew Research Center [61,62]. The first dataset is the November 2014 post-election study (n = 1353, margin of error 3.0%). The second study is the December 2014 political survey

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