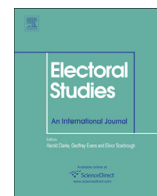


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# Electoral Studies

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## The Tea Party and the 2012 presidential election

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### ABSTRACT

Using both the 2012 American National Election Study and the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we examine the Tea Party movement's role in crystallizing attitudes and shaping voting behavior in the 2012 elections. The data show that, compared to other Republicans, Tea Party sympathizers were notably more hostile to Obama, more receptive to bogus notions about his origins and religion, and more conservative across a broad range of issues and issue dimensions—including those related to racial and ethnic minorities. Voters' opinions of the Tea Party were linked to their presidential vote choice directly as well as through their association with the core values, opinions, and attitudes that underlie opinions of the Tea Party. Tea Party sympathizers form the Republican coalition's largest, most loyal, and most active component, so their opinions and beliefs help to explain why national politics in the United States is currently stalemated on so many major issues.

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The Tea Party movement emerged almost immediately after Barack Obama assumed the presidency in early 2009 in protest against his policies for dealing with the financial crisis and deep recession he had inherited. Encouraged by the conservative commentariat, Americans claiming they were “Taxed Enough Already” rallied in opposition to the bailout of the financial sector and auto industry and to government spending to stimulate the economy (Lowndes, 2012). Although the nascent Tea Party movement's antipathy to high taxes and government spending was genuine and heartfelt, its supporters were also motivated by intense hostility to Barack Obama. Beyond vocal opposition to his legislative agenda—most prominently, his signature achievement, the Affordable Care Act (ACA)—Tea Partiers questioned Obama's character, patriotism, and legitimacy (Jacobson, 2012). His name, race, origins, associations, political background, and cerebral style had rattled people sharing right-wing populist sentiments even before he was

elected, and the first two years of his administration did nothing to reassure them. A broader swath of the public, suffering the anxieties brought on by the worst economic recession in two generations, was also in a mood to protest. The result was a powerful national tide that swept Republicans to an historic victory in the 2010 midterm elections. The anger and energy expressed in the Tea Party movement was central to this victory, and Tea Party sympathizers emerged as the dominant faction within the Republican electoral coalition.

Despite a modest overall decline in popular support for the movement, a majority of Republican voters continued to hold favorable opinions of the Tea Party movement in 2012, and these voters did much to make it the most partisan and polarized election in at least 70 years. In this article, we analyze data from two major academic election surveys, the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) and the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), to investigate the Tea Party movement's role in crystallizing attitudes and shaping voting behavior in the 2012 elections (ANES, 2013; Ansolabehere, 2012). We find that Republican voters sympathetic to the Tea Party were

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not only remarkably hostile to Obama and open to false beliefs about his origins and religion, but were also inclined to take positions at the extreme right on virtually every other dimension. They were also more politically active and loyal to the Republican Party and its candidates, including Mitt Romney, than were other Republicans. We also find that even with powerful predictors such as partisanship and ideology in the model, opinions of the Tea Party had a statistically and substantively significant effect on vote choice in 2012. In addition, beliefs about Obama's birthplace and religion, as well as the standard measure of racial resentment, had direct effects on presidential vote choice, as well as indirect effects through their influence on Tea Party attitudes.

Although Obama's eventual departure may temper their zeal a bit, the evidence we examine here suggests that the beliefs and attitudes shared by Tea Party Republicans will continue to predominate within the party's electorate, shaping future presidential as well as congressional elections and fostering polarized national politics in the United States for the foreseeable future. The Tea Party's role in the 2012 presidential election is thus worth examining in some detail.

## 1. Popular assessments of the Tea Party movement

After the Republican victory in the 2010 election, the Tea Party faction's congressional leaders stirred considerable controversy by attempting to hold legislation raising the debt ceiling hostage in order to force massive cuts in government spending. The ploy failed, but not without damaging the nation's credit rating and shaking the financial markets. Most Americans were highly critical of this action, but it took only a modest toll on the movement's standing with the public, and a solid majority of Republican identifiers continue to look favorably on the Tea Party. Typically in surveys, about quarter of ordinary Republicans say they consider themselves a part of the movement, with half as many independents and only a very small proportion of Democrats sharing that identity (Bradberry and Jacobson, 2013). A much larger proportion of Republicans view the movement positively, and these we classify as Tea Party Republicans for our analyses here. Of Republican identifiers in the 2012 CCES, 62 percent rated the movement very (31 percent) or somewhat (31 percent) positively. Only 17 percent of independents and 4 percent of Democrats did so, underlining the thoroughly partisan nature of the movement: 85 percent of voters with positive opinions of the Tea Party were Republicans, and 82 percent with negative opinions were Democrats.<sup>1</sup>

A similar partisan distribution is found among ANES respondents, whose degree of support for the Tea Party movement was gauged by a set of questions modeled on the three questions used to produce the classic 7-point

party identification scale.<sup>2</sup> Eighty-three percent of those in any of the three supporting categories (strong, not strong, leaning) were Republicans; 78 percent in the three opposing categories were Democrats. Analysis of responses to a variety of political questions indicated that, as with party identification, weak and leaning Tea Party supporters held similar views and reported similar behaviors, so we classify them, along with strong supporters, as Tea Party Republicans in our analyses. About 57 percent of Republicans in the ANES were Tea Party Republicans by this standard. In 2012 then, Tea Party sympathizers remained a clear majority within the Republican coalition, and the movement held very little attraction to voters beyond the coalition's confines.

## 2. Barack Obama and Tea Party Republicans in 2012

The Tea Party movement's professed goal is to cut taxes and dismantle "big government" and the welfare state, but its most salient unifying sentiment has been disdain for Barack Obama. Table 1 shows how Tea Party Republicans' evaluations of and beliefs about Obama stand out not only from those of independents and Democrats, from those of other Republicans as well. The public's opinions of Barack Obama's performance as he sought reelection in 2012 set a new record for partisan polarization, exceeding even that of his extraordinarily divisive predecessor, George W. Bush (Jacobson, 2013a). The Tea Party faction was a major contributor to the partisan divide. Almost none of them approved of Obama's overall performance; more than 90 percent in these polls disapproved "strongly." Tea Partiers were also much more inclined than other voters to blame Obama for the economy's shortcomings.<sup>3</sup>

Tea Party Republicans also stand out as extraordinarily hostile to Obama on a variety of other measures available from these surveys. His average rating from them on the 100-degree ANES thermometer scale was an icy 15° (for comparison, the lowest mean thermometer rating for a president from rival partisan voters in ANES surveys going back to 1968 was George W. Bush's 30° in 2004). Affective reactions to him were overwhelmingly negative, with a larger share of Tea Party Republicans saying Obama made them angry and afraid than has been the case for rival partisans questioned about any previous president since the ANES began asking the "affect" battery in 1980.<sup>4</sup>

Although all Republicans tended to see Obama as much more liberal than did his own partisans or independents, Tea Party sympathizers were especially inclined to place

<sup>1</sup> Except where otherwise specified, the "independent" category in this paper consists of pure independents; independent leaning toward a party are classified as partisans, and they are in fact more partisan in their behavior than are weak partisans in both the CCES and ANES surveys for 2012.

<sup>2</sup> The three questions were: "Do you support, oppose, or neither support nor oppose the Tea Party movement?" If support or oppose: "Would you say your [support/opposition] is strong or not very strong?" If neither: "Do you lean toward supporting, lean toward opposing, or do you not lean either way?"

<sup>3</sup> The other options were George W. Bush, Wall Street, the world economy, and Congress.

<sup>4</sup> This is true for all Republicans as well as the Tea Partiers; Tea Party Republicans were extraordinarily negative in their evaluations of Obama's character traits as well as in their affective reaction toward him (Bradberry and Jacobson, 2013, 15).

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