



Epilogue: What 2012 nomination contests tell us about the future of the Republican Party[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Analysis of Tea Party activists within the Republican Party illustrates the “good-news, bad-news” aspects of intra-party factionalism. The good news is that nomination contests between Tea Party and establishment Republicans, divisive as they appear, do not necessarily undermine support for the party’s nominees in the general election. Support for Tea Party candidates among its activists in the 2012 presidential nomination fight produced increased support for Romney–Ryan in the general election. At the same time, however, activism for Tea Party candidates contributed to increased negativity towards the Republican Party among Tea Party activists, suggesting that the factionalism within the party is unlikely to be soon resolved. Finally we find that negativity towards the Republican establishment is playing an even greater role than negativity towards President Obama in producing continuing or increased Tea Party movement activity. This suggests that the movement has the potential to survive beyond Obama’s presidency.

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As the papers in this election symposium issue make clear, the 2012 election took place under an unusual set of circumstances: a level of partisan polarization unprecedented in the last 100 years; the first African American president; a changing electorate with a rapidly increasing Hispanic component; and a major factional dispute within the Republican Party between Tea Party and establishment Republicans.

It was also unusual in the level of confidence of victory that the losing party and candidate had going into election night—so much so that Romney had not even prepared a concession speech prior to election night. Data itself, particularly in the guise of polls, became an object of dispute when the curious website *UnSkewedpolls.com* attracted hundreds of thousands of hits as it strived to explain why mainstream polls were wrongly, if consistently, forecasting an Obama win. Running against what

they considered a weak president in a weak economy, Republicans were confident. When the results came in, one Romney campaign staffer said, “It was like a death in the family.” (Dickerson, 2014). As Clarke et al. (2014) discuss, however, the problem for Romney was not that Obama was so strong, but that he was unable to establish his own strengths.

And the failure to win the presidency was compounded by the Republican Party’s loss of seats in the Senate in an election where, especially at the beginning of the election cycle, they also expected to pick up enough seats to regain the majority. Together these failures set in motion a process of finger-pointing, much of it directed at the Tea Party. Reflecting the findings of Barreto and Collingwood (2014) in this symposium, the Republican establishment blamed Tea Party Republicans for pushing Romney to adopt politically harmful positions, especially on immigration which produced a record Hispanic turnout and a record Hispanic Democratic majority. The Growth and Opportunity Project, appointed by RNC Chair Reince Priebus right after the election to analyze the loss and point towards the future,

[☆] This paper draws heavily on collaborative work on the Tea Party movement with Rachel Lienesch and Walt Stone.

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bluntly stated (RNC 2013, 8): “If Hispanic Americans perceive that a GOP nominee or candidate does not want them in the United States (i.e. self-deportation), they will not pay attention to our next sentence.” The Tea Party also came under attack for mounting Republican primary challenges against, and sometimes defeating, arguably more electable Republicans. The report concluded (2013, 54) that “Third-party groups that promote purity are hurting our electoral prospects.” Few had doubts about which “third-party groups” were being dressed-down. And Bradberry and Jacobson’s contribution here reinforce this perspective by emphasizing that the problem faced by Romney–Ryan was not with its appeal to Tea Party supporters, which it won handily, but rather with its appeal to more moderate voters.

Not surprisingly, many Tea Party groups and activists did not share this perspective. They were quick to point out that while the only Republican pickup in the Senate was in Nebraska by Deb Fischer, a Tea Party endorsed candidate, “moderate candidates like Tommy Thompson, Heather Wilson, Rick Berg, and Denny Rehberg went down to defeat despite significant support from [Karl Rove’s organization] Crossroads” (ForAmerica, 2013). And among more active Tea Party supporters, 54 percent thought that Romney’s being too moderate was a “very important” reason for his loss—almost twice as many as those who thought that lack of outreach to minorities was a “very important” cause (Rapoport, Dost, and Stone forthcoming).

Concerns about the effect of the Tea Party on Republican nominations and Republican prospects have continued into the current cycle. Taking heed of points made in articles in this symposium, “establishment Republican” groups including Karl Rove’s Crossroads GPS and the Chamber of Commerce have tried with significant success to protect incumbents and other establishment candidates, while pushing for a softening on immigration policy. Nonetheless, the loss of Eric Cantor, Tea Party successes at the state level in Texas and the bare escape of Thad Cochran continue to show the strength of the Tea Party faction within the Republican Party – a threat that even if not realized is on the mind of the “Republican establishment” and its candidates.

As we look forward to the next presidential cycle, a crucial—if not *the* crucial—issue for the Republicans relates to the role of the Tea Party. And the implications of the Tea Party’s role in the Republican Party for polarization, particularly in the House, are also key. Given the “structural advantage” which Republicans have in House elections, and the high level of party-line voting demonstrated by Jacobson’s symposium piece on polarization, Tea Party pressure on Republican incumbents seems likely to only increase the gridlock and polarization which Jacobson documents.

If, as has been the case over the past three cycles dating back to 2010, Tea Party candidates continue to contest primaries, can the Republican establishment mute their influence? Shortly after Thad Cochran’s narrow escape, Alexander Burns (2013), posted a story titled “The Staggering Price of Crushing the Tea Party.” The story referred to the huge expense of campaigns run against Tea Party prospects, but the other and equally serious potential cost is the potential loss of enthusiasm among Tea Party

supporters for the nominee. Will Republican nominees be able to count on support from the most energized segment of the party, i.e., Tea Party supporters, or will Tea Party supporter involvement decline if their candidates are consistently denied Republican Party nominations?

On the other hand, might activity for Tea Party affiliated candidates who lose the nomination further sensitize Tea Party Republicans to inter-party differences and actually increase Republican general election activity by translating into increased Republican general election activity? And if this does occur, will this support for establishment Republican nominees in general elections also produce a greater acceptance of establishment Republicans among Tea Party supporters and a more integrated Republican Party with less factional division?

Given that Tea Party candidates will continue to contest Republican nominations and mobilize Tea Party Republicans on their behalf, even in unsuccessful efforts, the impacts of that mobilization and activity are important to answering these questions. Looking back to the 2012 presidential election and the impact of activity for Tea Party candidates helps us to fully comprehend the impact of the Tea Party in 2012 and in the future.

First, I will examine how the 2012 Republican nomination process and support for 2012 Tea Party nomination candidates affected these supporters’ involvement in the 2012 general election period. How did the level of campaign involvement for Tea Party candidates for the nomination translate into activity for the establishment candidate Romney? Were those most active for Tea Party nomination candidates more active for Romney (positive carryover) or were they less active for Romney by virtue of their Tea Party candidate activity (negative carryover). And how did such activity affect their positive orientation towards the Republican party as a whole (integration).

1. Tea Party activist dataset

In examining the issues of carryover and Republican Party integration, I will utilize a unique dataset based on a series of surveys of Tea Party organizational supporters—specifically FreedomWorks subscribers. Given the importance of activists (those more active than rank-and-file supporters, but not necessarily holding party or organizational office) in both parties and interest groups, this is an important group to consider in assessing the future direction of the Tea Party and its supporters. This is particularly true since formal group affiliation is widespread among Tea Party identifiers in the mass public. Based on a CCES December 2011 national survey of registered voters, almost a quarter of all Republican Tea Party supporters report being members of a formal Tea Party group,¹ including almost half (45% of strong identifiers), and the largest respondent self-reported membership group is

¹ The survey was heavily weighted towards Tea Party supporters. Respondents were drawn from the November 2010 CCES survey, with 700 of the 1000 being those who had rated the Tea Party “very positively” in 2010. The groups about which we asked were FreedomWorks, Tea Party Express, Tea Party Nation, Tea Party Patriots, and Americans for Prosperity.

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