



Anti-minority attitudes and Tea Party Movement membership



Daniel Tope^{a,*}, Justin T. Pickett^b, Ted Chiricos^c

^a Department of Sociology, Florida State University, 526 Bellamy Building, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2270, United States

^b The School of Criminal Justice, University at Albany, SUNY, 135 Western Avenue, Albany, NY 12222, United States

^c School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Florida State University, 302B Eppes Hall, Tallahassee, FL 32306, United States

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ABSTRACT

In 2009, shortly after the election of the United States' first black President, a new protest movement emerged. When some supporters of this new Tea Party Movement (TPM) expressed their ire with race-laden messages various commentators suggested that racism may be a major motive for TPM activism. Accordingly, this study draws on national survey data to examine the extent to which racial attitudes and conservative ideology are associated with self-declared membership in the TPM while controlling for contextual factors that have proven influential in other rightist movement research. Key findings reveal that aside from conservative political ideology, racial resentment is indeed among the strongest predictors of TPM membership. Supplemental analyses explore the extent to which conservatives differ from TPM members. The results show that very conservative individuals and TPM members evince similar attitudes. The findings are discussed in terms of contemporary race relations and the implications for future social movement research.

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1. Introduction

The determinants of social movement participation have been widely explored. Well-known scholarship on collective action implicates the role of both structural and individual-level inputs for movement involvement (e.g., Goodwin and Jasper, 1999; McAdam, [1982] 1999; McAdam et al., 2001). Sociologists, however, have largely turned away from systematic attitudinal analysis in their attempts to explain social movement activity (Klandermans, 1997; McAdam, 2002; van Stekelenberg and Klandermans, 2010). In recent years, structural conditions, such as political, economic or demographic context, have been more frequently engaged than individual level factors in sociological accounts of social movement mobilization (e.g., McVeigh, 1999; Van Dyke and Soule, 2002). We have learned much from the structural approach yet attitudinal approaches can provide additional insights.

The present study uses the Tea Party Movement (TPM) as a case in point to assess the role of individual-level factors in motivating movement membership. The key factors that we engage are respondents' racial beliefs and political values. Racial attitudes have received substantial attention from political researchers (see Huddy and Feldman, 2009 for a review). Because racial sentiments in the post-civil rights era have taken on a more refined or covert character, analysts have focused on a subtle form of "new racism" or racial resentment (Kinder and Sanders, 1996). Studies reveal that racial resentment – a somewhat contentious concept – is linked to a wide range of policy attitudes (Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Sears et al., 1997; Tesler, 2012), social protests (Sears and Citrin, 1985), as well as support for political candidates (Mendelberg, 2001). In addition, extant theoretical and empirical work suggests that political values are also important determinants of policy preferences

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: dtope@fsu.edu (D. Tope), jpickett@albany.edu (J.T. Pickett), tchiricos@fsu.edu (T. Chiricos).

(e.g., Thorne, 1990; Soss et al., 2003) as well as engagement in activism such as anti-tax protests (e.g., Sears and Citrin, 1985; Costantini and Valenty, 1996a,b). We therefore assess the relationship between membership in the TPM and both racial resentment and political ideology.

There is a diverse and growing body of research on the TPM. For instance, Cho et al. (2012) find a spatial link between TPM protests and home foreclosures suggesting that economic concerns helped to spur the movement. Others have examined links between the TPM and congressional behavior (Bailey et al., 2012), how trends in political polarization facilitated TPM mobilization (Abramowitz, 2010), and the role of longstanding grievances about taxes, social programs and spending as well as fears of social change in promoting activism (Williamson et al., 2011). Parker and Barreto (2010) suggest that status anxieties and conspiratorial beliefs have motivated sympathy for the movement.

Despite the proliferation of TPM research, only a small number of studies to date have evaluated the relationship between racial attitudes and individual-level responses to the TPM. Most of this research assesses the link between racial animus and individuals' support for the TPM (e.g., Parker and Barreto, 2013). Only a single study has assessed a possible association between racial views and TPM membership (Maxwell and Parent, 2013). Taken together, the current scholarship on racial attitudes and the TPM has produced somewhat mixed findings which we discuss in more detail below. In addition, we are unaware of any studies that systematically examine the role of racial attitudes as determinants of self-declared TPM membership while controlling for county-level context. Contextual controls are important in light of the structural emphasis present in much of the research on rightist social movements and because prior research suggests that context matters for TPM activism (Cho et al., 2012). Accordingly, we provide an important extension of the research on racial attitudes and the TPM.

Our study focuses on self-reported TPM membership rather than the more commonly assessed support for or agreement with the movement because self-identification as a member implies a greater degree of commitment to, and investment in, TPM ideals. That is, unlike support, describing oneself as being a member of a movement, even if the movement is not an actual party or a dues-collecting organization, requires holding a conception of self as a part of the given collective. Moreover, those who adopt a member identity often view their position as advancing social or political change while supporters may not view their position in the same way (Futrell and Simi, 2004). Survey evidence suggests a distinction between membership and support in the case of the TPM. For example, Frank Newport, the Editor in Chief of Gallup, explains that recent surveys of Americans have found “a fairly wide range of reactions to the Tea Party ... ranging from 11% to 13% who are “activists” or who define themselves as “a part” of the movement to 46% who at least somewhat agree with the Tea Party movement’s ideas” (2010: 2).

Below, we proceed by first describing the emergence of the TPM. We then discuss scholarship suggesting that anti-minority attitudes, political ideology, and contextual threat may be important sources of movement activity generally and TPM mobilization specifically. Finally, we also take note of studies that document divisions among self-described conservatives (Kabaservice, 2012). In light of this literature we provide supplemental analyses that examine the extent to which TPM members differ from other political conservatives.

2. The tea party movement

2.1. A brief history

The Tea Party Movement (TPM) gained national attention in 2009 as a rapidly expanding loosely connected network of conservative activists. Members claim to be largely concerned about government overreach, mismanagement, taxes, and spending. In particular, the federal government’s bailout of U.S. financial institutions, the growing national debt, and health-care reform efforts have proved highly contentious for Tea Party groups (Zernike, 2010). Surveys suggest that approximately 11–13% of Americans claim membership in Tea Party groups (Newport, 2010).

Most accounts of the rise of the TPM suggest that the February 2009 televised “rant heard round the world” of financial analyst and cable news commentator, Rick Santelli, helped spur the movement (Lepore, 2010: 3). Santelli railed against government aid to financially troubled homeowners and called for a “Chicago Tea Party” (Zernike, 2010:20). Following this performance, tax protests proliferated across the country. And Town Hall meetings with members of Congress became contentious TPM protest sites. Among the most prominent TPM events was a 2009 “Taxpayer March on Washington” that drew a crowd of over 75,000 to Washington DC (Sherman, 2009). Protests continued throughout 2010 and conservative media personality Glenn Beck organized a sizable rally that brought approximately 80,000 participants to the capital in August 2010 (Burghart and Zeskind, 2010). Thousands of small TPM organizations formed across the country. The movement, moreover, continued to gain influence as TPM-endorsed candidates defeated established congressional Republicans in several high profile contests during the 2010 midterm elections. Some argued that the enthusiasm that Tea Party supporters brought to the elections contributed to the subsequent Republican Party takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives (Burghart and Zeskind, 2010). Since then, the House Tea Party Caucus has played a prominent role in policy debates.

Analysts have offered a range of interpretations about the primary forces that motivate TPM participation. For some, the movement’s rise in the wake of the election of the United States’ first black President as well as racialized expressions among some TPM activists signaled that racial resentment might motivate some protestors (Berlet, 2010; Parker, 2010; Parker and Barreto, 2010; Walker, 2011). In contrast, other observers have argued that the TPM is simply the latest manifestation of

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