

Special Report on the Tea Party Movement

*The Tea Party – an ideological Republican grass-roots movement –
but don't mistake it for a populist rebellion*

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The ‘Tea Party’ is very real and will have a big impact on this year’s election and beyond – but it is important to correctly characterize this movement. The Tea Party is a grass-roots, intensely ideological, conservative Republican movement, fired up by Fox News and Glenn Beck. It is not remotely an independent or populist revolt against the elites or a working class revolt rooted in frustration with the recession, Wall Street and government.

Popular accounts describe it as a populist revolt against elites. Richard Viguerie at a tax day rally said, “The tea parties are an unfettered new force of the middle class tapping into the anger [at] most major American institutions such as Wall Street, education, Hollywood, the media, big labor.”¹ And Matt Bai in *The New York Times* writes, “the only potent grass-roots movement to emerge from this moment of dissatisfaction with America's economic elite exists ... in the form of the so-called Tea Party rebellions that are injecting new energy into the Republican cause.”²

While many of the Tea Party supporters are also frustrated with the Republican Party of TARP bailouts, that does not alter the character of the movement:

- 86 percent of Tea Party supporters and activists identify with or lean to the Republican Party.
- 79 percent identify as conservatives.
- They are among the most pro-big business segments of the electorate: 54 percent rate it warmly and 20 percent coolly.
- The Tea Party movement is not particularly blue collar. Tea Party supporters are slightly less likely to be college-graduates than the likely electorate (41 percent, versus 45 percent), and the activists more so (48 percent). And 85 percent of the supporters are white.
- Only 5 percent report having voted for Obama in 2008.

With Tea Party supporters comprising one in four (25 percent) likely voters and one in ten (10 percent) active as donors or attending rallies, what they think matters:

- They are fired up – 94 percent of the supporters say they are almost certain to vote.
- They share a great disdain for President Obama, with over 92 percent disapproving of Obama’s performance, and 89 percent strongly. Only 6 percent think Obama ‘shares their values.’

¹ *The Washington Times*, “[Blessed Tea Party](#),” April 16, 2010.

² Matt Bai, *The New York Times*, “[Add Government to the List of ‘Fat Cats.’](#)” June 16, 2010.



- They share a coherent, anti-government, conservative ideology that wants small government, little spending and returning the country to the Constitution.
- They are united against “Obama’s Socialist Agenda” – that puts the country gravely at risk.
- They deeply identify with Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin and the NRA – which share their worldview – re-enforced by the echo-chamber of Fox News, their main source of news.
- They are gaining energy from the prospect that they can stop Obama in this year’s election, save the party from fake conservatives and use the Republican Party to save the Constitution.

The Tea Party supporters are a blessing for the Republican Party in this off-year challenge to the Democrats, but in important ways, they have become the Republican Party. Almost half of self-identified Republicans (47 percent) are strong Tea Party supporters who have already played an outside role in punishing Republican moderates and producing a unified, polarizing, and unpopular national Republican Party. The Tea Party is not very popular outside the Republican Party and Republican-leaning independents, and Beck and Palin even less so.

And in a presidential year, strong Tea Party supporters are only 21 percent of the larger electorate.

We do not know the long-term consequences of such a motivated, ideologically coherent bloc in the electorate. They could contribute to a 1964 Goldwater-type landslide re-election for President Obama in 2012. But their coherence could bleed over to conservative independents – if economic problems persist and Democrats and progressives are ideologically opaque or lack a clear political project – perhaps producing an election more like 1968.

This special report is based on findings from questions asked by Democracy Corps about Tea Party supporters and related questions in our last three national polls from April to June, which identified 652 strong supporters and 243 activists.³ Furthermore, this data is supplemented by released research conducted by Citizen Opinion on four focus groups of Tea Party supporters and activists in Ft. Lauderdale and Phoenix, each location home to a dramatic Senate race pitting an establishment Republican candidate against an outsider who appeals to Tea Party supporters.

³ This memo is based on focus groups and polls conducted in April, May and June by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps and Citizen Opinion. All surveys were based on telephone interviews with likely voters, conducted on the following dates: April 17-20, 2010 among 872 likely voters, May 15-18, 2010 among 875 likely voters and June 19-22, 2010 among 867 likely voters. The margin of error for the combined 652 strong supporters is 4 percentage points, for the 243 activists it is 6.5 percentage points.



Tea Party Supporters and Activists

In this combined database of over 2,600 interviews, 25 percent identify themselves as “strong” supporters of the Tea Party movement.⁴ These are the Tea Party supporters in this analysis. One-in-ten are activists: 10 percent who have been active in the Tea Party by either donating money or attending a rally or a meeting.

Tea Party activists are a very Republican and conservative group. Over 70 percent call themselves ‘conservative Republicans,’ compared to just a third of all likely voters; 86 percent say they are Republican or lean Republican.

Obama’s Socialist Agenda

Tea Party activists and supporters see Obama as the defining and motivating threat to the country and its well-being, typified by his socialist agenda. Among supporters, 90 percent say the socialist label describes Obama well and 68 percent say it describes him very well. Obama fares no better on the other attributes tested: nine-in-10 think he is too liberal (93 percent) and a big spender (90 percent).

The driving force behind their negativity toward Obama is the belief that his actions and goals are un-American. Throughout the focus groups, people repeatedly invoked “Obama’s Socialist Agenda” – with the occasional communism comment thrown in. Participants said it is this socialist agenda – which underlies all of Obama’s policies seeking to make citizens more dependent on the state – that has put people over the edge and launched a movement that has been percolating for a long time.

The only thing I’ve seen is that government has grown exponentially under Obama since he’s been in office and we’re going towards Socialized everything.

The cap and trade, the healthcare, all the things that Obama is throwing out there towards the Socialists.

It’s ugly right now, and it’s a long cycle and it seems like this country is becoming like a Socialist country. Obama’s sure into that. I don’t know. I just think he’s got a lot of inexperience and whoever the puppeteers that are behind him, you know, they’re doing all this too.

It’s going to take a long time to kind of repair the socialist agenda that he’s got going. But, today is better than tomorrow to start and just do something.

We’ve been crawling toward Socialism for 70 years; we’re sprinting toward it now.

⁴ Another 10 percent identify as ‘not so strong’ supporters of the Tea Party movement. They are not included in this analysis of Tea Party supporters.



The focus group participants believe the Tea Party is happening now because people have gotten so desperate that they are finally taking action; their concern has been building for years, but Obama's socialist programs are the straw that broke the camel's back. Specific programs manifesting this frustration include the stimulus bill and taking over the car companies, epitomizing government seeking to insert itself into the economy, and above all, health care reform that tries to impose government in citizens' lives and forces them to buy insurance.

We had stimulus one, stimulus two, and then the health care bill just threw it on it's... that was the straw that broke the camel's back.

The whole TARP thing. And we've spent like 25% and it was this grandiose save the day or whatever. And then people started to say, what? Where is the money, where is it going? Million dollar TARP money spent for some study on frogs, stupid stuff. SO people started to realize that we got conned, and yet we are losing jobs.

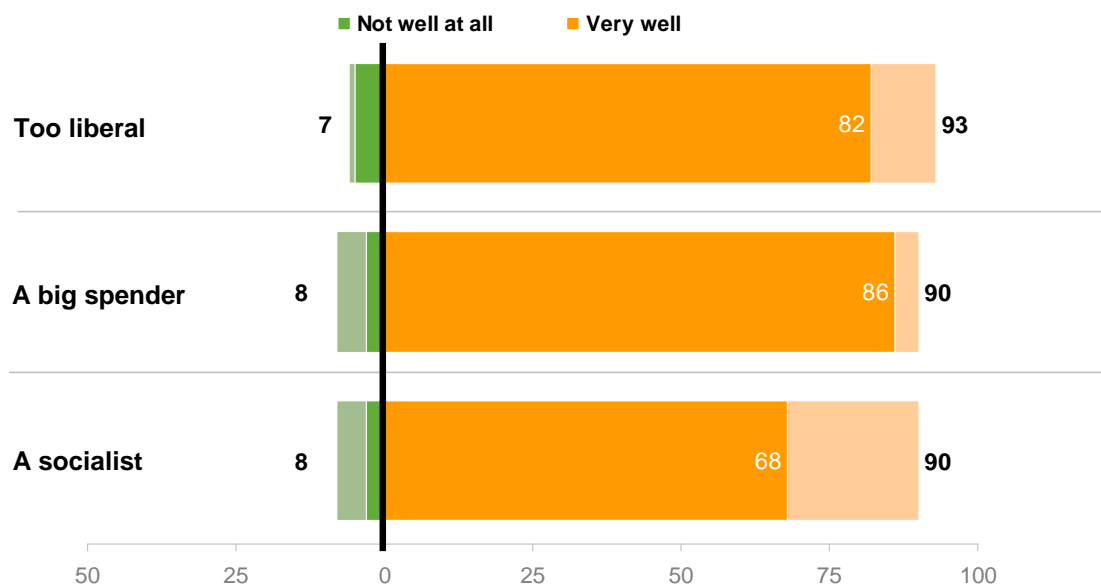
Any chance the Tea Party activists can take to say a bad word about Obama they do so with relish: 92 percent disapprove of his job performance with an amazing 89 percent strongly so. Nearly nine in 10 give him a cool rating on our thermometer favorability scale with 80 percent very cool. It is hard to overstate how defining Obama is for them.

Among Tea Party supporters, Obama gets no higher than 10 percent on any positive attributes such as offering a hopeful vision (9 percent), being on your side (7 percent), shares your values (6 percent) and offering realistic solutions (6 percent).



Nine in ten say Obama a socialist, big spender

Now, I am going to read you a list of words and phrases which people use to describe political figures. For each word or phrase, please tell me whether it describes Barack Obama very well, well, not too well or not well at all.



**Note: These numbers are of Tea Party supporters, and are solely from the June 19-22 wave.*

A regression analysis to predict ratings of the Tea Party using these Obama attributes as well as political and demographic variables found the strongest predictor to be the belief that Obama is a socialist. This was more predictive than party identification or ratings of the economy among many other demographic and political variables.

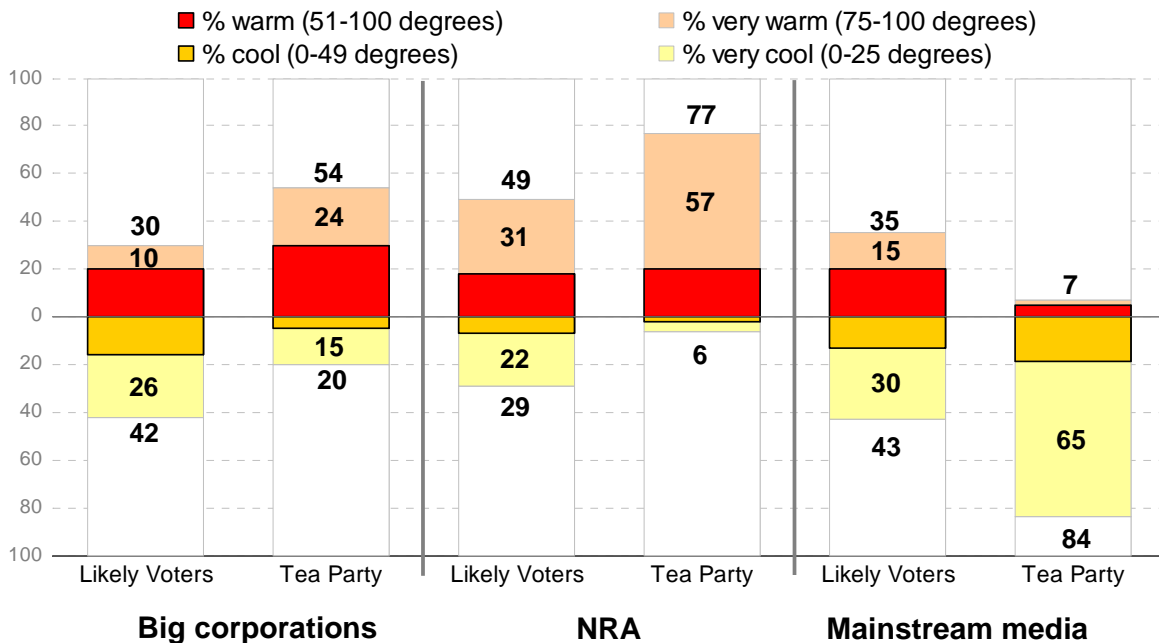
Pro-Big Business, Anti-Big Government and Mainstream Media

Tea Party supporters clearly express their anti-populist leanings in ratings of big corporations, with over half (54 percent) giving a warm rating. They are, if anything, one of the most pro-capitalist segments in the country.



Thermometer: For big corporations and NRA, but anti-media

Now, I'd like to rate your feelings toward some people and organizations, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold.



Trust in the National Rifle Association – the beacon of anti-government intrusion – is another organization that gets high marks from the Tea Party. They give an extremely high 77 percent warm rating to the NRA. Their ratings of other social issues are consistent with traditional conservative positions: 61 percent give a warm rating to pro-life organizations, and only 9 percent give gay marriage a warm rating.

The subject that may have drawn the most attention to the Tea Party movement was their vocal opposition to health care reform – and that may be contributing to the perception of hostility more broadly in the electorate. The new health care law was a keystone for their opposition to government intrusion into their lives. Just 3 percent give it a warm rating. But it is worth noting that among non-Tea Party supporters, a respectable 48 percent give the new health care law a warm rating.

Tea Party supporters give very low ratings to the mainstream media – networks such as ABC, CBS and NBC. Only 7 percent give the media a warm rating – confirming the intense distrust of the media in the focus groups. They are seen as a cheerleader for President Obama, and have been since the beginning of the campaign. This distrust extends to network news – ABC, CBS, and NBC are all seen as biased – and CNN referred to as “the Communist News Network.”

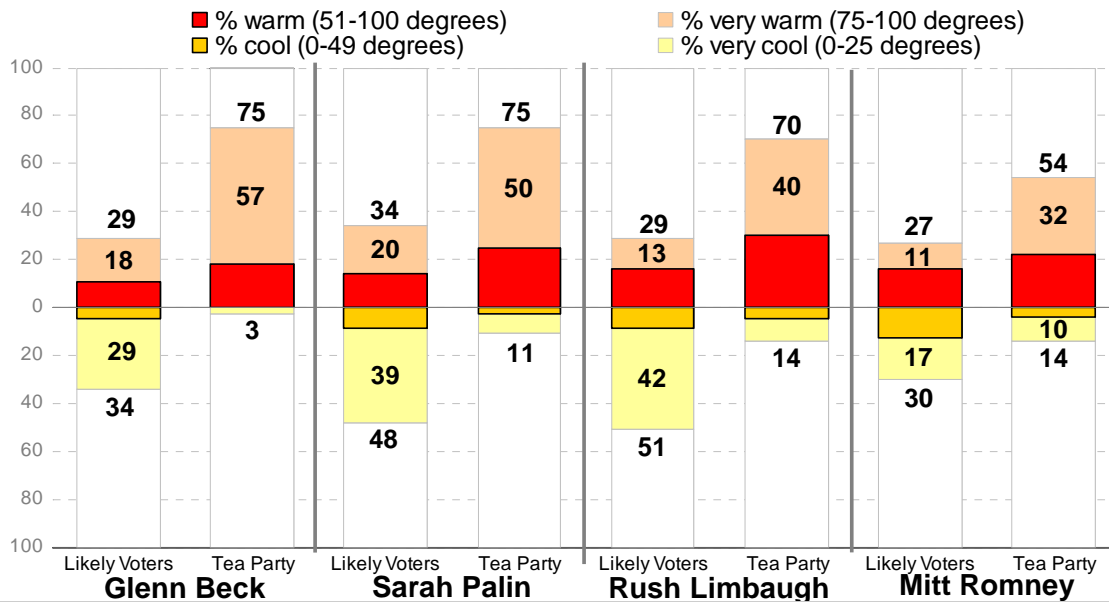


In Beck We Trust

Glenn Beck is the most highly regarded individual among Tea Party supporters of the people we tested. He scores an extraordinarily high 75 percent warm rating, 57 percent very warm.

Thermometer: conservative popular figures and GOP figures

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This affinity for Beck came through very clearly in the focus groups. The only news source that participants said they could trust was Fox. Glenn Beck, Bill O’Reilly, and Sean Hannity were cited as people who “are not afraid to tell it like it is” and support their arguments with solid facts. Beck was undoubtedly the hero in these groups. Participants consider him an “educator” (in contrast to the popular Rush Limbaugh who is an “entertainer”) who teaches people history and puts himself at risk because he exposes the truth. In the words of a woman in Ft. Lauderdale, “I would trust my life in his hands.”

Other comments are just as laudatory:

I like the way he’s trying to get back to the basics of the Constitution of the United States because I think that’s where our government is losing focus. They’re trying to change the Constitution or somehow twist it...



He brings out facts... And he actually shows the people saying the things. It's not like just sound bites. It's not chopped and really edited. And he is scary because every time I watch the show, which is pretty much every day, my heart feels...and I feel like I want to do something.

I'm frightened for him... Because of the things that he says. I think that he is stepping on some big toes.

He really does his research and he really lays it out to you well; a good professor.

Warm ratings for Rush Limbaugh were very high at 70 percent, just 5 points below Beck.

Sarah Palin is also a hero of this movement, with a warm rating of 75 percent among supporters, as reflected in the focus groups. People like her personally and believe she is the breath of conservative fresh air. They think she performed admirably under a terrible set of circumstances in 2008 when a weak McCain campaign threw her out there for the media to tear her apart.

I admire her tremendously but she was used as a puppet... Of the Republican Party and I don't like the fact that they did that. I think they ruined her for politics. I think she would have been very good moving into politics outside of Alaska had it not happened that way.

They said she didn't have enough experience. She had more than Obama does. She was an executive for a state, what did he ever run?

But while Palin was received favorably, there was also some caution as several participants expressed disappointment in her ability to perform as a leader and questioned her qualifications. She has become a symbol for the Tea Party movement and conservatism, surely, but she is not the *de facto* leader that many media sources attempt to make her.

I mean, I don't mind her. I think she was, you know, okay. I mean, I don't think she was right for the job certainly. I don't think she was experienced enough but I didn't mind her.

I sometimes a little bit wonder because she just seems to kind of just repeat herself with the same things. It just seems like if you see her last year and you see her three months ago, she's saying the same things. I'm certainly supportive of her, but I guess I'm a little disappointed that she seems so stagnated.

I kind of equate her on the same parallel as Bush; a likable person, kind of out of her element when it comes to the big league, not well informed but a very likable person.

I think she's genuine, but I don't think she's educated enough. I don't think she's savvy enough and I don't think she knows enough actually to, you know, let's put it this way there's no way that she's going to go anywhere. I mean, it's just, I don't see it. I don't see it happening. I don't see her becoming another one that's going to be electable.



Illegal immigration not surprisingly was particularly important in Phoenix (though also central among the non-college educated men in Ft. Lauderdale). People were incensed by McCain’s moving position on the issue, with most people feeling he supported amnesty and would not take a clear stand.

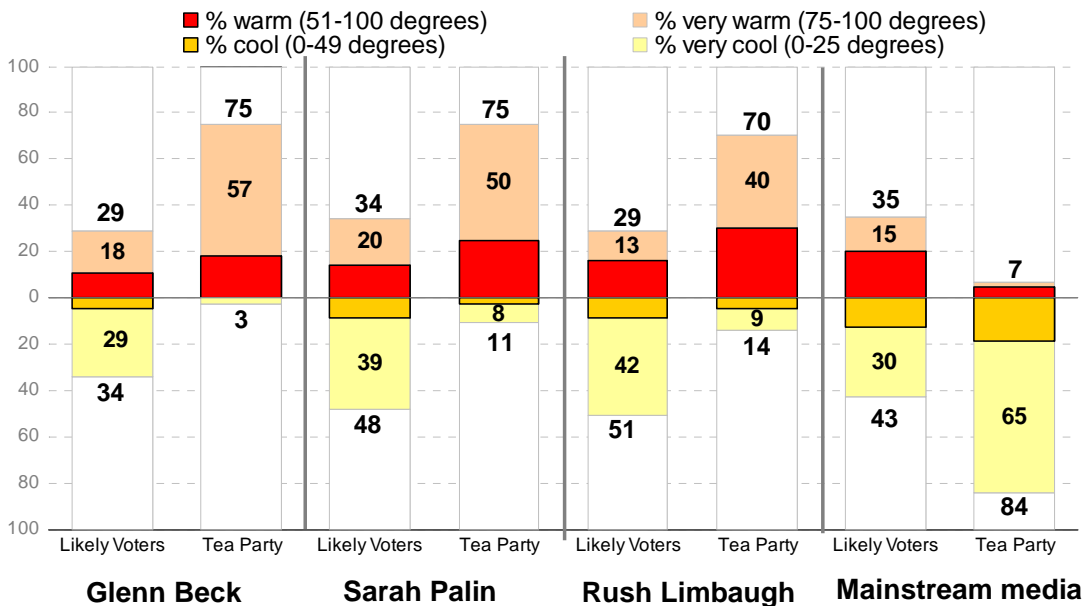
The government is spending money that we don’t have, aside from the illegal immigrants. They are also giving foreign aid to Mexico and I think we can’t afford it. I don’t give my kids allowance if they are not doing anything for me and if I don’t have money. So I don’t know why we are handing out money to other countries.

I mean, I’m talking about the bottom line. It’s like you can’t have the government paying for 3, 4, 5 kids that are on food stamps. What, you can have another kid and we’re going to give you more money? I just don’t get it. I don’t get why, or showing pictures of buses going from Mexico to the border, the kids getting off and going to our schools. We can’t pay for our own. Why are we paying for other? You know, or the same thing with medical, I mean, it’s ridiculous.

[McCain] is far from perfect. He’s more moderate than I would like, but I’m not fond of J.D. [Hayworth] either. I think [McCain] does have things going for him. And amnesty really worries me, but I also feel like he’s taken a strong stance on closing the border and I think that’s a great start.

Thermometer: conservative popular figures and mainstream media

Now, I'd like to rate your feelings toward some people and organizations, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold.





Conservative Ideology, Not Populism

The movement is rooted in a strident small, and in many cases, anti-government ideology. “Getting back to the Constitution” was a recurring theme across all the focus groups, with people explaining that this simply means: We the People. These groups suggest that the Tea Party movement is not fueled by the economic situation in the country or any populist underpinnings.

We don't need any fresh ideas. It is fresh ideas that have gotten into this mess. All the ideas we need can be found in an 8 page document, it's the Constitution; if you need to go beyond that just look at the Federalist papers. We don't need any fresh ideas.

Well, I think the economy is a result of other issues that are leading the charge. You don't keep to the things that are traditions, our constitutional values and rights, and you are pushing for agendas for socialized...

I doubt [Obama's] desire to protect our Constitution as was originally delivered by our Founding Fathers, of which my ancestors were a part of. I doubt his loyalty to us and I doubt his ability to keep his word.

When asked what they thought of the country's economic situation or their own personal situation, focus group members would repeatedly revert back to talking about how bad Obama is and that the government needs to get out of our lives. Any discussion of jobs or recovery turned to “all the new jobs are government and census jobs which don't do anything for our economy.”

These groups suggest that the Tea Party movement is not fueled by the economic situation in the country. Yes, there were a lot of economic concerns among the non-college educated women, but for the other three groups this was just not the issue. In the open-ended discussion at the beginning of the groups, they rarely brought up the economy unprompted. And when asked what they thought of the country's economic situation or their own personal situation, they would not engage

Grass-roots Movement

Motivated by a fear of an out-of-control government that threatens America's foundation, the movement has proven to be a political force for conservatives. Tea Party endorsed candidates in the Senate primaries in Nevada and Kentucky beat the establishment GOP candidates. But this raises the question of whether or not the Tea Party's agenda can appeal to a broad enough base to achieve its goals.

Nine-in-ten supporters of the Tea Party believe that the movement has realistic solutions to the country's problems, but over a third admit that they are very extreme in their own views.



This suggests that there is a substantive belief that extreme measures need to be adopted to instill their vision for America.

Nine-in-ten supporters see the Tea Party as a grass-roots, independent movement, which resonates deeply with the focus group participants. They see it as an expanding grass-roots movement comprised of citizens fed up with the status quo and dedicated to educating the general public about government's failures in supporting Constitutional values. Years of government growing out of control have culminated in a president who is pushing through a socialist agenda that threatens the underlying principles upon which America was founded.

We educate, inform and motivate the American people to support a government that is fiscally responsible, has limited government and supports free markets. We are not some hysterical people.

It's a grass-roots organization that wants to instill Constitutional values, limited government and capitalism. And they want elected officials who are willing and able to put those goals in place so that we can get rid of big government and bureaucracy.

They stand for the Constitution; they're pro-American and they're not ashamed of it -- not ashamed of America.

[The Tea Party] is geared towards getting our country back to the roots of which America was founded. It strongly supports the Constitution and Bill of Rights and free enterprise, ingenuity and hard work, not geared for government handouts, rather towards each individual's abilities and opportunities to succeed. And it's for fair and limited taxation.

Government spending, the budget deficit, and taxes are driving Tea Party anger. The bailouts, stimulus, and health care all play their parts. Heavily present in the focus groups are worries about what threatens our nation's future. They believe the government is simply spending massive amounts of money with no intention of stopping. We will keep borrowing from China to spend more, and they said that this weakens America and endangers our way of life.

We can't spend ourselves out of these problems. The sheer notion of hearing these experts being interviewed on a weekly basis saying well it's been good for the economy that the government spent another trillion dollars, you know, blah, blah, blah but the fact of the matter is all of us have to still balance our checkbooks.

I think it started with the stimulus package... the government was being fiscally irresponsible and with all the bailouts and then from there it snowballed into the health care and if you read the health care bill it not only increased our debt but it also gave a lot of entitlements.



Among Tea Party supporters, 89 percent say that Obama’s policies have run up a record deficit rather than helped to avert a crisis.

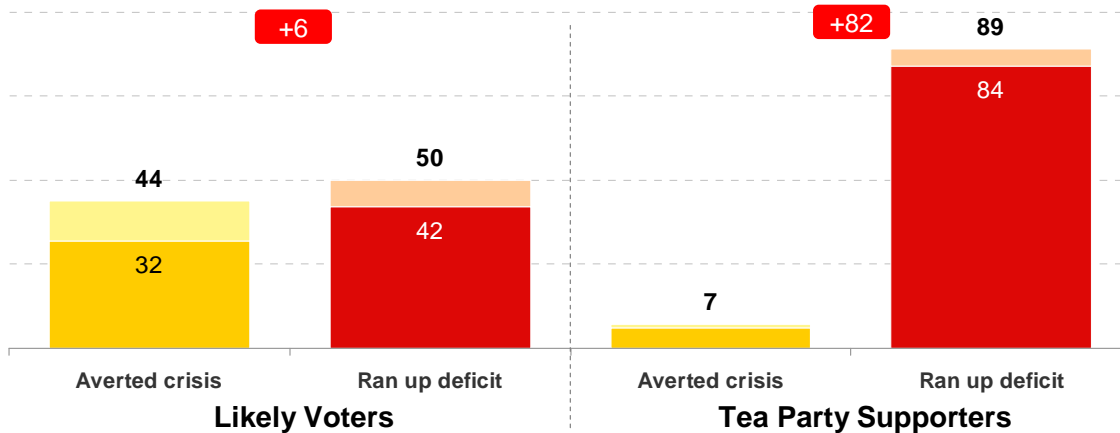
Tea Party: Obama’s economic policies bring only deficits

Now I’m going to read you some pairs of statements. After I read each pair, please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right.

First Statement: President Obama’s economic policies helped avert an even worse crisis, and are laying the foundation for our eventual economic recovery.

Second Statement: President Obama’s economic policies have run up a record federal deficit while failing to end the recession or slow the record pace of job losses.

■ First statement strongly ■ Second statement strongly



Who Are They?

Tea Party supporters and activists are more likely to be white, male, married and older than all likely voters. They are not very different from the rest of the likely electorate on education: 48 percent are college graduates compared with 45 percent for all likely voters. They are more working class than the likely electorate, and the activists, less so.

While true that just under half attend church each week (compared with 43 percent of likely voters), there is another third who rarely or never attend. They are not quite as devout as Republicans overall – just as they are more enamored of the NRA than pro-life groups.

What Does the Tea Party Mean for the Election?

Tea Party supporters are more motivated and engaged than other likely voters: 94 percent say they are almost certain to vote – 10 points higher than the likely electorate.



They are determined to see a Republican Congress this November: by 82 to 9 percent, they will vote for the GOP candidate. This margin is just shy of the vote among pure Republicans (90 to 5 percent) but wider than among conservatives (72 to 18 percent).

In Democratic held seats, interestingly, they are incredibly unified behind Republican challengers: only 16 percent saying they will vote for the Democrat. In Republican-held seats, however, they show no sign of anti-incumbency. They plan on voting for the Republican by an 87 percent to 4 percent margin. This is about partisanship, not anti-incumbency.

Republican Party and the Future

As much as these voters are critical of the Republican Party, it is the only vehicle that they would consider using to achieve their ends. They see it as the only appropriate political vehicle to advance their small government approach for America, but believe it has lost its way.

Change; I want to get rid of the Democrats. I'd like to see a change in Washington and get rid of the Democrats.

The Democrats are all about growing government. They believe government can solve everything. They want everyone dependent upon them.

I'm voting straight Republican because it's the only practical choice. It's the only practical, what am I going to do, vote for a Libertarian and waste a vote?... If you want to have any faith, any ability to believe that this country's going to straighten itself out and not turn into Europe only worse you're only choice is to vote Republican.

For these participants, the Republican Party does not adhere to the (fiscally) conservative principles that made it strong, and the Party does not adequately stand up to block Obama's radical agenda. In hypothetical postcards to RNC Chairman Michael Steele, participants wrote nothing about his personal controversies and instead emphasized the importance of fighting the Democrats and standing up for conservative principles.

Given this overriding dynamic, participants felt the Tea Party must remain a grass-roots movement that educates the public to elect conservatives, and that the Tea Party must not become a separate political party. They believe that becoming a political party would both strengthen Democrats by splitting the conservative vote and undermine the Tea Party's own purity because political parties (and their politicians who go to Washington) are inevitably corrupted by money and the desire to get re-elected.

If the Tea Party thinks they are going to be another party, then we are really going to lose becauseI know people that voted for the Libertarian candidate, so that was one less vote for McCain, for instance, or whatever state election. And then what do we get? We get more of this liberal, Marxist, Communistic, Socialistic crap.



[I'm worried the Tea Party] will actually become a legitimate political party...Like third party splintering.

Ultimately, they consider the Tea Party as an essential citizens movement that must keep the Republicans honest so they don't gravitate to fake conservatives like Charlie Crist or career politicians like John McCain.

I'm hoping [the Tea Party] will keep the Republican Party honest and conservative... I hope they move the Republican Party back to the right, further right than they are right now. I really think we just need a two-party system.

I think the future of the Tea Party has to be focused in on the singular message to the Republican Party, which is starting to happen now that the Tea Party is more involved in the Republican primaries... As that philosophy moves into the Republican Party and impacts the Republican platform, that's where you're going to see it... whether the Tea Party can actually bring the full power to bear remains to be seen, but I think they will have a tremendous impacts on the platform and general outlook of the Republican Party.

While Tea Party activists succeeded in nominating some very conservative candidates this year, they seem more open presidentially. Mitt Romney does quite well with a warm rating of 54 percent. The focus groups saw Romney as an “outstanding businessman,” “a genius,” and “presidential.” There were few anti-Mormon references, like 2008 – though Tea Party supporters are not as devout as Republicans overall. The participants were especially interested in Romney in part because he could potentially defeat Obama.

Public Perceptions of the Movement

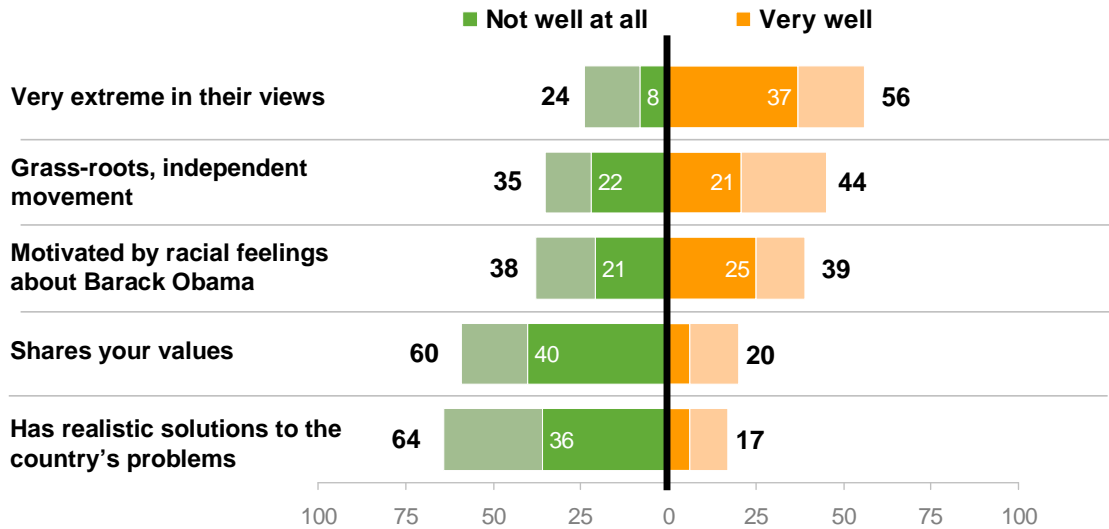
While the Tea Party sees itself as an independent, grass-roots movement, likely voters overall see the Tea Party as possibly extreme – and lacking realistic solutions to problems. But that benign and modestly negative view is obscured by the intensity of views among the Tea Party supporters themselves. Excluding Tea Party supporters, 56 percent think they are “very extreme in their views.” Indeed, 39 percent think that it “may be motivated by racial feelings about Barack Obama,” equal to the number who say that assertion is not accurate. The broader public is clearly uncertain or conflicted whether the Tea Party movement is motivated by race. Only one-in-five of the non-supporters in the likely electorate think the Tea Party “shares their values.”

These are issues that will come into play as the Republican Party decides what to do with the Tea Party movement at the heart of its politics.



Non-supporters: Tea Party extreme, with possible racial element

Now, I am going to read you a list of words and phrases which people may use to describe the Tea Party movement. For each word or phrase, please tell me whether it describes the Tea Party Movement very well, well, not too well or not well at all



**Note: These numbers are of non-Tea Party supporters and are solely from the June 19-22 wave. Based on research for Citizen Opinion.*