

REVOLTAS POPULARES CONTEMPORÂNEAS NUMA PERSPECTIVA COMPARADA

The *Tea Party* and the battle for the future of the United States

*O Tea Party e a batalha pelo futuro
dos Estados Unidos*

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de los Estados Unidos*

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Abstract: The Tea Party, which arose shortly after President Barack Obama assumed office, is the most recent incarnation of American populism. Numerous issues – including a protracted economic recession, alarming federal budget deficits, concern over immigration, fiscal deficits, and a seemingly ineffective government response to these problems – appear to be fueling the new right-wing populism. But changing demographics in the United States will limit the potential of the Tea Party and related movements insofar as they resonate almost exclusively with white Americans. Unless the Tea Party can reach out to America’s increasing non-white population, its long-term viability is limited.

Keywords: extreme-right; United States; extremism; violence.

Resumo: O *Tea Party*, que surgiu pouco depois de o presidente Barack Obama assumir o poder, é a mais recente encarnação do populismo norte-americano. Inúmeras questões – incluindo uma recessão econômica prolongada, os déficits orçamentários federais alarmantes, a preocupação com a imigração, os déficits fiscais, e uma resposta do governo aparentemente ineficaz para problemas – parecem ter alimentado o novo populismo de direita. Mas as mudanças demográficas nos Estados Unidos limitam o potencial do *Tea Party* e dos movimentos relacionados na medida em que quase exclusivamente ressoam junto aos americanos brancos. A menos que o *Tea Party* consiga apelar à população não branca dos EUA, a sua viabilidade, a longo prazo, é limitada.

Palavras-chave: extrema-direita; Estados Unidos; extremismo; violência.

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Resumen: El *Tea Party*, que nació poco después de que el presidente Barack Obama asumió la presidencia, es la última encarnación del populismo americano. Numerosos temas – incluyendo una recesión económica prolongada, los déficits presupuestarios federales alarmantes, las preocupaciones sobre la inmigración, el déficit fiscal y una respuesta del gobierno aparentemente ineficaz a los problemas – parecen haber alimentado el nuevo populismo de derecha. Pero los cambios demográficos en los Estados Unidos limitan el potencial del *Tea Party* y de los movimientos afines, en la medida que casi exclusivamente resuenan con los estadounidenses blancos. A menos que el *Tea Party* apele a la población no blanca de los EE.UU., su viabilidad en el largo plazo, es limitada.

Palabras clave: extrema-derecha; Estados Unidos; extremismo; violencia.

Introduction

Populism has a long tradition in American politics. Its most recent incarnation – the Tea Party movement – arose in early 2009 not long after President Barack Obama assumed office. A severe financial crisis, runaway federal spending, concern over immigration policy, and a seemingly ineffective federal response to these intractable problems provoked a widespread right-wing populist backlash. The Tea Party is far from monolithic as it encompasses a number of political orientations under its big tent, including libertarians, social conservatives, deficit hawks, and disaffected Republicans.

This essay examines the Tea Party which in recent years has stirred American politics. In order to place this movement in context, a brief overview of the history of right-wing populism in America is presented. This is followed by a discussion of the events that gave rise to the Tea Party, its development and where the movement stands today. Finally, the conclusion examines noteworthy trends in America and how they could affect the viability of the Tea Party in the long run.

The Populist Tradition in American Politics

Episodes of populism have long punctuated American history. Several historians cite the Anti-Masonic Party of the early nineteenth century as the first right-wing reactionary movement in

America.¹ The case of the Anti-Masonic Party is important because several commonalities between it and subsequent populist right-wing movements can be discerned.

First, the Anti-Masonic Party grew out of the angst amidst economic disruption and transition, in this case from a largely yeoman-based agrarian economy to a more commercially-based economy. Second, a penchant for conspiracy theories to explain events was evident in the Anti-Masonic movement as well. The Anti-Masons were suspicious of the Freemasons that figured so prominently in the American establishment during that era. Viewing the secret society as a formidable enemy, the anti-Masons felt as an embattled minority whose mission it was to spread the “truth” that they had uncovered (GOODMAN, 1988, p. 237). Related to this was the anti-statist tradition; Anti-Masons believed that the U.S. government was virtually under the control of Freemasons, an observation not without some merit at the time. Moreover, Freemasons were accused of holding dual loyalties to a belief system outside the framework of the American government (HOFSTADTER, 1967, p. 16). Finally, religion loomed large in the Anti-Masonic movement. Protestant ministers were in the forefront of exposing alleged Masonic machinations and sought to dissuade young men from joining the ranks of the quasi-secret order. These themes would recur in the history of American right-wing populism.

Ultimately, like other American populist movements, the Anti-Masonic Party was of ephemeral duration. Although it attained considerable political clout (it was actually the first American political party to hold a nominating convention), its influence was short-lived. Nevertheless the anti-Masons did indeed accomplish much of what they set out to do. Many Freemasons were ousted from governmental positions and the order went into retreat and never regained the influence that it once had in the upper echelons of American society (GOODMAN, 1988, p. 8).

Other populist movements would follow. Andrew Jackson, the seventeenth president of the United States (1829-1837), whose raucous style of populism earned him the nickname “King Mob,” represented

¹ For example see, LIPSET, Seymour Martin; RAAB, Earl. *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970*. New York: Harper and Row, 1970, GOODMAN, Paul. *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, and BENNET, David H., *Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988, and MYERS, Gustavus, *History of Bigotry in the United States*. New York: Random House, 1943).

an alliance consisting of lower-class whites, southern planters, and sections of the northern elite. In the 1840s, the Know-Nothing movement arose as a backlash amidst an influx of largely Irish and Southern German-Catholic immigration. Shortly after the American Civil War, the fraternal vigilante movement – the Ku Klux Klan – emerged in 1865 in Pulaski, Tennessee, which marked the first instance of large-scale right-wing violence in America. In 1915, the release of D.W. Griffith’s critically acclaimed feature film, “The Birth of a Nation” – which lionized the Reconstruction era Ku Klux Klan – was the catalyst for the creation of the second era Klan whose estimated membership reached between 3 to 6 million in the 1920s.²

In the next decade, the dynamism of Fascism in continental Europe inspired similar movements in America. Most notable was Father Charles Coughlin, whose radio sermons attracted millions of listeners. Smaller groups sympathetic to European Fascism emerged as well, including Gerald Winrod’s Defenders of the Christian Faith, William Dudley Pelley’s Silvershirts, Fritz Kuhn’s German American Bund, the Italian American Fascist League of North America. In Louisiana, Huey Long promoted an egalitarian brand of populism that contained both rightist and leftist themes. In fact, the national organizer of his Share Our Wealth Society was Gerald L.K. Smith, a prominent rightist and spellbinding orator whose career extended well into the 1970s. Because of its association with European Nazism and Fascism, the far right was marginalized after World War II.

But the specter of Communism in the 1950s provided an opportunity for the far right to return and regain respectability under the banner of McCarthyism. The John Birch Society saw communist subversion virtually everywhere and sought to put liberals, and the American left in general, on the defensive (BROYLES, 1964). It was not long before academics sought to explain the new upsurge in right-wing extremism. In a classic study of that period, *The Radical Right*, Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter, Seymour Lipset et al. argued that status deprivation fueled right-wing extremism. Moreover, it was asserted that rightists exhibited dogmatic belief systems and were less tolerant of ambiguity (BELL, 1964). This was very similar to the analysis of Theodor W. Adorno and members of the so-called Frankfurt School, which sought to pathologize the “authoritarian personality”

² For more on the “second era” Ku Klux Klan, see Chalmers (1981).

and its fears of displacement.³ In a similar vein, Hofstadter argued in his classic study, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”, that right-wing extremists had feelings of persecution that were “systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy” (HOFSTADTER, 1967, p. 4). What he felt was determinative in extremism was not so much the truth or falsity of the conspiratorial beliefs, but rather, the way in which those ideas were held (HOFSTADTER, 1967, p. 5). Hofstadter acknowledged that conspiracies were indeed part and parcel of politics. However, what distinguished the paranoid style of political extremism was its proclivity to ascribe vast and gigantic conspiracies as the motive force behind historical events. With this sense of embattlement, politics was viewed as an all-out crusade (HOFSTADTER, 1967, p. 29-30).

In their examination of reactionary movements in American history, Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons used the term “right-wing populist” to designate those movements that have sought to mobilize against “liberation movements, social reform, or revolution.” In their view, right-wing populist movements in America have historically reflected the interests of two types of social groups. The first are middle-level groups in the social hierarchy that have a stake in the traditional arrangement of social privilege, but resent the power that upper-class elites hold over them. The second are “outsider” factions of the elites that occasionally use forms of anti-elite populism to further their own interests in their bid for power. Berlet and Lyons coined the term “producerism” to denote a doctrine that “champions the so-called producers in society against both ‘unproductive’ elites and subordinate groups defined as lazy or immoral” (BERLET and LYONS, 2000, p. 1-17). The contemporary Tea Party exemplifies this tradition, as the movement decries what it sees as out of control spending by a federal government that caters to both corporate and lower class freeloaders.

Populism is primarily a style of political organizing rather than a separate political ideology. Indeed styles of populism can be harnessed by various political ideologies all across the political spectrum. In fact,

³ See Adorno (1950). According to Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab, the one constant that has characterized extreme right movements is “the reaction against the displacement of power and status accompanying change.” In that sense, extremist politics is the “politics of despair.” Lipset and Raab (1970, p. 3.). A more recent study with a similar theme i.e., fears of marginalization leads to scapegoating is Ezekiel (1995). For a critique of the Frankfurt School and its efforts to pathologize right wing extremism see MacDonald (1998, pp. 155-211). Kevin MacDonald puts the issue in an evolutionary framework, and argues that the fears of displacement to which far rightists are responding are often not illusory but genuine. This, right wing movements are seen in some measure as an effort to prevent displacement and marginalization in an arena of “resource competition”.

when the term populism first entered the vernacular, it referred to a leftist oriented farmers' movement of the late nineteenth century (DIAMOND 1995, p. 140). The People's Party of the 1890s drew support mainly from poor farmers in the South and the West. In 1896, the Democratic Party endorsed its presidential nominee, William Jennings Bryan. During the 1990s, Ross Perot promoted a version of populism from the center. The rightist version of contemporary populism sees government as the problem, not the solution. By contrast, contemporary left-wing populists, such as the Occupy Wall Street protestors, seek a government that will create a safety net, redistribute wealth more evenly, and restrain the power of corporations (RASMUSSEN and SCHOEN, 2010, p. 202-4). The economic recession, chronically high budget deficits, protracted wars in the Middle East, and growing discontent over immigration appear to be fueling the new populism.

The Rise of the Tea Party

The seeds of the Tea Party movement were planted prior to 2009. Dissatisfaction with the presidency of George W. Bush and the growth of government under his tenure alienated many conservative voters (RASMUSSEN and SCHOEN, 2010, p. 226). Although President Bush promised to restrain the growth of government, he presided over an increase in federal spending as a share of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) from 18.2 percent in 2000 to 20.7 percent in 2008, thus reversing a trend under his democratic predecessor, Bill Clinton (SALAM, 2012, p. 157). At least at the federal level, conservatives have acquiesced to increased spending while refusing to raise the necessary taxes to pay for it (SALAM, 2012, p. 152). The Tea Party is in large part a reaction to this perceived fiscal profligacy as it favors hard-nosed fiscal discipline (SALAM, 2012, p. 153). After Senator John McCain's (Rep-Arizona) lackluster presidential campaign in 2008, the political right seemed to lack direction (ZERNIKE 2010, p. 8). In large part, the rise of the Tea Party is symptomatic of a crisis in the Republican Party which is bereft of ideas (RASMUSSEN and SCHOEN, 2010, p. 12).

The newly elected President Barack Obama initiated a bold domestic agenda to jump start the U.S. economy in the throes of one of the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. On February 17, 2009, Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act more commonly known as "the stimulus package".

The next day, he announced the Homeowner Affordability and Stability Plan – a \$75 billion program designed to grant subsidies to seven-to-nine million families restructure or refinance their mortgages to avoid foreclosure (KLING 2014, p. 108). These laws set the stage for a backlash. The spark that ignited the movement, though, came on February 19, 2009, when Rick Santelli, a business commentator on a CNBC morning talk show called “Squawk Box”, expressed his outrage over the economic policies of the new Obama administration. From the trading room floor at the Chicago stock exchange, he hollered “This is America!... How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage?” He went on to express his desire to dump derivative securities in Lake Michigan and exclaimed, “We’re thinking of have a Chicago Tea Party in July” (ZERNIKE, 2010, p. 13). His message was soon highlighted on the Drudge Report and was replayed on cable networks throughout the country. Within hours, his call to arms went viral and was dubbed “the rant heard round the world” (LEPORE, 2010, p. 3). The video was seen more than a million times on YouTube (RASMUSSEN and SCHOEN, 2010, p. 121). Soon thereafter, numerous Tea Party organizations were created around the country. On April 15, 2009 – Tax Day – Tea Party protests were held in hundreds of cities and towns in America in which an estimated 500,000 people participated. Some commentators began referring to the “Tea” in Tea Party as “Taxed Enough Already.” Since its inception, the Tea Party has sought to stymie much of President Obama’s domestic policy agenda.

More contentious Obama administration policies energized the movement. On March 23, 2010, President Obama signed a comprehensive health care bill (the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act), which was later dubbed “Obamacare” by its detractors. Voting for the bill ran on partisan lines with all but 34 Democrats approving it and 178 Republicans rejecting it. Federal government bailouts of the banking, auto, and insurance industries spurred even more resentment. A growing distrust in government is fueling the current incarnation of populism. According to an Ipos/McClatchy poll conducted in February 2010, 80 percent of the American electorate believes that “nothing can be accomplished” in Washington. As a group – roughly 75 percent – Tea Party identifiers tended to be angrier than the general public and more pessimistic about the future.

The transformation of America’s media landscape enabled the rise of the Tea Party. Specifically, the decline of newspapers has destabilized

American politics.⁴ Out of this vacuum, the Tea Party emerged. In sharp contrast to the venerable Walter Cronkite, who sought to avoid partisan opinion in favor of building a consensus, today's cable news programs and the blogosphere are awash in highly-charged partisanship. Highly opinionated hosts, such as Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, Rachel Maddow, Jon Stewart, and Keith Olberman, voice strongly partisan views. Traditionally, the "old media" were, as what Edward Wagner called, "the liberal media" (or as Sarah Palin has dubbed the "lamestream media"). A majority of the American public believes that the mainstream media are biased to the political left, thus increasing the demand for more and more right-wing hosts who figure prominently on television.

Technology made it easier for like-minded groups to connect. For instance, back in 2006, a young woman in Seattle, Keli Carender, started a blog called "Liberty Belle" on which she proposed that conservatives should make a "solution revolution". On her blog in February 2009, she organized "the Anti-Porkulus Protest" (Porkulus is a term borrowed from Rush Limbaugh) and reached out to fellow conservatives Kirby Wilbur, a local radio host and Michele Malkin a blogger and author (ZERNIKE, 2010, p. 18). Carender's blog exemplified the online activism that the Tea Party movement has taken up with enthusiasm. According to Scott Rasmussen and Doug Schoen, the Tea Party movement emerged as ground-up movement that "spread virally, blog by blog, website to website..." (RASMUSSEN and SCHOEN, 2010, p. 6).

The Tea Party is an umbrella movement of more than two thousand local and national groups, best reflected in the motto "Limited government, fiscal responsibility, and free markets" (ZERNIKE, 2010, p. 143). Though characterized as populist, ideologically the Tea Party did not follow in the tradition of earlier populists who advocated social reforms. Although Tea Partiers tend to take conservative positions on social issues, they prefer to focus primarily on economic issues. Yet, the ideology of the movement is amorphous reflecting whatever individual members want to project onto it. First and foremost, the Tea Party seeks to limit the power of the government. To that end, a Houston-based lawyer, Ryan Hecker, advanced a "Contract from America" which would, inter alia, reduce taxes, simplify the tax code, balance the federal budget, limit federal spending, and repeal Obamacare. Tea

⁴ Lepore cites a website called "Newspaper Death Watch", which counted 145 newspapers that disappeared in 2009 (LEPORE, 2010, p. 40-1).

Party representatives have asked both Democrats and Republicans to sign on to the contract. In American politics, with its intricate system of checks and balances, the Tea Party has the potential if nothing else to stymie legislation through filibusters, and block appointments and treaties. For a movement motivated in large part to restricting the size of government, these can be powerful legislative tools (MEAD, 2011, p. 32). In its advocacy of fiscal responsibility, however, the Tea Party does not focus on the details, which arguably limits its viability if given the opportunity to take part making policy. Any meaningful reduction in the deficit would require deep cuts in programs that most American and Tea Partiers support such as Social Security.

In the realm of foreign policy, the Tea Party looks askance at liberal internationalism; however, there is not a consensus when it comes to the Middle East. The Palinite wing led by Sarah Palin – an unabashed evangelical Christian who displayed the Israeli flag in her office – favors proactive approach to fighting terrorism in the Middle East. The Paulite wing led by Ron Paul favors an inward-looking neo-isolationist approach that would distance the United States from Israel as part of a general reduction in America's profile in that region of the world. An increase in influence of the Palinite wing would make a military strike against Iran's nuclear program more likely (MEAD, 2011, p. 40-44).

A sense of history suffuses the Tea Party movement. Seymour Martin Lipset once characterized the American far right as "preservatist" in the sense that it seeks to maintain the status quo or return to an earlier era (LIPSET 1998). Many rightists are backward looking and idealize a mythic golden age (GALLAGHER, 1997, p. 70). The catalyst for the original Tea Party can be traced back to May of 1773, when the British Parliament passed the Tea Act to bail out the East India Tea Company, which was facing bankruptcy amidst stiff competition from smugglers. In the summer of that year, ships carrying East India Company tea were sent to Boston, Charleston, New York, and Philadelphia. Residents in Boston responded by dumping British tea into the Boston Harbor. According to the historian Jill Lepore, the contemporary Tea Party is the manifestation of a reactionary version of American history that took hold during the controversy over the American Bicentennial in 1976. At that time, various leftist activists and scholars sought to deconstruct the sanctity of the founding fathers by pointing out their shortcomings (e.g., the fact that some of them owned slaves and their restriction of the franchise to white male property owners). As Lepore explained, a

reactionary interpretation of history – opposed to the politically correct version favored by leftists – simmered for decades, but finally found expression in the Tea Party movement (LEPORE 2010, p. 68). Tea Party activists proudly display Revolutionary War symbols, such as the Gadsden flag (“Don’t Tread on Me) and the “Second Revolution flag” – a version of the Betsy Ross flag which has been modified with a superimposed “II” in the middle of the thirteen stars (SHULKIN, 2010).

Although the Tea Party is a conservative movement, it draws support from others besides Republicans. According to three national polls conducted by the Winston Group (a Republican leading firm), the national breakdown for the composition of the Tea Party is 57 percent Republican, 28 percent Independent, and 13 percent Democrat.⁵ Scott Rasmussen and Doug Schoen argue that the Tea Party is composed mainly of three main groups. First are the newcomers to politics who have been mobilized by anger over the federal government. Second are political Independents who feel betrayed by both the Democratic and Republican Parties for their lack of fiscal responsibility. And finally, the third group consists of Republican conservatives who feel that they no longer have a home in the GOP.

As a group, Tea Partiers are older than the general public. A mere three percent of those who attended Tea Party rallies were under thirty and only 17 percent were under the age of forty-five. Nevertheless, the party was created and largely organized by young people. The young activists were adept in the new social media that figure prominently in modern political campaigns. These young Turks provided the Tea Party movement with an ideology that was largely libertarian and marked with an “originalist” view of the U.S. Constitution. Younger Tea Party activists tend to be less concerned about social issues, and prefer to focus more on economic and libertarian issues. They are less likely to see illegal immigration as a serious threat, and were more likely to support gay marriage. Kate Zernike referred to this as a May-September marriage in which ideological differences were blurred (ZERNIKE, 2010, p. 9).

The demographic profile that emerges from Tea Party identifiers parallels other conservative movements in that it is mostly male (60

⁵ According to a Gallup poll taken in late 2009, 33 percent of American identified themselves as Democrats, 29 percent as Republicans, and 36 percent as Independents. Rasmussen and Schoen (2010, p. 15, 170).

percent) and white (roughly 80 to 90 percent) compared with 49 percent and 64 percent respectively for the general population. They tend to be above average in educational attainment, as 40 percent are college graduates. More likely to describe themselves as fairly or very well off, 66 percent of them earn more than \$50,000 annually. Regionally, they are more likely to come from rural areas in the Midwest, South, or West though the Tea Party is represented throughout the country, including the traditionally liberal Eastern Seaboard, which Barry Goldwater once mused, should be cut off from the rest of the country. Denominationally, most are Protestant.

To be expected, survey data reveal that, in general, Tea Partiers hold an unfavorable view of President Barack Obama. Nevertheless, according to a poll conducted by Scott Rasmussen and Doug Schoen, 30 percent of Obama supporters said that they have a favorable view of the Tea Party. In fact, some surveys claim that close to one-third of Tea Party members were once supporters of Barack Obama (RASMUSSEN and SCHOEN, 2010, p. 8). A *USA TODAY*/Gallup Poll conducted in November 2010, found that 28 percent of those surveyed believed that President Obama should have the most influence on government policy while 27 percent believed that Tea Party standard-bearers should (PAGE 2010). Ominously, a survey conducted by Public Policy Polling in 2009, revealed that 21 percent of Americans said that they believed that Obama is or may be the Antichrist. As regards the genuineness of the president's birth certificate, among Republicans surveyed, the figure was 34 percent, while 64 percent of the party's voters said that he was or may not be a U.S. citizen (POTOK, 2009).

Critics of the Tea Party, such as Nancy Pelosi, have dismissed it as "Astroturf" suggesting that it was not a genuine grass roots movement. She once opined that it was created "by some of the wealthiest people in America to keep the focus on tax cuts for the rich instead of for the great middle class."⁶ According to this line of reasoning, conservative strategists sought to repackage their movement as the Tea Party in order to distance themselves from GOP whose popularity was at its nadir after the resounding defeat in 2008. Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson concede that the Tea Party began as a bottoms-up movement, but aver that it was later commandeered by wealth conservative groups in order to move the Republican Party agenda in a rightward direction (KLING, 2014, p. 111). The Tea Party is quite amorphous, and not unlike the

⁶ Quoted in Rasmussen and Schoen (2010, p. 2).

extreme right, operates in a “leaderless” fashion. Nevertheless, Sarah Palin, Ron Paul, and Michele Bachmann are regarded as expressive leaders of the movement.⁷

Organizationally, the Tea Party movement is a loose coalition of numerous national and local groups, the most notable of which is Freedom Works. Initially founded in 1984, under the name Citizens for a Sound Economy and underwritten by the Koch family, Freedom Works is an advocacy group that fights for lower taxes, less government, and more liberty. The owner of a Kansas-based manufacturing and investment conglomerate, the Koch family has supported many libertarian causes and think tanks, including the Cato Institute. For years, Freedom Works’ ideas languished, but indignation over President Barack Obama’s stimulus bill gave the organization the grass roots ferment it had long been searching. As Kate Zernike explained, the real work of spreading the Tea Party brushfires was carried out by a small knot of zealous young conservatives who worked at Freedom Works. These young activists took a page from Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals* and applied his tactics to conservative causes (ZERNIKE, 2010, p. 36-8). Former Texas congressman and House Majority Leader, Dick Armey, is the group’s current chairman and Matt Kibbe, a lobbyist and longtime advocate of deregulation, is the president.

Other notable Tea Party affiliated groups include the Oath Keepers, a group of military and law enforcement personnel who pledge not to enforce unconstitutional orders. Our Country Deserves Better is a California-based PAC that was founded in 2008 to oppose the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama, whom the organization portrays as a spendthrift liberal. Americans For Prosperity, another group founded by David H. Koch in 2004, campaigns against Obamacare. The Tea Party Nation holds conventions around the country and the Tea Party Patriots provides support and training for activists in the movement.

Fox News has been a vehicle for the organization of Tea Party protests. For instance, the popular conservative television figure Glen Beck, exhorted his followers to form “9/12 groups,” which sought to return the country to the feeling of unity that it felt in the immediate days after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In a theme that resonated with the Tea Party, Beck averred that both Democrats and

⁷ According to an October 2010 *Washington Post* canvass of 647 local Tea Party organizers, which asked “which national figure represents your groups?” the following responses were listed: “no one” 34 percent, Sarah Palin 14 percent, Glen Beck 7 percent, Jim DeMint 6 percent, Ron Paul 6 percent, and Michele Bachman 4 percent (*WASHINGTON POST*, 2010).

Republicans were to blame for the malaise in Washington (ZERNIKE, 2010, p. 24).

As the Tea Party movement gained momentum it began exerting its influence in elections. After Senator Ted Kennedy passed away while in office, a special election was held on January 19, 2010. The Republican candidate, Scott Brown, defeated the Democrat, Massachusetts attorney general Martha Coakley, by a seven-point margin for which the Tea Party movement took credit. The Tea Party also helped elect Rand Paul (Ron Paul's son) as U.S. Senator in Kentucky, who in a surprise landslide, defeated his opponent, Charles Merwin Grayson III, by twenty-four points. The Republican Party's stunning 2010 victory in the House of Representatives can be attributed in large part to the energy generated by the Tea Party. Seeking to emulate Barack Obama's 2008 strategy, Tea Party activists recruited enthusiastic precinct captains to get out the vote in primaries and caucuses. The same strategy was applied by Christian conservatives in the early 1990s, and by Howard Dean. So far, though, the Tea Party has shown little interest in forming a third party. Be that as it may, the movement appears to have pushed the Republican Party in a more conservative direction.

The Tea Party movement certainly has its fringe, including the so-called "birthers" who impugn the authenticity of President Barack Obama's U.S. birth certificate. However, the fringe does not define the movement. Nevertheless, the Tea Party must deal with a small fraction of right-wing activists whose extremist views have the potential to discredit the movement.

Some critics of the Tea Party have sought to conflate the movement with the much maligned far right. According to this view, the Tea Party harkens back to the Know-Nothing movement of the 1840s, the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, and the John Birch Society in the 1950s and 60s. Tea Party supporters have been derided as "neo-Klansmen" and "knuckle-dragging hillbillies." To be sure, many of the conspiracy theories popularized by the far right, resonates with the Tea Party movement as well.⁸ Liberal critics were quick to condemn the movement as racist. For instance, Keith Olbermann of MSNBC remarked on the Tea Party's "alarming homogeneity" Other MSNBC personalities including Rachel Maddow and Chris Matthews have been unsubtle in disparaging the Tea Party (RAINEY, 2009). In the summer of 2010, two thousand

⁸ For an overview of some of the more popular conspiracy theories in the Patriot movement, see Zaitchik (2010)

delegates to the NAACP national convention unanimously passed a resolution demanding that the Tea Party renounce racists in their ranks (BUCHANAN, 2011, p. 131). By demonizing the Tea Party, Democrats can energize their left-of-center base (JONSSON, 2010). For their part, black conservatives, Herman Cain and Ward Connerly rejected the accusations of racism in the Tea Party and defended the movement (MONTOPOLI, 2011; THOMPSON, 2010).

The message of the Tea Party resonates almost exclusively with white Americans which have caused some critics to characterize the movement as racist, though this charge seems overstated. Nevertheless, the Tea Party displays what the controversial scholar Kevin MacDonald once referred to as “implicit” white racial consciousness.⁹ To be sure, Tea Party town hall protests are nearly wholly white affairs and demographically, nationwide polls revealed that the people who supported the Tea Party movement were overwhelmingly white (LEPORE, 2010, p. 95). However, these characteristics do not *ipso facto* make the Tea Party a racist or extremist movement. Nevertheless, the same trends appear to be fueling both the Tea Party and the extreme right. Sweeping demographic changes, severe disruption in the economy, and the decline of centrism in American politics could have far reaching effects into the future. In short, the issues that give rise to the Tea Party and extreme right will most likely become more pronounced in this century; hence, these movements could gain momentum.

Conclusion: What Lies Ahead for the Tea Party?

Historically, American political culture has favored centrism and pragmatism over ideology. As Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab once point out (LIPSET and RAAB 1970, p. 499-506), several

⁹ In a study of psychology and white attitudes on race, MacDonald argued that severe social sanctions inhibit the expression of white ethnocentrism in America. Nevertheless, white ethnocentrism persists, but in “a sort of underground world of unconscious, automatic processing” MacDonald (2006-07, p. 7-46). In fact, a recent representative sample of two thousand households found that seventy-four percent of those whites surveyed believed that racial identity was very important (thirty-seven percent) or somewhat important (thirty-seven percent). Furthermore, seventy-seven percent of whites thought that they had a culture worth preserving. In MacDonald (2006/7, pp. 16). He also cites research that indicates that there is a significant gap between whites’ explicit and implicit attitudes on race. Surprisingly, the gap is actually larger for white liberals than white conservatives. Although highly educated whites usually have liberal explicit attitudes on race, they are actually more likely to seek out racially segregated schools for their children and reside in racially segregated neighborhoods. in MacDonald (2006/7, p. 17-18).

characteristics endemic to the American political system seem to inhibit far right movements from sustaining any kind of enduring significant support.

- First, owing to the nature of the American political party system, the mainstream political parties are able to co-opt the issues that fuel right-wing extremism.
- Second, the first-past-the-post, or plurality electoral system, militates against the development of both fringe right and left political parties. What’s more, in plurality systems, the larger the constituency, the less likely it is for minor parties to compete successfully in elections.
- Third, the two-party system in a nation as large and diverse as the United States encourages political moderation. Finally, the wide availability, and the character of education in America has fostered a high level of “democratic restraint.” Arguably, these factors have had a moderating effect on American political culture.

Previously, populism in America has been episodic; however, a confluence of events, including the economic downturn, globalization, the technological revolution, and government dysfunction, could make populism an enduring feature of American politics. The rise in the number of self-identified Independents and the diminution of the political center has opened up a vacuum in American politics, thus creating the opportunity for a new populist ideology to take hold. An ominous development is the collapse of the center in American politics. Since the 1990s, the American party system has been increasingly characterized by an ideological divide. This was reflected in the rift in the electoral map of the country after the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. Generally speaking, “red” states favor a more conservative course for the nation, while “blue” states prefer a more liberal orientation. The political center appears to be attenuating. As the political scientist Alan Abramovitz found in his research, in 1984, forty-one percent of the voters surveyed identified themselves at the midpoint of an ideological scale versus ten percent who placed themselves at the liberal or conservative extreme. By 2005, though, the number that identified themselves at the center had dropped to twenty-eight percent, while the endpoints had risen to twenty-three percent.¹⁰

¹⁰Likewise, Frank Rich pointed out that a Pew survey suggested that nearly half of independents are actually Democrats (twenty-one percent) or Republicans (twenty-six percent) who just so happen to eschew the label. Another twenty percent are more populist “skeptical Democrats,”

Another trend worth noting is the changing conception of American identity and its possible effects on national unity. Over the years, American national identity has come to be defined by a creed, rather than ethnicity.¹¹ But, as Samuel Huntington pointed, out national identity based solely on ideals can be fragile. As he explained in his 2004 book, “Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s National Identity”, the rise of multiculturalism and the demise of the assimilationist ethic could diminish the larger American national identity, which he believes is essential for the long-run survival of the country as a unified political entity.¹² Moreover, a protracted economic downturn could undercut the credibility of the American Dream, and by extension, American national identity.¹³

Many people who identify with the Tea Party feel as though the surrounding culture has abandoned them. The Obama administration, with its initiatives to help people marginalized by the ‘Great Recession,’ is perceived as punishing the hard-working while rewarding the idle. Over the past few decades, preoccupied with the minority underclass, the media and academia have largely ignored the white lower class, which has grown under the radar screen. As Charles Murray explained in his 2012 book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, widespread dysfunction, which was once mainly the province of the minority population, now afflicts the white population as well. In light of this malaise, it is not surprising that a movement would arise which seeks to return America to a more pristine era. For Murray, America changed irrevocably on November 22, 1963 – the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Prior to that watershed event, Americans, for the most part, shared a common culture and a common value system. They

sixteen percent are “disaffected” voters with a negative view of government” and seventeen percent are “disengaged” from politics” These findings suggest that those in the independent camp do not constitute a portrait moderate unity, but rather are quite divided. See, Gergen and Zuckerman (2011), and Abramovitz (2011).

¹¹ Seymour Martin Lipset identified five components of what he calls the “American Creed,” which in his estimation shape America during the 1980s. He found that multiethnic and multi-religious societies had difficulty in establishing common political identities accepted by all of their citizens (LIPSET, 1996).

¹² Huntington (2004, p. 143). Years prior to the release of Huntington’s thesis, Donald Horowitz argued in *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, that ethnic and religious differences were the main factors fueling violent internal conflicts during the 1980s. He found that multiethnic and multi-religious societies had difficulty in establishing common political identities accepted by all of their citizens (HOROWITZ, 1985).

¹³ As the white nationalist Michael O’Meara observed, without prosperity and opportunity, the basis of the American Dream could evaporate. As he noted, Americans do not comprise a nation in the European sense. The Europeans basis of national identity centers more on ethnicity, language, and culture while America’s contemporary conception is based on creedal ideas. See O’Meara (2010).

obeyed norms with remarkable consistency. Marriage was universal for all races and divorce was rare. Almost always, mothers stayed home to raise their children. Overwhelmingly, men were active in the labor force, as there was a strong taboo against idleness. Rates of incarceration were but a fraction of what they are today. And popular culture – even Hollywood – reflected this consensus. But that common culture is now gone. In its stead, Murray sees the development of two distinct cultures – one functional and the other dysfunctional – that reflect the values and lifestyles of their respective classes. Murray laments that the narrow elite – and increasingly the new upper-middle class – are woefully ignorant of the rest of America.

In order to be viable in the long term, the Tea Party must coalesce around some coherent unifying platform and set of principles that can be presented to the American public. Whether the Tea Party can connect with a large segment of America's increasing nonwhite population will in large measure determine its electoral viability. According to U.S. Census Bureau projections, by the year 2050, whites will no longer comprise a majority of the American population due in large part to huge increases in both the Hispanic and Asian segments of the population (MILLER, 2004). The Tea Party's preoccupation with libertarian economics and tax cuts limits its potential to expand beyond its current base. Critics of the Tea Party movement dismiss it as a reactionary, yet "futile, protest against the emerging reality of a multicultural, multiracial United States and a new era of government activism."¹⁴ According to the Tax Policy Center, by 2009, 47 percent of all wage earners, and roughly 51 percent of all households in America paid no federal income taxes. Be that as it may, because of changing demographics in America, the Tea Party must connect with the country's increasing non-white population if it is going to be viable in the long-run. But reaching out to minority populations could be difficult insofar as their economic profile is less affluent than the general population, thus making a platform that centers on tax cuts less attractive to them. If the Tea Party fails in this respect, it could coalesce with the extreme right and be moved in a more radical direction.

Early on, poll data suggested that the Tea Party movement had substantial grassroots support nationwide. According to a New York Times/CBS News poll released in April 2010, 18 percent of Americans indicated that they supported the Tea Party movement. Other polls put

¹⁴This is how Walter Russell Mead described the Tea Party's critics (MEAD, 2011, p. 29).

the figure as high as 30 percent. Still, just four percent of the American public attended Tea Party rallies or gave money to Tea Party organizations (ZERNIKE, 2010, p. 6). According to a Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, 41 percent of those surveyed held a favorable view of the 24 percent who held a negative view of Tea Party movement, thus making it more positively regarded than either political party (BUCHANAN, 2011, p. 160). But since the 2010 mid-term elections, the Tea Party appears to have faltered. By late December 2011, according to a Pew survey, more Americans said that they disagreed (27 percent) rather than agreed (20 percent) with the Tea Party movement (KNICKERBOCKER, 2011). Some commentators even went so far as to proclaim 2014 as the year of the end of the Tea Party.

It would be premature, however, to write the Tea Party off. In the 2014 primary elections, a number of candidates associated with the Tea Party movement won surprising upset victories the most notable of which was David Brat, a little-known economics professor who defeated the sitting House Majority Leader Eric Cantor despite the fact that the latter overwhelming outspent the former. While Brat raised just barely \$200,000, Cantor raised over \$5 million (BLUMENTHAL, 2014). Cantor's support for legislation which would grant amnesty to millions of undocumented aliens is believed to have been an important factor in the election (LEE, 2014). Brat accused him also of working only for big-business, and of being a member of the only real party on Washington, the "power/money party". Tea Party candidates did particularly well in other states as well (RUBIN, 2014). Furthermore, similar political movements appear to be gaining momentum in Europe.

The European Parliament election in May of 2014 was seen as a surprising victory for the far right 'Euro-skeptic' parties (MARSHALL, 2014). Commentators were quick to characterize them as 'Europe's Tea Party' in the sense that like their counterpart in the United States, they were fed up with politics as usual. The Euroskeptic parties are particularly concerned about massive immigration into the continent, a situation not unlike the United States where the Tea Party decries the massive immigration from Mexico. Whereas the Euroskeptic parties decry the seemingly undemocratic bureaucracy of the supranational European Union, the Tea Party feels alienated from the federal bureaucracy in Washington, D.C. But the far right in Europe and Tea Party differ with respect to their conception of the nation. For European rightists, the nation encompasses features such as language, ethnicity, culture, and

shared history. This is consistent with the principle of *jus sanguinis* or ‘the law of blood’ in which citizenship is based on one’s descent. By contrast, the Tea Party holds a more civic conception (*jus soli*) of the nation based on shared principles such as the U.S. Constitution. Nevertheless, a nativist streak can be discerned in the Tea Party insofar as the movement seeks to curtail massive, mostly non-white immigration into the United States.

Criticism of the Tea Party has been growing among centrist Republicans who fear that the upstart movement will undercut the GOP’s electability. A growing dichotomy appears to be taking place in the Republican Party with one wing dominated by moderates and an insurgent wing with the Tea Party movement in its vanguard. Although populism in America has historically been highly episodic, the Tea Party had demonstrated staying power over the past several years and has connected with a substantial number of disaffected Republicans. This is a trend worth noting as it could be a harbinger of greater contentiousness in American politics.

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