

April 20, 2010

Comment on the Tea Party Movement

A Brief History of the Movement

Today's Tea Party movement began in early 2009 in reaction to the American government's efforts to stabilize the banking system and keep the nation from sinking into economic turmoil. In October, 2008 the Democrat-controlled Congress passed a "Wall St. bailout" bill (the "TARP" bill) proposed by the Bush administration, which Bush immediately signed. This bill deeply offended some economic conservatives who held a "let the chips fall where they may, no matter what" view of free market economics. *

Anger among economic conservatives rose yet higher in early 2009 when Congress responded to President Obama's call for a massive economic stimulus to keep the recession from turning into a Depression. Almost every major Western government, whatever its political stripe, went deeply into the red at this time to keep its economy afloat. Republicans in Congress voted massively against the bill, and Democrats took the heat for trying to stop a recession that the Republicans had largely caused by deregulating the banking system.

The first of what became Tea Party protests occurred on February 10, 2009. It was produced by *FreedomWorks*, an organization led by influential Republicans such as former House Majority Leader Dick Armey, that specialized in creating "grass roots" protests. On February 9, a FreedomWorks official phoned Mary Rakovich in Ft. Myers, Florida, whom he had trained in organizing demonstrations <http://www.verumserum.com/?p=4717> . He wanted a protest the next night when Obama was in town holding a town hall on the stimulus bill. About ten people showed up on short notice to decry government waste and "Obama's socialism," but it was a start. Rakovich was then interviewed on Fox.

The next week a truly grass-roots demonstration occurred in Seattle when Keli Carender, entirely on her own, asked every conservative she knew to join her in protesting the "pork" in the stimulus bill <http://taxdayteaparty.com/2009/03/meet-keli-carender-tea-party-organizer-in-seattle-washington/> More than a hundred people showed up. Another week later she used email addresses collected at the first meeting to draw a crowd of over 200. Fox's Michelle Malkin, reported these events, and said, "There should be one of these in every town in America." Malkin promoted a protest in Denver being organized by another conservative group, *Americans for Prosperity*. She then stated that the Seattle, Denver and other protests showed a movement was growing among conservatives against the pork in the spending bill. It certainly was, although various conservative organizations had produced most of the protests and Fox had fanned the flames.

On February 18, President Obama announced a plan to help people refinance bad mortgages. This led Rick Santelli, a Chicago-based editor for the CNBC Business Network, to complain on air about "promoting bad behavior" by "losers," and to suggest that a Tea Party be held in Chicago to protest this decision. The conservative news website, The Drudge Report, prominently featured "the rant" and it raced around the Internet. On February 27, "Chicago Tea Parties" were staged across the United States. But the turnout was light. Only about 200 appeared in Chicago, a rather typical result by most reports. Still, there had only been about a dozen at the first protest on February 10.

* I'm not going to provide references to major events that are part of the public record, such as the TARP bill, nor to organizations and polls that can easily be tracked down through Google from the information provided.

Warmer weather brought out much larger crowds for a nationwide Tax Day Tea Party on April 15, 2009. A liberal and (in my opinion) very competent and fair statistician, Nate Silver, estimated that over 300,000 people had attended nearly 350 such parties across the nation <http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/2009/04/tea-party-nonpartisan-attendance.html> . A Rasmussen Poll a few days later reported that most of its sample viewed the Tea Party movement favorably. The protestors seemed to be ordinary people who had simply “had it” with Washington.

The Fourth of July provided the backdrop for the next day of national protest. I have not been able to track down national attendance estimates. The local ones I’ve seen suggest the turnout was down some from Tax Day.

Health Care Reform. In mid-July a new organization with roots in FreedomWorks, *Tea Party Patriots*, organized a protest against the health care proposals that Democrats were developing in Congress. It then helped assemble demonstrations at town halls convened by elected representatives to discuss the issues. Some of the meetings were peaceful and polite, but in many others opponents of the proposals shouted down speakers and kept representatives from discussing the matter with their constituents.

Yet another group, the *Tea Party Express*, was created by a Republican public relations firm in Sacramento eager to get some of the money pouring in from Partiers for its political action committee <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0410/35785.html> . It got into the game late but captured headlines by organizing a cross-country bus tour that made daily stops for demonstrations, giving it ties to local groups. The officially non-partisan Tea Party Patriots said the Tea Party Express was basically raising money for the GOP. Other Tea Party groups have also sprung up, but the Express, with its “PR” skills at organizing events and giving the media catchy stories seems to have become the best known of them all. Those Tea Partiers who say they dislike both the Democratic and Republican parties probably don’t know they are increasingly being led by a Republican PAC.

The various Tea Parties sponsored a rally in Washington D. C. on September 12 to protest the emerging health care legislation. FreedomWorks said 1.5 million protestors had shown up; the crowd was more likely 60-70,000 <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/09/12/tea-party-express-takes-washington-storm/> .

Demonstrations continued on the local level throughout the winter, especially whenever Congressional representatives came home. But the next major national event was the First Annual Tea Party Convention, held in Nashville in February, 2010. Many within the movement condemned its mercenary ways, however, including the \$100,000 speaker’s fee given Sarah Palin.

Tax Day, 2010 saw hundreds of local Tea Party protests across the country. The demonstrators were enthusiastic and peaceful. Reports of crowd sizes were sketchy, but the turnout appeared smaller than that a year earlier. The Drudge Report did not even carry a story on the demonstrations the next day. The Washington Post reported the gatherings in Washington D.C. were smaller than those of last September, but “the ire and energy that have defined the tea party movement since it became a force last summer have not abated.” The Tea Party Express got the lion’s share of the media coverage with its list of Congressional “heroes” (all Republicans but one) and “targets” (all Democrats but one).

Are Tea Partiers Ordinary Citizens? Three Recent Polls

A nationwide *Quinnipiac Poll* of 1907 registered voters released on March 24, 2010 reported that 13 percent of its sample said they were part of the Tea Party movement. Another nationwide poll of 3,000 registered voters, released eight days later by the *Winston Group*, pegged the figure at 17 percent. So only a small percentage of potential voters are Tea Partiers. However, 15 percent of the registered voters in the United States amount to 25 million citizens. And they are very active and committed individuals in a nation where a solid majority of the citizens are not. And additional millions support them even if they do not identify with the movement themselves. To put this in perspective, only 81 million people voted in the 2006 mid-term election.

Like the student radicals and hippies who joined forces to demonstrate against the war in Vietnam, the Tea Party is composed of disparate groups united more by what they are against (President Obama and Democrats) than what they are for. The public sees them as ordinary people, and Tea Party organizations insist their members are a cross-section of American adults, a nonpartisan mix of Democrats, Independents and Republicans. But the Quinnipiac poll found that 74 percent of the Tea Partiers were Republicans, or Republican-leaning Independents. Seventy-two percent had a favorable view of Sarah Palin, while the sample as a whole disliked her by a 2-1 margin. They were a little less educated than most, more female than male, older (most were over 50), and overwhelmingly white (88 percent).

The Winston Group results generally reinforced and expanded on these Quinnipiac demographics. Eighty-five percent of that batch of Tea Partiers said they were Republicans (57 percent) or Independents (28 percent). Sixty-five percent said they were “conservatives,” about twice the national average. This time males outnumbered females. Most of them again were over 50. Data were apparently not collected on education or race. Tea Partiers proved much more likely than most people to watch Fox News.

The Winston survey dug into what matters to Tea Party members. The most common theme was a conservative economic philosophy. Their top priority, like the rest of the sample, was job creation. But they thought the way to create jobs was mainly to cut taxes on small businesses and increase development of energy resources. Also like the sample as a whole, getting unemployment rates down to 5 percent was more important to Tea Partiers than balancing the budget. But in general they abhorred deficit spending. Ninety-five percent believed the Democrats were taxing and spending too much. Eighty-seven percent said the stimulus package was not working. Eighty-two percent opposed the Democrats’ health care plan. Eighty-one percent disapproved of Obama’s performance as president; and 81 percent had an unfavorable view of Congressional Democrats. So Tea Party members were most united in what they were against: the Democratic Party.

A third poll, released by *USA Today/Gallup* on April 5, 2010, interviewed 1,033 adults whether they were registered voters or not. So this less-focused poll does not compare directly with the first two. It found that 28 percent of the sample *supported* the Tea Party movement (whether they were members or not); 26 percent opposed it, and the rest were undecided. The supporters were overwhelmingly Republicans or Independents. Seventy percent described themselves as “conservatives.” They were mostly male, only slightly older, 79 percent “Non-Latin White,” but just as well-educated as U.S. adults as a whole. They overwhelmingly (87 percent) condemned the passage of health reform, and 65 percent said they took a “pro-life” stand on abortion.

So are the Tea Partiers ordinary people with no political leanings, as they say they are? Definitely not. The findings cited above and other data in the polls indicate that the Tea Party is overwhelmingly stocked with Republican supporters. They are by no means “ordinary people,” although the public’s perception that they are is one of their strongest suits.

Are they just economic conservatives then? The Winston survey tells us much about Tea Partiers’ economic views, and the “Contract from America” released on April 14, 2010 focuses on taxes, federal spending, and big government. But if you Google the questionnaires that local Tea Parties send to candidates, you will almost always find more than questions about these issues. You will often discover inquiries about religion as well (e.g., Do you support school prayer? Do you recognize God’s place in America?). And often there are questions about abortion and gay marriage and teaching Creation Science in public schools. And you run into queries about gun control, law and order, and immigration. So while Tea Partiers overwhelmingly take conservative economic stands, which bind them together most, many seem to be strong “social conservatives” as well. Local groups often speak of wanting only “pure conservatives” or “100 percent” conservatives as candidates.

Tea Party enthusiasts as Authoritarian Followers:

Authoritarian Followers

If you read the book presented at this website, you’ll find lots of evidence that, as a group, **social conservatives** share the psychological trait of being **authoritarian followers**.¹ And you can hardly miss the authoritarian follower tendencies in the behavior of the Tea Partiers. Here are **a dozen** that seem pretty obvious.

1. Authoritarian submission. Authoritarian followers submit to the people they consider authorities much more than non-authoritarians do. In this context, Tea Partiers seem to believe without question whatever their chosen authorities say. Rush Limbaugh, Glen Beck, various religious groups, the House and Senate GOP leaders, Sen. Grassley from Iowa, Rep. Bachmann from Minnesota, and of course Sarah Palin can say whatever they want about the Democrats, and the Tea Partiers will accept it and repeat it. The followers don’t find out for themselves what the Democratic leader truly said, what is really in a bill, what a treaty actually specifies, or whether taxes have really gone up. They are happy to let Rush Limbaugh and Sarah Palin do their thinking for them. It has gotten so bad that their leaders casually say preposterous things that are easily refuted, because they know their audience will never believe the truth, or even hear about it.

2. Fear. Fear constantly pulses through authoritarian followers, and Tea Partiers are mightily frightened. They believe President Obama is a dictator. They also think the country will be destroyed by its mounting debt. They readily believed the health care proposals provided for “death panels” that will euthanize Down’s syndrome babies, “put Grandma in the grave,” and place microchips in each American so the government can track us. When Rep. Paul Brown (R-GA) said that Obama’s plan to expand such things as the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps was really intended to create a Gestapo-like, brown-shirt military force in the United States, his followers accepted this. Conservative leaders especially vilify Barack Obama, recently calling him in the space of two days (April 7 and 8) the “most radical president ever” (Gingrich) who is “inflicting untold damage on this great country” (Limbaugh) and is inviting a nuclear attack on the United States by indicating we won’t hit back (Palin). The people who orchestrate the Tea Party movement know well what button to push first and hardest among social conservatives, and they work it overtime. And they know spreading fear “works” with others as well. Sometimes it seems they are all trying to out-boogie-man each other.

3. Self-righteousness. Self-righteousness runs very strongly in authoritarian followers, and combines with fear to unleash aggression in them. The Tea Partiers commonly describe themselves as “the good Americans,” “the true Americans,” “the people,” and “the American Patriots.” They could hardly wrap themselves in the flag more thoroughly or more often than they do. Theirs is the holy cause. They believe they are the only ones who can save the country.

4. Hostility. Authoritarian aggression is one of the defining characteristics of authoritarian followers. Do Tea Partiers seem particularly aggressive? The behind-the-scenes organizers of the protests often provided the “words” for the protest through talking-points they distributed. But the protestors put the feeling into the song, and the feeling was often hostility. They angrily called people who disagreed with them at the town halls “Liars,” “Communists,” and “Traitors.” They booed and booed until opposing speakers simply gave up. They lashed out at elected representatives who tried to engage in dialogue. If you look at some of the videos of last August’s protests, you can see veins bulging in the necks of some of the Tea Partiers as they vented their fury.²

5. A lack of critical thinking. Authoritarian followers have more trouble thinking logically than most people do. In particular, they tend to agree with sayings and slogans, even contradictory ones, because they have heard them a lot. Thus Tea Partiers reflexively, patriotically thump that the United States *is* the best country on earth, but as well that it *is* now an Obama dictatorship. They also have extra trouble applying logic to false reasoning when they like the conclusion. A ready example can be found in Tea Partiers’ assertion that Obama is a socialist. They have heard this over and over again from Rush Limbaugh, etcetera, and “so it must be true.” But Obama has never advocated state ownership of an industry. He certainly did not advocate state ownership of health insurance, and eventually even backed away from the “public option” (that most Americans wanted) which would have let the government as well as private companies offer health insurance.³

6. Our “biggest problem.” Authoritarian followers will readily believe that lots of things are our “biggest problem.” It can be drugs, the decline of religion, the breakdown of the family, you name it. Thus it was not hard to get Tea Partiers worked up about, of all things, a plan to improve health care to the levels found in other industrialized countries. Yet Tea Partiers believe the passage of the health care bill marks the end of liberty. But they could just as easily have been led to believe that climate change legislation, nuclear disarmament, gay marriage, or taking “In God we trust” off the money would sound the death knell for America. In earlier eras it could have been sex education, Sunday shopping, the 40-hour week, or a Catholic president that would lead to our doom.

7. Compartmentalized thinking. Authoritarian followers can have so many contradictory beliefs and “biggest problems” because their thinking is highly compartmentalized. Ideas exist independently of the other ideas in their head. Their thinking is so unintegrated because they have spent their lives copying what their authorities say, without examining whether the ideas fit together sensibly. And Tea Partiers say over and over that the Democrats are installing a dictatorship, but they demonstrate every time they demonstrate that Americans still have all the freedom of speech they ever had. And one notes the health care reforms bear a striking resemblance to Social Security and Medicare—which many of the protestors happily enjoy and would never give up. Tea Partiers argue that competition makes private enterprise do things more efficiently than the wasteful government can; but they don’t want the insurance industry to have to compete against a public option in health care that might offer coverage at lower prices. And they complain bitterly that the government is ruining the economy by interfering in the free market system. But the recession was brought on precisely because the banks had been de-regulated, showing the only “invisible hand” at work then was the one sliding other people’s money into its own pocket. Even Alan Greenspan eventually realized this (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/24/business/economy/24panel.html>).⁴

8. Double Standards. Highly compartmentalized thinking makes it easy for authoritarian followers to employ double standards in their judgments. One finds many examples of this among the Tea Partiers. The protest started off being about “pork” in the stimulus bill. But there have long been clots of extravagant local spending in the federal budget. Who of the protestors took to the streets when Senator Ted Stevens, a champion pork barrel-er, brought tons and tons of pork home to Alaska year after year, such as Sarah Palin’s “bridge to nowhere”? Tea Partiers also protested about the federal deficit growing by unprecedented leaps and bounds under Obama. But it grew by unprecedented leaps and bounds during George W. Bush’s presidency, and demonstrations against that were few and far between. President Bush signed the \$300 billion Housing and Economic Recovery Act on July 30, 2008 which gave relief to people who were losing their houses and shored up the government-sponsored Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac agencies. But this set off no epic rants in Chicago or declarations that Bush was a socialist.

Tea Partiers have asserted that the Obama administration has too much power and is taking away our Constitutional rights. But they did not cry out when President Bush set up illegal domestic spying operations. And when Tea Partiers claimed today’s government is riding roughshod over basic human rights, how loudly did they protest the previous government’s use of torture? And can we not doubt people’s commitment to democratic freedoms when they shout down speakers at town halls, allowing only their own opinions to be heard?

Tea Partiers howled, on cue, when the Senate used the reconciliation process to pass health care reform. How loudly did they howl when the Republicans used reconciliation to pass George W. Bush’s tax cuts? They thought the Democrats bullied the Senate parliamentarian into giving them the rulings they wanted. Did they recall that this parliamentarian had been hired by a Republican controlled Senate, and that those Republicans had fired the previous parliamentarian because he had ruled against them? The Tea Partiers vilified Nancy Pelosi for the way she “steamrolled” the legislation through the House. Did they ever hear of Tom DeLay, “the meanest man in Congress”? Tea Partiers claimed abuse of process when Obama made “recess appointments” that he could not get through Congress. Do they know how many times George W. Bush did exactly the same thing?

It’s pretty clear that many, many Tea Partiers aren’t really against the things they say they’re against. For them, it’s OK when Republicans do these things. But that is pure hypocrisy, which one finds in abundance among authoritarian followers. And in their leaders, such as the various governors who condemned the stimulus package, said they would refuse such funds, but then accepted them and had their picture taken at project announcements that followed.

9. Feeling empowered when in groups. Authoritarian followers seem to want to disappear as individuals. They’re not comfortable taking stands on their own, or acting alone. Instead they seem fulfilled simply by being part of a large, powerful movement on the march. Thus the insult-hurling Tea Partiers probably would have been quiet, even deferential, had they met with their member of the House one-on-one last August. But experiments have shown that authoritarian followers are highly conforming. When they are in a group of like-minded persons they are much more likely to do things, especially aggressive things, that they would not do alone. They make a good mob, winding each other up by hearing each other yell. Did you notice how they got louder and louder as the town halls wore on? Being in a crowd of fellow-believers also helps them maintain their opinions through the “GOP echo chamber.” “You say to me, ‘Obama’s a tyrant!’ and then I’ll tell you ‘Obama’s a tyrant!’ Then we’ll both be more certain he is. And if we’re with lots of other people who agree, we’ll all shout it. And the more we shout it, the more I’ll believe it.”

10. Dogmatism. We also know that authoritarian followers lead the league in being dogmatic. When their leaders set their opinions for them, those opinions are set in stone. Experiments show that nothing (aside from their authorities) can convince them they are wrong. If overwhelmed by logic and evidence, they simply “castle” into dogmatism. This is probably because they don’t really know why they believe what they believe. They didn’t figure it out for themselves; they Xeroxed what their authorities said.

Does this apply to Tea Partiers? During the health care debate their authorities said an enormous number of untrue things, and the proponents of reform quickly countered them point by point. For example, Joe Wilson was proved the liar when he famously shouted that Obama was lying about no coverage for illegal immigrants. And opponents endlessly told their followers that federal dollars would now be used to fund abortions, when they would not. Obama called out the Republican House caucus face-to-face in a meeting last January about the lies they had spread, but Tea Partiers probably never heard about it. So the truth was out there in lots of places. But it rolled right past the protestors, who had been inoculated against catching it.

Another example of Tea Partiers’ intransigence in the face of fact was illustrated by a CBS News/New York Times poll reported on February 12, 2010. Democrats have lowered income taxes for almost all Americans, but the poll found that virtually none of the Tea Partiers realized their taxes had gone down. Instead nearly half of them thought their taxes had gone *up*, a mistake they made more than twice as often as the rest of the sample. They simply believed the rhetoric of their movement more than the information on their own pay slips.

11. Ethnocentrism. Authoritarian followers are notably ethnocentric, constantly judging others and events through “Us versus Them” lenses. They largely choose their friends according to their beliefs. They stick to news outlets that tell them what they want to hear. They live in a polarized world, divided into their in-group, and out-groups consisting of everybody else. They stress in-group loyalty, and try to keep their distance from the out-groups.

Tea Partiers certainly display a streak of ethnocentrism. They wrap themselves in the flag so tightly, everybody else is outside it. They have very definite out-groups. And of course one of the reasons that the Tea Partiers were uninfluenced by what was actually in the health care reform proposals is that they relied so much on their untrustworthy trusted sources.

This fierce in-group orientation, along with the followers’ need for external confirmation of their beliefs, explains why Fox News has such a big audience compared with other outlets, why Sarah Palin’s, Glenn Beck’s, and Ann Coulter’s books leap to the top of the best sellers lists, and why “hate radio” is so popular. Authoritarian followers have to get their ideas “validated” by others more than most people do. So they constantly seek out sources of information that will tell them they’re right. It amounts to in-group in-breeding of the intellect. Research shows that less authoritarian people are more likely to consider different sides of an issue, and figure things out more for themselves.⁵

12. Prejudice. Studies have found that authoritarian followers are among the most prejudiced people in society. It is the nastiest aspect of their ethnocentrism, and one they insistently deny—to others and to themselves. And they really do not realize how prejudiced they are, compared with others, because they associate so much with other prejudiced people. So their prejudices seem normal and perfectly justified to them.

Racial prejudice appeared at many of the Tea Party demonstrations, in the form of signs, banners, and tee-shirts—just as it did during the 2008 campaign after Sarah Palin energized the social conservatives. Tea Party spokespersons attributed these racist attacks to outsiders, “a few bad apples,” or fringe members of the group. However Carl Paladino, the Republican candidate for governor of New York who was enthusiastically supported by the Tea Party as a “100% conservative,” was discovered on April 12, 2010 to have emailed racist photos (and also a picture of a woman having sex with a horse) to a long list of friends. One doctored photo depicted the president and Michelle Obama as a stereotyped black pimp and prostitute. Another described an African tribal dance as the Obama inauguration rehearsal. A third picture showed an airplane landing behind a group of black men, with the caption, “Holy Shit, run niggers, run!”

Paladino quickly disassociated himself from the emails he sent, saying “That activity is not Carl Paladino.” He didn’t however say who it was instead, but still insisted he is not a racist. You can be pretty sure that the rank-and-file of the Tea Party doesn’t think he is either. But the point here is, he sent these pictures to so many associates, some influential people in the movement had to know what he thought. And it was apparently all right with them too, for he got a rousing Tea Party endorsement.

The vitriol directed at Barack Obama seems unprecedented to many observers. It may be that most Americans now see him as the President of the United States who happens to be African-American. But to many Tea Partiers he is a black man/N-word first, who has no right to be president. Instead, he is a Muslim, a foreigner, a gangster, a fascist, a communist, even the anti-Christ. And they will probably never see him as anything else.

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You will find the research alluded to in the twelve points above in *The Authoritarians*.⁶ You will also see that the studies discovered *less* authoritarian people were not nearly as submissive, fearful, self-righteous, etcetera as the authoritarian followers. It’s *not* a case of, “Well, you do it too, just as much.” Liberals do show some of these same behaviors—but not nearly as often. So if you have noticed, for example, how hostile today’s conservative and Republican leaders have been with their inflammatory speeches, cross-haired congressional targets, and threats to turn a shotgun on the census taker, compared to liberals and Democrats, you have noticed something repeatedly borne out by scientific study.

Still and all, I was just amazed by the Tea Party protest movement. It seemed as if the demonstrators had read the research findings on authoritarianism and then said, “Let’s go out and prove that all those things are true.” Whatever else the Tea Party movement has accomplished, it has certainly made the research on authoritarianism look good.⁷

The Other Authoritarian Personality

Because the Tea Partiers display so many “classic” signs of authoritarian followers, I think it’s safe to conclude that a lot of the members have such personalities.⁸ But another sizeable group swells the ranks who would seem to have little tendency to follow anyone: **libertarians**. And while the two contingents may agree on many economic issues, they appear to have fundamentally different views of government and liberty.

Oh sure, authoritarian followers will shout that Obama has too much power and is crushing individual liberty. But studies have shown they would like government to impose their own religious beliefs upon others, outlaw the teaching of evolution, punish homosexuals, forbid abortions, and so on. Libertarians, on the other hand, may genuinely want a government that does as little as possible and lets “nature take its course” otherwise. They wouldn’t want governments saying anything about abortion, for instance. They’d say that’s the woman’s decision. As John Dean and Barry Goldwater Jr. point out in *Pure Goldwater*, that was the very pro-choice position of “Mr. Conservative” himself (who almost certainly could not get the GOP nomination for the Senate in Arizona now because of that position).

Libertarianism has deep roots in American history. Nobody likes the government telling him what to do, and then having to fill out pages and pages of forms to do it. And you find libertarian sentiments at almost every Tea Party web site, talking about individual rights, small government, and taxation. Their positions vary from general principles that everyone can agree with (taxes must be spend wisely; government waste must be reduced) to quite dramatic pronouncements such as this I found at <http://www.teaparty-patriots.com/> on April 13, 2010.

“In a Republic we have three kinds of people...

Group One: These are the achievers, those who stride, work hard and are rewarded with the fruits of their toils.

Group Two: The non-achievers. This group seldom exerts the extra effort required to rise above their station and attain their perceived goals. They are dissatisfied with their lot in life and spend much of their lives in envy of achievers.

Group Three: This segment consists of those who contribute absolutely nothing, yet demand equality based on the labor and achievements of society as a whole.

...

Any attempt to engage in the confiscation or the conscription of the fruit of one man’s labor, by either men or government, in order to provide goods or services to another is an act of illegal plunder and as such should be protested and resisted by all.”

According to this rather extreme position, a government that used tax revenues to give a white cane to a blind man would be illegally plundering others. As well, one can think of other “Groups” besides the three listed above, such as “Group One-A: Those who work hard and are not rewarded with the fruits of their toils because of unfairness.”

Libertarians vary in how much the government should do, but staunch libertarianism apparently rejects the role that government can play in righting injustice and social wrong. It seems to say, “If some people get screwed in life because of discrimination against their race or gender or nationality or sexual orientation or whatever, that’s their tough luck. The government exists to do things like organize fire departments. It has no business interfering with the way society works.”

One can hold this view, but it does not overflow with sympathy, generosity, or a sense of justice. When millions of Americans had no health insurance and other millions were being gouged by the big insurance companies, when so many had been laid off because of a recession caused by greedy, deceitful bankers, when the poor stayed poor while the rich got richer through tax cuts enormously favoring them, the “leave things alone” attitude seems morally bankrupt and very selfish. You often see the Gadsden flag at Tea Party rallies; it’s the yellow one with the coiled snake in the center. The inscription under the snake does *not* read, “Don’t tread on us;” it goes, “Don’t tread on me.” It’s an apt symbol for this kind of libertarianism.

If you read postings and comments that argue the Tea Party’s case on various websites, you will sometimes encounter sentiments like those expressed in the “Three Groups” quote above. Poor people are poor, they say, simply because they are lazy. We should not extend unemployment benefits to the people laid off now because it will just encourage them to watch TV instead of looking for work. The poor people who accepted the banks’ invitation to buy nice houses for their families at low interest rates were “reaching beyond their class” and deserved to lose them. The rich are rich simply because they worked harder than everybody else, and deserve their wealth. Obama is taking money from those who work hard to buy votes from people demanding hand-outs.

These attitudes come right out of the catechism of the other authoritarian personality that research has discovered, the **social dominators**. Their **defining characteristic is opposition to equality**. They believe instead in dominance, both personal (if they can pull it off) and in their group dominating other groups. They endorse using intimidation, threats, and power to enrich themselves at the expense of others. This is the natural order of things, they believe. “It is a mistake to interfere with the ‘law of the jungle,’ they argue. Some people were meant to dominate others.” “It’s a dog eat dog world in which the superior people get to the top.”

Such people may want government to stick to running fire departments so they can rise/stay above others unimpeded. Research shows that social dominators are power-hungry, mean, amoral, and even more prejudiced than the authoritarian followers described earlier. They want unfairness throughout society. Barack Obama, and the ludicrous perception that he is going to lead African-Americans in “taking over America” would be their worst nightmare. So the *hypothesis* that the Tea Party movement has more than its fair share of social dominators may have merit.

Summary

The Tea Party movement was largely created by conservative groups that provided organization, guidance and publicity for the protests. But these efforts by themselves would never have gotten tens of thousands, much less hundreds of thousands of Americans into public squares to rail against the government. While the sponsoring organizations undoubtedly set up the protests for their own purposes, bussed demonstrators to town halls, and organized massive telephone and email campaigns to elected officials, “astroturfing” can’t explain **the size of the protests**. The Tea Partiers seem to have been spring-loaded, waiting for the call to arms. I suspect FreedomWorks and the Tea Party Express were **rather astonished at how easily they rounded up crowds, and have been working hard ever since trying to control and channel the eruption they set off.**

The people who responded to the call appear to be primarily the authoritarian followers who form the base of the present GOP—social conservatives who, when they campaigned behind religious leadership, were known as the religious right. But the movement also attracted economic conservatives, who also strongly tend to lean Republican. Many of these economic conservatives are libertarians, and they may include a relatively high percentage of social dominators.

Other groups have no doubt flocked to the Tea Party banner. Like most populist movements, the Tea Party has attracted many people who are pissed off about many different things. And while it is intensely organized on the local level, it is anything but unified nationally. Some local groups insist they are politically independent and equally disgusted with both parties. And of course many people in the movement are not particularly authoritarian. But it does seem that the movement has lots of authoritarians in it, and that is quite troubling.

Suppose slavery still existed in the United States, but the federal government was trying to end it. However Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, and so on told their audiences that slavery was a good thing, recognized by the Founding Fathers, endorsed in the Old Testament, the natural order of things, an issue for individual states to decide, protected by an individual's inalienable right to do what he wanted with his property, and so on. I doubt Abraham Lincoln would find these arguments compelling. But how much trouble do you think the Patriotic Association of Slave Owners would have getting today's Tea Partiers out to campaign for slavery in America?

What will the future bring?

Is the Tea Party losing steam? Tax Day 2010 apparently did not bring out nearly as many protestors as Tax Day 2009 did. Does that mean the Tea Party is waning, and by November will be but a shadow of itself? I wouldn't count on it. The grass roots may have tired of taking to the plazas over and over. After all, how many votes on health care reform did the demonstrations change? But the various organizers behind the movement are clearly focused now on November, and the people who show up at the rallies are promising to turf their enemies out through the ballot box. I think it's foolish to think the Tea Partiers are going to go home and stay there. They are madder now than they've ever been. They pump each other up too much to quit. They are by far the most committed political force in the country now. And their numbers are not dropping in the polls. A CBS News/New York Times poll released April 10, 2010 found 18 percent of the sample identified with the Tea Party, compared with 13 percent and 17 percent in polls a little earlier.

The movement *has* lost some of its shining image among the American people. Fifty-one percent of a Rasmussen poll released after the first Tax Day rally had a favorable view of the Tea Party. The figure had dropped to 28 percent in the Quinnipiac poll dated March 24, 2010, and 37 percent in the USA Today/Gallup poll of April 5. But Americans still hold Tea Partiers in higher esteem than their national leaders. Rasmussen released a poll on April 1, 2010 that showed most registered voters believe the average member of the Tea Party has a better understanding of the issues facing America than the average member of Congress. President Obama fared little better in a Rasmussen poll released on April 5: 48 percent said the average Tea Bagger is closer to their views than the president is, compared to 44 percent who opted for Obama. Republicans of course overwhelmingly voted for the average Tea Bagger, and Democrats of course overwhelmingly endorsed the president. The difference in the final score was decided by Independents, who felt closer to the Tea Partiers by a 50-38 margin.

In the long run, the emergence of the Tea Party movement is just the latest step in the radicalization of the Republican Party that began in the 1980s. The same people who formed the religious right over the past twenty-five years continue to drive the party to the far, far right. In the process almost every moderate Republican leader has been purged from the lists, and the party's intellectual capital is as low now as Lehman Brothers' net worth when it rolled over and went belly up. When the American Enterprise Institute recently fired David Frum for saying the GOP was contributing to its own Waterloo by listening to the most radical voices in the party, it was just the latest loss of a principled, intelligent conservative that began some time ago.

As a moderate and an Independent, I would like to see at least two sets of well-thought-out policies to choose from when I vote. But who is left to shape and guide conservatism in America now? Sarah Palin? Rush Limbaugh? Glenn Beck? Sean Hannity? Newt Gingrich? Michelle Bachmann? Mitch McConnell? John Boehner? Mitt Romney? Scott Brown? Mike Huckabee? Ann Coulter? The best and brightest Republicans have been shown the door. As was true during McCarthyism, some GOP leaders must be deeply concerned about what is happening, but few dare speak. They've seen what happens when someone challenges Rush.

Will the Tea Party become a third political party? I doubt it. Some local groups are determined to keep the Republican Party at arm's length, but where else can the Tea Partiers go in their determination to throw out the Democrats? The Tea Party will probably put up candidates itself only in contests where the nominees are too moderate for its tastes. The Conservative Party did this in New York's 23rd Congressional District in 2009, causing a monumental Republican loss in a district the party had won for eons. The resulting message of "Do what we want, or you'll lose" has to make local GOP officials very leery of supporting a candidate unsatisfactory to the Tea Party leadership. And the Tea Party wants "pure conservative" candidates like Carl Paladino who take very right-wing stands on everything. It's not going to be enough to just champion smaller government and lower taxes. So Republican nominees will probably become yet more radical than they are now.

In the long run, this should be good for the Democrats. Most Americans do not like radicals of any stripe, they want gifted people running the government, and they will turn on liars once they discover the lies. Thus Sarah Palin hurt the GOP ticket in 2008. But in the short run, meaning this year of 2010, I see a great danger. The rock-solid Republican base has been recharged and augmented. It will bust a gut to send as many radical social/economic conservatives to Congress as possible. While the Tea Party movement is opposed by a significant part of the population, the rest of the electorate is up for grabs. And not many people understand who is controlling the Tea Party movement, who is in it, and what they will do if they come to power. Significantly more Republicans than anyone else tell pollsters now that they are certain to vote in November. And although Democrats appreciably outnumber Republicans in the country, more people say they plan to vote for a Republican candidate than a Democrat. Combining the zeal of the Republican grass roots with a slowly recovering economy, a less-than-popular president, and the sentiment that "Whoever's in/running Congress now should be thrown out on his ass," I predict the Republicans will score a great victory in November.⁹

Unless. Unless the least authoritarian part of the American population out-organizes, out-hustles, out-reaches, out-recruits, out-communicates, and out-delivers the votes drummed up by the most authoritarian part. They did exactly that in 2008, and achieved unimagined victories. So it can be done, by patiently and sensibly explaining to moderate, independent, "middle" voters exactly who got us into this mess, and who has done nothing to get us out of it except constantly say "no"—like someone who stands on the hose when you're trying to put out a fire. And if the Tea Partiers succeed in getting more and more extremists running on the Republican ticket, that should open huge differences between the Democratic candidates and them. That can produce victory after victory—thanks to the Tea Partiers.

But alternately, the least authoritarian folks can find a dozen reasons to do little or nothing, and then the authoritarians will win. I'm pretty sure the authoritarians will be ready to take to the field next autumn in force, deeply committed and raring to go. So the liberals will decide the outcome of the election in November.¹⁰

Endnotes

¹ It will seem strange that persons protesting against the government would be labeled “authoritarian followers.” But the concept of authoritarianism centers on submission to those whom one views as the legitimate, established authorities. And the whole point of the “birther” campaign against Obama is that he is an illegitimate president. As well, many Republican rank-and-file members believe the Democrats were unfairly favored by the media in 2008, and stole the election through massive voter fraud engineered by ACORN. [Back to text](#)

² On April 13, 2010 word appeared that Tea Party leaders in Oklahoma were trying to organize an armed militia to fight federal intrusion into state’s rights. And on April 18 a Baptist minister told a rally in Greenville, S.C. that he was “ready to suit up, get my gun, go to Washington, and do what they trained me to do.” I’m sure he’d say he holds the Constitution sacred, but he’s talking about armed insurrection against the United States government. At the same rally former Representative and GOP presidential hopeful Tom Tancredo said it was time to send Obama “back to Kenya.” [Back to text](#)

³ Limbaugh (http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_030209/content/01125112.guest.html) has given definitions of socialism which sensibly centered on state ownership of industry. But he then “showed” that the Democrats were socialists because, for example, they caused the subprime crisis. (?) (??) (???) Recently Sean Hannity agreed that Obama was a socialist: “Obama is a socialist. If you take over banks, if you take over car companies, if you take over financial institutions, the way that he has--now the health care system. If you're going to use every crooked deal that you can come up with to get a bill like that passed--most recently the health care bill--that is by definition, if you look up the dictionary definition of socialism, this is it.” <http://www.dittos-rush.com/2010/03/hannity-if-you-look-up-dictionary.html>

If you can work your way through Hannity’s fractured syntax (is socialism defined as “using every crooked deal,” or as the health bill, and how is either of those a definition?) he ignores the fact that it was George W. Bush who asked for the TARP funds, and then gave billions in loans to General Motors and Chrysler as well as the banks. Obama continued loaning TARP funds to various banks to keep them solvent, and he advanced billions more to GM and Chrysler. But true blue socialists hardly loan money to industries going down the tubes when no one else will; they nationalize them. Barack Obama hasn’t nationalized anything. (The Treasury does now own 60 percent of GM stock, taken as security for a lot of the loan; but it is looking forward to selling its shares so it can get some of its money back.)

My point here is that Limbaugh’s and Hannity’s confused and misleading pronouncements are accepted so uncritically by Tea Partiers. A competent senior in high school would find their flaws after 30 minutes of research. [Back to text](#)

⁴ A CBS News/New York Times poll released on the eve of the 2010 Tax Day protests reported that most Tea Party supporters said the income tax they paid this year was fair. This may be a stunning example of compartmentalization, since the “Tea” in Tea Party is often said to stand for “Taxed enough already.” But there was considerable ambiguity in the question used: “Is the income tax you will pay this year fair?” “Fair” in what sense? Does the government take a fair part of my income, versus too much? Or did some people interpret the question to mean, “Are your taxes fair relative to what everyone else pays?” You will also note that the question was not worded in “both directions,” such as “Is the income tax you will pay this year unfair or fair?” Authoritarian followers tend to

acquiesce (say yes) more than most people do when asked ambiguous questions. So it may be that 100 percent of Tea Party supporters think their taxes are too high, despite the poll's findings. [Back to text](#)

⁵ In this context one must stand on a chair and applaud Senator Tom Corburn (R-OK) who told an Oklahoma City town hall on April 5, 2010 not to believe everything they saw on Fox News. Instead, he said, they should watch other channels as well, and get a balanced view of what's going on. He also chided his audience when it booed the name Nancy Pelosi. He said she was a nice person. "Just because somebody disagrees with you doesn't mean they're not a good person" he added. (Bill O'Reilly of Fox News was not amused at Corburn's comment.) [Back to text](#)

⁶ The list of parallels between the research on authoritarian followers and the behavior of Tea Partiers probably extends well beyond twelve. For example, such followers in general have very poor self-insight; they realize almost nothing about how unfavorably they stack up compared to most people. As well, authoritarian followers run away from bad news about themselves; they are highly defensive. Authoritarian followers also have a strong tendency to be zealots, and Tea Partiers seem quite zealous. And authoritarian followers know surprisingly little about the things they say they believe in. It would be interesting to see how much the Tea Partiers actually know about the Founding Fathers, the Constitution, and American history. For example Tea Partiers commonly refer to the sanctity of "the Constitution and the Bill of Rights." Do they not know about all the amendments since 1791, or just don't consider them part of the Constitution? [Back to text](#)

⁷ *The Authoritarians* was written in 2006 and appeared on this website in early 2007. One can quietly modify an e-book over and over again, changing what one said to fit new facts. But except for (numerous) spelling corrections, and changing "I Titus" to I, Claudius" on pp. 157-8, the book appears now as it did originally. *The Authoritarians* has been read by some tens of thousands of people—proving the price is right. Only a few people have challenged the results. The most determined protest came from a conservative blogger who thought my findings on authoritarianism were misleading because my way of measuring authoritarianism involved issues that conservatives had definite opinions about, whether they were authoritarian or not. The findings would disappear, he said, if a good measure of conservatism were used instead, such as political party affiliation. The discussion ended when I did the analyses he wanted, and found Republicans were way more prejudiced than Democrats, etcetera.

As I mention at the end of the book, some other researchers think I am really, unknowingly studying intense in-group identification, or some other thing. (It may be a sign of dogmatism, but I haven't been convinced yet.) But there have been no noteworthy "failures to replicate," as far as I know, by other scientists—going back to 1981 when these results began appearing. Indeed, the record for replication and extension by other researchers in other places has been quite reinforcing. [Back to text](#)

⁸ The task of identifying Tea Partiers' sentiments might grow more difficult now because a group called "Crash the Tea Party" announced on April 13, 2010 that it will infiltrate their rallies. Their goal is to "top" whatever a real member of the movement says, to make them sound like a gathering of crazy people. I think this both unfair and unwise. How would liberals like it if some group posed as Communists in their ranks and shouted Marxist slogans to the press? And just by announcing the plan to place *agents provocateurs* at Tea Party demonstrations, they have given the movement a ready alibi when one of its real members does something stupid. (In fact, the "Spy vs. Spy" part of my personality suspects this announcement is bogus—I mean, why would you *tell* people you were

going to do this?—and the real purpose is to sow internal distrust by making the real Tea Partiers suspect one another.) [Back to text](#)

⁹ A Pew Research poll released on April 18, 2010 found that only 22% of its nationwide sample said they trust the government in Washington almost always or most of the time. [Back to text](#)

¹⁰ Americans are rightly disgusted with Congress. Democratic lawmakers might sensibly respond to this disgust by offering the voters a list of promises regarding pork barreling, lobbyist influence, Senator “holds,” limiting the filibuster, campaign financing, and so on that they will enact if they win enough seats—with some iron-clad promises of what will happen if they don’t. [Back to text](#)