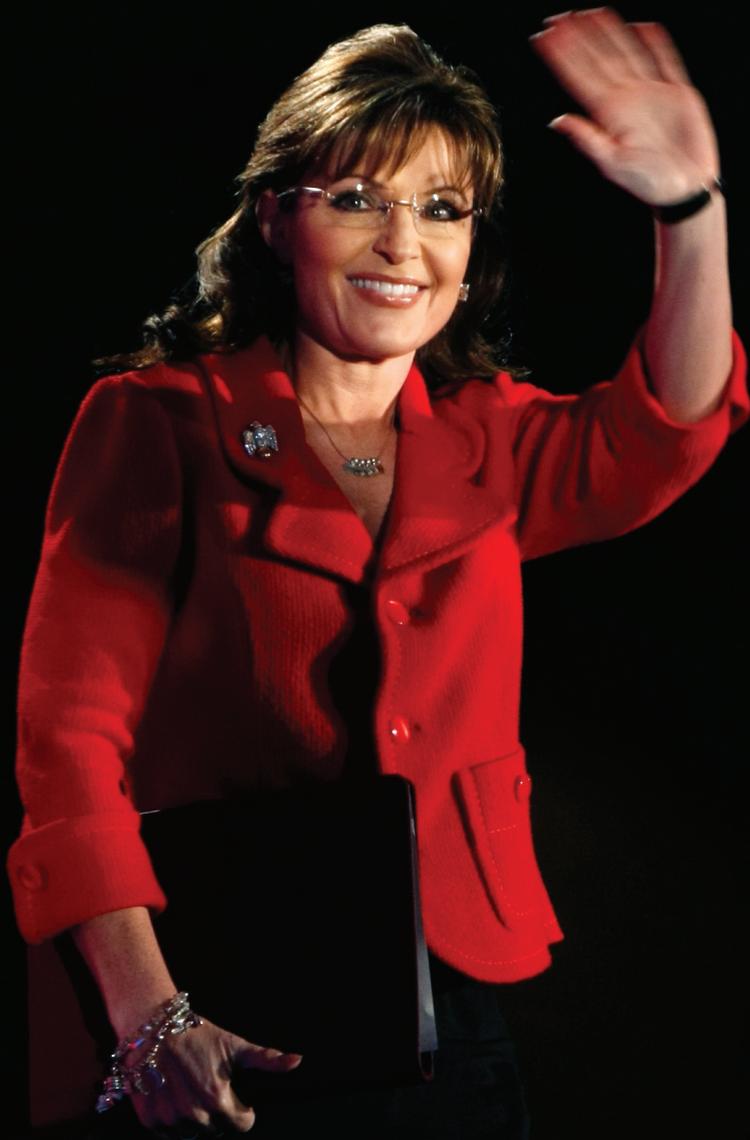


The rise and rise of the Tea Party

The Tea Party movement is reshaping American politics, but its future as a political force relies on the ability of conservative leaders to weld its disparate groups together into a focussed coalition, writes **Tom Switzer**.



When Barack Obama won the White House and his Democratic Party increased its majorities in both houses of Congress in 2008, the conventional wisdom pointed to a political realignment in the United States. Conservatism, which had shaped much of Washington's legislative agenda since Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980, had come to an end. And liberalism, which had become a dirty word in American politics for more than a generation, had made a comeback. The US, we were told, was at the dawn of a Permanent Democratic Majority.

Two years later, however, it is clear that Democratic partisans and liberal activists have misread the anti-Bush mandate of their victory. By governing so far to the left—big spending and debt-ridden 'stimulus', multi-billion-dollar bank bailouts, financial regulations, nationalised health care—the President and his allies on Capitol Hill have ignited a fierce backlash from middle America. So much so that most seasoned observers in Washington predict big GOP gains in November's mid-term elections. And Republicans are expected to finish the year with up to 36 of the 50 state governorships. Meanwhile, the internal debate within the conservative Grand Old Party has subsequently shifted right, as Republicans have voted for congressional candidates who will fight the expansion of the welfare state.

All of which helps explain the rise of the Tea

Party, probably the most discussed yet widely misunderstood political movement of recent times.

They're 'nuts', 'wackos' and 'flat-out crazy,' warns Pennsylvania Democratic Governor Ed Rendell. Bill Clinton says they make George W Bush 'look like a liberal.' The movement, insists Barack Obama, is financed and directed by 'powerful, special interest lobbies'. And Britain's left-wing *Guardian* newspaper has described it as 'a movement most of whose emergent stars would appear to be better suited to prison or lunatic asylums.'

In reality, the Tea Party is more complicated. True, it has received some financial support from well-heeled conservative institutions in the big cities. But it is also among the most independent and vigorous grassroots movements of our time, dedicated to a genuine constitutionalism and commitment to small government. The movement, which takes its name from the 1773 anti-tax revolt in Boston that sparked the American Revolution three years later, champions mainstream conservative themes on spending, taxes, and the reckless expansion of state power. Say what you like about some of its more unorthodox candidates, the point here is that the Tea Party is tapping into the economic anxiety and political estrangement that voters feel across the nation. Its first nation-wide wave of protests broke out within weeks of passage of President Obama's \$787 billion stimulus package, which, as it happens, has failed to reduce America's double-digit jobless rate.

Although its supporters back a large number of Republican Party candidates, it is not part of the GOP. Indeed, Republicans who were seen as accommodating the Obama-Democrats' record-high tax-and-spend policies have been defeated by Tea Party-backed candidates in this year's primaries: Kentucky (libertarian eye doctor Rand Paul), Colorado (attorney Ken Buck), Nevada (state politician Sharron Angle), Alaska (decorated veteran and federal magistrate Joe Miller) and Delaware (conservative pundit Christine O'Donnell). Add to this little known Republican Scott Brown's January victory of the Massachusetts Senate seat held by the late Teddy Kennedy for nearly 50 years, and it is clear that the Tea Party movement is the single most powerful force in the US today.

But Tea Partiers pose risks, not least to the American conservative movement generally. Politics in America's two-party system is about coalition building, and any successful party should reach out to many groups, including blue parts of the electoral map. In electing some Tea Partiers—right-wing

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Christine O'Donnell in left-leaning Delaware, for example—Republicans won't pick up the more moderate electorates that nonetheless should be fertile terrain for the GOP.

None of this means that Republicans should repudiate the Tea Party movement lest they offend the Beltway media class. It just means that Tea Partiers who genuinely want to reduce the size of government, rather than simply dole out ideological red meat on talk-back radio, should recall William F Buckley Jr.'s rule: support the most conservative candidate who is electable.

Doubts also dog the Tea Party's broader philosophical agenda. Although it has run a well-planned campaign highlighting the perils of Obama's big government agenda—from tax-and-spend and cap-and-tax—it lacks the connection to a concrete ideology that characterised the tax revolt of the late 1970s, which complimented the rise of insurgent supply-side economics. Meanwhile, deep divisions exist on social and foreign policy. How, for instance, do Christine O'Donnell's past campaigns for sexual abstinence and against masturbation square with Rand Paul's social libertarianism? Or do Sarah Palin's neoconservative foreign policy instincts gel with Ron Paul's non-interventionism? These spats suggest that the Tea Party movement, far from being united, could itself splinter into several cantankerous factions.

Moreover, it is not altogether clear that the Tea Party resonates with the broader American electorate, or whether it is capable of practicing what it preaches. Recall that following the 1994 midterm elections, Republicans came to Washington intent on implementing a Tea Party-like, fiscally conservative agenda. Yet their own overreach on various issues, culminating in the government shut down in 1995, led to Bill Clinton's remarkable comeback and re-election a year later. Similarly, following GOP Congressional gains during the Bush years, the party of Goldwater and Reagan became the don't-rock-the-boat party, content to feed different types of pork to different constituencies.

However, despite all this, the Tea Party has largely been a boom for America and the conservative movement, reviving the case for small government, free markets and a properly understood Constitution. As the *Wall Street Journal* has editorialised, the way to more Republican election victories is not to disparage and isolate Tea Partiers but to marshal them into a conservative coalition. That is no easy task, given the aforementioned risks. But if a genuinely conservative coalition can be achieved, then reports of a new era of liberal dominance in Washington are well and truly exaggerated.

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