


IDENTITY, VALUES, AND THE AMERICAN TEA PARTY

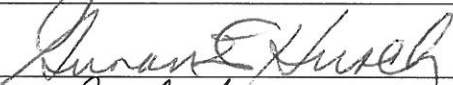
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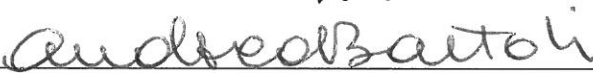


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Identity, Values, and the American Tea Party

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at George Mason University

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my father, Joel Wiskin. As always, thank you for everything.

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ABSTRACT

IDENTITY, VALUES, AND THE AMERICAN TEA PARTY

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This thesis examines the value-commitments that drove the activism of fourteen Virginia Tea Party members in 2010. The personal narratives of these fourteen Tea Party members informed a loose “theory” about Tea Party activism, namely that: The Tea Party’s narrow conception of American identity, *Americanism*, was the primary value-commitment that drove the group’s political activism. Aspects of social identity theory help frame the arc of the analysis with particular focus on Tea Party group identity and collective axiology. I argue that freedom and opportunity make up the principle values in the Tea Party’s collective axiology, or shared value system. The Tea Partiers’ commitment to these twin values of freedom and opportunity are expressed in one significant way as threat narratives, which I have summarized and coined as: socialism, burgeoning debt crisis, and bleak future (pessimism).

The second half of the thesis looks at “Tea Party as religion” with an analysis of those features of Tea Party identity that hint of a fundamentalist-like orientation. I argue that the Tea Party in 2010 displayed a form of political fundamentalism, centered on notions of Constitutional purity, liberty, and the free market system. I also expand on the idea of “Americanism” and posit that for the Tea Partiers, Tea Party identity was simply an extension of their American identity. For the Tea Party members, their American identity was their most salient identity and they were fully invested in their belief of American exceptionalism. The thesis concludes by revisiting the Tea Partiers’ value-commitment to opportunity by analyzing their chief concern of maintaining a viable American future for their children and grandchildren. The Tea Party phenomenon is emblematic of an intractable values-based conflict that is at once very personal yet far-reaching - with likely national implications.

INTRODUCTION

The American political landscape is often fraught with conflict. Differing ideologies have always given rise to contending visions of what is “best” for the country. What was perhaps most remarkable about the 2010 election cycle was the surprising force of a loosely organized political movement: the newly christened Tea Party.¹ This grassroots movement purported to “reclaim America” by bringing the country back to its “Constitutional roots.” What accounted for this surge in conservative activism in 2010? And who exactly are the Tea Partiers?

It is widely recognized that the Tea Party burst onto the scene in early 2009 following financial analyst Rick Santelli’s heated outcries on the CNBC show Squawk Box. On that February 19th show, Santelli railed against President Barack Obama’s proposal for a \$75 billion mortgage –modification program to help struggling borrowers stave off foreclosure (Magnet, 2010, p. 33). Two days earlier, President Obama had signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, a \$787 billion stimulus that was meant to serve as a direct response to the economic recession. To Santelli, the “bailout” proposal to support homeowners facing foreclosure amounted to “subsidizing the losers’ mortgages” (as cited in Goldstein, 2011, p. 1813). Turning to the commodity

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I have categorized the Tea Party as a national movement (avoiding the debate on whether it truly is a “movement” or not). I use the capitalized “Tea Party” to denote the movement as a whole. I use the un-capitalized “tea parties” to signify the many local grassroots tea party groups that make up the national movement.

traders behind him at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, Santelli asked his now infamous question: “How many of you people want to pay your neighbors’ mortgage, that has an extra bathroom and can’t pay their bills?” (as cited in Magnet, 2010, p. 33).

It is evident that Santelli believed that using taxpayer money to finance such a proposal constituted an over-reach by government and by extension, ran counter to American principles. Santelli continued, “This is America!... We’re thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July. All you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I’m going to start organizing... If you read our Founding Fathers, people like Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson, what we’re doing in this country now is making them roll over in their graves” (as cited in Goldstein, 2011, p. 1813). Americans across the country who felt the same way as Santelli took this as a rallying cry and began organizing small local “tea parties.” Myron Magnet, the editor-at-large of City Journal, writes that one of the unifying elements that propelled people to take part in the tea parties was their fear that Obama’s “Great Recession bailouts” and proposal for federally mandated healthcare would “change America from the limited-government, individualistic, free-enterprise regime that the Founders created to a statist, big-government regime that will curb liberty in the name of redistributionist ‘fairness’ and will burden their children and grandchildren with impoverishing public debt” (2010, p. 34). Across the country, about a thousand tea party groups were subsequently created from 2009 to the end of 2010 (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012, p. 8).

Research Problem

In thinking about this burst of conservative activism, my first question was, “What moves people to political action?” And then much more specifically: “What underpins an individual’s decision to become a Tea Party activist?” These are relevant questions in light of the Tea Party’s influence and attributed successes in the November 2010 Congressional midterm elections. The longevity of the Tea Party will likely have important implications for both the Republican and Democratic parties, and for the social and economic direction of the country. The Tea Party’s successes in 2010 have already had wide-ranging consequences for the Republican Party and for the Obama Administration’s legislative agenda.

The Tea Party is also a worthwhile topic of study because of the movement’s ability to harness strong emotions and channel them into political activity. As I began to think more critically about the Tea Party, I questioned what was actually driving this heightened level of activism. In general, simply gaining awareness about a certain issue or problem is not usually enough to motivate a person into political action. The impetus to act must be very compelling.

I argue that little is more compelling than a perceived threat to one’s values. Conflict analysts, Kenneth Melchin and Cheryl Picard (2008) write that “our values guide our actions, direct our cares and feelings of threat, shape our sense of identity, and situate us in relation to others...Because conflicts involve values, we experience threats to our values as threats to ourselves as persons” (p. 82). Since a person’s value system is intricately tied to his/her sense of identity, what role did “values” play in a person’s

decision to actively participate in the Tea Party movement in 2009-2010? Accordingly, my primary research question became: **What are the value-commitments that drive political activism in Virginia's Tea Party movement?** How are these value-commitments expressed? And what do Tea Partiers feel is under threat?

By answering the questions above, I hope to provide insight into the values that make up the Tea Party's collective axiology or shared value system. As touched on briefly above, the idea of "values" is intricately linked to questions of identity. Kevin Avruch (2012), a professor of conflict analysis and resolution at George Mason University writes that, "values are linked to what is deemed good and true or, in the case of identity, perhaps authentic as well" (p. 110). In this paper, I argue that Tea Party members are deeply invested in values that they feel are authentically *American*. I am defining values as deeply held beliefs, which are often tied to a sense of morality. Values are what people care about. A value-commitment then is a deep concern or investment in preserving a cherished belief or value. Through my research, I further hope to answer questions such as: How does investment in certain values shape Tea Party activists' conception of American identity and what it means to be American? I will delve into the ideological underpinnings that inspire Tea Party activism and explore how this may be related to Tea Partiers' views of what it means to be American.

The research presented here is exploratory and contributes to the field of conflict analysis and resolution because of its focus on identity, values (collective ideology), and threat. At its core, the rise of the Tea Party signifies a deeply entrenched values-based conflict. The Tea Party is symbolic of a protracted struggle over competing value-

systems (a perceived divergence of values) about what America represents, the direction in which it should be going, and its very identity. I believe that an analysis of the Tea Party movement through the lens of identity theory would yield clues not only to how values shape group identity but also to how values manifest in conflict.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will provide a quick overview of the scholarly literature available on the Tea Party. I will sketch out social identity theory, which I will use as the guiding framework for my analysis. I will also introduce my theory of Tea Party “fundamentalism,” which I will develop further in the analysis portion of the paper.

The scholarly literature on the Tea Party is still fairly small and limited with more and more publications coming out in 2012 as well as over the past year. When I first began my research in early 2010,² I found an abundance of newspaper and magazine articles chronicling the nascent movement, especially during the lead-up to the 2010 midterm elections. What was also readily available then were popular books that served as publicity pieces about the Tea Party and its platform. Examples include *The Official Tea Party Handbook* (Charly, 2009), *Tea Party Revival: The Conscience of a Conservative Reborn* (Baker, 2009), and Dick Armey and Matt Kibbe’s *Give us Liberty: A Tea Party Manifesto* (2010), among others. Much of what I ended up uncovering from my own 2010 interview data³ is validated by the scholarly literature that has emerged in the last two years since the Tea Party’s founding.

2 Partly due to the paucity of peer-reviewed literature on the Tea Party in 2010, I decided to write my literature review last. I also decided to do this in order to remain as open as possible to my interview data, as I did not want the literature review to unduly influence my analysis.

3 I conducted 14 interviews with Virginia Tea Party members in November 2010.

Theda Skocpol, a sociologist and political scholar at Harvard, and Vanessa Williamson, a PhD candidate at the university, used both qualitative and quantitative research to analyze the Tea Party movement, focusing their interviews and participant observations on tea party groups in Massachusetts. Their newly published book, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (2012), covers the Tea Party's rise, beliefs, and influence on the GOP. In his review of the book, Elbert Ventura writes that it is "the definitive study of the Tea Party to date" (2012, p. 59). It is an important book and I highlight a few of the authors' principle findings below.

Skocpol and Williamson argue that the Tea Party is "a grassroots movement amplified by the right-wing media and supported by elite donors" (Ventura, 2012, p. 59). These elite donors include the libertarian Koch brothers, among others, who have traditionally helped bankroll conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute (Skocpol, Williamson, and Coggin, 2012, p. 29). In their article, also called "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," the authors assert that the Tea Party "is a new incarnation of long-standing strands in US conservatism" (2012, p. 26). This is in line with what other scholars and pundits have argued; Washington Post columnist, E.J. Dionne wrote that the Tea Party is not a new phenomenon but rather "the reappearance of an old anti-government far right that has always been with us and accounts for about one-fifth of the country" (Washington Post, April 19, 2010).

The vast majority of Tea Party participants are conservative Republicans: polls have found that three-quarters or more of Tea Party supporters are Republican or lean

Republican (Skocpol, Williamson, and Coggin, 2012, p. 27). Pundits and scholars have written about the identity of the Tea Party as either being a more “hard-core” faction of the Republican Party or as extreme patriots. Skocpol and Williamson (2012) validate the conventional wisdom that Tea Partiers are “right-wingers in the GOP orbit” (p. 27). The authors assert that the emergence of the Tea Party provided conservative activists with a new identity because it allowed for “the rebranding of conservative Republicanism and gave activists an unsullied standard to mobilize behind” (2012, p. 35). They affirm that what distinguishes Tea Party supporters are their “very right-wing political views, even compared to other conservatives” (p. 26). The authors posit that prospective Tea Partiers felt that they had to look for a “new political home amidst the detritus of the GOP in late 2008,” following the election of Barack Obama and a Democratically-controlled Congress (p. 26).

In terms of the Tea Party movement’s organizational structure, at the grassroots level, the “Tea Parties are small, loosely interrelated networks, assembled at the initiative of local and regional organizers who often use online organizing tools” (Skocpol, Williamson, and Coggin, 2012, p. 28). As one of my own interviewees, Judy Diamond⁴ explained it, “Each [tea party group] has its own flavor. Each has almost identical goals, however. The people might come and go, and the way things are structured might be different from group to group, but the overall reason for having a group, the overall reason for getting together, is still the main three values: fiscal responsibility, limited government, and free market principles” (Judy Diamond interview, November 7, 2010).

⁴ I have changed all of my interview participants’ names to pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

At the national level, there is no unified, official Tea Party organization although there are two closely associated umbrella advocacy organizations, the Tea Party Express and the Tea Party Patriots. Social networking media played a significant role in the Tea Party's rapid rise. One Tea Party member I interviewed in particular spoke at length about the role of social media such as Twitter and YouTube in promoting the Tea Party's message. Fox News, as well as other conservative media and talk radio shows, also played a major role in spotlighting the Tea Party onto the national stage. Skocpol and Williamson, along with their colleague, John Coggin argue that, "The conservative media have played a crucial role in forging the shared beliefs and the collective identity around which Tea Partiers have united" (2012, p. 29).

The Tea Party was, however, careful to not include social issues, such as abortion, in their platform during the 2010 midterm elections. The inchoate movement made a concerted effort to focus instead on primarily fiscal issues so as to not dilute their message or create divisions within their ranks. As one Tea Party member I interviewed explained, "...everybody understands, or most people understand that, you know, outside of these [fiscally oriented] principles, if you get into those social issues, you fracture the coalition" (Charles Murray interview, November 11, 2010).

In their article, Skocpol, Williamson, and Coggin write that the Tea Party's number one concern was the size and scope of government, particularly as it related to the amount of government spending (2012, p. 31). The authors explain that, "concerns about freeloading underlie Tea Party opposition to government spending" (p. 32). They reveal that Tea Party members are resentful of people they deem to be unworthy or

undeserving of taxpayer funded entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid. Most significantly, the authors found that the difference between the “deserving” – those who work hard and are productive citizens like themselves – and those who are “undeserving” – those who don’t work/are lazy/waiting for handouts – is fundamental to Tea Party ideology (Skocpol, Williamson, and Coggin, 2012, p. 33). Very similar sentiments also came up in my own interviews with Virginia Tea Party members in 2010. Tea Partiers also resent taxes and government regulation of businesses. There has been one national survey to date that has sought to measure racial resentment among Tea Partiers compared to politically similar Americans and it found that “support for the Tea Party remains a valid predictor of racial resentment” (as cited in Skocpol, Williamson, and Coggin, 2012, p. 34). For example, the survey found that Tea Partiers are more likely to disagree with statements such as, “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class” (as cited in Skocpol, Williamson, and Coggin, 2012, p. 34).

Skocpol, Williamson, and Coggin (2012) note that the Tea Party perceived Barack Obama’s presidency as a symbol of an irrevocably changing America - “the culmination of generations of societal change” - and they fear that the country they live in is “not the country of their youth” (p. 34). The Tea Partiers’ “anger evinces a determination to restore that remembered America” (as cited in Ventura, 2012, p. 60). In my interviews, I also found evidence of this sense of deep nostalgia for an idealized American past. Skocpol, Williamson, and Coggin expand on this idea further: “At a fundamental level, Obama’s policies and his person are not within the Tea Party

conception of America, so his election seems like a threat to what they understand as their country” (2012, p. 35).

Elizabeth Price Foley, a constitutional law professor at Florida International University College of Law and author of *The Tea Party: Three Principles* (2012) distills Tea Party ideology down to three key principles: limited government, U.S. sovereignty, and Constitutional originalism. She writes that the most prominent examples of the principle of limited government include the Tea Party’s opposition to the government bailouts of corporate entities and health-care reform, coupled with the movement’s desire to restore federalism, enact a Constitutional amendment to require a balanced federal budget, permit states to veto federal laws, and require Congressional bills to cite their constitutional power source (Foley, 2012, p. 21). According to Foley, the Tea Party also believes strongly in protecting U.S. sovereignty, namely its right to defend its geographic territory and maintain its legal independence from other countries and entities such as the United Nations. Foley (2012) writes that, “the sovereignty principle is evident in several issues of importance to the Tea Party, including the war on terror, immigration, and the role of international law in interpreting the U.S. Constitution” (p. 76).

The third defining principle, Constitutional originalism, refers to the Tea Party’s insistence on honoring the Constitution and ensuring its original meaning by interpreting it in an “originalist” way. This means that the best interpretation of the Constitution is “that which most closely matches the meaning ascribed by those Americans who originally ratified the relevant language” (Foley, 2012, p. 169). This is in contrast to the “living” Constitution approach, which supports a more dynamic understanding of the

Constitution. Of the three principles that Foley brings up, I found the most support for the principles of limited government and Constitutional originalism in my own 2010 interviews of Virginia Tea Party members.

A Fundamentalist Thread

The result of the Tea Party's influence in the 2010 election cycle is undeniable: Skocpol and Williamson (2012) write that in the aftermath of the 2010 victory, the Tea Party "would not hear of compromises, and pushed GOP officials to act quickly and unremittingly: to reduce taxes, slash public spending, curb public sector unions, and clear away regulations on business" (p. 4). Indeed, the 112th Congress has managed to derail much of President Obama and Congressional Democrats' legislative agenda. The authors report that during their interviews, they "never heard anyone acknowledge the need for two-way dialogue with other Americans who think differently from Tea Partiers" (as cited in Ventura, 2012, p. 60). To the Tea Party, people who don't hold the same views just need to be educated or "re-awakened." In the Tea Party worldview, compromising with Democrats would "verge on the illegitimate" (as cited in Ventura, 2012, p. 60).

I did not find much scholarly literature on the Tea Party as "fundamentalists." The media (aside from Fox and conservative radio shows) had more or less successfully labeled the Tea Party as "extremists" or "crazies," but I was interested in seeing whether any scholarly publications had been written about the similarities between Tea Party beliefs/behavior and political/religious fundamentalism (an argument that I make in my analysis). The most notable pieces were written by Jared Goldstein, a law professor at Roger Williams School of Law, and Mathew Schmalz, a professor of religious studies at

College of the Holy Cross. In his article, “Can Popular Constitutionalism Survive the Tea Party Movement?” Goldstein (2011) writes this about what the Tea Party offers its adherents:

Addressing the fears aroused by change, the Tea Party movement offers the same solution that religious fundamentalist movements offer to those who are alienated by modernity: identification of the fundamental principles at the core of their identity that they believe are under attack and vow to defend and restore those principles. To Tea Party supporters, changes in the size and function of the federal government are not merely unwanted but conflict with foundational American principles and what it means to be American. The Tea Party movement locates the fundamental principles that form the character in the Constitution, and it argues that only a revival of these principles can save the nation from ruin (p. 1811).

These impressions are exactly what I came across in my Tea Party interviews, and they make up a large portion of my own analysis. Schmalz wrote a blog post on the Washington Post’s On Faith Panelists Blog called, “Party/Religion/Sect/Cult.” In his blog post, Schmalz likened the Tea Party to a “religion” because “its diverse members are coming to embrace a vision of the Constitution and the United States as supernatural, inviolable entities” (Washington Post, September 21, 2010). Schmalz defines religion as “beliefs and practices concerning superhuman entities,” which not only encompasses a belief in God but can also include entire political and economic systems. The Virginia Tea Party members I interviewed strongly suggested that America has a “unique and providential place in history.” Schmalz expounds on this idea of the Tea Party embracing a **divinely inspired civic religion** in his blog post:

In one sense, the Tea Party’s mission statement is nothing more than a concise summation of American civil religion with a fundamentalist subtext. There is belief in the sanctity of the individual, with the free market having a unique status not reducible to the human actors who generate economic activity. There is a canon of basic texts (the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights)...The Tea Party can be called “religious” in the sense that it crystallizes religious aspects of American political

discourse. But the Tea Party also shows signs of becoming more overtly religious in its view of the uniqueness and continuing power of the Founding Fathers, the U.S. Constitution, and others texts of the young American republic (Washington Post, September 21, 2010).

These ideas surrounding America's founding mythology and the notion of the Founding Fathers as divinities are also themes that I uncovered during my interviews. Schmalz's premise is the same argument that I make in regards to the Tea Party's fundamentalist orientation. My argument is not that Tea Party members are religious (which many are); instead, like Schmalz, what I am highlighting is **Tea Party as religion** - with a decidedly fundamentalist subtext.

In the quote above, Schmalz writes that the Tea Party's "mission statement is nothing more than a concise summation of American civil religion." The idea of an American civil religion was first strongly articulated by UC-Berkeley sociology professor, Robert Bellah in his 1967 article, "Civil Religion in America." Bellah (1967) writes that alongside our Judeo-Christian tradition, there exists an "elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America" (p. 1). He defines this American civil religion as a religious dimension imbued with the same level of seriousness, integrity, and historical significance as any official religion (p. 1) and writes that it is "expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals" (p. 3). Important symbols of American civil religion include the country's founding documents: The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which are both seen as "sacred" scriptures.

Bellah states that the idea of a civil religion is inherent in the Declaration of Independence as exemplified in the famous statement that all men "are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights" (p. 4). When speaking of the values most

important to them, virtually all of the Tea Party members cited ‘freedom’ with several anchoring their conception of freedom in the Declaration of Independence. Freedom is a critical American value, one that is understood as a national birthright. Furthermore, the Constitution affirms that sovereignty rests with the people. As interpreted by many of the Tea Party members I interviewed, ultimate sovereignty rests explicitly with God. American civil religion is representative of “deep-seated values and commitments that are not made explicit in the course of everyday life” (Bellah, 1967, p. 2).

The idea of America as the “promised land” also plays a role in American civil religion; the Tea Party members strongly espoused their belief in American exceptionalism during their interviews. Bellah writes that American civil religion has historically served as a “vehicle of national religious self-understanding” (p. 5). He explains that, “Behind the civil religion at every point lie biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and Sacrificial Death and Rebirth. But it is also genuinely American and genuinely new. It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols. It is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all nations” (p.11). American civil religion is an undeniable part of American identity and nearly all of the Tea Party members I interviewed brought up allusions to these important markers of national identity.

I ultimately decided to frame the narrative arc of my analysis on the Tea Party around the idea of “Americanism,” which I am defining as a sort of fundamentalism related to American identity. Over the years, there have been numerous studies on the

definition of American identity. Citrin, Reingold, and Green (1990) examined the subjective meaning of being American and found that it depends on support for the primary American values of equality and individualism. The authors write that the ideological values that define American identity include: democracy, liberty, equality, and individual achievement (1990, p. 1129). Their study was based in part on how important certain characteristics were in “making a person a true American,” and they included ‘belief in God’ and ‘defending America when it is criticized’ as two of the criteria (1990, p. 1130). Citrin, Reingold, and Green found that, “Republicans and conservatives were more likely than Democrats and liberals to endorse the religious, ‘patriotic,’ linguistic, and individualistic conceptions of Americanism;” for example, 64% of conservatives felt that believing in God was very important in making someone a true American (p. 1131). Indeed, many of the Tea Party members I interviewed espoused a deep belief in God and emphasized how the country was founded as a Christian country.

Hartz (1955) posits that liberalism is the “image of America that comes to mind when people think about what it means to be American and is widely seen as *the* defining essence of American political culture. It stresses minimal government intervention in private life and promotes economic and political freedoms along with equality of opportunity” (as cited in Schildkraut, 2007, p. 599). This essence of what American identity means was true for the Tea Party members I interviewed. In her study on American identity in the twenty-first century, Deborah Schildkraut (2007) found that ideological conservatism was the strongest predictor of support for the norm of economic freedom and opportunity (p. 609). The Virginia Tea Partiers I interviewed were all ardent

supporters of capitalism and were wary opponents of economic regulation and taxation. Leonie Huddy (2001) writes that, “It is the meaning of American identity, not its existence, that determines its political consequences” (p. 130). I found this to be true of my research findings as well: *for the Tea Party, the meaning of American identity is very narrow in scope and is the motivating force behind the group’s conservative political activism.*

Social Identity Theory

As can be seen above, the Tea Party has emerged as a fascinating new socio-political group. There is a lot to consider as the group’s identity and function continues to evolve. To help analyze the identity of the Tea Party, I will use concepts from Henri Tajfel and John Turner’s (1979) social identity theory. Social identity theory lends itself well to both conflict resolution and political science due to its focus on questions of group identity, difference, and power.

In his definition of social identity theory, Tajfel (1981) explains it as “that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (as cited in Brewer, 2001, p. 117). This means that social identity has two interlocking components: 1) belonging to a group and 2) the importance of that group membership to a person’s sense of self (Ashmore, Jussim, and Wilder, 2001, p. 6). A person’s social identity is reflected in his/her membership and sense of belonging to various primary groups.

The main idea behind Tajfel's theory is that people strive for a positive social identity (Korostelina, 2007, p. 135). This need can be achieved in part through ingroup favoritism, or feelings of positive overestimation of one's group (Korostelina, 2007, 24). In social identity theory, the ingroup is "a set of people who share a *common* characteristic or social experience" (Brewer, 2001, p. 117). As I will explain later, this common characteristic for the Tea Party is embodied in a very clearly delineated conservative political ideology.

This phenomenon of ingroup favoritism or bias was evident as the Tea Party members I interviewed positively viewed each other as "true" Americans or patriots. Ingroup favoritism is also intimately connected to feelings of opposition to an outgroup; in this specific case, the outgroup being liberals, Democrats, and the Obama Administration (as well as mainline "moderate" Republicans). The Tea Party is a particularly strong oppositional identity.

It is important to acknowledge Barth's (1981) view that "much of the meaning of identity is created at its boundaries in interaction or dialogue with outgroup members" (Huddy, 2001, p. 145). Boundary formation ("us vs. them") is a key concept in social identity theory. The obvious political implication here is that Tea Party group identity was defined and heightened by its opposition (and distinct boundaries) to a clear outgroup: liberals/progressives. The Tea Party members' vastly differing vision for America occurs at the boundary between themselves and the liberal "other."

Another significant aspect of social identity theory deals with stereotyping and prejudice as ingroup bias can lead to outgroup denigration. Social identity theory

suggests that, “a strong identification with the ingroup leads to negative attitudes toward any and all outgroups (Korostelina, 2007, p. 130). There is clear stereotyping and prejudice in the Tea Party narratives I gathered, particularly in reference to Congressional Democrats, liberals, and the poor. Emotions also run high in the Tea Party. Emotions, which include “feelings of inclusion, such as love, hate, amity, and enmity” (Rothbart and Korostelina, 2011, p. 129), are an important factor in the process of group identity formation.

To reiterate, according to Tajfel, a need for positive distinctiveness or self-esteem drives social identity (Huddy, 2001, p. 134). I argue that the Tea Party has been able to maintain a high level of positive distinctiveness, despite its negative image, through its identification with positively regarded American values such as patriotism and by aligning itself with American symbols including the Constitution and the Founding Fathers. The idea of identity salience is also a central component of social identity theory. A salient identity is the most important identity for an individual (Korostelina, 2007, p. 20) and I will argue that the most important identity for Tea Party members is their American identity, with their Tea Party identity being a natural extension of this.

Social identity theory does have its limitations, including its lack of emphasis on ingroup/outgroup values and normative positioning, or what Rothbart and Korostelina (2011) call “the normative framing of identity and difference” (p. 26). To address this, I will be using the ideas put forth by Daniel Rothbart and Karina Korostelina, both professors of conflict resolution at George Mason University. Their contributions to social identity theory include their ideas surrounding collective axiology (2006) and

threat narratives, which I will explore in my analysis. Rothbart and Korostelina (2011) explain that, “Collective axiology encapsulates a group’s sense of virtue and vice, right and wrong, and good and evil in relation with outsiders” (p. 4). Since I am interested in assessing the values underlying group membership in the Tea Party, the concept of collective axiology will be particularly useful.

My research adds to the already existing literature by providing anecdotes from Virginia Tea Party members and by focusing on a more in-depth analysis of Tea Party identity. It also seeks to further understand the precipitous rise of the Tea Party and its stunning ability to have engaged a wide swath of Americans across the country so quickly.

METHODOLOGY

The research presented here is an exploratory study of the normative values that drove Tea Party activism in 2010. I used a flexible qualitative design for my research and collected primary data through personal interviews with fourteen Virginia Tea Party members. I structured the interview questions to help shed light on the following research questions:

- A. What are the value-commitments that drive political activism in Virginia's Tea Party movement? How are these value-commitments expressed? What do these Tea Party members feel is under threat?
- B. Do Tea Party members share a group identity? How important (salient) is their Tea Party identity?
- C. What are the linkages between Tea Party values and Tea Party members' conception of American identity? How does investment in certain values shape these Tea Party members' conception of American identity and what it means to be American?

To code the interview data, I used NVivo9 computer research software. I generated dozens of codes, analyzed the relationships among them, and focused on a few central themes for my analysis. The purpose of the analysis was to address the research questions and to also generate a "loose" theory about Tea Party activism.

Interviews

I chose interviews as the primary method of data collection because the study required a depth of response that could not be met through a survey or a questionnaire. In order to collect data that would help answer the research questions, I designed an interview protocol with a semi-structured format (see appendix). I did not believe that a structured interview would be flexible enough to allow the interviewee to tell his/her narrative, while I felt that an unstructured interview format would not be focused enough to shed light on the research questions. The open-ended questions proved to be important for eliciting rich and nuanced information while allowing participants to speak at length. Each interview lasted approximately 45-90 minutes, and I conducted them over the phone via Skype over a three-week period immediately following the November 2, 2010 midterm election, from November 6-28, 2010. This timing was chosen in order to emphasize to participants that the research was non-partisan.

I interviewed fourteen self-identified Tea Party activists who were members of a local Virginia tea party group. The fourteen participants spanned seven different local Virginia tea party groups: five were from the Richmond Tea Party, three were from the Alexandria Tea Party, two came from the Northern Virginia Tea Party, and the other four interviewees were members of either the Roanoke Tea Party, the Shenandoah Valley Tea Party Patriots, the Hampton Roads Tea Party, or the Peninsula (York) Tea Party. My sample included nine men and five women. In order to safeguard their anonymity, I have

changed each of the participants' names in this paper and I have omitted any identifying characteristics. The participants were all adults over 18-years old and for the most part new to political activism. This was true for the majority of the interviewees even though nearly all of them did hold some sort of leadership position within their local tea party group, whether as president, communications director, outreach director, committee chair, etc. I tried to target political "neophytes" because my research aimed to understand in part how people move from awareness (of a perceived problem) to action (to address the problem).

I chose to derive my population sample from a geographically bounded area: the state of Virginia. Virginia was apt for this research project because the state had been labeled a "purple state" following the 2008 elections. Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) political scientist, Robert Holsworth defines a purple state as one "that has changed enough that it can legitimately be a 50-50 state that either party could win" (as cited in Turque, Wiggins, and Stewart, Washington Post, Feb. 13, 2008). Even though Virginia has begun to turn "redder" with the election of a Republican governor, Robert F. McDonnell, and the Democratic loss of the Virginia State Senate on November 8, 2011, I chose my sample population before these two events had occurred. Since Virginia is more or less politically divided by region, I targeted Virginia Tea Party activists from different parts of the state in order to provide a wide sample population of Tea Party activists. My population sample included tea party activists operating in the 'blue' region of Northern Virginia as well as from more conservative areas such as Richmond, Roanoke, and the Shenandoah.

During the interviews, I did not directly collect any demographic or occupational information from the participants. Looking back, this was a flaw in my research design as this information would have been helpful to have in my analysis. At the time, however, I did not want these questions to detract from the interview or make any of the participants uncomfortable. However, several of the interviewees did reveal their ages to me, as well as their race and occupations. From the interview data, I gleaned that my sample included at least one African American and two Latinos. My interview sample also included several grandparents, people in their 50s and 60s, as well as a couple of small business owners. Since I did not garner demographic information from everyone, I will not make any generalizations based on such information in my analysis. Many of the surveys about the Tea Party have, however, previously included this kind of demographic data, which I have used for general purposes in this paper.

Data Collection

John Creswell (2009) writes that, “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (p. 178). I therefore used a non-probability purposive population sample for my research. In order to find Tea Party members for my research sample, I first identified the local Virginia Tea Party groups by using the official Tea Party Patriots website which lists tea party groups in every state: <http://www.teapartypatriots.org/>. Clicking on a tea party group gives you access to the “usernames” of each of the individual members of that particular tea party group, as well as the URL of that group’s official website (when applicable). I decided to

contact every tea party group in Virginia with a membership of over ten members. After identifying the tea party groups to target, I sent my HSRB-approved “recruitment” email (see appendix) to the tea party group’s general contact email listed on its official website (the emails are usually in the format of info@VAteapartygroup.com). In my recruitment email, I explained the purpose of my research and emphasized that it was non-partisan and would not be used for any political purpose. I then asked whether any members of the group would be interested in taking part in a 45-90 minute telephone interview to talk about their involvement in the Tea Party movement and their motivations for joining.

I was very pleased with the response rate, particularly from the Richmond Tea Party. Five of the fourteen people I interviewed were members of the Richmond Tea Party. I think I received such a positive response rate from the Richmond Tea Party because this group in particular was very cognizant of the importance of participating in the public narrative about the Tea Party. The group was very aware of the negative image that the Tea Party in general was garnering in the media and was willing to take active steps to counteract derogatory stereotypes and misconceptions about their group by communicating directly with the public.

Once I received emails from those Tea Party members who expressed interest in being interviewed for my research, I emailed each of them an HSRB-approved informed consent form as well as an audio consent form (see appendix). I received permission to tape-record 12 of the 14 interviews. To make contact and to keep track of my research-related correspondence, I created a separate hotmail email account (joywiskin@hotmail.com) that I used only for research purposes. I scheduled each

interview and called the participant's cell phone number through my Skype account at the appointed time. At the time, I hoped that by conducting the interviews over the phone the participants would feel more comfortable speaking honestly and would not have the opportunity to make assumptions (i.e. political affiliation, ethnicity, etc.) about me based on my appearance.

Limitations and Considerations

There are several significant limitations to my research, the most noteworthy of which is the small sample size. This study was of a small subset of Tea Party activists: fourteen Tea Party activists who were members of local Virginia Tea Party groups. The findings are not scientifically generalizeable, nor do they offer a definitive analysis of Tea Party motivations, values, or aspirations. The participants were not necessarily representative in age, socio-economic background, ethnicity, or education. This case study provided just one small snapshot of the Virginia Tea Party in 2010 with a specific focus on the normative values leading to Tea Party members' political activism.

Another limitation related to my methodology was the fact that the research participants were self-selected. There were several obvious problems with relying on self-selection for my research sample. Since the initial recruitment email that I sent was to a generic "info address," usually checked by the tea party group's secretary or media relations person, my sample ended up only including those Tea Party members in leadership positions within their local tea party group (i.e. the person checking the group's email offered him/herself to be interviewed or just forwarded my email request on to a member(s) whom they thought would be interested). In this way, the sample also

unintentionally became a snowball sample. I did not speak to any Tea Party members who did not hold a leadership position and was therefore not able to get the perspective of an “average” Tea Party activist who was involved but not part of their group’s leadership structure. This may have meant that the participants in my sample group were more guarded or had had prior practice speaking about the Tea Party and its platform to outsiders. All of the participants I interviewed were articulate, cordial, and knowledgeable about their tea party group and its platform and concerns.

There were likely several reasons why these individuals volunteered for my study, including the opportunity for ideological proselytizing. For example, in response to my recruitment email, Ralph Harrods wrote: “What better way to understand why we began than to find out why you should too (email communication, October 21, 2010). I was routinely invited to local tea party events (i.e. meetings, restaurant banquets, lectures, etc.), all of which I declined. Though attending would have provided interesting opportunities for participant observation and would have further contextualized and triangulated the data in my research, I wanted to remain as anonymous as possible. To summarize, I did have several overall concerns about the self-selection method: namely, that the participants were interested in speaking with me in order to proselytize or to debunk Tea Party stereotypes. Self-selection also meant that I did not have a randomized or representative research sample. Nonetheless, this method of sampling worked well for this research since I had no intention of making any statistical generalizations about the Tea Party beyond the 14 people I interviewed.

That being said, I did attend two public tea party events: the August 28, 2010 “Restoring Honor” rally and the September 12, 2010 “Taxpayer March on Washington,” both in the nation’s capital. I attended these two rallies because I was interested in understanding the imagery and protest rhetoric that the Tea Party used. All of the photos in this paper were taken at the 9/12 Taxpayer March rally by my sister, Mae Wiskin. I noted the same observations that others have made about these two events: namely that older, white Americans were the primary attendees. I did not see many minority groups represented at these two gatherings. The other notable observation is related to the social aspect of the tea parties; particularly for the Restoring Honor rally, participants made it a family affair. They brought their children to the event, many of them picnicked, and even during the speeches, a majority of the attendees continued socializing amongst their own groups and did not appear to pay close attention to what was being said on stage. For these attendees, the rally appeared to be primarily a social event.

Although my research study is not meant to serve as an indictment of any political party or ideology, I must acknowledge my liberal bias. This issue did not, however, become an ethical consideration as not one interview participant asked me directly about my political affiliation or voting history. As an interviewer, I asked the questions in the interview protocol (along with any relevant follow-up questions) and let the participant tell his/her narrative. There were no debates, heated exchanges, or any reason to de-escalate any of the interviews.

Another significant limitation of the study is rooted in the ambiguity of such terms as “values,” “identity,” and “American.” This ambiguity did turn out to be a

challenge of the study, particularly when I asked interviewees about their *personal* values. Many participants were unclear about what the question was asking, were confused, told me that they did not know what I meant by the term, or simply reiterated or continued to elaborate on what they had previously said about Tea Party values. This was most likely due to the ambiguity of the word, as well as possibly due to the placement of the question directly following the question specifically about Tea Party values. While the meaning of the following terms: value, identity, freedom, and American were specific to each individual, there was a great deal of important overlap and uniformity in the interview data. As much as possible, I have let the personal narratives speak for themselves in my analysis.

By the term “activist,” I was largely relying on Tea Party member affiliation. Those participants who self-selected themselves for my research more or less self-identified as newly minted political activists. Although these Virginia activists were not necessarily representative of the Tea Party movement, I derived a lot of rich, valuable data relevant to my research questions. Again, my sample population was not representative in terms of geography, age, socioeconomic class, or education but it most likely fit the picture of the Tea Party as painted by previous news media and university surveys. The small sample size was also sufficient in generating some powerful and revealing information and to form a general theory about Tea Party activism.

Analysis Plan

The primary intent for the analysis was to let the Tea Party narratives speak for themselves by incorporating as much of the Tea Party members’ anecdotes and language

as possible in my analysis. I had collected a lot of rich data from the interviews and I used the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo9, to help with the coding of the interview data. Creswell (2009) defines coding as “the process of organizing the material into chunks of text before bringing meaning to information” (p. 186). NVivo is a well-known qualitative research analysis software and I took a two-day Nvivo9 workshop hosted by QSR International in March 2011 to familiarize myself with it. NVivo enables the researcher to meticulously code the data line-by-line and to create and store as many categories or “codes” as necessary. Colin Robson (2002) writes that NVivo is often used as a theory-generation software program; he describes NVivo as a ‘code-based theory builder’ (p. 463).

During the initial coding phase, I created dozens of codes, or “nodes,” as they are known in NVivo. I did line-by-line coding of the interview data and coded each unit or “fragment” of text data. My conceptual categories (codes) were not pre-determined but derived directly from the data. I tried to preserve the original meaning of the concepts that became my primary codes. My nodes of data included sentences, entire paragraphs, or simply sentence fragments and key words. This stage of “open coding” is about “teasing out the theoretical possibilities in the data” (Robson, 2002, p. 494) and I continued to code until I felt that the data was saturated and no new insights were forthcoming.

During the next stage of my coding process, I grouped or linked the codes together in NVivo as I began to see patterns, associations, and themes emerge from the interview data. NVivo9 also allows the researcher to write “memos” while s/he is coding.

Throughout the coding process, I wrote numerous memos within NVivo9 to serve as a proxy research journal where I kept track of my reflections, thoughts, questions, and comments about the interview material. In NVivo9, I was able to relate each memo back to the node that elicited the idea or insight.

After I had completed the coding, I decided to focus on several of the major themes that had emerged from the data. I also decided on a main “storyline” for the analysis; namely that of Tea Party fundamentalism or “Americanism.” This overarching theme was a recurrent pattern in the interview data. The Americanism story line reveals the lived experiences or the narrative reality of the Tea Party members whom I interviewed. The Tea Party members I interviewed spoke about their lived experiences, which gave important context to their values and reasons why they joined the Tea Party. These narrative realities included serving in the military, being a small business owner, worrying about healthcare, being a grandparent, and the like. I hinged my “theory” on this idea of Americanism as the driving force of Tea Party activism. I argue that for the Tea Partiers, their most important identity is their American identity. The Tea Party members I interviewed were driven by their desire to “preserve” traditional American values in their “purest” form. The theory that I propose in my analysis is a low-level theory borne from the fourteen Tea Party narratives:

The Tea Party’s narrow conception of American identity, *Americanism*, is the primary value-commitment driving the group’s political activism. The Tea Party’s fundamentalist orientation and uncompromising narrative are important to its appeal, helping to at once solidify group membership while also demarcating its boundaries from the moderate and liberal “outgroup.”

THE TEA PARTY: SOCIAL IDENTITY FORMATION

Do Tea Party members share a group identity? I argue that the answer is a resounding yes. All of the Tea Partiers interviewed for this paper articulated a common ideology based on limited government and fiscal responsibility. The distinct unifying ideology shared by members across different tea party groups helped shape Tea Party identity and attracted would-be supporters to the movement. Another theme voiced by the interview participants was a sense of insecurity and fear about the country's future. Whether motivated by a sense of urgency, frustration, or ideology, the maintenance of Tea Party membership has been fueled in part by the unique social outlet that the tea party groups have been able to provide to their members.

First-time Activism

Skocpol and Williamson (2012) found that “while some Tea Partiers are new to political activism, seasoned hands turn out to be very common” (p. 41). The authors cited a finding that “nationally, 43% of self-reported Tea Party supporters claim to have previously worked for a political candidate or to have given money to a campaign (2012, p. 40). In contrast, all but three of the Virginia Tea Party members I interviewed self-identified as being new to political activism; the majority had never before been politically active in terms of attending rallies, political conventions, organizing political events, or canvassing for candidates.

When I asked Cindy Edwards whether many of the Tea Party members in her group were new to political activism, she replied, “Yeah, I think most, just about everybody I know.” Charles Murray verified this phenomenon by stating that at volunteer events when people are asked whether they have ever been involved in politics, “consistently, 95 percent have never ever been active in politics.” Susan Combs revealed that, “We all came as rookies, most of us” when I asked about the membership of her group. In his email response to my recruitment email, Ralph Harrods wrote: “By ‘new to political activism’ I assume you mean a year or so is new. If that is the case I expect you will find very many of us are new” (email communication, October 21, 2010).

Judy Diamond recounted her experience of being asked to run her first tea party event:

It took about three or four days of me writing back and saying, “I’ve never done this before. I’m just a grandmother from Northern Virginia. What do I know about running a big political thing?” “That’s okay, most of us have never done anything like this before, either.” ...They wanted this to be real grass roots. “Honey, I’m about as real grass roots as you can get.”

Kyle Niman also talked about his lack of prior political experience:

I think we can thank our current President, really. I think he governs from a little more of an extreme than our previous Democratic president. I don’t think that’s in doubt. And I also think that has really awakened some people like myself who have never been involved in any kind of political activism before in our lives and I see this a lot with the people I meet with the _____ Tea Party who have never come off the couch before and done anything political. And that I think the involvement of citizens across the country in a tea party-like fashion helped influence the elections (Kyle Niman interview, November 6, 2010).

Mobilizing Group Identity

The impact that social media has had on elevating the grassroots Tea Party movement was tangible in my interviews. All seven of the local Virginia Tea Party groups in the research sample have a website that includes the Tea Party's platform as well as an ongoing schedule of events. It is through social media that the Tea Party advertised its events, garnering impressive turnouts to their rallies and protests in 2009 and 2010. One Tea Party member in particular, Lauren Burns, spoke at length about the impact of social media on helping to launch her activism. She spoke about using Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to get out her Tea Party message and to attract would-be supporters:

But I've also disseminated a lot of information. You can go to TeaParty____.ning.com. I also have a ____ Tea Party group, and that's about – those two groups probably have about 1,600 people. And then on Facebook, I'm connected to another 7,000 or 8,000, and then I communicate through Twitter with another 2,000 or 3,000. So I communicate in multiple ways, and the reason why I use information is because there's so much misinformation out there, and frankly, propaganda and mislabeling...And if you actually look at my YouTube page and scroll down to the bottom, you can see that video, which is my thesis statement that actually has acted through everything that I've done since I became a Tea Party person. I went to the first tea party in February of '09 shortly after I made that video, and I've been using the same medium ever since. It just made sense to me that oftentimes it's easier for people to watch a video than it is to read something (Lauren Burns interview, November 28, 2010).

In response to a question about messages that most resonate with potential Tea Party supporters, Lauren Burns answered:

Well, Twitter has really helped. It oversimplifies things, but that's just part of reducing everything down to having like 164 characters, isn't it? It helps you to really boil down everything to a very basic level in terms of what it means to folks. And so through my

communication with my new network, being able to summarize quickly a piece of legislation's impact on people, and then providing a link for further reading, it helps engage them quicker. They then can pass on that information faster. They understand the strategic importance of whatever I'm sending them and tend to act more quickly.

Social media has been instrumental in not only connecting Tea Party and would-be Tea Party members, but also in quickly relaying information, educating people about issues and new developments, and mobilizing them for events important to the Tea Party.

Boundary-Making

A major component of social identity theory is the process of border formation: forming boundaries between “us” and “them” (Korostelina, 2007, 29). Tilly (2005) stresses the importance of intergroup boundaries in formulating the narratives that groups create about one another (Korostelina, 2007, 30). In the case of the Tea Party, this boundary is predominantly ideological. In order to feel that sense of ingroup identity, Tea Party members must buy into the central tenets of Tea Party political philosophy. The group's relationship with outsiders is therefore defined by its ingroup beliefs and by its complete repudiation of liberal political ideologies. Once part of the ingroup, members engage in ingroup favoritism and outgroup hostility. Tea Party identity became progressively hardened with each subsequent introduction of major Democratic-sponsored legislation, beginning with the 2008 Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). This was followed by the 2010 Affordable Care Act, which the Tea Party derides as “Obamacare.” As its group boundaries became more and more pronounced, the Tea Party's outgroup denigration took on an increasingly heightened form, as evidenced by its heated rhetoric, messaging, and symbolism.

One of the Tea Party's strengths in terms of defining its borders has been in articulating what it is *against*. Tea Party members are vehemently against socialism/communism and its attendant offshoots including universal health care and anything they deem to be over-reach by government including the 2008 TARP "bailouts." Tea Party members are also against liberalism/progressivism and what they view as veiled socialism in the form of social justice. For the Tea Party ingroup, the outgroup includes liberals, progressives, Democrats, President Obama, moderate Republicans, and anyone who supports 'big, bad government.'

The Tea Party has been as equally adept at defining its ideological platform and articulating what it stands for. Judy Diamond explained: "Fiscal responsibility, Constitutional values, and free market principles. That's the one, two, three that everybody in the movement agrees on." I will use the example of the Richmond Tea Party group to illustrate Tea Party ideology for two reasons: its large membership and the fact that this tea party group was the most responsive to my request for interviews and therefore the group with the greatest representation in my interview data. The Richmond Tea Party's five core principles are (in no particular order): *Constitutional adherence, limited government, free markets, fiscal responsibility, and virtue and accountability*. Its website explains these five principles further:

Richmond Tea Party, Inc. is a non-partisan, grassroots community established to advance and strengthen the Founding principle that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are God-given rights guaranteed to every individual by the Constitutions of the United States and the Commonwealth of Virginia. We believe that government derives its power from the people and is established solely to protect these rights. The core principles of limited government, fiscal restraint, personal responsibility, and governing with virtue and accountability are all necessary to ensure the preservation of our freedom. We believe that local governments, communities, and individuals are best suited

to serve and represent the needs of the people. Most importantly, we believe that citizen participation in the political process is a fundamental necessity for good government (from the Richmond Tea Party website: <http://www.richmondteaparty.com/about-2/five-principles/>)

The five Richmond Tea Party members I interviewed were all able to articulate these five principles, nearly verbatim, and each person was clearly invested in this unifying platform. Korostelina (2007) writes that, “social identity is developed on the basis of main values (p. 81) and that “shared values increase the salience of social identity and define group boundaries” (p. 74). Taking the Richmond Tea Party as an example, it is evident that the Tea Party’s ingroup ideological boundary is particular and very well-defined.

Interestingly, the two most famous Tea Party prototypes, the most prominent faces of the Tea Party who embody its most “valued individual features and characteristics” (Korostelina, 2007, p. 75), are both women politicians: Minnesota Congresswoman, Michelle Bachman, and the 2008 Republican vice-presidential nominee and former governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin. Both of these women are conservative, uphold Tea Party ideals, and most importantly, are uncompromisingly committed to their conservative values and principles. Tea Partiers have rallied around these two prototypes in the past; they have also rallied against the two most visible ‘anti-prototypes:’ Obama and Democratic leader, Nancy Pelosi, who both exemplify the threatening outgroup (liberals).

Group Identity as Social Outlet

During the course of the interviews, several participants brought up the number and diversity of activities available to members. The activities fell into two general categories: educational and social. The Virginia Tea Party groups engaged in educational outreach, which included Constitution classes and workshops as well as lectures. They hosted multiple events including social events such as dinners, film screenings, networking opportunities, and even special Veteran's Day events honoring their war veteran members. Constitution classes were extremely common among the tea party groups and some groups obtained influential speakers such as Rep. Michelle Bachman (R-MN) to lead these classes. Various Virginia Tea Party groups also held mixers so that members from different local tea party groups could meet and interact with each other. Susan Combs spoke about how some events intermingled both socializing and educational activities:

...like our Constitution class night even though we had a class, there was a dinner where the husbands were invited and it was really delightful so we had a good time in just visiting and just good old fashioned fun. But then we studied. And we went over, of course, we got into current events and we watched a film even... It is just exhilarating to be able to have these great conversations because we are all on the same track, on the same lines, we understand it and we are thrilled to be informed of what we need to be informed about...There are so many events and things to look forward to (Susan Combs interview, November 20, 2010).

The Richmond Tea Party organized public "Liberty 101" events to engage people who were interested in learning more about the Tea Party and its platform. Charles Murray explained that the Richmond Tea Party also held "RTP 101's," which are Richmond Tea Party Introductory Meetings that serve the same purpose as the Liberty 101 events. In October 2010, the Tea Party hosted a two-day "Virginia Tea Party Patriot

Convention” in Richmond, which included breakout seminars about the Constitution as well as grassroots activist trainings. At the Convention, Tea Party members were able to take part in national policy forums and other activities. Kyle Niman characterized it as an educational convention where people could “take workshops where you could go learn how to start your own tea party, how you canvas for candidates. Another thing was about understanding the Constitution better, how to argue positions on some issues.”

The plethora of activities available to members not only helped keep members engaged and interested but helped them invest in their Tea Party group identity. It is clear that the Tea Party as political *social outlet* was an important source of motivation for Tea Party members, particularly for elderly members with more limited social networks. Many of the meetings and activities took place on weeknights. Some of the elderly Virginia Tea Party members I interviewed talked about how fortunate they felt getting to know their fellow Tea Partiers. Dennis Irons spoke of his tea party group as an important source of hope for him. A political social outlet is different from say, a church network or doing charity work since it is about channeling passion and anger/frustration to mobilize political change. People feel a strong connection when they share similar ideological and political views; as mentioned above, sharing in the same values is a critical component of social identity.

A vital part of keeping people involved is to make sure that being a member is *fun*. When explaining how he became involved in his local tea party group, Kyle Niman emphasized the importance of having fun and how he has tried to maintain that principle as a leader within his group, “We don’t have to do this and we try to make it fun and we

try to make it meaningful. My purposes as a community leader is to make sure that we get stuff done and we have fun at it too.” Kyle Niman first became involved in the Tea Party when he was tasked with manning the kid’s zone at a Richmond Tea Party Liberty 101 event during the summer of 2010. He was apprehensive at first but: “I met some people there who helped me out and we had a sort of entertaining children’s fun zone with all this kind of simple, educational things for them like a dunking booth and chucking flip flops and dunking coins and so on. And it was just great fun. I said, I’m in this for the long haul.” The staying power of the Tea Party can be attributed to the strong sense of political group identity that members share, which is augmented by the social benefits of being a member.

A New Political Home

Several of the Tea Party members I interviewed spoke of having felt a sense of political isolation or disaffection prior to becoming involved in the Tea Party. They spoke of having felt alone in their views and political beliefs and what a great sense of relief it was to finally be among people who felt the same way they did about issues. For the majority of those interviewed, being a member of a Virginia Tea Party group was an important source of like-minded camaraderie. A common experience for the Tea Party members I spoke to underscores the importance of having first felt a sense of political alienation and then finding an enclave of other people who shared similar (or the same) political beliefs.

A few also voiced dissatisfaction with both the Democratic and Republican parties; the Tea Party meanwhile represented a possible alternative, a new political

“home.” It is in part from this feeling of political isolation that the Tea Party was able to create its own ideological group, separate even from the Republican Party. Even though the boundaries of political categories can sometimes be fairly vague and amorphous, the membership criteria for the Tea Party are very clear and defined: members must adhere to the core beliefs of: 1) fiscal responsibility, 2) small government (Constitution), and 3) free market principles. In 2010, there was very strong normative support for the movement’s goals among its members.

Many of the Tea Party members I interviewed first attended a tea party event out of curiosity and were drawn in by coming into contact with like-minded people. These members were in search of a new political group identity, which they did not find in either the Democratic or Republican Party. The Tea Party, on the other hand, gave them a strong sense of ingroup political identity, which many of them wholeheartedly invested in, to the tune of several hours of volunteerism a week. For example, as the director of his tea party group, Brian Jacobs told me that he spent 3-4 hours a day, five or six days a week on Tea Party-related work and activities. This is a significant investment of time and energy.

Judy Diamond explained how she felt after attending her first tea party event: “That was it. That was the very first little tea party, and I said, this is great. I love this. I love speaking to like-minded people. I want to do this more.” John Lyons echoed similar sentiments when talking about how he felt after his first tea party experience:

Wow, I’m really not alone. There are other people who think like me. And you know, you start, you nibble around at it at first because you don’t know what you’re walking into. And you start, you start talking to people and you find out that a lot of them have a lot of the same concerns as you do. And they’ve been looking, they’ve been looking for others

like them and unable to find them. And so, the Tea Party movement sort of furnished me that way to find people who I, with whom I share ideas about what the government should and should not be doing (John Lyons interview, November 17, 2010).

Denise Adams explained that part of what attracted people to the Tea Party was that, “People were relieved that there was someplace they could go to have their voice heard” (Denise Adams interview, November 19, 2010). Joining a tea party group seemed to have been a transformative experience for several of the Tea Party members I interviewed.

Lastly, a strong sense of ingroup social cohesion was formed due to the successes that the Tea Party has had, particularly in the aftermath of the November 2010 Congressional elections. When I asked the participants what motivated them to become Tea Party members, many of them talked about the positive effects of feeling that they were making a difference and having an impact. Kyle Niman noted, “So now I’m seeing the results of my efforts. So that was a real draw to me. I think a lot of people are seeing that too, so maybe that’s a reason a lot of people were getting involved because they’re seeing some results for their actions.” Being a member of a group that believes that it is affecting change is highly motivating and attractive; this has helped to further cement Tea Party group identity.

Tea Party Language and Symbols

Tajfel posited that the need for positive distinctiveness drives social identity (Huddy, 2001, p. 134). Members from the Richmond Tea Party spoke vocally about how the media had negatively portrayed the Tea Party as out of the mainstream, racist, and radical. Identifying so ardently with the Founding Fathers and to America’s mythic past

has been one way that the Tea Party has been able to create a positive group identity. Another mechanism has been the Tea Party name itself, which signifies a sense of *authentic* patriotism as it connects the movement to the original colonial tea party, an event designed to protest English tyranny and taxation by tossing chests of tea into the Boston Harbor.

An important element of catalyzing group identity is shared symbols. Tea Party members not only share a love for the American flag, but the movement has also adopted the Gadsden flag as a unifying symbol. The Gadsden Flag is a historic American flag with a yellow background and a picture of a rattlesnake with the words, “Don’t Tread on Me.” Since 2009, the flag has become a popular and recognizable symbol for the Tea Party and its beliefs. When I asked the interviewees about what the flag signified, several said that it is a symbol of Tea Party defiance against government over-reach. Cindy Edwards talked about the significance of the rattlesnake image: “I guess what it symbolizes with the rattlesnake, you leave it alone and it will leave you alone. If you tread on it, it is going to bite.” Judy Diamond explained that the flag is meant to act as a warning sign that not only has the Tea Party had enough, but that it will also be vigilant in making sure that those they elect to Congress do not stray from their Tea Party-approved campaign platform:

The Gadsden flag is both waving us and pointing to the past when that flag was created. But think about the color. Yellow is a warning flag. Yellow is a big warning for everybody out there who is going to try to tread on us. This flag is up. It’s not lying on the ground. We [the Tea Party] are up, and we are marching, and you have been warned. You [those elected to Congress] can either do what your job says that you are supposed to do, or we will find someone else to get that job.



Figure 1. Gadsden Flag

Courtesy of Wikipedia

When analyzing a group's social identity, it is critical to explore the common language that members use. There were many similarities among the Tea Party members I interviewed in how they articulated their views and spoke about the Tea Party and its goals. In general, the Tea Partiers in the research sample used strong language to promote the group's messages and concerns. The language was often emotionally charged, and the Tea Party members were very clearly invested in the movement and felt a personal responsibility to become involved. For example, Denise Adams described the 2010 midterm election results as "a start for sending a message on a lot of fronts to big, liberty-killing, freedom-snatching government."

At times, the Tea Party language could even be characterized as militant. Dennis Irons spoke about the U.S. being engaged in a "domestic war" over the "hearts and minds of our people." He also used the term, "citizen soldier" when referencing the need to protect and uphold the Constitution. Lauren Burns spoke about the ideological division in the U.S. as a "battle of humanity." Susan Combs described her activism by using war metaphors:

...but we wanted to get out there and be foot soldiers. We got in the trenches and really met with the people and handed out flyers for the candidates supporting the conservative candidates in our area...So anyway, you know all of that to say that it has made me even more patriotic to know that I have got to be in the fight.

As he was talking about the ‘slow creep’ of ever-increasing government, John Lyons also used militaristic discourse and told me that, “real liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots...” He explained that he did not mean that people had to die but the association is obvious; only true Americans will stand up against the threat of a “socialistic” government. As I will elaborate on in my analysis, the Tea Party members I interviewed also used dehumanizing language, particularly when speaking about the poor.

In addition, the Tea Party has appropriated the language of nationalism to a certain degree through its use of American exceptionalism, patriotism, and freedom. The Tea Party has monopolized the word “patriot” and those I spoke with consistently referred to themselves as patriots. It was understood that only those who were willing to uphold the Constitution and fight against the onslaught of government were true “patriots.” To be a true American, one must also be a patriot. In describing Tea Party activism, Susan Combs said, “Another bunch – a band – of little people decided that they want to be patriots again and rise up to say enough is enough.”

Some of the most provocative language I came across was displayed on protest signs wielded by Tea Party members at the 9/12 rally I attended. For example, one sign had a picture of Obama and the words, “Obama, the Terrorist from within.” Another sign read, “Socialism/Slavery/Evil. Karl Marx is not a Founding Father.” At the rally, the Tea Party also used controversial imagery such as negative images of Obama (with a gun, a

pitchfork, etc.). The language used at the rally was more contentious than that found in the interview data likely due to two reasons: the need for short, provocative sound bites that could fit on a protest sign and 2) those I interviewed did not want to come across as “radical” in their interview with me.

With the exception of Susan Combs, the Tea Party members I interviewed came across as fairly ‘mainstream,’ and did not use hateful or overly provocative language. Charles Murray was particularly sensitive to this as the communications director of his tea party group; he had worked extremely hard to frame the Tea Party narrative as “un-radical.” Many of the members simply came across as concerned citizens who used persuasive messaging and language to articulate their ideas in a non-threatening manner.

Furthermore, there was an interesting juxtaposition between the fearful and hopeful language that the Tea Party members used. The Tea Party members used words such as “socialistic,” “social engineering,” and other fear-infused language in their threat narratives. Equally, their language was also often hopeful; they were convinced that their activism was positive and well-meaning. They spoke of *saving America*. Several of the Tea Party members used the words “awakening” or “reawakening” to talk about both their own political activism and their hope for restoring ‘American-ness.’ During their interviews, the Tea Party members conveyed a range of emotions: frustration, indignation, anger, fear, and pride. Both hope and fear resonated through their narratives. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on the Tea Party’s shared value-system or collective axiology and discuss how Tea Party values are expressed as threat narratives.

TEA PARTY VALUES

Before beginning the next section of analysis, I would like to share the following passage to illustrate one of the Tea Party's core narratives. While explaining the Tea Party's motivations, Greg Fitzsimmons stated:

(1) We're only trying to stay true to what the Constitution allows us to do. (2) And, it's to maintain us as a country and a nation, as far as the core principals, which is the Constitution...(3) When the government gets out of control and passes laws that are not in line with the Constitution, it's a threat to our – because what keeps us in line is our Constitution. (4) It's what keeps giving me my rights as a citizen...(5) When you get away from those rights that the Constitution gives us – it's a threat to who we are as Americans, who we are as citizens (Greg Fitzsimmons interview, November 6, 2010).

This is a very rich and multi-layered passage that deals with many of the overarching themes that came out of the interview data. This person's narrative is revelatory and full of explicit and implicit meanings. The first sentence is motivational and deals with the moral mission of the Tea Party to "stay true" to the Constitution. The implicit meaning here is that of Tea Party as protector of the Constitution. The second sentence talks about the function of the Constitution as the foundational document of the U.S.; the implicit normative orientation here is that of the Constitution embodying the core values that define American identity. The third sentence in the passage defines the threatening "other" which is an out-of-control government. This person's social and political reality, like that of most of the other Tea Partiers interviewed, is that of an ever-expanding government not adhering to the Constitution.

The latter part of the third sentence and the fourth sentence re-emphasize the importance of the Constitution as the guarantor of citizen rights and freedoms. The last sentence (5) draws on the fundamental Tea Party threat narrative: that the very meaning of what it is to be American is being corrupted. Just in this one passage alone, numerous central themes emerged: the meaning and function of the Constitution, the Tea Party's role, government as threatening other, the importance of individual rights, corruption of the Constitution, and threats to American identity.

While analyzing the Tea Party interviews, I was struck by the stark similarities among the narratives. There were very strong recurrent patterns in the data and I discerned the following three primary value-commitments that the fourteen Tea Party members shared: **freedom, free enterprise, and opportunity**. I will elaborate on these three espoused Tea Party values while attempting to stay true to the participants' own interpretation of these values. Figure 2 is a simple diagram of these three value-commitments, along with the meanings associated with each. Figure 2 can also be summed up as a Tea Party view of American "exceptionalism."

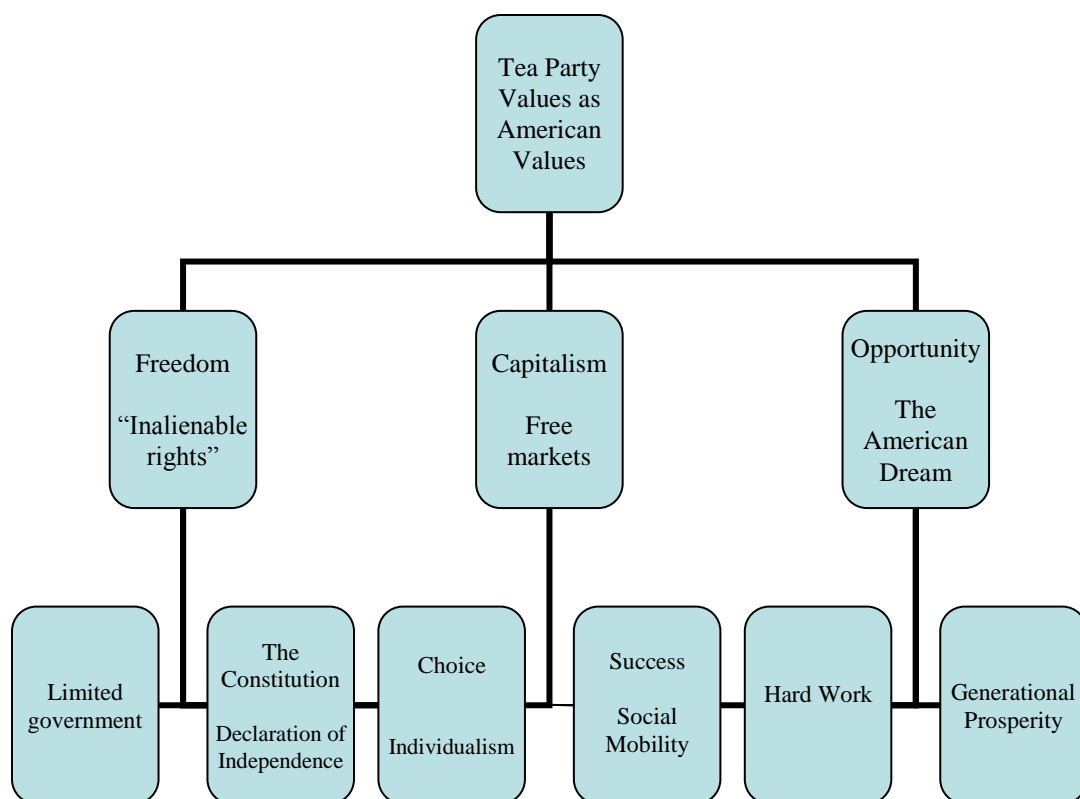


Figure 2. Tea Party Values

The majority of those interviewed spoke most specifically about political and fiscal values. Interestingly, there was very little overt mention of social or religious values. My attempts at asking participants about their personal values only yielded further elaboration of their political values. In 2010, the Tea Party stayed away from engaging much in the “culture” war social issues of abortion, gay rights, and the like. The focus first and foremost was on fiscal issues, framed in conservative and libertarian political philosophy.

From the Tea Party narratives, I would conclude that the value the Tea Partiers most deeply care about is **freedom**. I will outline what the Tea Party members mean by

“freedom,” drawing parallels with libertarianism. I will also illustrate how the Tea Party members ground their notion of freedom in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Their entrenched belief in limited government is largely tied to this value-commitment. Under this notion of “freedom,” I will include the principle of free enterprise/capitalism since the Tea Party belief in the sanctity of capitalism is intimately tied to its members’ conception of freedom.

Freedom

Freedom is *the* quintessential American value. Nearly every Tea Party member I interviewed spoke about freedom as a core value. When I asked the Tea Partiers to define what they meant by the term, a few gave vague answers or declined to elaborate while others used stock responses related to the country’s founding documents. It is very significant that the Tea Party’s definition of freedom is enshrined in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. When I asked Laurence Kline about his definition of freedom, he replied by saying, “Well, it’s defined in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Life, liberty, happiness, all that stuff” (Laurence Kline interview, November 10, 2010). Jeff Garnett shared his thoughts, “We have limited government under the Constitution so the people remain free, and the whole point of the Tea Party movement is actually freedom and liberty under the Constitution – limited government under the Constitution” (Jeff Garnett interview, November 21, 2010). The Tea Party’s value-commitment to the idea of freedom lends itself directly to its strident defense of “upholding” the Constitution.

Judy Diamond viewed the freedoms guaranteed in the Declaration of Independence as being divinely inspired: “There are freedoms given by man and there are freedoms given by God. The ones from God are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Laurence Kline shared the same sentiment, stating that these are rights “given to us by God” that cannot be taken away. Ralph Harrods also spoke of freedom as being God-given: “Now as – God intends us to be free and to be – you know, to live as individuals with individual rights.” This notion of inalienable rights has strong roots in Lockean natural rights liberalism, which states that all men are born with natural liberties (i.e. to life, liberty, and property). It is also the backbone of American civil religion.

Several of the Tea Partiers viewed the Tea Party as a liberty or freedom movement. Greg Fitzsimmons likened the Tea Party’s activism to the actions of the Founding Fathers by saying, “Thomas Jefferson and all those individuals, Franklin, when they did the Declaration of Independence back in the day, they were radicals, too. But, they were radicals for good. They were radicals for freedom. And, if they [outsiders] want to consider us [the Tea Party] radicals for keeping our country on track, then yes we are radicals in that sense.” Denise Adams specifically viewed the Tea Party as a liberty movement and signed off each of her emails with, “In liberty.”

For the Tea Party members interviewed, freedom also signifies choice and responsibility; the idea of **personal responsibility** being a key concept in Tea Party ideology. When I asked her what freedom meant, Lauren Burns replied, “Freedom means making my own choices and living with them, the consequences of those choices, and the rewards of those choices. I don’t – never have expected my government to

provide me anything. I've never thought in those terms. That's freedom to me." For Kyle Niman, freedom meant: "Having the ability to pursue my dreams without impediments imposed upon me by a government." Cindy Edwards defined freedom in this way: "I think that as an individual I think we should be able to make choices for ourselves and be responsible for ourselves and that is what this country was based on, was freedom from having the government control your life. That was what the original revolution was about, was to break control that the English had over the colonists." It's evident that the Tea Party members viewed government as an entity that limits and restricts freedom. Cindy Edwards succinctly summed up this sentiment: "the bigger the government the less freedom you have...we just want to be left free to live our own lives."

The Tea Partiers' outlook on freedom and their corresponding philosophy on limited government ring of libertarianism. A few of the members interviewed did allude to being libertarian. John Lyons explained his idea of freedom in libertarian terms:

So, what does it mean to be free? It means, first of all, you have to be able to make your own way in life. And that means you need to be largely unfettered by other people being able to place demands on you. I need to make decisions for my life, and as long as they don't adversely impact your life, and this is classic libertarian thought of course; then, I have the right to make those decisions. And, I have the, I have the right to reap the rewards of the good decisions and suffer the consequences of the bad decisions.

Ralph Harrods expressed his view on maximizing freedom: "It's kinda – I guess, in standard terms, I guess I would be a libertarian, recognizing that as long as I'm not infringing upon anybody else's rights. Be free to do whatever I can do, you know. And you know, the more freedom, the better."

Maximizing liberty is the central concept behind libertarianism. The basic idea is that people should be free to do anything that is peaceful, as long as that action does not

aggress against the person or property of anyone else (Huebert, 2010, p. 4). The theory's foundational value is the protection of individual liberty (Attas, 2005, p.1). Related to this concept is the sanctity of individual property rights, including the principle of self-ownership (Attas, 2005, p. 47). The principle of self-ownership feeds into the idea that a person should own the fruits of his/her labor. A libertarian philosophy therefore supports a capitalist economic system along with a political system devised of a minimalist government whose power over its citizens is severely limited. The Tea Partiers' political values align closely to a libertarian model of government. In a later section of the analysis, I will elaborate further on the Tea Party's principles of limited government and Constitutional purity, which are both directly linked to the group's value-commitment to "freedom."

Capitalism/Free Enterprise

To work hard and succeed is a critical American value, one that can be traced back to the country's founding. Dennis Irons described America's free enterprise system as "a way to better ourselves" and to "get a fair shake – a fair day's pay for a fair day's work." For the Tea Party members interviewed, **capitalism** was seen as the best mechanism to encourage innovation and success. Judy Diamond stated, "This country was founded by people who wanted to try and succeed on their own." The Tea Party members also described capitalism as the "fairest" system since it purportedly allows individuals to rise or fall on the basis of their own merits. The themes of hard work and success were very strongly conveyed in the Tea Party narratives. The implicit association

here is that not working hard is wholly “un-American.” Furthermore, those who did not work hard were “lazy” or “undeserving” of government benefits.

For a few of the Tea Party members in my sample, capitalism was an intimate part of their lives as small-business owners. In speaking with them, it was clear that they were proud of their hard work and were staunch, unapologetic capitalists. The small-business owners also felt that there were too many government rules, regulations, and taxes that stifled small business ventures. Jeff Garnett shared his concerns: “They're [the government] imposing, taking away my rights and making it harder for me to run my business. For instance, I personally looked at starting my own business but there're so many rules and regulations and it's like why do all a lot of these exist?” Lauren Burns echoed the same sentiments: “they’re [the government] so aggressively killing off the small business right now through regulation and through taxes.”

Many of the Tea Party members I interviewed spoke about the virtues of capitalism. They included an unfettered version of the free enterprise system in their long-term vision for continued American prosperity. Denise Adams asserted her view that, “Free market solutions are the answer to our problems.” The Tea Partiers felt that in order to revive the struggling American economy, it was necessary to get the federal government out of the market. John Lyons expressed his views on how to help the poor and unemployed:

I think, I think the best thing we can do to help them out is not give them jobs, but to get the government out of the economy so the economy can grow and furnish them jobs. I certainly don't wanna let them starve to death, but the best thing – give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day – The best thing we can do for them is to, is to go back to unleashing the human spirit here in America, like we did once a few hundred years ago, and actually

let America be America.

The message here is clear: the government should not intervene in the free market. The darker side of capitalism was never mentioned, including the systemic inequalities that have compounded over time to increasingly concentrate wealth at the top. Capitalism's potential for unmitigated greed and exploitation was not discussed in the Tea Party narratives. Financial regulation was seen as an unnecessary and debilitating burden, and there was no mention of the significant role that deregulation had played in the recent financial crisis. Even though the Tea Party members were incensed by the TARP "bailouts," the outrage was not targeted at corporate greed; rather it was targeted at the federal government for over-stepping its bounds and "stealing taxpayer money."

As touched on above, the way that the Tea Party members spoke about capitalism had distinctly libertarian undertones. For them, there was a definite connection between freedom and the free market system. Placing limits on the free market was seen as limiting freedom. John Lyons acknowledged this worldview by stating that, "restricting economic freedom, in my opinion, is restricting freedom itself." In the same vein, the Tea Party is vehemently against taxation, which its members view as a government intrusion that takes away individual freedom. Kyle Niman asserted that, "taxes take away your freedom. Simply put." This is in line with the libertarian view that the government should not be allowed to forcibly take money from people, even for taxation (Huebert, 2010, p.4). A sign at the 9/12 rally I attended exclaimed, "Born Free, Taxed to Death." Greg Fitzsimmons concurred with this sentiment and viewed taxes as a personal affront, emblematic of the government's disregard for people's hard work to make a living.

The Tea Partiers I interviewed embraced the “laissez-faire” or unfettered capitalism that was seemingly espoused by Adam Smith in his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. In *Wealth of Nations*, Smith argues that an economic system based on competitive markets is not only “natural” but is the one best suited to human nature and liberty. An important implication of Smith’s argument is that “limits on market exchange are limits on human freedom” (Bowles, 2007, p. 26). The conservative libertarian view of capitalism focuses on the individual: on his/her right to pursue his/her own rational self-interest, own property, and profit from his actions (Hosseini, 2010, 101). Libertarians believe that “a free market that protects private property rights and voluntary exchange makes people better off, and that government restrictions on liberty make people worse off” (Huebert, 2010, p. 6). The Tea Partiers certainly advocated a form of “entrepreneurial capitalism” in which people are free to start businesses, provide a service/product, and make a profit.

Similar to libertarianism, the Tea Party members believe in limited government when it comes to the economy. The Tea Party view of capitalism is the libertarian view: that capitalism is meant to maximize individual choice and liberty. The reality, however, is that what we seem to have now in America is a form of “financial capitalism” wherein only an elite few truly benefit i.e. investment bankers and hedge fund and private equity fund managers (Pearlstein, Washington Post, May 27, 2012). In terms of its political and fiscal values, the Tea Party members espoused a libertarian-leaning philosophy; it is important to note, however, that this was *not* true of their social or religious values. Not surprisingly, many of the Tea Party members appeared to be social conservatives.

Maximizing social and religious liberty was therefore not part of the Tea Party's modus operandi.

American Opportunity

Opportunity is the third primary value borne out of the Tea Party narratives. This value-commitment is closely tied to both freedom and capitalism. In granting freedom, America is seen as a place that allows people to pursue opportunities and self-actualize. Charles Murray articulated his view: "Here's [the U.S.] about giving everybody the opportunity to bring themselves up to whatever level they can. It's, it's about enabling people to achieve the best they can in their lives, and this country. And this country gives the opportunity better than any country in the world." Having opportunity and choice, and bearing the responsibility for those choices, is intrinsic to what it means to be American. John Lyons explained that by providing opportunities, America enables people to reach their full potential:

The thing that will let us become the greatest country that the world has seen – I don't want to say ever, although that may be true, but certainly in a very long time – we unleashed, America unleashed the human spirit and let it realize its own potential. That's what it means to be an American. It means to have the opportunity to succeed or fail, and if you fail to pick yourself up again, and try again.

The Tea Party members interviewed were proud of the fact that America is a place that immigrants have historically flocked to in order to pursue a better life. Judy Diamond reiterated that people are attracted to America because of the freedoms it grants: "This is the country that everybody tries to get to and wants to move to. There's a reason for this. It's because they have freedom. They have the freedom to do and to try

and to be the best they could possibly be. And as long as America encourages people to be the best, it will be the best country.”

The idea that America is a “land of opportunity” where by working hard, you can achieve anything you set your mind to, has defined the American psyche for generations. Greg Fitzsimmons defined the American Dream in this way: “Oh, the American Dream. The American Dream is the ultimate – you can be whatever you wanna be.” The American Dream is a very powerful ideal tied to opportunity, hard work, reward, and upward mobility. The Tea Party members were very much invested in their espoused value of American opportunity.

In her article, “Fair Shot or Freedom?,” Associated Press writer Sharon Cohen writes about the 2012 presidential campaign rhetoric used by Obama and Republican presidential nominee, Mitt Romney. She defines the term “opportunity society” as:

A phrase with long Republican lineage now used by Romney to describe a society in which people and businesses succeed based on merit and free enterprise, not government doling out benefits, regardless of effort. Reducing the size of federal government is essential. Reagan spoke of an opportunity society and Newt Gingrich’s Conservative Opportunity Society preached the importance of moving from a ‘liberal welfare state’ to one centered on opportunity (Cohen, Associated Press, June 16, 2012).

In the Tea Party’s narrative, opportunity is based on an unencumbered free enterprise system. Success is defined on an individualistic level and tied to the individual’s merit and hard work. The narrative is simplistic and de-contextualized; none of the Tea Party narratives from my sample touched on the hard reality of *inequality* of opportunity. In a later section of the analysis, as well as in the conclusion, I will elaborate on the Tea Partiers’ fears of waning American opportunities, particularly for their children and future generations.

If we subsume “free enterprise” under “freedom,” then I argue that the twin values of *freedom and opportunity* are the two core components of the Tea Party’s collective axiology. In the next section, I will use the idea of collective axiology to expand on the role and impact of values in binding Tea Party membership.

Collective Axiology

George Mason University professors, Daniel Rothbart and Karina Korostelina (2011) define social identity in this way:

We define social identity as an individual’s sense of connection to a social group and the social category, a connection that affects perceptions and behaviors. Social identity is generated, confirmed, and transformed in the process of interactions between groups and individuals. And through such interactions; the individual achieves a sense of belonging. As the salience of group identity intensifies, the group members take on notions of a shared history, common values, and local customs. With such salience providing ingroup unity, outgroup differences become more pronounced. Identity forms in the process of comparing ingroup characteristics with outgroup ones (p. 4).

The scholars expand on the ideas of social identity theory by emphasizing the importance of examining how group identity is shaped by “a complexity of value commitments” (2011, p. 3). Their contribution to the framework of social identity theory involves the inclusion of collective axiology, which refers to a group’s shared value system, or the value-commitments that underpin its group identity (Rothbart and Korostelina, 2006, p. 4). Rothbart and Korostelina (2011) make an argument for the inclusion of collective axiology as a basis for social identity (p. 20), and advocate for a normative approach to identity studies. Their focus is on the normative dualities that arise out of the conflict-ridden relationships between ingroups and outgroups. A group’s collective axiology defines its normative commitments, which in turn act as a rationale

for the group's behavior and actions, particularly during conflict. Even though their use of collective axiology focuses on violent conflict (i.e. civilian devastation in war, the Rwandan genocide, and other examples), I will borrow from Rothbart and Korostelina's theory since it "centers on the moral and political polarities of collectivities (2001, p. 4), which is very much at the heart of my study into Tea Party identity and political ideology.

Rothbart and Korostelina (2006) write that, "axiology is an inquiry into the nature, criteria, and conception of value" (p. 4). For this research, I was interested in understanding the Tea Party's values and how its value commitments have served as the basis for its group identity. A group's collective axiology is "defined through categories of right/wrong, good/bad, and/or virtuous/vicious, drawing upon stories of a sacred past and propelled forward in the form of obligations, expectations, requirements, demands, and rights" (p. 6). In the case of the Tea Party, the tacit claim is that its principles of limited government and Constitutional purity have roots in the country's mythic founding. It therefore becomes the obligation of the Tea Party member to fight against the overreach of government and to hold elected officials "accountable to the Constitution." Rothbart and Korostelina (2011) further explicate that a collective axiology may be revealed in "a group's political ideology, religious conviction, or its moralistic stance in relation to outsiders" (p. 27). I argue that elements of all three are present in the Tea Party's collective axiology.

Collective axiology also includes the idea of "normative order" in which the world is broken down into morally binary terms (i.e. good vs. evil). These dualities are usually

emotionally charged (Korostelina, 2007, p. 88). For example, Dennis Irons asserted that, “People with socialistic ideas are dangerous. And they are arrogant of American values.” In turn, the Tea Party members described themselves as virtuous and good: “So we [Tea Party members] are very patriotic. And everybody loves America” (Susan Combs). In these morally binary terms, socialism = bad, dangerous, while Tea Party and patriotism = good. Patriots are “good” because they fight for “freedom,” a core Tea Party value-commitment. Rothbart and Korostelina (2011) write that a group’s collective axiology “establishes judgments of character through the attribution of virtues and vices to members of the ingroup and outgroup, respectively (p. 4). Sarah Palin is therefore seen as a good American and patriot while Obama is seen as dangerous, arrogant, and suspicious.

Collective axiology is important for cementing group identity because it “unites members of a group around a shared normative vision of an idealized world” (Rothbart and Korostelina, 2011, 27). This means that any particular ingroup makes value judgments about how the world *should* be organized. In the Tea Party worldview, America should be a country of patriots, with limited government, maximum freedom, and unrestricted free enterprise. Cindy Edwards painted her vision for America: “My vision is basically that we go back to the government being scaled back, the spending being scaled back and getting a balanced budget, and less regulation for businesses to be able to create and build and employ people.” Susan Combs articulated her vision “That we go back to being a country that lives under the Constitution, that we abide by the concepts that our forefathers brought to us... that we are no longer afraid to be a Christian nation.” According to the Tea Party’s normative order, the Founding Fathers

and the Constitution are pure and good. President Obama, on the other hand, is demonized and “described as ideologically foreign because he does not adhere to the Tea Party movement’s notions of small government, low taxes, and free markets” (Goldstein, 2011, p. 1816). The Tea Party’s identity rests solidly on its value judgments, particularly in its axiological difference to Obama and what he represents and symbolizes.

Susan Combs was one example of a Tea Party member who was fully invested in this form of binary thinking and of the fourteen interviewees, the most direct and unapologetic in its expression. In her worldview, socialism, social engineering, and Obama are all dangerous “evils.” When speaking about Obama, Susan Combs asserted that, “when he [Obama] came and he said that he will fundamentally change the way our government runs. He really meant those words. People thought he meant it for good but I believe he meant it for evil because he is trying to, in all of this, to collapse the government so he can be the supreme.” She also equated Obama and his policies to Nazism. Susan Combs’ dislike and distrust of Obama was palpable and she rarely mentioned Obama by name during the interview. It was as if Obama’s very name was abhorrent to her. For many Tea Party members, both Obama and former Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, are seen as the prototypical embodiment of everything the Tea Party is against.

I outlined above that the Tea Partiers’ primary values are freedom and opportunity. Since the Tea Party’s collective axiology is centered on these twin values, I argue that the group’s threat narratives are expressed as threats to these two values. Threat narratives are an expression of an ingroup’s **normative positioning**: the Tea Party

has positioned itself as protectors of traditional American values. The implicit claim underlying the Tea Party's threat narratives then is that the "outgroup" (Obama, liberals, etc.) are corrupting these American values. In the Tea Party narrative, its positioning is the right and "virtuous" one. In the following section, I will write about the Tea Party's three central threat narratives which I have coined as: *socialism*, *burgeoning debt crisis/government spending*, and *bleak future*.

THREAT NARRATIVES

Rothbart and Korostelina (2006) write about the “importance of threat narratives as expressions of those value-commitments which are deeply embedded in perceptions of identity and difference” (p. 6). The Tea Party’s threat narratives help solidify and reinforce Tea Party beliefs, while also heightening the perceived differences between the Tea Party and the outgroup. In its narrative, the Tea Party is the standard-bearer of liberty, Constitutional purity, and Americana. Threat narratives are also used in the **“global devaluation of the other”** (Rothbart and Korostelina, 2011, p. 145) wherein for example, Obama is portrayed in posters at Tea Party rallies with a Hitler-esque moustache or pointing a gun, playing off of stereotypes of the dangerous black man (figure 3). In addition, the outgroup in this case is devalued as unpatriotic, socialist, and radical.



Figure 3. The "Othering" of Obama⁵

Threat narratives are powerful. They not only help intensify group boundaries, but can also serve as a messaging tool (or motivating force) for collective action. Rothbart and Korostelina (2011) write that, "such narratives confer on group members an existential orientation, establishing their placement (as victims) in a dangerous world" (p. 125). This dangerous world includes an Obama Presidency, the lingering effects of the

⁵ All photos in this paper were taken by Mae Wiskin at the 9/12 "Taxpayer March on Washington" Tea Party rally in Washington, DC on September 12, 2010.

Great Recession (including waning economic opportunities), and the perceived chipping away of traditional American values. For the Tea Party, the threat landscape looms large and wide. For Tea Partiers, it is a call to action.

I posit that the Tea Party's threat narratives are an expression of its primary value commitments of freedom and opportunity. In figure 4, I have characterized the Tea Party's core threat narratives as: socialism, burgeoning debt crisis/government spending, and bleak future (pessimism). Each of these threat narratives is inter-related and works in tandem. Socialism and burgeoning government debt are seen as threats to freedom. A bleak future is seen as the consequence of the dying American dream (diminishing opportunity). The three threat narratives with its attendant characteristics are summarized in the figure below:

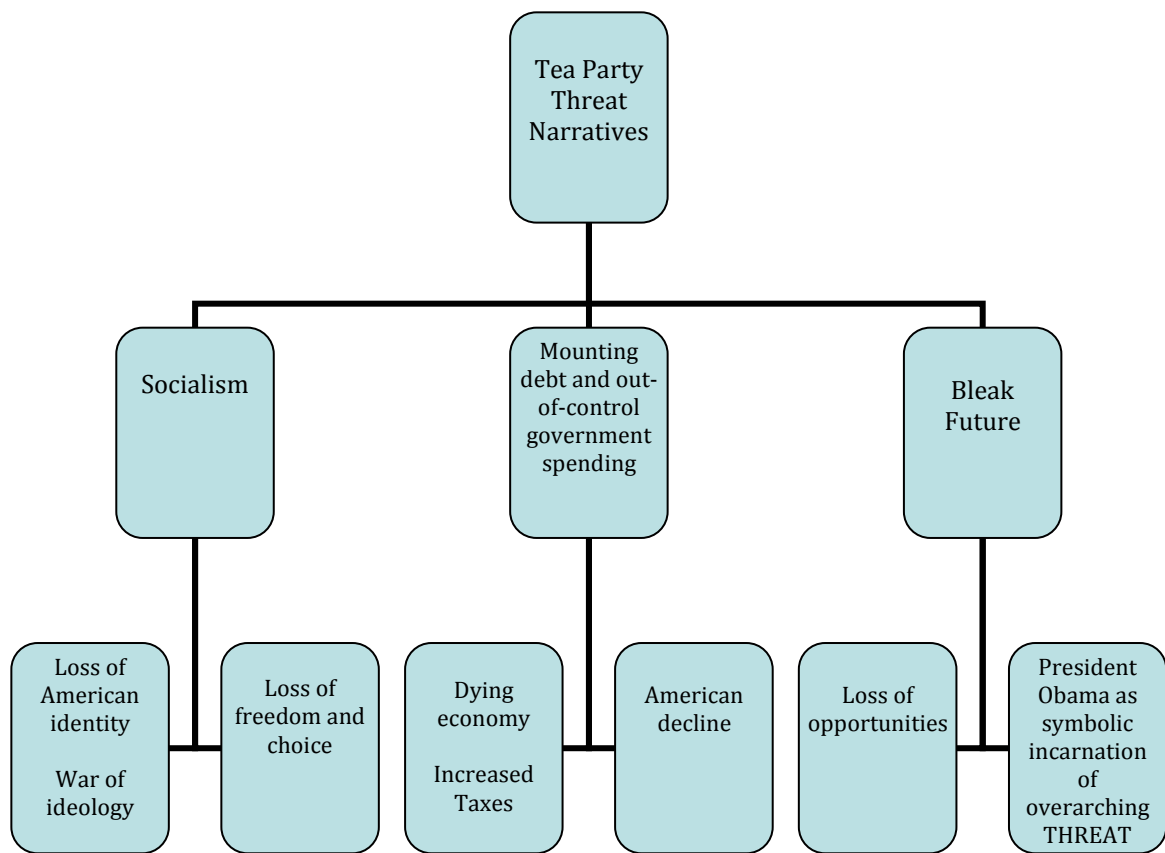


Figure 4. Threat Narratives

Socialism/Big Government

In the Tea Party narrative, socialism is the antithesis of freedom. For the Tea Party members interviewed, socialism was synonymous with “big government.” One of the Tea Partiers’ most common refrains was the virtue of limited government, which is rooted in their ideas around freedom and what it means to be a “free” citizenry. The Tea Party members’ critique of big government was tied to the threat narrative about the evils of socialism. Cindy Edwards asserted that, “socialism is in direct conflict to what our

country was based on.” For Dennis Irons, “Pure socialism is pure tyranny in its own right.” To bolster their claims about socialism, some of the Virginia Tea Party groups held events where members from formerly communist countries spoke about their experiences and fears:

So, you know, in our tea party, we have this wonderful guy named Vladimir who was from the former Soviet Union. We have a number of people who have fled communism. And he just says it breaks his heart, he was here today for the meeting, it breaks his heart to see what is happening in this country [the U.S.] He said that we are on the path step by step and really at a rapid pace. We have to do everything we can to prevent this. He came here 30 years ago and loves this country. So he says he fled exactly what he sees happening here [in America] (Susan Combs interview).

When I probed, some of the Tea Partiers maintained that the U.S. government began growing out of control during President Roosevelt’s New Deal. The Tea Partiers saw the New Deal as a time when Congress greatly exceeded its powers and violated the Constitution:

And then Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a great war-time leader, but also a very poor steward of domestic issues, prolonged the Depression through spending basically and having his government filled with people who were in the Communist Party...I don’t think those are people who represented the true values of what made this country great and they have been a threat upon the way of life in America, a slow creep and this has been a strategy, just a slow creep (Kyle Niman interview)

Susan Combs explained the “slow creep” of ever-increasing government in a similar fashion:

It is just that we have to get back to the basics and that is what we have lost in all of this. I see Obama, the Administration, all of this is kind of the conclusion of what has been happening over decades in our country. Actually since the New Deal...Franklin Roosevelt and his socialism was the name of their game that they really were promoting. It has been here for a very long time. Who knew? I didn’t know. Now I know. So it has been – we are going down this slippery slope for a very long time. And we have got to fight our way back. And say we reject it. We reject it. We reject it.

For many of the Tea Partiers interviewed, socialism is an evil they associate with Obama, liberals/progressives, and Democrats. Socialism is seen as part of a liberal agenda to fundamentally change the country and exert control over people. John Lyons stated, “The Democrats, on the other hand, want clearly, want to establish a social welfare state, a socialist welfare state and take money from me because I’m too stupid to know what to do with it and give it to whoever they think most deserves it...” Many felt that the aim of the Obama Administration was to shift America towards socialism, beginning with the healthcare overhaul: “Our president shifted everything into high gear to move towards more of a socialist European-like country. And we don’t want it. We don’t want it” (Susan Combs). Denise Adams spoke about the 2010 Affordable Care Act in these terms: “Obamacare is not about healthcare; it’s about controlling a large segment of our economy, it’s about social engineering. It’s about control.” In the Tea Party worldview, big government is perceived as a threatening paternalistic entity bent on dictating people’s lives. Threat narratives tend to “enshrine a shared public danger” (Rothbart and Korostelina, 2011, p. 141) and for the Tea Party, this shared public danger is the slow creep of socialism/big government. For the Tea Party, the threatening “other” is home-grown.



Figure 5. The Threat of Socialism

Free market principles are intricately linked to perceptions of American opportunity. For the Tea Partiers interviewed, socialism occupies the opposite end of the spectrum and is perceived as not only dangerous but as wholly **un-American**. For them,

socialism is akin to social engineering – a mechanism for remaking society, forcing decisions on people, and limiting freedoms. Denise Adams asserted that President Obama “sees our country through the eyes of social engineering,” and explained that “social engineering tamps down on drive, free will, and choice. Too much entitlement stifles initiative and personal responsibility. Not the American way at all.” A sign at the 9/12 rally corroborates Denise Adams’ assertion; it read: “Living under government assistance will suppress your life potential, your family, and your dreams” (see figure 5, bottom photo). Rothbart and Korostelina (2011) write that, “Underpinning the threat narrative is a system of normative positioning of groups (p. 143). The Tea Party is positioning itself as preserving the American way of life, while liberals/Democrats are being positioned as a real threat to American identity and prosperity.

A distinctive element of the ‘socialism’ threat narrative is the fear of lost choice and freedom. Tea Party members’ commitment to preserving freedom is central to their activism and identity as a group. Every one of the interviewees expounded on the threat of losing freedom, and decried the government’s role in chipping away at this fundamental American value. Big government (socialism) was associated with too much government intrusion into people’s lives. Greg Fitzsimmons lamented that, “government is forcing things down our throat,” and Jeff Garnett repeatedly stated his view that, “With every government agency there's less freedom, less freedom and liberty.” Brian Jacobs explained his reasoning:

Well, I think we are going to totally become a socialist state. I think we are evolving to that. Where the government tells you basically how to do things, what you are going to watch, what you are going to listen to, but like right now, they are telling you which light bulbs you can use, and how much water you can use. But they will also be telling you

how much electricity you can use, when you can use power for air conditioning or heating, what car you can drive, what type of grass you can use in your lawn because you cannot use grass anymore, you have to use native bushes or whatever. It is just slowly going to erode our choices in how we live. We are not going to be able to make the choices, they are going to be made for us, and our choices are going to be much more limited in the future. And the government is going to provide a basic standard of living but when you take success out of it, I mean take failure out of it and provide a bottom, you also take success out of it, you take the reason for striving to go forth and grow, and benefit, build. That is what I am afraid of (Brian Jacobs interview, November 11, 2010).

The threat of losing freedom and choice is a fear that can easily be capitalized on to mobilize people into action.

The Tea Party members were very much against what they perceived to be government over-reach; they felt that the government dictated too many aspects of their lives, which in turn limited their choices and therefore, their freedom. To them, big government is a major threat to personal freedom. A sign at the Tea Party rally I attended exclaimed, “Wake Up America – U R Losing Freedom” [*sic*].



Figure 6. Wake Up America!

Denise Adams explained that government over-reach would mean that “young people will have fewer choices and not be able to live their own lives.” According to an April 2010 Pew Research Center survey analysis, “73% of Tea Party backers say the federal government threatens their personal rights and freedoms, including 57% who say the government is a major threat” (Pew Research Center, April 18, 2010). Freedom is inextricably linked to the American ideal of “rugged individualism,” with socialism strongly perceived as being at odds with American notions of **individualism** and individual autonomy. The socialism threat narrative, drawn directly from the primary value-commitment of freedom, is fundamental to the Tea Party’s American identity.

Out-of-Control Government Spending and Debt

The growing national debt was a top concern for the Tea Party members I interviewed in 2010; twelve out of the fourteen spoke about what they perceived to be “out-of-control” government spending. Many of the Virginia Tea Party websites prominently displayed a national debt ticker to show how quickly the debt was rising. Several of the Tea Partiers talked about the need to cut government “waste” by eliminating departments such as the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Education. To the Tea Partiers, the escalating national debt is a corollary of such government waste. There was no mention however of the role that military spending, in terms of the War on Terror (Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan), has had on increasing the national debt. The “out-of-control” government spending was spoken of only in terms of wasteful spending on specific government departments and programs, in particular social safety net programs or “hand-outs.” Socialism, big government, and

excessive spending all went hand-in-hand. The Tea Party members criticized what they interpreted to be the “tax and spend” mentality of big government.

The ballooning national debt is one of the Tea Party’s core threat narratives, tied to apocalyptic visions of an eventual U.S. demise. Many of the Tea Party members interviewed were convinced of the necessity of making draconian cuts to government spending in order to reduce the national debt. When I asked about possible consequences, many responded that economic collapse would be a likely outcome of not resolving the national debt. Laurence Kline and John Lyons both spoke with complete surety that the nation’s debt problem would lead to an economic meltdown. John Lyons shared his thoughts: “So, I think we are going to continue on the trajectory we’re on and I think the consequence is gonna be a very, very serious economic collapse. I think it’s –I think we’ve crossed the event horizon. I, I don’t think it’s avoidable at this point. It’s going to happen.”

This feeling of inevitability was also conveyed by Laurence Kline: “....our country won't be able to make its debt payments or pay for the things and then we'll be defaulting on our bonds and it's going to be a complete meltdown of the economic system in this country by, you know, probably 2020, 2025 at the latest. So, now it's just a matter of -- it's not a matter of if it's going to happen, it's a matter of when.” Cindy Edwards also expressed her fears:

I think most people are kind of afraid of what could happen if the federal government's spending and the state government's spending and all that does not get under control, we feel like if we do not do something about it now, that it is gonna reach the point where nothing can be done about it (Cindy Edwards interview, November 10, 2010).

Charles Murray spoke about the national debt by referencing Europe's ongoing debt crisis: "The consequence is that from a fiscal standpoint we're on an unsustainable path. The consequences have been played out for us in Europe. Watch what's going on in Greece and Ireland, and you're seeing our future. That is our future from a fiscal standpoint." This threat narrative was at the forefront of the Tea Party's platform in 2010.



Figure 7. Outrage over Government Spending

In order to reduce the national debt, the Tea Party believes that less government spending must go hand-in-hand with lower taxes. Many of the signs at the Tea Party rally I attended dealt with the need to lower taxes. One sign read: Taxed Enough Already (acronym for **TEA** Party), Less Spending, Lower Taxes," while another read, "Stop Taxing and Spending." The question of taxes and how to best address the national debt

represents a great ideological divide between Republicans/conservatives and Democrats/liberals.

Bleak Future (Pessimism)

The threat narrative that underlies the first two is fear and concern for the future of the country. The “bleak future” threat narrative is directly borne out of the value-commitment to opportunity. For the Tea Party members interviewed, diminishing opportunities, big government initiatives, and an ever-increasing national debt have all led to feelings of pessimism about the future. When I asked about their motivation for joining the Tea Party, several of the members underscored their concern for their children’s future. During her 75-minute interview, Denise Adams repeatedly let me know that she was fighting for me, to preserve *my* liberty. I understood that to her, I symbolized a younger generation whose livelihoods, opportunities, and freedoms were all under attack. I argue that the bleak future threat narrative played a very important role in propelling Tea Party activism.

When I asked Cindy Edwards what she thought was driving the heightened level of Tea Party activism, she replied, “I think it is passion but I think it is also that this feeling that things potentially could end very, very badly for this country and I think that scares us.” Lauren Burns simply said, “So I fear for – I mean I have a daughter, so I fear for what the next generation will look like.” Cindy Edwards explained her concern that the burgeoning national debt would seriously inhibit the ability of future generations to simply “make it.”

The [government] spending is out of control and the other thing is that we are building up debt that cannot be paid off in our lifetime. So basically we are creating debt that is going to be on the backs of our children and grandchildren to pay off. So how are they going to live their lives and run their governments when they are trying to pay off the debt that we created, if we do not crash the system before then?

Charles Murray expressed this about the members of his tea party group: "...and all that they want to do is make sure that the country is solvent when their grandkids grow up."

Susan Combs echoed similar sentiments saying that the tea party members in her group "are scared to death of the country we are leaving to our children and they have to do something."

Many of the Tea Party members interviewed were also concerned about a future where government would severely regulate people's lives. Cindy Edwards explained that, "We [the Tea Party] are really doing this because we are worried about the country and whether or not some people disagree and think we are crazy or whatever. But we are not trying to benefit personally from this. Only from the standpoint that we think things have gotten off track and that is all we want is to get back to a government that is under control." She went on to convey the Tea Party's sincerity in wanting to secure a "better" future for the country: "...the other thing that I think that is unique [about the Tea Party] is that the people involved, at least in my experience, is that we are all doing this for the betterment of our country and at least in our opinion, that it is for our country." The bleak future threat narrative is significant because it allows Tea Party members to describe their group membership in very positive terms: patriotism (working for the betterment of the country), selflessness (concern for future generations), and preservation (of American

opportunities). This threat narrative gives Tea Party members a sense of “virtuous” normative agency.

Now that I have expanded on the Tea Party’s main value-commitments and the expression of those values as threat narratives, I will discuss elements of the Tea Party that hint of a fundamentalist orientation. In the next chapter, I argue that the Tea Party’s fundamentalist-like character serves to attract and bind would-be members to the group. I also argue that the strength of Tea Party identity is augmented by its “fundamentalism” and strict belief system, or collective axiology.

TEA PARTY FUNDAMENTALISM

Although the Tea Party movement does have religious undertones, I will not be focusing on Tea Party religiosity. As mentioned in the literature review, my argument is that of *Tea Party as religion*. Nevertheless, I will briefly highlight the importance of Christianity to the Tea Party and then speak to how Tea Party beliefs denote an American civil religion, based on the country's founding documents.

According to an August 2011 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), fully three-quarters (75%) of those who identify with the Tea Party movement describe themselves as a "Christian conservative" (PRRI, August 2011). Susan Combs observed this about her tea party group: "I really couldn't tell you how many are not Christians. We start every meeting with a prayer." A February 2011 analysis by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life found that the Tea Party draws "disproportionate support from the ranks of white evangelical Protestants" (Clement and Green, February 23, 2011). According to this analysis, the Tea Party is made up of 34% white evangelical Protestants. The Pew analysis also found that Tea Party supporters are much more likely than registered voters as a whole to say that their religion is the most important factor in determining their opinions on social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage (Clement and Green, February 23, 2011).

Susan Combs in particular voiced specifically Christian aspirations for the country. She lamented that, “Prayer life is being cut out of football games, graduations, so our way of life where we honored our Father in heaven, it becomes taboo. And the deal is that our nation was built on these very premises.” She also expressed her hope that, “We are no longer afraid to be a Christian nation. That we are who we are and that means patriotic Christian people who welcome people of all persuasions.” This same sense of Christian patriotism was a strong undercurrent in the Tea Party members’ narratives. A 2010 American Values Survey found that 55 percent of Tea Partiers believe that the U.S. “has always been and is currently a Christian nation” (as cited in Formisano, 2012, p. 54). Richard Hughes (2004) writes that the myth of ‘America as a Christian Nation’ is problematic not least because it “flies in the face of the founders’ intentions. In spite of their Christian grounding, they never intended to create an explicitly Christian nation (p. 88). This would most likely be an unpopular viewpoint in tea party circles.

For the Tea Party members I interviewed, the Constitution was conveyed as a sort of “national bible.” Foley (2012) writes that the Tea Partiers’ zeal in studying the Constitution has been likened to Bible study (p.167). Several of the interviewees spoke of the Constitution as God’s plan for the country. For them, the Constitution is grounded in Christianity and is full of religious symbolism. For example, Judy Diamond affirmed: “Personally, being American is something I take a lot of pride in. I believe that this country is the greatest not just on earth, but in all of history. I think that it was founded based on principles created by God with a great deal of thought.” When speaking about

the Constitution, Susan Combs explained, “It was our Creator who gave us that. It is just chock full of Christianity.”

Some of the Tea Party members described their reason for joining as a “calling,” conjuring up religious connotations. Being called to a mission imbues it with value and meaning. Throughout her interview, Denise Adams spoke repeatedly about being “called to duty” to join the movement. She saw her activism as her calling, galvanized by her very real concern for future generations: “I’m very concerned for you. I’m called to protect your liberty and freedom.” Kyle Niman described his activism in this way: “This is something of a higher calling... This is different, a different kind of purpose.” Ralph Harrods also explained his motivation as being borne of a higher purpose:

I think the motivation for me probably came from wanting to do something that was – that was powerful, meaningful that related to – well, basically, I’ve been praying about wanting to be able to do something, and – or you know, what am I supposed to do? And just the political situation, just kind of helped ‘open my eyes’ that the – very – best thing that we can do for our fellow man is to set the stage to do right by our fellow man, by setting the environment as God designed it mostly to be for us to be free and in a – in a country – in an environment that actually is suited to our nature (Ralph Harrods interview, November 22, 2010).

Ralph Harrods’ quote also speaks to the natural rights liberalism (i.e. inalienable rights, freedom, and individual sovereignty) that some of the Tea Partiers were fond of using to justify their activism and vision for America. Using the “rights” language of liberalism is compelling and potent, and seemingly very American.

For the Tea Party members interviewed, their activism not only gave them a sense of meaning but also a sense of personal and group identity. Susan Combs described her involvement in the Tea Party: “I am very passionate about this. It really caught me up and it is sort of like you find that this is where you are supposed to be. I think each one of us,

at different times in our lives, we have a place that we are supposed to be. And definitely this is where I am to be right now and for the rest of my life really.”

A degree of religiosity was on display at the Tea Party rally I attended at the Capitol on Sept. 12, 2010. There were numerous signs and posters including a satirical one spoofing the iconic 2008 Obama Hope campaign poster. In this version, the image is of Jesus with the words, “Jesus is our Greatest Hope” (figure 8). Another poster proclaimed, “America was founded on Judeo-Christian principles and values” (see figure 6). For these Tea Party members, America is a decidedly Christian nation. An easy way to “otherize” Obama then has been to castigate him for being “Muslim.” Susan Combs declared that Obama is subjugating the moral values of the country because he is not Christian. When I asked her the interview question, “Do you think that any traditional American values are being compromised or threatened today?,” she replied with:

Well, aside from what I said before, our whole life is being threatened. Our moral values are being threatened. Even though he [Obama] proclaims Christianity, everything he aspires to, who he wants to support and encourage are the Muslims. So as a result of that, you know, he has not attended prayer breakfasts and things that traditionally our President is involved in. He [Obama] avoids anything Christian.

Obama has regularly been demonized by the Tea Party by being labeled un-American. This is a significant tactic because the Tea Party’s activism has been driven in large part by its very “American-ness,” and desire to re-imagine the country according to “traditional” American norms and values.



Figure 8: Jesus is our Greatest Hope

The Problem of Fundamentalism

“There is a war over the hearts and minds of our people” (Dennis Irons interview, November 11, 2010)

Even though the Tea Party did draw a significant amount of support from Christian conservatives and evangelical Protestants, I would not characterize the movement as an overtly religious one. Instead of espousing religious orthodoxy, the Tea Partiers displayed a form of *political fundamentalism* centered on notions of “liberty” and Americanism (of what is and isn’t “American”). Fundamentalism works by staking moral claims. In this case, Tea Party members largely believe that the Tea Party holds the moral high ground when it comes to setting America “back on track.”

Fundamentalism has generally been used to describe extreme (and often violent) religious movements. I am not using the term “fundamentalism” in its traditional sense to

describe the Tea Party. I am very loosely borrowing from Almond, Appleby, and Sivan's *Strong Religion* to define fundamentalism as a "particular configuration of ideology" (2003, p. 14) that translates into a discernable "pattern of belief and behavior" (p. 15) that is shared by members of a group. I argue that the Tea Party is "fundamentalist-like" in its adherence to uncompromising values that are regarded as sacred. **In my definition of Tea Party members as "fundamentalists," I am describing Tea Party members who are true believers in the fundamentals of the Constitution (i.e. "liberty"), in the principles of free enterprise, and in what they believe are the very fundamentals of what it means to be American.**

In the fifth volume of the Fundamentalism Project called *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, Almond, Appleby, and Sivan (2004) write about the 'family resemblances' or properties of fundamentalism. I will borrow from their conceptual framework to illustrate how the Tea Party movement exhibited fundamentalist-like characteristics and to show how the Virginia Tea Party members in my research sample ascribed to a particular pattern of ideological belief. According to Almond, Sivan, and Appleby (2004), "to qualify as genuine fundamentalism in our understanding, a movement must be concerned first and foremost with the erosion of religion and its proper role in society" (p. 405). The Tea Party movement would therefore not qualify but it is still useful to analyze its patterns and belief system using these scholars' fundamentalism framework in order to better understand tea party group dynamics and identity.

Fundamentalist movements often emerge during what adherents would characterize as “threatening times” or crises. For the Tea Party, the period following the 2008 take-over of the White House and both houses of Congress by Democrats, punctuated by the greatest recession since the Great Depression, would qualify as a dangerous and uncertain time in America. Nearly every one of the Virginia Tea Party members I interviewed characterized the 2010 political climate and the country’s trajectory as threatening. Many of the Tea Partiers felt compelled to join a local tea party group out of concern and fear for the future. Almond, Appleby, and Sivan (2004) assert that a central characteristic of fundamentalism is that it is reactive, specifically to secularizing forces that are seen as marginalizing religion (p. 405). Even though the great majority of Tea Party members are Christian, and they see America as a fundamentally Christian country, the Tea Party is not religiously reactive. It is, however, highly reactive to demographic and socio-political changes as well as to specific Democratic-led legislation which they perceive to be dangerous for the direction of the country.

When I asked what had motivated them to become Tea Party members, most of the interviewees cited either the highly unpopular and controversial “TARP bailouts” and/or “Obamacare.” Charles Murray denied that the Tea Party was racially motivated by the election of the first American black President, but rather by the ideological values that Obama represents: “You know, the rooster crows and the sun comes up, but that doesn’t mean the rooster caused the sun to come up! Obama was elected and the Tea Party sort of began to come together, but it’s not causal other than his policies really fueled the Tea Party fire. That’s part of it.” Kyle Niman spoke about how people were against the idea

of universal healthcare and how the 2010 Affordable Care Act helped mobilize the Tea Party as a viable political group:

So that [healthcare bill] really did fire us up. Definitely that was a catalyst because it was just the gleaming jewel of liberal legislation. That was easy to attack because we know it's a failure from the start because it's been tried around the world. It doesn't work. And in our opinion, it doesn't work.

Nearly half of the Tea Party members interviewed pinpointed the 2008 TARP bailouts as the initial driving catalyst for the Tea Party's formation. John Lyons articulated how TARP was a pivotal and defining event that propelled would-be members to join the Tea Party:

"Why are you here?" What was the one thing that made you get off your butt and come to this thing [tea party rally] and most of them, I mean, I mean like 90% of them said, "TARP." TARP was the most blatant act of theft by the government in recent history. They literally stole 700 billion dollars from us and gave it to the banks and it was so obvious, everybody knew it.

The Tea Party was a highly reactive phenomenon, borne out of the "politics of crisis." Almond, Sivan, and Appleby (2004) write that the characteristic of reactivity "constitutes the very essence of fundamentalist movements" (p. 409). Fundamentalists see the "state" as being highly interventionist and intrusive (Almond, Sivan, and Appleby, 2004, p. 409). As outlined above, Tea Party members view the federal government as highly intrusive in the public and private sphere. The Tea Party has been reacting against a host of internal domestic changes.

Constitutional Purity

In the midst of economic uncertainty, steep pessimism about the future, and perceived ideological threats, I argue that Tea Party members find some measure of

collective security in the group's stringent embrace of particular American values and principles. One such belief is in the sanctity of the Constitution.

The over-riding view of the Tea Partiers I interviewed is that of the Founding Fathers as omniscient beings who created the country's most sacrosanct text - the Constitution. There is little doubt that the Founding Fathers occupy a uniquely special place in the Tea Party pantheon. Schmalz is quoted as saying: "I think in some ways the founding fathers are almost divinized. They [The Tea Party] don't say this explicitly. There is this resonance they were these far-seeing individuals who had more than normal human perception" (as cited in Khan, ABCNews.com, October 18, 2011). Kyle Niman explained:

But we [the Tea Party] think that those founding documents were a, I believe, a gift. That somehow these guys [the Founding Fathers] were very educated, very knowledgeable about what was going on at the time and created this new system of government, this framework within which people could pursue their dreams with limited government involvement. And the United States became the most powerful, most influential and the richest, you could say the freest nation in the history of mankind in the shortest period of time. I would say that's because of the system of government that our Founders set up for us.

The implication is that the Constitution should be followed as the Founding Fathers had "intended," regardless of changing circumstances or contexts. Tea Party members advocate adhering to a very literal or originalist interpretation of the Constitution. When I asked him about the common values shared by Tea Party members, Laurence Kline replied, "In general, I think it's a -- I can't -- I'm gonna say it's a belief that in the -- in a literal construction view of the Constitution." Almond, Sivan, and Appleby (2004) explain that for fundamentalists, "a crucial element of their rhetoric and self-understanding is the assertion that their innovative programs are based on the

authority of the sacred past, whether that past be represented in a privileged text or tradition, or in the teachings of a charismatic or official leader (p. 402). The Tea Party's devotion to the Constitution as a privileged text has a fundamentalist sub-text, and the group is very much tied to the idea of a sacred American past. The Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights are seen as deriving from divine, inspired origin and as such, are absolute.

Ralph Harrods depicted how his belief in the Constitution propelled him to join the Tea Party: "Then this political situation came along, and it was basically, you know, made me realize that you know, yeah, this is what the Constitution is about, protecting God's plan on this earth, protecting that liberty for everyone to live to their full potential." For another Tea Party member, "Staying true to God and the Constitution" were of central importance to her. If the Constitution is interpreted as an extension of God's will, then it becomes a sacred duty to uphold it: "those are God-given rights that are meant to be protected by the Constitution" (Judy Diamond). Nancy Ammerman (1994) writes that, "fundamentalists make claims to being the legitimate keepers of the nation's traditions...U.S. fundamentalists talk about the Christian intentions of the Founding Fathers, picturing the U.S. Constitution as a sacred document built on biblical principles and granting political liberties as a sacred trust" (p. 152). The parallels here are apparent.

I argue that this thread of Constitutional "fundamentalism" is one of the overarching principles anchoring Tea Party ideology. This Constitutional refrain was present in every interview. Ralph Harrods asserted, "But if there's one thing that we [the

Tea Party] all have in common, I think it's that we all agree that the Constitution is right." The belief in the sacredness and veracity of the Constitution is at the core of Tea Party identity. Goldstein (2011) writes that in the "Tea Party's constitutional mythology, a legendary and possibly divinely inspired group known as the Founders created a sacred text known as the Constitution that embodies the values that make America exceptional – the libertarian principles of individualism, limited government, and faith in free markets" (p. 1809).

Ammerman (1994) writes that, "The mobilizing stories at the heart of fundamentalist movements are stories that link a renewed future with renewed adherence to the sacred texts and authorities formerly dominant in that society (p.153). Tea Partiers believe that "going back" to the Constitution would set the country back on its "proper" course. Denise Adams reiterated that the "Tea Party is about number one: protecting and affirming the Constitution." Many of the signs at the Tea Party rally I attended dealt with "restoring" the Constitution. The Virginia Tea Party Convention from October 2010 was themed "The Constitution Still Matters." Tea Party members are Constitutional "true believers" or essentialists.

The Tea Partiers I interviewed were concerned that Congress, Obama, and the federal government have strayed dangerously far from what the Constitution mandates. Their perception is that the federal government has grossly over-extended its powers. To them, the 2008 TARP bailouts and the 2010 Affordable Care Act are unconstitutional. Laurence Kline was indignant over what he viewed as breaches to the Constitution: "It's not the way that the Constitution was written, it's not the way the country was founded,

and the majority of people would rebel against that sort of nation.” He declared that, “people need to start standing up for the Constitutional way to do things.” For the Tea Party, the Constitution is meant to act as a safeguard against government’s abuse of power. Cindy Edwards explained, “The Constitution represents I think what the Founding Fathers set out to do with the Constitution was to protect the citizens from the government. In other words, the Constitution was meant to limit the power of government, it was never set out to limit the power of the citizens.” For the Tea Party, a large federal government is incompatible to freedom.

Every Tea Party member I interviewed talked about the importance of “going back” to the Constitution. When I asked Judy Diamond about the personal values that were most important to her, she replied that, “The single most important one to me is a return to the Constitution, and the Constitutional values. The more I find out about the Constitution, the more I see it’s been twisted and warped to give more and more power to the federal government that should have stayed with the American people. And I want to go back to those original values that are in there.” A sign at the Tea Party rally I attended read, “Honor and Obey the Constitution” (figure 9). Ralph Harrods explained that it is a Tea Party priority to get “the government to operate within the bounds of the Constitution. I think, pretty much, everybody agrees on that.” This principle of limited government is at the crux of Tea Party identity and is intimately tied to members’ investment in the Constitution. To them, the Constitution and the ideal of limited government go hand-in-hand. Foley (2012) writes that, “In the words of the movement’s Contract from America, the [Tea Party] movement seeks to ‘restore limited government

consistent with the U.S. Constitution's meaning' (p. 20). The Tea Party's desire to preserve the Constitution is in itself symbolic; it is about preserving the "traditional" American way of life.



Figure 9. The Sanctity of the Constitution

Tea Partiers specifically take issue with how the "elastic clause" has been interpreted by Congress. The Necessary and Proper Clause is part of Article I of the Constitution, which establishes the powers of the U.S. Congress. Article I, section 8, clause 18 states that: "The Congress shall have Power – To make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States, or in any Department or Officer thereof." Tea Partiers claim that Congress has abused the elastic clause to pass laws (i.e. "Obamacare") not in keeping with the original intent of the Founding Fathers. Goldstein (2011) writes that, "the Tea Party movement is centrally

focused on the meaning of the Constitution,” convinced that “the nation is facing a crisis because it has abandoned the Constitution” and determined to “restore the government to what they believe are its foundational principles (p. 1807).

The Tea Party reveres Thomas Jefferson as a Founding Father, explicitly drawing from Jefferson’s concept of “republicanism under a limited government based on a written constitution strictly interpreted” (Kaminski, 1996, p. 515). Jefferson did believe that “the natural progress of things is for liberty to yield, and government to gain ground,” and that the only way to preserve liberty was through the active civic engagement of citizens in government (as cited in Kaminski, 1996, p.515). Unlike the Tea Party, however, Kaminski (1996) writes that Jefferson had “no reverence for the sanctity of original intent” (p. 516); Jefferson believed that constitutional change was inevitable. The Tea Party’s quest for Constitutional purity is misplaced, and can be likened to that of Christian fundamentalists seeking to promote a literal interpretation of the Bible.

Tea Party as Watchdog

An additional ideological characteristic of fundamentalism is that of “moral Manicheanism,” or certitude (Almond, Sivan, & Appleby, 2004, p. 406). Moral Manicheanism is related to collective axiology in that it is concerned with understanding the world in dualistic terms i.e. good vs. evil. Almond, Sivan, and Appleby (2004) write that, “A dualistic or Manichean worldview is one in which reality is considered to be uncompromisingly divided into light, which is identified with the world of the spirit and of the good, and darkness, which is identified with matter and evil” (p. 406). All of the

Tea Party members I interviewed displayed this strong sense of certitude about the “rightness” of their Tea Party beliefs. They believed that the right mechanism for ensuring a moral and prosperous future for the country entailed the following: limited government under the Constitution, fiscal responsibility, free enterprise, and liberty. Any idea or legislation that deviated from these core beliefs was seen as unpatriotic and un-American (i.e. as bad or evil). With this high level of moral Manicheanism, there is little or no room for alternate worldviews.

Moral Manicheanism is related to upholding orthodoxy or “right belief,” a central property of fundamentalism (Almond, Sivan, and Appleby, 2004, p. 402). Not only are Tea Party members committed to these “right beliefs,” but they are dedicated to ensuring that their elected officials adhere to Tea Party orthodoxy. Several of the Tea Party members explained that one of the primary roles of the Tea Party is to act as *watchdogs* over the representatives they helped elect in the November 2010 election. Greg Fitzsimmons put it bluntly, “The Tea Party is looking at – when we send you to Washington, we expect you to abide by the Constitution, we expect you to be fiscally accountable, we expect you to be representing the core values, which we believe in. And, if you don’t do that, then we’ll vote you out.” Ralph Harrods also emphasized “right beliefs” when referencing the Constitution classes that the Tea Party Caucus had set up for the incoming House freshman Republicans: “The Tea Party Caucus and the classes that they’re giving for incoming freshman, at least, with a Constitutional basis, at least, gives them some – of the ‘correct’ perspective.”

Electing officials who believe in the Tea Party's principles is a critical strategy for the movement as it strives to "restore" and preserve traditional American values and the American way of life:

*But what we're doing in the _____ Tea Party and what I see in other tea party groups is that we are making a difference, we are having an effect on elections, and not just nationally. I want to focus on the local. We're having a lot of effect on local elections too. And that's what we're gonna do. We're gonna start local and use rising stars, who eventually are gonna be running this country one day and **we want to make sure that they believe in our principles so they're gonna bring back America in that direction** (Kyle Niman interview).*

Judy Diamond explained how the Tea Party expected to hold the Congressional freshmen that they helped elect into office in 2010 accountable to the movement:

Actually, we're going to be here watching you, and we'll let you know if you start to slip up. Boy, will we ever let you know if you start to slip up. The second you get into office, you're not my friend anymore. You're my employee, and I'm watching you. You're on probation.

Kyle Niman was also very direct when talking about the Tea Party, "...if your viewpoints don't chime with us, we don't want you as part of our group, really." The certitude that all of the Tea Party members displayed in their group's collective axiology was a striking element of the group's fundamentalist orientation. The Tea Party quest for near-total ideological "purity" in their elected officials has, however, alienated some mainline conservative Republicans. It also means that the Tea Party must back increasingly "hard-core" conservatives. This can be evidenced in the 2012 election cycle by the toppling of long-term moderate Republican Congressmen such as Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) who lost his primary bid to Richard Mourdock, a Tea Party-backed challenger who criticized Lugar's support of the financial bailout, Obama's Supreme Court nominees, and raising the debt ceiling. Lugar called Mourdock's "unrelenting

partisan mindset” irreconcilable to his own philosophy of governance and compromise (as cited in Montopoli, CBS News, May 8, 2012). I posit that the Tea Party drive for ideological purity will prove to be a very real political liability for the Republican Party in the 2012 election.

The problem with fundamentalism is that it is inherently uncompromising. In my definition of Tea Party fundamentalism, one of the key elements is this issue of non-compromise. In the case of the Tea Party, not compromising is seen as a necessary attribute and a badge of honor. Compromise is weakness. One of the defining aspects of fundamentalism is a strict belief in the veracity and purity of certain values and truths, to the point of absolute certainty. The problem is that absolute surety precludes compromise. This is shown in stark relief when Tea Party members compare liberal vs. conservative Tea Party ideology. Laurence Kline exclaimed, “And it's really I think at some point, it's incompatible. There's no way to compromise my vision of what America looks like and Nancy Pelosi's vision of what America looks like – they're incompatible. There's no room to compromise and that's why the Republicans always get themselves in trouble, because they always try to compromise with the Democrats.” Lauren Burns talked about the necessity of *not* compromising, “Trust me, I've lived in almost isolation in terms of being a conservative in a liberal environment, and it is the worst kind of loneliness. And to compromise is to destroy one's self.” The Tea Party's identity is bound in its uncompromising values and vision for America. Their narrative is not only just but the “correct” one.

Fundamentalist beliefs and ideals are zero-sum with very little room for dissonance. The Tea Party's unyielding stance towards compromise and its almost singular focus on Constitutional purity have irrevocably influenced the Republican Party. This was evidenced most notably in the bitterly partisan debate in 2011 over raising the debt ceiling and reducing the national debt. When compromise is outwardly discouraged in politics, true democracy is weakened. With the Tea Party as the watchdog of the Republican Party, raising taxes was completely out of the question, which severely limited a comprehensive approach to addressing the national debt. The Tea Party and its uncompromising approach to raising taxes played a central role in the Congressional Super Committee's collapse on Nov. 21, 2011 as it tried to reach a bipartisan agreement on reducing the federal deficit. In his book, *The Tea Party*, Ronald Formisano (2012) writes that:

The [Tea Party] movement's dedicated rank and file will tolerate no politics-as-usual compromise, moderate Republican lawmakers, or negotiation with political adversaries. This inflexibility – grassroots Tea Party leaders would call it "loyalty to principles" – has saturated the Republican congressional leadership and determined the positioning of most Republicans seeking national elective office in 2012. The salient fact: some 40 or even 45 percent of Republican Primary voters are hard-core, no-compromise Tea Party supporters (p. 2).

Fundamentalist Economics

I have identified freedom and opportunity as the two primary values in the Tea Party's collective axiology. Capitalism is intricately intertwined with these twin values; it is equated to economic freedom and by extension, as a means to create opportunity. I will borrow the term "fundamentalist economics" (Timur Kuran, 1993, p. 290) to characterize the Tea Partiers' commitment to unrestricted free enterprise. For the Tea Party members,

any form of economic regulation was seen as “endangering cherished market freedoms” (Kuran, 1993, p. 291). Timur Kuran (1993) writes that implicit in fundamentalist economics is “the notion of a unique legitimate choice, as opposed to many, equally legitimate choices” (p. 292). The Tea Partiers were vehemently opposed to anything that rang of socialism or of the welfare state. Free enterprise was seen as the only American way, which meant that all other forms of economic thought were quickly deemed heresy. This worldview can also be called “market fundamentalism,” a term that was popularized by George Soros “to capture the religious-like certitude of those who believe in the moral superiority of organizing all dimensions of social life according to market principles (Somers and Block, 2005, p. 261). Market fundamentalism is pinned on the belief of a purely self-regulating market (Somers and Block, 2005, p. 282). In the quotes that I included in the earlier capitalism section, it is very clear that the Tea Party members believe in a self-regulating free enterprise system with no interference from government.

The interviewees spoke about capitalism in almost religious terms, as a sacred mechanism that makes the American Dream possible. Charles Murray articulated his appreciation for the American capitalist system: “Capitalism offers each individual the best opportunity to improve himself, his own situation...I think there’s a very common belief in the private enterprise and capitalist system as a vehicle for opportunity.” Capitalism is indisputably part of the American way of life, a value-commitment strongly linked to American identity. In the Tea Party narrative, there is a very real investment in the “mythic dimensions of American capitalism,” with its accompanying “gospel of wealth” (Hughes, 2004, p. 128). To the Tea Party members, the spirit of free enterprise is

an inviolable part of the American psyche. Brian Jacobs felt that this was being threatened when he lamented, “Part of our way of life is capitalism and we are getting away from it quickly.”

“Socialism” was derided as foreign, destructive, and unworkable by all of the Tea Party members I interviewed. To them, socialism was synonymous with the social welfare state and with “government handouts.” Similar to Skocpol and Williamson’s finding that only hard-working Americans “deserved” to benefit from social welfare programs, several of the Tea Party members I interviewed spoke disparagingly about the poor and those they considered to be undeserving “freeloaders.” Judy Diamond’s comments reveal some of these themes:

*‘Take back America’ is to take it back from the people who are spending the way that we don’t want them to spend, who want to change America from the land of the free to the **land of the freeloader**. There are so many programs and so many things that have happened in this country that have gotten people used to deferring to the government for everything, asking the government for permission, expecting the government to do every little thing for them. Wipe their nose every time it drips. This country was founded by people who wanted to try and succeed on their own.*

The last sentence is indicative of Judy Diamond’s belief that government welfare is simply un-American. Using such loaded terms as “freeloader” helps to frame the Tea Party narrative of what is and isn’t appropriately American. Further examples of the dehumanizing language used by some of the interviewees included references to a “vast underclass dependent on the government” and a “parasitic class.” Skocpol and Williamson (2012) write that, “the distinction between ‘workers’ and ‘people who don’t work’ is fundamental to Tea Party ideology on the ground. First and foremost, Tea Party activists identify themselves as productive citizens” (p. 33). I came across this same

impression in my interviews of Virginia Tea Party members, at least a third of whom were small business-owners or entrepreneurs. Skocpol and Williamson characterize this as the split between the “deserving” and the “undeserving.” Social welfare programs were denounced as “freeloading” by the poor and other “lazy” undeserving groups.

Some of the Tea Partiers’ views of the poor are in keeping with the “perversity thesis” in which the poor are blamed for their economic conditions without any contextual understanding of larger societal forces at work. A classic example of this was Judy Diamond’s comment that, “the poor have been encouraged to be poor, think poor, stay poor.” Margaret Somers and Fred Block (2005) explain the perversity thesis in this way: it is “the assertion that policies intended to alleviate poverty create perverse incentives toward welfare dependency and exploitation, and thus inexorably exacerbate the very social ills that they were meant to cure” (p. 265). Common perversity rhetoric includes the idea that the welfare system discourages work and self-reliance and that welfare can seduce people into a life of dependency (Somers and Block, 2005, p. 264). Lauren Burns also espoused views in keeping with the perversity thesis when speaking about the problems with “progressivism” (which to her equaled government handouts):

So the problem with progressivism is it’s all shiny. It’s – but it’s fools’ gold. It never satisfies. It cripples people. It promises something, and then it cripples people, and then it hamstring them and puts them in a fearful position constantly wanting and asking for more. It removes all dignity from the human person, and unfortunately, people are weak. Sometimes, cutting them off and making them stand on their own two feet can only realize that, “Oh my gosh, I can do it.”

The perversity thesis further justifies this mode of thinking: “if assistance is actually hurting the poor by creating dependence, then denying it is not cruel but compassionate” (Somers and Block, 2005, p. 265). As noted earlier, a sign at the Tea

Party rally read: “Living under government assistance will suppress your life potential, your family, & your dreams” (see figure 5, bottom photo). This is powerful messaging in keeping with American ideals of self-reliance and individualism.

In line with their rejection of socialism, several of the Tea Party members also denounced social justice which they viewed as an illegitimate redistribution of wealth: “Well, social justice, which I don’t believe in, is a redistribution of wealth” (Lauren Burns). Several of the Tea Party members I interviewed spoke of charity as the better alternative to social justice or “socialism.” They believed that helping the poor should not be a government mandate, but a personal *choice* made by the individual. Lauren Burns stated, “And through charity, of course, we can make those [economic] burdens lessen. But it’s not for society to take from one person and give to another.” This is a value judgment, tied not to communitarian values but to extreme values of individualism.

The principles of laissez-faire capitalism have libertarian connotations and would appear to be in keeping with Adam Smith’s philosophy. However, in his *Wealth of Nations*, Smith argued that, “no society could be happy if the bulk of the population did not share in its prosperity” (Bowles, 2007, 24). Sandy Baum (1992) writes that Smith deplored severe poverty and felt that the purpose of economic growth was to improve society’s welfare (p. 143). Smith makes the argument for a *moral* political economy (Bassiry and Jones, 1993, p. 621). He identified many of the dysfunctions of capitalism including market failures, the massive concentration of economic resources in the hands of an elite few, and the undermining of democracy as economic power translates into political power. Smith’s philosophy on economic freedom is complex and nuanced, and

creates room for an economic role for government beyond the simple provision of public goods (Bassiry and Jones, 1993, p. 625). Again, it would appear that the basis of some of the Tea Partiers' foundational values is not quite so "black and white." However, in fundamentalism, there is no room for "grey areas" or nuance - or for that matter, alternative narratives.

I argue that the Tea Party is fundamentalist-like in terms of its belief structure and orientation. This is significant because it helps solidify and demarcate group boundaries and ensures that Tea Party members are "true believers" in the group's collective axiology. Members subscribe to and encourage Constitutional purity and laissez-faire capitalism and expect their elected officials to follow Tea Party orthodoxy. Perhaps most importantly, there is meant to be no room for compromise, which has severe political repercussions. Tea Partiers reject values they associate as being un-American, including anything perceived to be "socialistic" or as undermining the American spirit of self-reliance and rugged individualism. In the next section, I will explore in greater depth what American identity means to the Tea Partiers and further define what I mean by "Americanism." I also argue that the Tea Partiers adhere to a narrow "fundamentalist" conception of American identity, which has served as the primary motivating force behind Tea Party activism.

TEA PARTY IDENTITY AS AMERICAN IDENTITY

The focus of this research has been to shed light on the values underpinning Tea Party activism and to understand how these values may be tied to notions of American identity. Those I interviewed joined the Tea Party because they believed that the movement embodied the fundamental American values that make up what is special and exceptional about America. The Tea Partiers also explicitly wish to protect, preserve, and restore those values that have defined American identity for generations. The overwhelming Tea Party feeling is that these values and what it means to be American have all come under duress due to the stagnant economy, the Obama Administration, and the influence of Democrats/liberals.

I am labeling the Tea Party's conception of American identity as "Americanism." I argue that a strong investment in Americanism is the driving force behind Tea Party activism. Both Tea Party "fundamentalism" and Americanism are clear examples of a social identity that is heavily laden with normative content – an axiology that espouses very specific values. I am defining Americanism as a form of fundamentalism; it is the constrained belief that being American means fitting into the following narrowly defined categories: Christian, patriotic, freedom-maximizing ("libertarian"), individualistic, free enterprise-oriented, and committed to limited government and Constitutional purity. The

implication of Americanism is that there is a clearly defined true “American” ingroup, i.e. Tea Partiers. This view of American identity is inherently nativistic and exclusionary.

Conceptions of American Identity

During the interviews, I asked each Tea Party member, “What does being American mean to you? From the interview data, it can be extrapolated that American identity stands for the core values of freedom, opportunity, and individualism. Freedom was the value most associated with being American. *Being American is to be free*. When asked the question, Brian Jacobs responded with, “I value our values as a Nation, I get all misty-eyed on July 4th, when I see the flag and I salute the flag and say the Pledge of Allegiance. Being an American, being free, being able to build my own life to be able to live and not be told how to live...” Denise Adams asserted that, “the core of being an American is having freedom and opportunity.” When I asked Greg Fitzsimmons what being American meant to him, he replied:

Wow. We are living in one of the greatest nations on the earth. Uh-huh. The most powerful nation on the earth...And, I think that we set the standard for other nations as far as freedom, as far as liberty, as far as justice, and we have to maintain those things, too, for other nations to see who we are, what we are...And, because we're Americans we believe in freedom, not only for ourselves, but freedom for all people. And, that's what makes me proud to be an American, the American dream.

Richard Hughes (2004) writes in his book, *Myths America Lives By*, that “The Declaration of Independence captures the American Creed in these immortal words: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” (p. 2). Kyle Niman’s definition of being American embodied

this idea of the American creed: “What does being American mean to me? Well, being an American at the very simplest level means I get to live here. I get to say the Pledge of Allegiance. I get to participate in an American way of life that is in pursuit of happiness, life and liberty.” The values embodied in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence are very loaded and full of meaning; they are at the very core of American identity. The Constitution is thought to guarantee certain inalienable rights. It is *because* of these rights that the Tea Partiers believe that America has achieved its greatness. To the Tea Party members, the Constitution is what assured that Americans could become *Americans*. Individualism also came up as an important part of the American psyche: “There’s always been the rugged individualism, and in a lot of ways, you know, that’s, that is the American spirit” (Charles Murray).

As I covered in chapter 4, the members I interviewed shared a sense of Tea Party group identity. However, it is their identity as Americans that is most salient. A salient identity is “the most important identity for an individual” (Korostelina, 2007, p. 20) and the Tea Party members all displayed strong salient identities as Americans. They are Americans, first and foremost, with their Tea Party identity simply being a natural extension of this. For the Tea Partiers, American identity *is* Tea Party identity and vice versa.

The Tea Party members exhibited a strong and vocal sense of American patriotism. Korostelina (2007) writes that, “Salient national identity can be understood to be the importance of a national identity for an individual, including strong feelings of belonging to one’s nation” (p. 185). The Tea Partiers were attached to the symbols of

American patriotism, including the American flag, significant holidays (i.e. Veteran's Day), and songs/anthems. Judy Diamond talked about the Tea Party and its reverence for one of the most powerful symbols of American identity: "And the two flags you're going to see all the time in the Tea Party events are the American flag, which everybody knows and loves." Evidence of some extreme patriotism was on display at the Sept. 12, 2010 Taxpayer March; one sign read: "America: Love it or Get Out."



Figure 10. America: Love it or get out

A critical function of social identity is to provide self-esteem and status. The Tea Partiers' strong sense of American identity provides this important function. Each of the Tea Party members I spoke to was proud of his/her American identity. Greg Fitzsimmons expressed this sentiment: "Just thinking about being an American makes you so proud."

As shown in numerous surveys, however, the general public has a largely negative view of the Tea Party. As a way to help counter the negative associations of their group identity, the Tea Party members all proclaimed a visceral love for America. Denise Adams revealed, “We [Tea Party members] all share a love for our country that is unusual.” Susan Combs became teary when she talked about her love for America and said, “I think forever I have been patriotic.”

By linking Tea Party identity with the positive associations of American identity, the Tea Party members were able to maintain a positive ingroup identity. One interviewee made the connection between the Tea Party and the Founding Fathers as one being a bridge to the other: “I think if the Founding Fathers were here today, they would be doing exactly what the Tea Party’s doing; trying to reawaken people, get people back involved” (Ralph Harrods). In this sense, the member claimed the Founding Fathers as the Tea Party’s own. For the Tea Party members, Tea Party values are genuine American values. They see the Tea Party as the true standard-bearers or exemplars of American identity. To them, the Tea Party is resolutely American. Daniel Cox, Research Director at the Public Religion Research Institute was quoted as saying, “The idea that ‘I am America’ is really in the context of the Tea Party movement” (as cited in Khan, ABCNews, October 18, 2011).

American Exceptionalism

In conjunction with a deep sense of patriotism, the Tea Party members were also sincerely invested in their belief in American exceptionalism. The Tea Party’s conception of American identity promotes a very strong sense of in-group superiority (i.e. America is

the greatest country on earth). Two of the interviewees took serious issue with what they perceived to be Obama's lack of commitment in promoting American exceptionalism:

Being an American took a sharp turn this year. We were disappointed when President Obama travelled the world and said some disparaging things about America. As a new President, he should have been proud and wearing the lapel flag. He went to France and said that America is arrogant... What he did was embarrass us and the pride that I had for my country up to that point was chopped off at the knee. Everyone felt it across America. It was the great Apology Tour. If you serve up America on a platter to the world as wrong, too heavy-handed, as responsible for other global issues, I lost a lot of respect. When asked if he thought America was exceptional, he said we were exceptional just like the Greeks are exceptional. If we weren't an exceptional country, people wouldn't be clamoring to come here (Denise Adams interview).

A sign at the Tea Party rally I attended read:

OBAMA: Offensive/ Blatant/Apologist/Marginalizing/America”

Both Greg Fitzsimmons and Denise Adams spoke of being American as a great privilege. Greg Fitzsimmons likened Americans as a “chosen people” by saying, “And, we are a privileged people on the face of the earth. The things that we have, the freedom that we have, the wealth that we have, the life that we have is nowhere on the face of the earth, everybody wants to come to America.” These sentiments are in keeping with what Hughes (2004) writes as the ‘myth of the Christian Nation,’ which entails believing that “God had chosen America for special privilege in the world, precisely because America was thought to be a Christian Nation” (p. 6). This myth is connected to the idea of American exceptionalism and Hughes explains that, “Among the most powerful and persistent of all the myths that Americans invoke about themselves is the myth that America is a chosen nation and that its citizens constitute a chosen people” (p. 19). This is also reminiscent of Bellah's argument in the existence of an American civil religion.

The Tea Party members I interviewed internalized a strong belief in American exceptionalism.

Several of the Tea Party members expressed nostalgia for a glorified American past where traditional American values prevailed. Many of the Tea Party members conveyed to me that their involvement in the movement was intimately tied to their desire to preserve the country that they grew up in for their own children:

We [the Tea Party] recognize the qualities and the exceptionalism that was built into our founding documents that permits the environment to raise exceptional people and to create economic freedom for centuries. It means getting in the fight now to preserve it, and it means sacrificing to maintain it for not only ourselves, but our children, and even if we don't have any children, it's the right thing to do. (Lauren Burns interview)

The Tea Partiers believe that they are promoting the basic principles that represent the fundamental values that underlie the American way of life. This is one of the reasons why there is a powerful sense of nostalgia in the Tea Party movement as it frames its narrative around “re-establishing” American values.

It can be deduced that the Tea Partiers are concerned with promoting and preserving a particular American brand of identity. I argue that their activism is driven by their value-commitment to Americanism, which I defined earlier as a fundamentalist rendering of American identity. For the Tea Partiers, the meaning of American identity is centered around Christianity, patriotism, freedom, individualism, capitalism, and limited government (the Constitution). The Tea Partiers are “eager participants in an ongoing global process of national self-definition” (Appleby and Marty, 1993, p. 620). They are strongly invested in their definition of America and what being American means - and they long to guarantee its continuity.

The idea behind Americanism entails that anything that falls out of its scope is decidedly un-American, and therefore morally wrong and inauthentic. I posit that the Virginia Tea Party members I interviewed have a narrow understanding of American identity and what being American stands for. To reiterate my theory:

The Tea Party's narrow conception of American identity, *Americanism*, is the primary value-commitment driving the group's political activism. The Tea Party's fundamentalist orientation and uncompromising narrative are important to its appeal, helping to at once solidify group membership while also demarcating its boundaries from the moderate and liberal "outgroup."

My "theory" is simply that Americanism was the driving force behind the quick mobilization of Tea Party group identity. Would-be Tea Party members were attracted to the movement due to their salient social identity as Americans, coupled with their fears that the fundamental values that have historically defined America were under attack. The members' pride in being American, their investment in what they perceive to be traditional American values, and their need to preserve a particular brand of American identity, all help to explain their involvement in the Tea Party movement. The idea of Americanism signifies a highly emotionally charged salient identity, one that can be effortlessly triggered and mobilized if threatened.

CONCLUSION

The first part of my theory dealt with the idea that a strong investment in Americanism helped propel Tea Party activism. The Tea Party's uncompromising narrative attracted would-be members to the group as it provided members with a concrete set of beliefs, values, goals, and a common worldview. The Tea Party's fundamentalist-like orientation helped bind group identity while also demarcating group boundaries. The group's fundamentalist bent and inexorable unwillingness to compromise on issues that clearly need bipartisan solutions have alienated Democrats, Independents, and establishment Republicans alike. I would argue that the Tea Party movement's likely eventual decline will be due in large part to its fundamentalist orientation, with its sense of moral superiority and certitude, and uncompromising mentality. I believe that the popularity of the Tea Party will continue to wane as it comes to be increasingly seen as too much of a fringe movement, unyielding and rarely satisfied.

Indeed, according to media reports, it appears as though the Tea Party's clout in 2012 will be much less impressive than it was in 2010. Ever since the CNN/Tea Party Republican debate on Sept. 12, 2011, there has been little mention of the Tea Party in the 2012 electoral season. One explanation for the Tea Party's seemingly waning popularity may be that it was never able to completely shake off its negative image. According to a Fox News poll earlier this year, 30 percent of Americans had a favorable view of the Tea

Party, compared with 51 percent who viewed it unfavorably (Blake, Washington Post, April 7, 2012). Nonetheless, Skocpol and Williamson predict that the Tea Party will continue to influence the 2012 elections through active participation and fundraising in Republican primaries, which will likely force candidates to take increasingly conservative stands on such issues as immigration policy and the still infant healthcare law. Skocpol affirms that the Tea Party is far from dead; it is simply evolving from its 2010 incarnation. She predicts that there are still 600 tea party groups left across the country (as cited in Arrillaga, Huffington Post, April 14, 2012).

The Tea Party *is* still fighting. At her concession speech for the Republican presidential nomination, Michelle Bachman (R-MN) promised to continue fighting President Obama's policies, particularly the health care legislation and called the 2012 election "the last chance to turn our country around, before we go down the road of socialism" (Goldman and Bingham, ABC News, Jan. 4, 2012). Tea Party member Laurence Kline asserted that, "We need to get back to the core principles that the country is founded on... We want the Republican Party to be very much aligned with the values of the Tea Party movement." This is something that the Tea Party has been very successful at: influencing the direction of the Republican Party and taking it further to the right of the political spectrum. Skocpol confirms that the Tea Party "has been in the business of pulling the Republican Party away from the possibility of compromising with Democrats and further toward the hard right. And they've been successful... They've taken over the Republican Party, lock, stock, and barrel" (as cited in Arrillaga, Huffington Post, April 14, 2012).

In a Huffington Post article, Skocpol is quoted as saying this about the Tea Party: “They’re not dressing up and going to demonstrations in the street. They’re meeting. They’re poring over the legislative records of these Republicans that they’ve elected. They’re contacting their representatives, and they’re keeping the pressure on. They’re following the debates, and they’re going and they’re voting” (as cited in Arrillaga, Huffington Post, April 14, 2012). Since the 2010 elections, the Tea Party has decided to shift the focus of its efforts to exerting its influence more at the state and local level (Arrillaga, Huffington Post, April 14, 2012). Democratic media strategist John Lapp said this about the Tea Party: “It’s no longer viewed as a populist, grassroots organization, but a dangerous group with extremist views that don’t reflect the mainstream values of America’s middle class” (as cited in Blake, Washington Post, April 7, 2012). The Tea Party members I interviewed would argue that they *are* mainstream America. It is evident that no one political party holds the mantle of American identity. What is also not debatable is that Americans are very concerned about the future and direction of the country.

Restoration and Preservation vs. Change and Transformation

As I touched upon briefly in the literature review, the Tea Party members viewed Obama’s agenda for change as a real threat. Laurence Kline recounted:

I was already very disaffected with the Republican Party and of course I was very concerned about the Obama candidacy, just because I feel like he is, you know, outside of the mainstream when it comes to believing in things like capitalism, and the Constitution, and things like that, he's got a very radical agenda for - I think what he calls - for radically or fundamentally transforming the country.

Brian Jacobs echoed very similar sentiments, “I remember listening to the President and he said like four or five days before the election that we were just a few days from fundamental transformation of our country. And I do not want fundamental transformation.” These Tea Party members strongly feel that the country is going in the wrong direction and are very concerned about what they perceive to be negative changes to the country’s socio-political landscape. They also feel that the moral compass of the country is deteriorating and that traditional American values are under assault. Greg Fitzsimmons explained, “When our morals decay, then or values decay.” The Tea Partiers interpreted Obama’s words to fundamentally change America as a very real and serious threat.

The Virginia Tea Party members I interviewed were vehemently against change as embodied by the Obama Administration; instead, they were wedded to a vision of an idealized American past. The fundamental ideological tension here is that the Tea Party members are fighting for restoration and preservation, while trying to inhibit change and “transformation.” The Tea Partiers are interested in restoring traditional American values, preserving their idea of the Constitution, and maintaining the economic systems they grew up with. Dennis Irons bemoaned, “We seem to have forgotten where we came from.” The Tea Partiers are anxious to resurrect or realize a particular vision for America, rooted in what they believe the Founding Fathers intended for the country: “So – and it may take a hundred years again, to get us back to where we were, or back to – closer to the models of liberty that the Founders intentioned” (Ralph Harrods).

The Tea Party members were angered and frustrated by what they perceived to be increasingly irrevocable changes in American society, including what they see as the overgrown size and intrusiveness of government. Susan Combs became very emotional when I asked her the question, “What does being American mean to you?” When speaking about the symbolism of what America stands for, she began to weep and talked about maintaining the country that she grew up in:

I think whenever I've been patriotic, there's something about your country. When I go to the Stars and Stripes, they used to do it in the summer every year, it's just a pure patriotic program with all the military and different services, singing “this is my country.” It's very hard to get through it without crying [begins crying]. I think that this has even made it more so, because I'm in the fight. I didn't mean to get all teary about this but it's hard to talk about. It's a fight to maintain the country that you grew up in. In my era, in the 40's and 50's, things were so much more innocent...

The Tea Partiers are interested in defending and conserving “traditional ways of life from erosion” (Almond, Sivan, and Appleby, 2004, p. 402). They often conveyed a feeling that the “good old days” were a thing of the past. One sign at the Tea Party rally I attended read, “A-Bama-Nation. Not the America I grew up in. Not the America I want for my grandkids” (figure 11). The reality, however, is that this idealized American past that the Tea Partiers are fighting for never truly existed in the first place.



Figure 11. Idealizing an American Past

Inequality of Opportunity

The Tea Party members were proud of the fact that America is a place that immigrants have historically flocked to in order to pursue a better life. The American Dream is a quintessential part of American identity and it is one of our most compelling and enduring myths. The idea that America is a “land of opportunity” where by working hard, you can achieve anything you set your mind to, has defined the American psyche for generations. Greg Fitzsimmons defined the American Dream in this way, “Oh, the American Dream. The American Dream is the ultimate – you can be whatever you wanna be.” It is a very powerful ideal tied to opportunity, hard work, reward, and upward mobility. Cindy Edwards explained, “I think being American is having a level of freedom to be able to work hard and succeed based on the level of your you know, having equal opportunity.” Lauren Burns talked about the role of the Constitution in promoting the

ideal of opportunity for all: “But the government under the Constitution is meant to provide an environment in which the most opportunity for the most people exist.” As I explained earlier in this paper, the idea of American opportunity is one of the Tea Party’s most important value-commitments. What is telling about the Tea Party narrative, however, is that its prescription for a more prosperous American future (financial deregulation, spending cuts on infrastructure, education, and social programs, uneven tax policies, etc.) would actually result in diminishing opportunity for a great number of Americans.

Achieving the American Dream is a very unequal endeavor. The cumulative effect of structural inequities and racism means that the American ideals of equal opportunity and equal reward are in fact myths. A November 17, 2011 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute, in partnership with the Religion News Service, found that “Americans are divided on whether the American Dream still holds true today.” The survey found that, “A plurality (48 percent) of Americans say the American Dream—if you work hard, you’ll get ahead—once held true but does not anymore, compared to 44 percent who say it still holds true today, and 6 percent who say it never held true. Republicans, men, and Hispanics are the groups most likely to say the American Dream still holds true today” (PRRI, November 17, 2011).

Ronald Formisano (2012) writes that, “Many economists believe that today’s concentration of wealth in the top 5 percent of the population contributed to the economic collapse of 2008” (p. 64). The top one percent of Americans controls 40 percent of the country’s wealth. While the top one percent has seen their incomes rise 18 percent over

the past decade, the middle class has seen their incomes stagnate or fall. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2010 "Income Inequality Index" for thirty-three developed nations, the U.S. ranked among the worst in income inequality, food insecurity, and life expectancy at birth" (as cited in Formisano, 2012, p. 64). The connection here should be clear: *Rising inequality means shrinking opportunity.*

While Tea Partiers care about opportunity and the "American Dream," a significant number, 42 percent, do not believe that increasing income inequality is a serious problem for the country (Formisano, 2012, p. 64). This discrepancy can be explained in part on the Tea Party's over-riding value-commitment to capitalism and an unregulated free market. Nonetheless, for the Tea Party members I interviewed, there was a very real underlying sense that the same opportunities that existed for previous generations may not be available in the future. The Tea Party members expressed a sense of loss and a feeling that there are seismic shifts occurring in the pursuit of the American Dream. They conveyed a very real fear that opportunities would become increasingly more limited in the future. Denis Irons expressed his concern that, "Our right to prosper is being threatened." Studies show that economic and social mobility is becoming increasingly more difficult in American society. According to the Pew Charitable Trusts' Economic Mobility Project, "While belief in this American Dream remains a unifying tie for an increasingly diverse populace, it is showing signs of wear, with both public perceptions and concrete data suggesting that the nation is a less mobile society than once believed" (Pew Charitable Trusts, July 2012).

Cindy Edwards expressed this shift in the American Dream several times during her interview:

And the future was, we had a lot of possibilities in our future and I feel like if things do not turn around, that my kids and you, or the younger generation, is not going to have that same opportunity... I never felt like there was not a better future and that is how I am feeling right now.

Greg Fitzsimmons also acknowledged this shift by stating, “This is America, this is a place where you should be able to live your dreams. And not struggle so much in this great nation that we live in.”

Cindy Edwards articulated her concern that not feeling hopeful felt un-American: “I never felt like there was not a better future and that is how I am feeling right now. And so that is why I am doing what I am doing, and I think that is why most of us are doing it because that has never been I do not think as an American, that is not normal to think that way. That we have always thought there was something better.” The Tea Partiers’ fears for the future were also tinged with a certain sense of nostalgia for ‘better times.’ Susan Combs expressed this mixture best when she told me her hopes for the country’s future: “So that we are free, again, to be all that we were and that we can be in the future.” Brian Jacobs also expressed similar sentiments when articulating his vision for America:

To have people feel that their future is going to be brighter and to go out there and make it. To not have this vast under class who is dependent upon the government but have to be dependent upon themselves for their own future and for their own life and their kids future and just the vibrancy that this country had thirty, forty, fifty years ago.

The question of **opportunity** (possibilities) is at the heart of the divergent ideology between liberals and conservatives (Democrats and Republicans). The Democratic or liberal vision for creating fair opportunity is to enable an activist

government to provide social safety nets, quality public education, and a regulated economy. The Tea Party vision, however, to continue the American Dream encompasses deep spending cuts, lowered taxes, a limited federal government, and an unregulated economy. The divide is clear: the Tea Party sees government as the source of problems while Democrats view government as a potential source of solutions. When I asked them specifically about their vision for America, virtually all of the Tea Party members I interviewed cited the same things: smaller government, free enterprise, and a return to the Constitution. What follows is a sampling of the responses I received:

“I wanna see less taxes, less government. I guess, the biggest thing for me is less government intrusion into our lives. Smaller government.” (Greg Fitzsimmons)

“I would like to see the federal government return to the things it was originally instituted, constituted to do.” (John Lyons)

“My vision is basically that we go back to the government being scaled back, the spending being scaled back and getting a balanced budget, and less regulation for businesses to be able to create and build and employ people.” (Cindy Edwards)

Many of the Tea Party members I spoke to did not see a role for government in terms of providing a social safety net for its citizens; this was beyond the scope of government as mandated by the Constitution. It is evident that there is a very real ideological split over the role of government; the Tea Party does not believe that it is the government’s job to provide a minimum standard of living for its citizens. Charles Murray summed up this ideological divide succinctly when he said, “Now, on the Constitutional side, that’s really going to be a challenge because there are fundamental differences in the way the two sides look at the world, and the role of government and the role of the individual.” Formisano (2012) cites a Gallup poll that found that 92% of Tea

Party activists reject government as a way to solve problems or meet needs (p. 13). The Tea Party has a very limited vision for the role of government, based on its narrow interpretation of the Constitution. I would argue that the Tea Partiers are in fact acting against their own self-interests. They fail to understand that the economic and social policies they advocate will fail to create the conditions necessary to ensure continued opportunity and prosperity for the greatest number of Americans possible.

An Intractable Values-Based Conflict

The Tea Party phenomenon is representative of a values-based conflict, one centered on questions of American identity and opportunity. Unfortunately, values-based conflicts tend to be intractable because they are so often tied up with issues of identity, and are therefore seen as very personal. John Forester (2009) writes at length about the special nature of values-based conflicts:

Why do value conflicts look so special? Our values seem intimately connected to who we think we are, or to aspects of the world we cherish – whether they involve the sacredness of our land or our water or the sanctity of life or private property... Because values seem connected in this way to our identities and not to simple choices of this good versus that one, this benefit versus that one, they appear inherently personal, subjective, developed as a matter of tradition and socialization, hardly easy to change by simple persuasion, rational argument, or even bargaining (p. 77).

Forester suggests that, “When values conflict, assume the need for all parties to learn: about each other, about the issues at stake, about the practical options that lie before them (2009, p. 90).” I have attempted to listen and learn from the Virginia Tea Party members and to give voice to the concerns and values underlying their narratives. Values are often irreconcilable but that does not preclude the need for positive engagement and dialogue. I warrant that it may be useful to use the Tea Partiers’ value-

commitments to freedom and opportunity as entry-points for mutual dialogue. Both Democrats/liberals and Tea Party members seemingly care very much about the question of **American opportunity**. However, I do agree that such a values-based conflict is likely intractable, particularly since it involves “basic incompatibilities between the parties at the deepest levels of worldview, or perceived threats to personal or group identity” (Kriesberg, Northrup, and Thorson 1989, p. 111).

In his April 2012 reaction to the House Republican budget plan, President Obama evoked the strong symbolism of two polar visions for America. Obama stated, “I can't remember a time when the choice between competing visions of our future has been so unambiguously clear.” Obama used hard-hitting language to paint the GOP as harboring a “radical vision” for the country. Journalist David Nakamura wrote that Obama castigated the GOP for straying “so far from the political middle that its policies represent an affront to core American values” (Washington Post, April 4, 2012). Obama not only attacked Republicans on their policies but as Nakamura writes, for “their idea on what it means to be American.” Obama evoked the notion of patriotism in wrapping up his speech by emphasizing the need to all work together to preserve the American Dream: “We have to think about what's required to preserve the American Dream for future generations. And this sense of responsibility -- to each other and our country -- this isn't a partisan feeling. This isn't a Democratic or Republican idea. It's patriotism.” Democrats are more likely to believe in this sense of communitarianism, while the Tea Party is entrenched in its value-commitment to (extreme) individualism, which is not always in the interest of the common good.

In his speech, Obama listed some of the consequences that would occur if the Republican budget plan were adopted, namely that ten million college students would be stuck paying higher loan payments, 200,000 children would be denied access to the early education program, Head Start, and that there would be 4,500 fewer grants to fight crime. Nakamura wrote that in his speech, “Obama cast the election as a fundamental choice for the public on what kind of future the country should have.” (Washington Post, April 4, 2012). Obama assailed the GOP budget plan, calling it a prescription for American decline:

It is a Trojan Horse. Disguised as deficit reduction plans, it is really an attempt to impose a radical vision on our country. It is thinly veiled social Darwinism. It is antithetical to our entire history as a land of opportunity and upward mobility for everybody who's willing to work for it; a place where prosperity doesn't trickle down from the top, but grows outward from the heart of the middle class. And by gutting the very things we need to grow an economy that's built to last -- education and training, research and development, our infrastructure -- it is a prescription for decline (Obama, April 3, 2012).

On the flip side, Tea Party member Susan Combs declared this about the Tea Party: “So we are very patriotic. And everybody loves America. We are sickened by what we see happening to America. And we think that too many of us Americans have our heads buried in the sand.” There is a very real ideological battle that continues to be waged in 2012 over what America means, what it should stand for, and what direction the country should take. It will be fascinating to see how Americans vote in the 2012 election season. What is potentially at stake is the meaning of the American Dream and how best to cultivate opportunity. The very meaning of opportunity is also up for debate; as exemplified at the 2012 Democratic Convention, does American opportunity mean

individual success or *shared* success and prosperity? The ultimate question also remains:

Who will get to define America's future and **whose interests will be served?**

APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol: Identity, Values, and the American Tea Party

- 1) Thank participant for his/her time and participation
- 2) Introduce self: tell participant that I am conducting research for my Master's thesis
- 3) Reiterate purpose of the study: to gain a sense of why s/he became active in the Tea Party movement.
- 4) Assure participant of his/her anonymity and confidentiality
- 5) Tell participant that s/he has the right to withdraw at any point during their participation: during the interview process and up until the publication of the final report
- 6) Have participant sign informed consent form
- 7) Ask participant if s/he will give permission for the interview to be taped. Have participant sign audio/video consent form. Tell participant that the interview will last about 90 minutes and will consist of a series of open-ended questions.

Date: _____

Name of Participant: _____

Code given: _____

Interview Questions:

(Please note that not all of these questions will be asked of each participant. The follow-up questions will vary by interview)

- 1) How do you feel about the midterm election results?
- 2) What motivated you to become active in the Tea Party?
- 3) Do you remember the specific event(s) that led you to become an activist rather than just a supporter of the Tea Party movement?
- 4) What has satisfied you most about being an active Tea Party member?

- 5) What do you think are some of the common values shared by Tea Party members?
- 6) Can you prioritize those values that are most important to you personally?
- 7) Follow-up: Please define Value A, Value B, Value C.
- 8) At Tea Party rallies, you sometimes see the “Don’t tread on me” flag. What does, “Don’t tread on me,” mean to you?
- 9) “Take back America” seems to be one of the common refrains of the movement. What does “taking back America,” mean to you?
- 10) At the August Glenn Beck rally, “Restoring Honor” was the predominant theme. Do you feel that something has been lost in America? How can it be restored?
- 11) What does being American mean to you?
- 12) Do you think that any traditional American values are being compromised or threatened today?
- 13) Follow-up: If so, which values? (Can you give me an example?)
- 14) Follow-up: How is this value being threatened? By what or whom?
- 15) Follow-up: What do you think is the cause or source of the threat?
- 16) Follow-up: If the threats continue, what do you think will be some of the consequences?
- 17) Follow-up: Who do you think will be affected? (Who are the victims?)
- 18) Follow-up: Do you feel that you or your family are being affected by the changes that you see taking place in America? (Do you feel that you are under threat directly?)
- 19) If the Founding Fathers came back today, what do you think their reaction would be?
- 20) What changes do you expect or hope to see as a result of Tea Party activism?

The interview would ideally be composed of semi-structured questions followed by pertinent follow-up questions to keep the thread of the narrative intact.
Thank participant for his/her time. Let participant know that you will be in touch with any questions if necessary.

Recruitment Email

Dear _____,

My name is Alisa Wiskin and I am a George Mason University graduate student writing a Master's thesis about Tea Party activism. I am interested in researching the reasons and motivations behind why people become Tea Party activists. My thesis is for research purposes only and is non-partisan and non-political. It will not be used for any political purpose.

I would like to ask you whether you would be willing to speak with me about your involvement in the Tea Party and your motivations for joining the movement. Some of the questions will ask you about the values you associate with the Tea Party movement. Other questions will ask you whether you feel that traditional American values are under threat today.

Participation in the research study would involve just one 45-60 minute interview. If you agree to participate, you are not required to answer every question and you may withdraw from the study at any point. All of your information will remain confidential.

I will be interviewing members from various local Tea Party groups in Virginia. I am particularly interested in interviewing the group organizers of these groups as well as those group members who are new to political activism.

I would greatly appreciate your participation in my research study. If you would like to be interviewed, please email me at joywiskin@yahoo.com. Depending on your preference, the interview can take place either in person or over the phone. Thank you very much in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Alisa Wiskin

Informed Consent Form

George Mason University Informed Consent Form

Research Title: *Identity, Values, and the American Tea Party: An Exploration into Political Activism*

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to explore the reasons why people become politically involved in the Tea Party. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in one 60-90 minute interview.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research. It should be understood that this research will **not** be used for any political purpose. There are also no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research into the nature of political activism in the grassroots Tea Party movement.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. (1) Your name will not be included on any of the collected data; (2) a code will be placed on each interview and other collected data; (3) through the use of an identification key, the researcher will be able to link your interview to your identity; (4) only the researcher will have access to the identification key and 5) no identifiable data will be used in the final report.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss to you. Any data you may have given during the course of the study will be expunged.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Alisa Wiskin, a graduate student with the Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) at George Mason University. She may be reached at 703-635-0772 for questions or to report a research-related problem. The research is being overseen by ICAR faculty member and thesis advisor, Dr. Daniel Rothbart. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

Name (signed)

Date of Signature

**Approval for the use
of this document
EXPIRES**

Version date: 09/13/2010

SEP 14 2011

1 of 1

Protocol # 7099
George Mason University

Audio Consent Form

Audio/Video Consent Form

I hereby authorize Alisa Wiskin to audio/video (circle one) record the following interview for her Master's thesis, *Identity, Values, and the American Tea Party: An Exploration into Political Activism*.

Your confidentiality will be strictly maintained. The principal researcher, Alisa Wiskin, will be the only one who will have access to the interview material.

Consent

I have read this form and agree to have my interview recorded.

Name (print): _____

Signature: _____

Date of interview: _____

Please initial: Video: _____

Audio: _____

Approval for the use
of this document
EXPIRES

SEP 14 2011

Protocol # 7099
George Mason University

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Interviews:

Denise Adams interview, November 19, 2010
 Lauren Burns interview, November 28, 2010
 Susan Combs interview, November 20, 2010
 Judy Diamond interview, November 7, 2010
 Cindy Edwards interview, November 10, 2010
 Greg Fitzsimmons interview, November 6, 2010
 Jeff Garnett interview, November 21, 2010
 Ralph Harrods interview, November 22, 2010
 Dennis Irons interview, November 11, 2010
 Brian Jacobs interview, November 11, 2010
 Laurence Kline interview, November 10, 2010
 John Lyons interview, November 17, 2010
 Charles Murray interview, November 11, 2010
 Kyle Niman interview, November 6, 2010

CURRICULUM VITAE

Alisa Wiskin graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the College of William and Mary in 2004 with a degree in Sociology and a minor in French. She spent her year after graduation teaching English to elementary school children in Quimperlé, France and working on an organic farm in the Pyrenees. She then served as a Field and Outreach Fellow at Population Connection (formerly ZPG) for six months where she worked with organizers across the country to raise awareness about reproductive health and rights issues. Alisa has worked at the Congressional Hunger Center (CHC) in Washington, D.C. since October 2006, first as a program assistant for the Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program and now as the program manager for CHC's Mickey Leland International Hunger Fellows Program.