

Politics, Populism and the Democratic Ideal: the Tea Party and Neo-Libertarianism Forty Years in the Making

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Introduction

In a recent and well known political ad, the National Association for Gun Rights (NAGR), on the *Townhall.org* website offered as a give away a “top quality Colt 6920 AR-15 Rifle.” One look at the weapon is enough to send the message that there is a war underfoot to deprive common Americans of their gun rights. Setting aside the nature of the weapon (which is clearly an assault rifle whose only purpose beyond target shooting is to kill people), the image is startling because of the political content. As a “single-purpose citizen’s organization” the NAGR proclaims itself dedicated to preserving the Constitutionally protected right to bear arms. The NAGR espouses an “aggressive” program to mobilize public opposition to anti-gun legislation. Most telling, the NAGR is offering in sweepstakes style an assault weapon to a lucky subscriber to the *Townhall Spotlight*. There is a populist anti-government wave that has been rising for over forty years in American politics, and nowhere is this more obvious than at the virtual Townhall. Populism in the 21st century of American politics has many faces. There are versions of both the Right and the Left of the political spectrum. All the same, it is from the Right, and the several competing forms among conservatives and libertarians that we find the most powerful voices of anti-government ideas. This populist movement is fragmented and divisive, and yet united in opposition to perhaps one thing only: “big government” and *progressive* values. All the same that statement does not fully and accurately characterize the wave. It is important to sort out these fractious forces, evaluate their possible effects and to understand how they arrived as they have on the American landscape.

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It is equally important to identify the anger, frustration and fears that may ally what are clearly distinct and diverse positions. Finally, it is important to inquire if anger and mistrust of government on a populist footing can maintain a fragile alliance, disrupt governance and foster discord long into the future?

The Tea Party movement has had politicians of both major American parties shaken for nearly eight years. Democrats feared the Tea Party would bring Republicans to a passionate fever pitch, and their voters to the booths, ushering a populist swell of Republicans into Congress to block government, policy and progress. The 2010 elections justified those fears. Republicans feared the Tea Party might frighten away moderate and independent voters, and make the GOP unelectable: an ideologically extreme carcass outside the mainstream and unpalatable to centrist conservatives and independents. These fears were corroborated in the wake of the 2012 election and government shut-down.

Meanwhile, the Press media are thrilled because they have had a hot, new topic to report about. The Tea Party presents a loud, unexpected, outlandish, noisy and vivid drama. The Press originally viewed the Tea Party as a low middle class and working class “movement” that sprang from nowhere. In their desire to prove they are NOT elitists themselves--or biased liberals—the Press Media have treated Tea Party activists with respect and lavish attention. One result has been the rise of journalistic “false equivalency.” False equivalency sees the political world as binary—two sides equally culpable for the current dysfunction of government. The press media has become contributory to an anti-incumbency mood. Since 2008 the unintended anti-incumbency spirit of the Press became romantically engaged to the “Tea Party Phenomenon” and its populist fervor; it has commanded their cameras, provided a dramatic spectacle, and often dominated cable news/infotainment radio and television programs (Mann and Ornstein, 2012).

The Tea Party movement is a populist force, but has also been characterized as a “libertarian” movement. The Press commonly conflates the Tea Party with what is called a “libertarian wing” of the Republican Party and American Conservatism. Such characterizations are understandable and mistaken. The error is understandable because powerful libertarian forces emergent from the John Birch Society and the Cold War 1950s have been financially and strategically behind the movement for almost twenty years. This side reflects an older generation’s mistrust of “big government” as well as a self-serving anti-regulatory worldview.

The older libertarian perspective is hard bitten, ideological, anti-communist and seeded with the ideas of Ayn Rand individualism and the Cold War. The characterization is an error because on many dimensions the older Cold War libertarianism is not reflective of a broader and more recent civil libertarian strand. Despite some original connections, libertarians are not the Tea Party today (Ball, 2013). The main question is how to understand the populist anti-government wave and to put it into its proper political contexts.

In 2014 one can find many definitions of what it means to be a libertarian. According to Brian Doherty (2007):

The libertarian vision is in the Declaration of Independence: we are all created equal; no one ought to have any special rights and privileges in his social relations with other people. We have certain rights—to our life, to our freedom, to do what we please in order to find happiness. Government has just one purpose: to help us protect those rights. And if it doesn't, then we get to "alter or abolish it."

It's hard to imagine a more libertarian document, but there it is: a sacred founding document of the United States of America. Libertarians may worry that the drafters of the Constitution compromised too much and ceded too much power to government, but they clearly understood that state power is forever trying to overwhelm political liberty and that they needed to be diligent in its defense. Despite some serious shortcomings, the modern American libertarian can feel real patriotic fervor when contemplating the founding of the United States, (Doherty, 2007).

The Libertarian Party today provides specific definitions of the meaning of their movement, which was articulated in the 2012 Platform formulated in Las Vegas, Nevada, titled "The Party of Principle," (2012):

- We, the members of the Libertarian Party, challenge the cult of the omnipotent state and defend the rights of the individual.
- We hold that all individuals have the right to exercise sole dominion over their own lives, and have the right to live in whatever manner they choose, so long as they do not forcibly interfere with the equal right of others to live in whatever manner they choose.

- Governments throughout history have regularly operated on the opposite principle, that the State has the right to dispose of the lives of individuals and the fruits of their labor. Even within the United States, all political parties other than our own grant to government the right to regulate the lives of individuals and seize the fruits of their labor without their consent.
- We, on the contrary, deny the right of any government to do these things, and hold that where governments exist, they must not violate the rights of any individual: namely, (1) the right to life -- accordingly we support the prohibition of the initiation of physical force against others; (2) the right to liberty of speech and action -- accordingly we oppose all attempts by government to abridge the freedom of speech and press, as well as government censorship in any form; and (3) the right to property -- accordingly we oppose all government interference with private property, such as confiscation, nationalization, and eminent domain, and support the prohibition of robbery, trespass, fraud, and misrepresentation, (2012).

There is nothing that is either naturally conservative or populist in their own definitions, but Libertarians believe the common person must be protected from the predatory schemes of government (Zwolinski and Tomasi, 2012). The differing 'tribes' within American Conservatism, especially among those whose view is stamped with Christian evangelical attitudes, are not encompassed by the Libertarian world view. American Conservatism is diverse, and may express a variety of interests from Wall Street, to blue collar and rural America and even what Waldman and Green once called the "Heartland Culture Warriors," (2006). The Tea Party and the new or neo-libertarians are distinguishable, but both are players in a popular movement that has been shaping the American political narrative.

Reagan era conservatives surging out of the late 1970s allied with Cold War libertarians to bring to fruition an assault on government, public agencies and effectually the values of the New Deal, the War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement. The Reagan era conservatives are remarkable for the forging of a Republican Party that aggregated Christian evangelicals with Wall Street Yankee capitalists, Southwestern individualists, Southern White racial conservatives, Cold War nationalists and the post-Vietnam era rural and blue-collar skeptics who were disillusioned with the 1960s and fearful of a future America changing before their eyes (Prewitt, 1996). This disparate alliance came together under an umbrella of mistrust and fear of something called "big government."

Ironically, this alliance not only generated the populist Tea Party movement, it also fostered the not-so-populist neo-conservative view in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The libertarian element and its place in American politics today was also a child of the narrative inspired by this political alliance. The evolution of these unusual yet significant forces was forty years in the making.

American Populism and Classical Motifs

American populism has a deep and abiding history. Certainly, even Thomas Jefferson gingerly used populist sentiments in his attacks on Hamilton and Adams, the National Bank and the nascent Federalist Party. Jefferson's assertions that the Federalists sought to re-establish a monarchy following the first Presidency of Washington helped he and Madison to overtake the office, and depose John Adams as the 3rd and 4th Presidents respectively (Meacham, 2012). The Republican Party was born. Jefferson knew his claims were exaggerated but he willingly incited popular passions among the "common man" to gain the necessary support and electoral votes to become the 3rd President.

Populism as a political phenomenon has been around a long time and is grounded in a basic conviction that governments must primarily concern themselves with providing for the greatest good among the greatest number. This may sound Utilitarian, but the American populist has not historically reflected a Utilitarian attitude, but rather a passion for the common everyday person---the "man in the street," the hard working farmer, the industrial laborer, the average person just trying to make a life and a living; the poor, the young, the "salt-of-the-earth." Populists are the natural opponents of elitism of all sorts, oligarchy and plutocracy; and their main enemy has often been the government seen to be the representative of the rich, the mighty, and elite insiders.

American populism manifested itself in a significant way around the rural land movement in 1891 and 1892, spawning a party (amongst many) of the same name, and catching up a groundswell of angry rural sentiment which saw the farmer as an exploited tool in the hands of creditors and land speculators. Strong traces of populist outbursts in America can be seen even earlier at the time of the Whiskey Rebellion in 1791 and before. All the same, the warnings about populism can be heard all the way back to ancient Athens and Aristotle and Plato.

In The Politics, Aristotle warned against a kind of regime we can call a *mobocracy*. A government led by mob was, according to Aristotle, one of the dangers and perversions possible in democracy. Aristotle defined a *demagogic democracy* as one in which “the decrees of the assembly override the law and a popular faction takes the superior share in the government as the prize of victory.” The populist leader or “people’s leader” as Aristotle would have said, incites the mob through passionate speech. The popular tyrant plays to the people’s lowest fears and hatreds (Olsen, 2010; Aristotle, 1946, pp. 207-269). Certainly history records many of these and the 20th century was filled with the nightmarish results as Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Peron, and even folks like Slobodan Milosevic, appealed to the anger, hatreds and fears of the “masses.” Spawning genocide, ethnic cleansing, violence or revolution is not the only result, and the American political landscape has had its share of alternatives with the likes of Huey Long, Joe McCarthy and others who used demagogic appeals to fire up a fearful and ill informed mass audience. Popular appeals were also used by Martin Luther King in the Civil Rights Movement, and the Students for a Democratic Society in the anti-war movement of the 1960s. Big government and big money were among the villains for the Progressive populists, too.

Plato in The Republic likewise showed contempt for this kind of popular politics. The people in certain social conditions tended to act as a mob. Plato argued extensively, but especially in Book VIII of The Republic, that too much democracy will tempt the citizens to surge toward one man as their leader (Arnhart, 2003). The demagogue promises *liberty* as the goal for the average person. The “liberated” masses may then take the property of the wealthy for themselves while the elites and those with wealth become “enemies of the people.” Arrested as criminals the elite classes suffer exile or execution (as was Socrates), by a mindless, passionate crowd. In essence, Plato warned that those who know least how to govern take control of the polis, and in a paroxysm of passion, hate and selfishness, they grasp what it is they want, destroy the prospect for dialogue and a pursuit of the best, or the good (Plato, 1985). This partly explains Plato’s outrageous suggestion of the Philosopher King, because as he argued, you would not let a shoemaker attend you in your illness. Plato asked: why leave the governance of the polis in the hands of a demagogue, or ruthless politician whose greatest skill is pandering to the mob, and moving the people to do their worst?

Plato and Aristotle lived through these very kinds of events. Athens endured the demagogic and popular tyrannies of Alcibiades and Cleon in the 5th Century BCE.

Plato watched as his friend and teacher Socrates was sentenced to death merely for teaching contrary ideas. If perhaps they made an error in subsuming “democracy” with “popular tyranny” the philosophers were certainly right to warn against the political organization of ignorance and anger for political gain. As Plato suggested in Book VIII of *The Republic*, democracy itself can potentially be more dangerous than tyranny because the chief goal and good in a democracy is something called *Liberty*. The incompetent leader may pander and promise more Liberty, bringing ruin by offering what the appetites crave. The mob—the public—now having no goal but this Liberty to satisfy their appetites may spawn an excess of Liberty. Populism can lead to break down, violence, chaos and injustice for everyone (Plato, Book VIII, 1985).

Demagogic populism is best known by its attachment to fear and hatred. In the modern era its counterparts to the Athenian experience can be found in communism, fascism and Nazism and ultra-nationalist movements of all sorts. The enemy might be economic, religious, ethnic, racial or a foreign nation or organization (Nussbaum, 2012). In some cases several of these might be in force at once, as the Nazis identified economic and racial foes along with foreign enemies. The circumstances of each case may differ (as in the genocide in Rwanda, anti-Muslim fervor in the US, or ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina) but the pattern remains the same. The popular, self-styled “victim” seeks to vanquish the supposed enemy (the Threat of the “Victor”) to take back what is (or *was*) rightfully seen as theirs, and *to do unto the other what has been allegedly done unto them*. Martha Nussbaum has recently argued that although a natural element of the human condition, fear is the most base and thoughtless of human emotions. Fear causes people to hate others, and in this hate to determine that the “Other” is a lower form of animal life, (Nussbaum 2012). Recent emanations of religious intolerance in America are emblematic of this ugly side of fear in human social relationships. When the drama is over and the dust settled, the mob gives way to the tyrant, and in the worst case scenario, the gas chambers.

American Populism and Legacies

A fear of a majority fired by angry passions prompted the theme in James Madison’s *Federalist #10*: the greatest threat to governance and the public good is the violence of faction; and the faction most to be feared was that of the unpropertied masses incited to a “common passion.”

The main rationale for the acceptance of the new constitution, as Madison believed, was the structure itself which makes the rise of popular factions unlikely (Hamilton, Jay and Madison, pp. 56-65). In Federalist #49, Madison wrote of his fear that:

“The executive power might be in the hands of a peculiar favorite of the people. In such a posture of things, the public decision might be less swayed by prepossessions in favor of the legislative party. But still it could never be expected to turn on the true merits of the question. It would inevitably be connected with the spirit of pre-existing parties, or of parties springing out of the question itself. It would be connected with persons of distinguished character and extensive influence in the community. It would be pronounced by the very men who had been agents in, or opponents of the measures to which the decision would relate. The *passions* therefore not the *reason*, of the public, would sit in judgment. But it is the *reason* of the public alone that ought to control and regulate the government. The passions ought to be controlled and regulated by the government, (Hamilton, Jay and Madison, pp. 338-343).

Madison in Federalist #49 bluntly argued that public passions can and should be regulated by government. The rise of petty demagogues rousing popular unrest must be avoided. This contrasts widely with the libertarian view of the constitution and ideas of the Framers. At the same time, there is credence to the argument that the current state of political affairs in American dysfunction would be a nightmare to James Madison (Yeselson, 2014). In #49 above we see a foreshadowing of the very kind of populist uprising experienced today that has the Madisonian model of governance grounding to a halt.

Madison likely believed Americans would be inclined to populism, and he saw the 1789 federal constitution a mechanism for limiting that possibility (Olsen 2010). In fact, Madison was right; the construction of the Republic has worked well in this regard. American political history and culture has not produced a classically populist regime (though many politicians have launched populist appeals). Americans are wary of such populism long term, and a large-scale quasi-democratic movement has not succeeded in the classic manner. Such movements have had little staying power on a national level, and despite some domestic terrorist organizations and cultish fanatics, the American experience with populism has been transitory. All the same, such movements can leave their mark.

Americans think of themselves as a self-governing people, and perhaps because of the Madisonian vision of the Republic and its clever separations of powers and points of conflict, or perhaps because of the egalitarian social conditions as found by De Tocqueville in Democracy in America, 1835, American populism frequently resolves itself in calls for self-determination (Tocqueville, 2000). Certainly, some Americans will always respond to demagogic elites and populist movements have formed, but the polity has eventually reverted to balance. American populism has often led to constructive change and enduring political alliances. The underlying worry is more structural. Will the Madisonian model show the same resilience in these times and in the face of a temperament that blames government itself for the perceived problems?

Americans endured populist political movements as early as Jefferson, and certainly in the Presidency of Andrew Jackson. Jackson's election in 1828 made a virtue of his humble frontier roots, heated rhetoric and class divisions. Abraham Lincoln played to similar images, despite his own resistance to the populist movement of his day, the "Know Nothing" movement that opposed immigration. Lincoln cultivated the images of the "Illinois rail splitter" with "log cabin roots," but he was not a populist in ideas. The interesting part of the Lincoln story is how he utilized populist appeals and techniques to win elections in 1858 and 1860. Lincoln's nuanced usage of populist techniques can be seen in his image and policies aimed at the "Everyman" in America. Meanwhile, his opposition to slavery avoided attacking the right of southerners to keep their property early in his career, and demonstrated a sense of balance more than hypocrisy. Lincoln found that the threads of populism could be woven into a different political coat—and he transcended the common man approaches of Jefferson and Jackson.

In the 1880s America saw the rise of the People's Party, led by James Weaver running on the "cross of gold campaign." Eventually this was countered by the evolving Democratic Party, who behind William Jennings Bryan in 1892, called for a kind of class warfare against the bankers and industrialists. Bryan and the Democrats effectively absorbed the followers of the Populist Party and the People's Party—but they did so at a price. Bryan never became President. American forms of populism have always been out there, from Barack Obama's theme of *Hope & Change*, to McCain and Palin's *Maverick Hockey Mom from Wasilla*.

American populism has a liberal progressive legacy, and it also has had its archly conservative, and religious, even evangelistic legacies. One thing American populism has in common in all its guises: an appeal to the interests of the common citizen against the “powers that be,” the elitists, the big wigs, or the social groups both foreign and domestic that threaten somehow American values, and the American “way of life.” Populism can be uplifting and positive or downright hateful, mean spirited and ugly. Either way it has a poor reputation among American scholars, intellectuals and politicians, until such time as these same have chosen to use the populist themes themselves (Olsen).

In a NY Times article, (January 2010) David Brooks argued that this country “was built by anti-populists. It was built by people like Alexander Hamilton and Abraham Lincoln who rejected the idea that the national economy is fundamentally divided along class lines. They rejected the zero-sum mentality that is at the heart of populism, the belief that economics is a struggle over finite spoils. Instead, they believed in a united national economy—one interlocking system of labor, trade and investment.” Brooks worried: “Politics some believe, is the organization of hatreds. The people who try to divide society on the basis of ethnicity we call racists. The people who try to divide it on the basis of religion we call sectarians. The people who try to divide it on the basis of social class we call either populists or elitists.” Brooks concluded: “The populists have an Us vs. Them mentality. If they continue their random attacks on enterprise and capital, they will increase the pervasive feeling of uncertainty, which is now the biggest factor in holding back investment, job creation and growth. They will end up discrediting good policies (the Obama bank reforms are quite sensible) because they will persuade the country that the government is in the hands of reckless Huey Longs. They will have *traded dynamic optimism, which always wins, for combative divisiveness, which always loses.*” David Brooks as an unabashed conservative offered a grim view of the “Populist Addiction,” (Brooks).

The Tea Party

How serious should Americans view the rise of the Tea Party (TPPers)? The answer is: “seriously enough.” In our world of electronic social networks, financial volatility, globalization and systemic transformation both seen and unseen, the voice of an angry and resentful generation at the height of their leadership in American politics means something. In fact, similar populist movements employing the new technologies of communication currently dot the landscape of Europe. This phenomenon is common during hard economic times (Wodak, et.al. 2013).

That does not mean the Tea Party phenomenon itself will last for many years, but it is a signal of a period in which many Americans are anxious, lost and worried. Americans are struggling with their 21st Century identity, and a sense of fading power. This is a time when, even if it would be best to embrace the changes and challenges America faces, there will be social forces that fearfully resist confronting the present and future in its objective realities. They will cling to images, half formed truths and myths, and angry frustrations that work against the Republican values of our main enterprise: to create a more perfect union. Political ideologies do matter (Ball and Dagger, 2011). Before it is gone the Tea Party may have lasting consequences, but it remains only tangentially libertarian in scope and ideals.

In March 2010 a Harris poll revealed that one third of adult Americans supported the Tea Party, and about one quarter opposed it. By 2013 that number had dropped dramatically, with over 50% of Americans in opposition to the Tea Party (Pew research 2013). Although current support is smaller, Tea Party followers are more passionate than ever. The real question is: do those who support the Tea Party know what they are supporting or even what they might dislike? The movement remains fragmented and cannot settle on a single platform or set of ideas. Unlike Newt Gingrich's *Contract With America* in 1994, which began in triumph and then collapsed in embarrassment, the Tea Party lacks even that level of specifics. The absence of a central set of ideas or platform allows anyone who is just existentially angry or unhappy to feel right at home. The TPP have taken anger into the public square in a significant way.

The Tea Party makes the angry and cynical person feel welcome in their midst. In their gatherings, *No One* will demand to know what anyone is really or specifically angry about. Anger is its own justification. For example, on Web sites and in speeches and rallies the Tea Party Patriots (who can be distinguished as an organization within the Tea party movement) reveal a fondness for procedural gimmicks (like a ban on congressional earmarks; constitutional amendments no matter how far-fetched; term limits; balanced budget requirements; mandatory sentencing guidelines; impeaching the President; holding the debt limit; etc.). The TPP seeks shortcuts to salvation. For example, the Tea Party is fixated on "Obama-Care" and President Obama, but simultaneously they are angry at both Wall Street and Republican Establishment Leaders, just as much as the Federal government itself. Still, TPPers remain Republican. Their anger is clear, but their targets are not.

Beyond the belief in the failure of things they do not truly understand the monstrous danger of Big Government covers everything. Information is not the ally of the TPP, and in their angry world they seek gimmicks for solutions, and chaos and break down as their tactics (Altemeyer, 1996).

Apart from a general unhappiness, and cynicism, the TPP offers one common theme: the mystical threat of Big Government. In the absence of a "certain elite" out there to aim their anger, the TP has subsumed the singular image of Big Government into their popular enemy, the Elite, and the bane to the "common man." The Tea Party movement has been favorably compared by David Brooks, George Will and others to the Student Protest Movement of the 1960s. Although the one came from the Left and the current one arcs from the Right, both are and were at least self-styled as populist mass protests against an oppressive establishment. The two movements share in common an anti-establishment pose, but from that point forward, they are best understood by their differences.

The 1960s may operate as a euphemism for the range of political and social movements of that period: Civil Rights, Anti-Vietnam War, Anti-Nuclear, Free Speech, Environmentalism, and so on. The 1960s were about young people and although many social and cultural movements are connected to them, the single major issue of the 1960s was the Vietnam War. Looking back, despite the length of time and the unfinished business and unhealed wounds, the Anti-War movement and the Civil Rights movement were successful. The protest to the war in Vietnam eventually became a majority movement, and the ongoing struggle for civil rights in America can view the 1960s as the beginning of not only social justice and equality for Black Americans, but also Hispanics, Asians, Gays and Women. Surely the work is not finished, but the Vietnam War did end, and the political culture in America began a continuing period of social transformation. The 1960s, although filled with selfish, silly and petulant behavior, as well as mass demonstrations and violent riots, was primarily selfless and idealistic: stop the war, make love and peace not violence, end racism, eradicate poverty, and save the environment. The goals and tactics may have been Romantic and childish, but the 1960s were also about trying to make the world a "better place." The music and the art of the period speaks to those goals.

Comparisons to the Tea Party with the 1960s do not hold water. As the Pew Research data reveal, the Tea Party is for and about middle-aged White folks (predominantly over 50 years old and male). There is no single issue like the war in Vietnam to drive the movement.

Hatred of “big government” is not the same thing, although on that dimension the 1960s and the TPP are not far apart. The TPP is united by fear, frustration and hatreds and this compares unfavorably with the 1960s. For example, Health Care Reform is cited by some as the “Vietnam” of the TPP, but it lacks real gravity. The most devoted Tea Partier is certainly not as passionate about stripping away health insurance from those who have just gotten it for the first time, than a nation resisting a terrible war. Issues like immigration, the Wall Street bail out, or the national debt are simply not as existentially significant as the Vietnam War. Worse, the TPP does not really agree about what to do with these issues, except that they know such issues make them angry. If the TPP is to have success for anything in the future, what might that be? We do know it will not be anything like ending a war, or expanding civil rights. Finally, the TPP is not as future oriented as the 1960s, or about making the world a better place for everyone. It is not inclusive; the TPP is exclusive. Peace, love and civil rights is not the same as: “cut my taxes;” “Stop government from messing with my Medicare;” “reduce the debt;” “Keep illegal aliens out;” Obama is a socialist, Muslim, alien, or anti-gun rights;” and “Don’t Tread on Me.” There is no music or poetry identified with waving a Confederate flag in front of the White House while shutting down government. The Tea Party and the 1960s are/were both populist. There was a certain nastiness and resentment in the 1960s, but it did not dominate the atmosphere of the groups which tended to unite people ultimately across lines of race, ethnicity, religion, age, gender and religion. Both movements will leave lasting images and legacies. Both movements are anti-establishment for different reasons. The favorable comparisons end at that point.

Unity and Disunity

There are some who have argued that the Tea Party is united by racism. That is not completely fair, but it is true that the Tea Party movement is not a solution for America’s problems, and part of its voice is stimulated by racial attitudes (Pew Research). The TPP are an expression of what is wrong with America, not because it is right-wing and conservative, and not because it is tempted by conspiracy theories and elements of racism. The Tea Party movement signals what is wrong with America because in its self-indulgent way, it claims that what is bothering America, and all of America’s difficulties, is somehow “*not our fault.*” The Tea Party Movement is an expression of angry irresponsibility.

The Demographics of the Tea Party 2010 vs. 2013

| 2010 | 2013 |
|---|---|
| Republican—49% Independent—43% Democrat—8% | N/A |
| Conservative—70% Moderate—22% Liberal—7% | Conservative—83% Moderate—15% Liberal—1% |
| Men—55% Women--45% | Men—61% Women--39% |
| Less than \$30,000 annual income—19% \$30,000-49,999—26% \$50,000 and above---55% | Less than \$30,000 annual income—21% \$30,000-49,999—31% \$50,000 and above---36% |
| 18-29 years old—16% 30-49 year old—34% 50-64 years old—29% 65 and older—21% | 18-29 years old—9% 30-49 year old—32% 50-64 years old—34% 65 and older—23% |
| Employed full time—49% Employed part time—6% Retired—24% Homemaker—9% Student—4% Unemployed—6% | N/A |
| Non-Hispanic White—79% Non-Hispanic Black—6% Other—15% | White—83% Black—0% Hispanic—8% |

In summary: Tea Partiers are Republican, and Whiter, Wealthier, Older and more Male than anything else that defines them demographically. These attributes have become more consolidated over the three years after the 2010 elections. A unifying theme among their followers is that most of America's problems, as they see them, were caused by somebody else. In addition, the Pew Research Data confirm that Tea Party Republicans (TPRs) oppose Obama Care, favor smaller government and support gun rights. The data also reveal that TPRs oppose compromise among their leaders with the opposition party (Pew Research).

Perhaps no theme has been more prevalent among Conservatives over the last 30 years than that of “personal responsibility.” In reaction to the growth of the welfare state and programs like affirmative action and other “entitlements,” Conservatives have wailed against the tendency to expect government or social programs to take the place of personal responsibility and individual accomplishment. It is a common theme among Tea Partiers too—especially in the case of Health Care Reform—as if a person who loses their job and their insurance and then is later diagnosed with cancer somehow did this to themselves, and should have figured out a way to avoid this trouble on their own? In a way, many modern Conservatives have outdone the liberals of the past in excusing citizens from personal responsibility. For example, many Conservatives claim illegal immigrants are in the US because of bad government and bad policies—but not because Americans profited from their presence for decades. For Tea Partiers, all of America’s ills are the fault of the government. The government is the great “other,” the “enemy of the people,” and over which people have no control. According to the TPP, Government spends the people’s money, blows up the deficit and does so for mysterious yet nefarious reasons of its own.

The argument that all of America’s problems are the fault of the government is clearly false. Government manages large scale social benefits like Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, etc.; it directs the national defense, provides for recovery from disaster, attempts to regulate on behalf of private enterprise a vast and complex global market---and along the way seeks to maintain and regulate the affairs of the people such that we may safely travel, visit national parks, communicate, and retain a much debated but absolutely essential promise of civil rights and liberties. In its imperfect way, a democratic republic has not only survived, but became by most measures the wealthiest and most powerful nation on the planet. In the end, we could ask: “who or what is government?” One answer is that, for good and ill, the government is people working in all the jobs that “*We the People*” have asked it to address for over two centuries. The American Republic is a pluralist democracy. Imperfect and yet founded on the Classical Liberal principles of the social contract, the *rule of law* is the central pillar in the great edifice that houses American democracy. Unbeknownst to the Tea Party, what they really despise is Liberalism--both philosophically and in practice. If the Tea Party is libertarian, it represents a twisted form of Libertarianism. Tea Party libertarianism is mean and intolerant. It does not oppose “big government” as much as it opposes liberal democracy.

The TPP is led intellectually by retired white folks many of whom are collecting social security checks and are covered by Medicare, who find themselves with enough free time to drive their RVs to attend Tea Party Rallies wearing tri-cornered hats; or to throw barricades at the White House, cheer a shuttered government and accuse their “illegitimate” President of reading the Qur’an at night (which if true—would still not make the President illegitimate). The Tea Party Patriots ignore the positive role of government and instead scream about the “audaciousness and arrogance of government,” and call for abolishing the Federal Reserve Board, closing the Postal Service, or drastic over-hauls of the Internal Revenue Service (Foley, 2012). The TPP talk about returning to the Gold Standard, abolishing the Department of Education and the EPA, but they demand that their Social Security and Medicare Benefits are to be left pristine. Big government is fine—when delivering services to their interests.

Tea Party hates President Barack Obama, and claim that big government is a monster. In the same breath they argue: “They’ve got to focus on issues like keeping jobs here and lowering the price of prescription drugs,” (Los Angeles Times, 2010). Ironically, creating jobs and regulating prescription drugs are tasks of “big government.” In a democracy people do not all agree on how to address national problems. If the TPP ever established a coherent platform, they would likely lose half their followers over night. The inchoate and fragmented nature of the Tea Party’s anger and frustration is an ideological virtue because it expands the pie of possible followers. Anyone can join because there is no clear program (Allen, 2011; Baradat, 2006; Foley 2012; Hoover, 1994; Ingersoll, Matthews and Davison, 2010).

Libertarianism and the Tea Party

Could libertarianism have been the original Tea Party philosophy? Maybe. Radically reducing the scope of government, providing for basic national defense, and giving the poor just enough resources to live decent lives---perhaps there is a platform therein. The first Tea Party protests are traced back to 2007, and many claim that Ron Paul’s “Boston Tea Party 2007” was the hall mark event. In the aftermath of the 2008 national election and the failure of Ron Paul, many former followers began to engage in meetings and social networking across the country. In 2009, a Conservative activist named Keli Carender (among others) began organizing protests and dialogue in reaction to 2008 Federal laws: the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008; and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, both associated with the bail out of Wall Street.

These laws incited the core anger of the original Tea Party and made solid connection with the particular libertarian ideas of Ron Paul. The populist element lay in the outrage against Wall Street and the sense of collusion between government and the Plutocrats. The next phase came in 2009 with the signing of President Obama's stimulus package and the beginnings of what today is called Obama Care—what is fundamentally health insurance reform covered in the Affordable Health Care Act. In this early going, and associated with an organization known as Americans for Prosperity, the Tea Party had a germ of Libertarianism in its roots. This would not last long.

The original talking points of Ron Paul were always: “reducing the scope of government, providing for basic national defense, and giving the poor just enough resources to live decent lives.” Similar core values are now being enunciated in new ways by his ambitious son, Rand Paul. But that is not what most Tea Partiers believe, and today Rand Paul does not claim to be a true Libertarian. The TPP vision is that you can keep Medicare benefits, Social Security, and balance the federal budget by quick tricks like ending congressional earmarks (which has been done) and defunding the National Endowment for the Arts. Of course, since earmarks were hardly as much as 1% to 2% of the federal budget at any given time, it is hard to see how that might have worked. Of course, ending earmarks has had no affect whatsoever on the federal deficit, but it has made it more difficult for Senators and House Members to bargain with each other because they have so little to trade with one another.

As attractive as it might sound to some in the abstract, libertarianism of the Ron Paul type will not work in the 21st century. The libertarian ethic expresses values and virtues worth consideration, (e.g. “That government is best that governs least”), but as a possible model for running the American government, its time passed well over a century ago (Kahn and Minnich, 2005). For many followers today, Libertarianism operates as an ideology of principles for disaffected outsiders, or rugged individualists, looking for an answer. Libertarianism is often a pose for the self-identified iconoclast, but there is historical and philosophical depth. Charles Fried's Modern Liberty and the Limits of Government, is both a hard headed promulgation of a libertarian alternative and a cautionary tale about the vulnerability of civil liberties in an age of large scale governmental management of our lives (Fried, 2007).

All the same it is difficult to see how “small government” could work in the Twenty-first Century and in an age of globalization beyond the basic civil libertarian principles. As Rand Paul has discovered, the problem is structural, and it has long been impossible to promise a system reflecting the theories of the likes of Donald Allen, Murray Rothbard or F.A. Hayek (Hayek 1960; Allen 2011; Rothbard 1973). Hayek’s lack of empathy for “social justice” is surely not well understood by modern Libertarians, and Rothbard’s opposition to central banking and musings about anarcho-capitalism are too far-reaching, as were his original interpretations of Lockean classical liberalism. Allen, Rothbard and Hayek provide signposts in the long train of libertarian philosophy and values, as does John Locke, but their value has been transcended by Twenty-first century realities.

The claim to being a Tea Party Patriot is perhaps compelling but controversial. From the beginning the Patriot claim suggested that all opponents to the TPP are disloyal, unpatriotic and perhaps not real Americans. Movements that claim to be patriotic run into trouble when their immediate goals are demanding tax cuts or closing government. Complaining about the social issues, and then claiming to love the country but not the government sounds reminiscent of the arguments employed by people like Timothy McVeigh, Aryan Nations, or the American Nazi Party. After all, they are angry too, and they profess to love their country. Is the government to blame for all their ill, or is the problem liberal democracy itself?

While the Tea Party as a populist movement, has managed to make government the elite it attacks, it has ignored the elites who are its secret backers and funders. The Tea Party has received major funding since its inception from corporate elites whose primary goal is to escape taxation and regulation from the government. TPP support has come from a number of privately supported PACs, for example: Our Country Deserves Better PAC, and Americans for Prosperity, to name just two. Another source was Health Care Professionals and the Medical Industry Pharmaceutical lobbies. Americans for Prosperity especially has effectively launched attacks on the federal government, the Obama Administration and the Democratic Party, along with its sister organizations and think-tanks: Freedom Works, the Heritage Foundation, The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), the Cato Institute and more. In many ways, the Tea Party is a social movement manipulated for the public expression of interests and ideas of powerful conservative and corporate backers. The populist Tea Party is the brash public mouth piece, arguably, of Plutocrats and corporate free-market ideologues.

The Cato Institute is interesting in this regard, as it is a self proclaimed think tank for American Libertarian ideas, but is dominated by Koch Industries. In fact, among the founders of the Cato Institute is Charles Koch.

The Brothers Koch and the Neo-Libertarians

In an August 30, 2010 article by Jane Mayer written in the *New Yorker*, titled *Covert Operations*, Mayer offered a detailed account of what she called the “Billionaire brothers who are waging a war against Obama.” To spotlight the Koch brothers as political demons in 2014 is now almost a cliché since Mayer’s revelations. Even so, the connections between the Koch’s and the Tea Party serve as a revealing metaphor. The Koch’s represent the John Birch Society and a Cold War connection to the anti-government populism of today, and shed light on how the Tea Party and neo-Libertarianism evolved over the last forty years.

Charles and David Koch own nearly all of Koch Industries, a conglomerate that hails from Wichita, Kansas. They are frequently referred to as “the biggest company you have never heard of.” Annual revenues are estimated to be above 100 Billion dollars. Each Koch Brother is estimated to be personally worth 35 Billion dollars. Koch enterprises operate oil refineries in Alaska, Texas and Minnesota, and control more than 4,000 miles of pipeline. Koch Industries owns Brawny Paper, Dixie Cups, Georgia Pacific Lumber (see formaldehyde), Stainmaster Carpet and Lycra, among other products. *Forbes* ranks it as the second largest private company in the USA (after Cargill) (Mayer, p.2).

The Kochs were brought up as radical Libertarians who believed in reducing personal income and corporate taxes, social services for the poor and, most important, reduced government regulation of industry—in particular environmental regulation. Their corporate and political interests are symbiotic. “The University of Massachusetts at Amherst’s Political Economy Research Institute named Koch Industries one of the top ten polluters in the United States,” (Mayer, p. 3). Greenpeace has labeled Koch Industries the “kingpin of climate science denial.” David Koch started Americans for Prosperity in 2004. Americans for Prosperity (AP) worked closely with the Tea Party since the movement’s birth. In April 2009, AP hosted the web site for *Tea Party Talking Points* and funded the rallies from their origin.

The anti-government fervor of the 2010 political landscape is the political triumph of the Kochs. By giving money to “educate, fund and organize” Tea Party protesters, they have been able to turn their private agenda into a mass movement. In April 2009, for example, Americans for Prosperity, underwritten by Koch Industries, introduced a Texas politician named Ted Cruz to the Tea Party audience. He would in time become the Texas Senator Ted Cruz who led the government shut-down of 2014.

According to Mayer’s research, a Republican campaign consultant said, “The Koch brothers gave money and founded it. It’s like they put seeds in the ground. The rainstorm comes, and the frogs come out of the mud—and they’re our candidates.” The consultant added: “To call them (the Kochs) under the radar is an understatement. They are underground. They’re smart. This right-wing redneck stuff works for them. They see this as a way to get things done without getting dirty themselves,” (Mayer).

As boys the Koch brothers were raised by their father to embrace the free-market and the radical views of the John Birch Society. Later they were influenced by the radical thinker, Robert LeFevre, who favored abolition of government. The Koch brothers grew up to become the financial support for a nationalistic and extreme kind of libertarian politics allied with major private enterprise. Charles Koch’s goal was to “tear government out at the root” (Mayer). In this vein you can hear the Ayn Rand world view allied with the theories of F.A. von Hayek, Rothbard and LeFevre. Rigidly anti-communist as youngsters, government is seen by the Koch’s as the harbinger of all forms of totalitarianism. In time, as their oil and chemical fortunes grew, the desire to rid themselves of government regulations, taxes, fees and liabilities became an article of religious belief.

The Koch Brothers endured several failed efforts to launch a radical anti-government Libertarian party in the 1980s and 90s, and they personally stepped away from the public spotlight. Instead, they quietly contributed more than 100 million dollars to dozens of “seemingly” independent organizations. Tax records show that in 2008 the Koch Family foundations gave money to 34 political and policy organizations, three of which they founded and several of which they direct. In addition, the Kochs and their company have poured millions to political campaigns, estimated at over 48 million dollars.

Between Charles Koch's wife and brother, along with other foundations of their creation, they may have spent somewhere closer to 120 million dollars, not counting KochPAC and its millions in support of individual political candidates. According to Jane Mayer, Koch Industries led all energy companies in political contributions in 2010 (Mayer).

The Kochs' give money to non-profits and think tanks who in turn do research and advocacy on issues which impact the profit margins of Koch industries. Their efforts are at the head of a pro-corporate movement, subsidizing think tanks (e.g. CATO Institute and Mercatus Center, etc.) who provide a conservative slant to the US Constitution, promote radical libertarian ideologies, and generate a mistrust of public institutions which makes the government less capable of effective regulation of private, corporate and especially energy producing enterprises. The Kochs have funded a number of groups whose aim is to foster environmental skepticism, and to spread the idea that the scientific community does not share a consensus concerning global climate change theory. The Kochs are leaders among a number of companies, like Exxon-Mobil, who have been known as the "Merchants of Doubt." The Koch family is also among the most philanthropic of families, donating millions to public television, the Smithsonian, and to cancer research. At the same time, Koch industries is among the most sued enterprises in America, with a large array of claims against them concerning toxic wastes, pollution and the problematic manufacture of dangerous chemicals and laminates. The Kochs are very powerful players who have played a long game, stirring a libertarian and a populist movement against big government; a movement that may have gone beyond their control.

The Path to Now

Not long after the end of WW II, as America ascended to its primary place in the world, and amidst the ruin of Europe and fears of the Cold War, opponents of the idea that the public good could be well addressed by public agency began to find their footing. The Cold War injected American society with both a fear and hatred of communism. Intellectually this called to some as an opposition to the concept of totalitarianism which is always opposed ideally to democracy. Among a few, the fear of totalitarianism was the same as the fear or resentment of government. The New Deal and the post-war American government could be feared as the precursor to an American "Big Brother."

Cold War Libertarians were anti-communist, pro-private enterprise and free markets, and interestingly, pro-corporate industry. The irony of fearing big government but not private industrial corporate empires requires some intellectual dexterity. Gradually, as America endured the 1960s and the Vietnam War, the Nixon Era and the seemingly non-stop growth of government with the simultaneous failures of government, conservatives began to coalesce around some general ideas. By 1980, the American Right was ready to have a path defined for them, and this came in the Reagan era alliance. While appealing to the Cold War generation of Libertarians, Reagan brought together forces that were anti-regulatory, anti-redistributive, anti-welfare state (entitlements), and anti-Progressive reforms. This allowed a merging of rural and blue collar conservatives, with East coast corporate capitalists, Southwestern new capitalists, Southern White conservatives, and conservative Christian organizations typified by the "Moral Majority" and the "Culture Warriors." It was a masterful aggregation of interests, but the one unifying idea was critical: Big Government is THE problem. Public institutions and government became the scapegoats for angry white male resentment, over-regulation of the economy and dwindling US stature in world affairs. Entitlement programs were opposed as wasteful government pay-outs to undeserving freeloaders.

Since the 1990s there has emerged a new kind of libertarian wave that was born out of disgust with the two main parties. The rise of the independent voter in America generated a neo-Libertarian position that is unlike the cold War version, and has very little in common with Tea Party populism and anger. The neo-Libertarian is younger, most likely born after 1965. They are non-partisan and individualistic, but also secular, suspicious of government, and protective of personal liberties. The neo-Libertarian accepts climate science, is concerned about global environmental problems, favors legalization of marijuana and decriminalization of drugs, and rejects the cost or justifications for an American global military presence. The neo-Libertarian is racially inclusive, supports LGBT rights, accepts equal pay and justice between men and women, and opposes the influence of great corporate wealth as oligarchic and unjust. The common themes in this new Libertarian view are disgust toward the major political parties, skepticism toward government and respect for individual rights. In the 2014 special Congressional election in Florida's District 13, the Libertarian candidate, 27 years old, espoused these very themes and referred to himself as a "community libertarian."

| Categories | Old Cold War Libertarians | Tea Party "Libertarians?" | Neo-Libertarians: Born after 1965 |
|------------------------|---|---|---|
| Big government | Opposed –anti communist; anti-totalitarian; anti-social welfare | Opposed—but supportive of specific entitlements of social welfare | Opposed; primarily as it endangers personal liberties; skeptical of sustainability of entitlements |
| Military | Favors global military presence in protection of US interests | Favors powerful military, but concerned about deficits and budgets | Opposed, and especially to interference in foreign wars. Seeks reduced military investment & presence |
| Gender | Male-centric | Ambivalent but aware of gender equality; opposes women's right to choose, equal pay, etc. | Supports gender equality and women's right to choose; contraceptive rights and equal pay |
| Race | Insensitive but opposed to using public policy or resources to ameliorate injustices of the past. | Sees non-white races as a threat and/or as undeserving free loaders | Sensitive to racial differences and injustice; seeks racial equality & justice. |
| LGBT | Insensitive; generally viewed as a perversion | Opposed to LGBT rights and equality; viewed as a threat | Open to LGBT equality. |
| Environment | Government regulation is opposed; environmentalism is rejected | Sees environmental regulation and views climate change theories as exaggerated and hysterical | Accepts climate science and environmental sustainability; skeptical of the role of government |
| Civil Liberties | Individualist and competitive | Fears their erosion | Actively seeks to protect all rights as found in the Bill of Rights and by law especially speech, privacy and religion. |
| Gun rights | Supports 2 nd amendment | Supports 2 nd amendment; fears erosion of gun rights | Supports 2 nd amendment |
| Economics | Free market—supports corporate capitalism | Free market—resents Wall Street and corporate capitalism | Free market—opposed to plutocracy |
| Conservatism? | Secular individualist; nationalist | Resentful, religious, anti-liberal; nationalist | Pro-liberalism, secular, global, civil libertarian |
| Drug Policies | Insensitive; law & order issue | Mandatory sentences; punish drug abuse | Legalize and de-criminalize |

In the years that followed the 1970s, anti-government rhetoric flowered on the Right and became a national narrative that has played a dominant role in American politics. The struggle to use government to expand civil and economic liberties on the Left was opposed by those on the Right who sought to reduce government's role, and thus protect personal liberties as they defined them. The result is a fragmented polity with deeply opposed understandings about government. Today, the alliance of the Reagan era is showing signs of wear and fragmentation, and this is in part due to the divergences that can be found in the conservative movement itself and the role of the Tea Party. One of the lasting consequences may be a public disgust with the two major parties and partisan politics. Partisan disgust may be palpable but also misplaced. The real underlying problem intersects the structural character inherent in the Madisonian system of separation of powers with a long term narrative against the virtues of government that was forty years developing.

Conclusion

Who are the elites the Tea Party Populists should be angry about? Do the TPPers really know who helped create them, and do they really know where their best interests lie? In the end, by aiming hatred and anger at something called "big government" they might actually be helping something or someone who is just as big, but ultimately self-interested, power-seeking and anti-democratic. What happens to America when Americans find democracy intolerable? As David Brooks said: combative divisiveness makes everyone losers. Populism can sometimes come at the expense of the common good. This is an irony.

American political culture works against demagogic populism; the social conditions found by Tocqueville and David Brooks have stood against such tides. Can the model of government ascribed to James Madison continue to work against popular majorities rising in a common passion and removing the rights and liberties of the few or the weak? The modern question surrounds a new problem: the Madisonian model allows for government gridlock and dysfunction. If a well organized minority gains the right position, as the Tea Party has today in the Republican Party, then government can be made hostage to their ill-informed, angry demands. The TPP and their conservative allies can make government perform as badly as they always believed it does.

The only medicine for this are future elections, reforms of rules in both Houses of Congress, and the possible disillusionment of the Tea Party Movement itself beginning with a loss of financial support from its corporate outside sources.

Perhaps American forms of populist anger have always mixed the anger of class warfare with the distrust and fear of tyrannical or despotic government? Looking back before the American Revolution we see defiant colonists joining together to overthrow a King, but the most wealthy and powerful, in fact those perhaps with the most to lose in property and position, were the leaders of the rebellion itself. Distrust of the elites and oligarchy has a tradition of mingling itself not only with anger at the rich, but a sense that the greatest danger to American freedom was arrogant and uncontrolled government. Americans come by their particular and ambivalent form of populism quite naturally. When Americans rage against power they have always had one eye on government itself, while blindly searching with the other for the social conditions and the powers that operate in the darkness.

Nothing has ever barred the powerful, with interests of their own, to find clever ways to manipulate the popular masses to do their will. McCarthyism in the 1950s was evidence that the "powers-that-be" may use any and all of their influence to gather together an angry fearful mob. We know that a national mood of anger and fear can be harnessed to the ends of those who will take most advantage from the unrest. Of course, you never completely harness all the anger to one end. There will be collateral damage. In America the wealthy and powerful have always suffered least in the wake of the anger, chaos and blame, despite Madison, Plato and Aristotle's reservations about demagogic democracy.

Perhaps too much time has been spent thinking about the dishonest, or powerfully interested politicians, rousing the mob, the public beast, to aid them in their quest for office or control of policy. Perhaps a more careful look would consider the dangers of the powerfully wealthy, manipulating the beast, not for office, but to stifle the government and the nation itself. This is not demagogic populism, but as the Tea Party demonstrates, it is populism at the behest of unknown forces whose main enemies are the only institutions that stand against them: self-determination, democracy and the government itself.

If the best government always seeks the common good, then perhaps the most dangerous populism is that which is manipulated by the few, on behalf of the few. The trick is to make selfish interests appear to be the righteous anger of the common person.

The Framers understood that the American Republic was not, and could not be, perfect at the beginning. What Americans inherited from their revolution is an uncharted path to the future. Given qualified tools of self-determination, liberty and rights to make the journey, Americans will decide how they wish to define the role of government in their lives. To make a more perfect union will likely mean separating American skepticism toward government intellectually from the ideals of democratic governance which must accept rule of law, compromise and common sense.

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