A history of American Reactionary Movements: From the Klan to Donald Trump

Christopher Sebastian Parker

For the last seven years the Tea Party has made a lot of noise. It helped the GOP regain the House in 2010. Further, from the debates over the debt ceiling to immigration reform, the Tea Party has forced the GOP to take very conservative positions and caused a rift in the Republican Party. The success of the Tea Party movement has roused media types and academics alike to better understand from whence it came. They wonder how and why it’s come to dominate the political landscape. These are worthy, even necessary, questions. However, I believe that gaining traction on those questions requires placing the Tea Party in historical context because I don’t believe the Tea Party is something new.

What, exactly, is a reactionary movement? According to sociologist Rory McVeigh, it’s “a social movement that acts on behalf of relatively advantaged groups with the goal of preserving, restoring, and expanding the rights and privileges of its members and constituents. These movements also attempt to deny similar rights and privileges to other groups in society...[something that] distinguishes right-wing movements from progressive movements.”¹ Where are the “advantaged groups” to which McVeigh refers? Historically, people that identify with reactionary movements tend to be overwhelmingly white, predominantly male, middle-class, native born, Christian, and heterosexual. Taken together, this is the classical cultural and racial image of American identity.² Further, this strata of the population is more likely than other people to favor strong military presence, support more strict moral codes, back free market capitalism, reject government policies that give minorities a shot at equality, and prefer to maintain the advantaged status of native-born whites more than any other social group.³ As middle-class, white males with a stake in America—both cultural and economic—members and supporters of the Klan, JBS, and the Tea Party committed (and commit) to preserving, restoring, and expanding the rights and privileges of its members and constituents. These movements also attempt to deny similar rights and privileges to other groups in society...[something that] distinguishes right-wing movements from progressive movements.⁴ Who are the “advantaged groups” to which McVeigh refers? Historically, people that identify with reactionary movements tend to be overwhelmingly white, predominantly male, middle-class, native born, Christian, and heterosexual. Taken together, this is the classical cultural and racial image of American identity.²

Further, this strata of the population is more likely than other people to favor strong military presence, support more strict moral codes, back free market capitalism, reject government policies that give minorities a shot at equality, and prefer to maintain the advantaged status of native-born whites more than any other social group.³ As middle-class, white males with a stake in America—both cultural and economic—members and supporters of the Klan, JBS, and the Tea Party committed (and commit) to fighting what they perceive(d) as tyrannical forces. Moreover, they defended freedom in the face of what they argued were unjust laws and court decisions, ones they cast as oppressive. Each, moreover, suggested that sometimes intolerance is necessary to protect liberty.⁴

Beginning with the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850’s clear through the Tea Party of today, reactionary movements are motivated by a belief that America is in rapid decline, something that’s associated with perceived social and cultural change.⁵ Indeed, thanks to interpretive work relying on historical accounts, I have a firm grasp of the macro-historical forces that provoke the emergence of right-wing movements. At the individual level, however, beyond race, ethnicity, class, and religious orientation, we know relatively little about why people are drawn to right-wing movements. We know even less about whether or not supporting right-wing movements can explain social and political attitudes and preferences beyond the influence of other factors, including ideology, partisanship, and racial group membership.

In this chapter, I examine the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of the reactionary right. By the time the present chapter closes, if I’ve done my job, the reader will emerge with a better understanding of what motivates the reactionary right, and how such motivations inform the policy preferences and behavior of its constituents. Right off the bat, however, I must be clear about the limits of this examination, the largest of which is its scope. The paucity of data restricts my analysis of the reactionary right to a fifty-year span, from the 1960’s through the Tea Party. I begin with an overview of reactionary thought, something that includes a brief history of reactionary movements through the mid-20th Century. I then conduct an assessment of who, I believe, are the immediate predecessors of the Tea Party: the John Birch Society. This is followed by an analysis of the contemporary reactionary movement in the United States: the Tea Party, and the movement responsible for the election of Donald Trump. In the conclusion, I will also briefly touch upon the continuities (and discontinuities) between the Tea Party, and its European counterparts.

Toward an Explanation of the Reactionary Right

So, what is the reactionary right? How, if at all, does it depart from the “establishment” right? The reactionary right is commensurate with what Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl

Raab called “preservatism,” or what Clinton Rossiter identified as “ultraconservatism.”

Unlike establishment conservatism that tolerates change as a means of maintaining social, political, and economic stability, reactionary conservatives are willing to undermine stability in service to maintaining the social prestige associated with their strata: white, male, middle class, relatively old, heterosexual, native-born Americans. Anytime the dominance of this stratum is coming into question, as it is when threatened by rapid, large-scale social change, it provokes a “reaction” from the dominant group. This reaction includes violating the rule of law, something that establishment types as far back as John Adams—would. Further, the “reaction” will, more often than naught, include one or more scapegoats to which the group under siege ascribes an ongoing conspiracy. In other words, the principal way in which the in-group explains their loss of relative prestige is by way of a concerted campaign of displacement directed by the out-group(s).

Many years ago, noted historian, Richard Hofstadter, offered what we believe an organic framework in which we may better understand the reactionary right. In his seminal essay, The Paranoid Style in American Politics, he believed the far right wing to practice a style of politics consistent with paranoia. For him, there was no other way to explain the “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and the conspiratorial fantasy” associated with the Goldwater movement. He is careful to distinguish paranoid politics, or the paranoid style, from the clinical version. However, he cites important similarities between political and clinical paranoia in that “both tend to be overheated, over-suspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression.”

The key difference, as he sees it, is that the clinical paranoid perceives himself the object of the conspiracy. The paranoid politico, on the other hand, perceives the conspiracy to be “directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself but millions of others….His sense that his political passions are unfashionable and patriotic, in fact, goes far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation.”

Hofstadter also outlined a belief system on which the paranoid style rests: pseudo conservatism. The pseudo-conservative is a person who is quick to use the rhetoric of conservatism, a belief system that prizes traditions and institutions and has an appreciation for the history of both. Yet, according to Hofstadter, the pseudo-conservative fails to behave like a conservative in that “in the name of upholding traditional American values and institutions and defending them against more or less fictitious dangers, consciously or unconsciously [he] aims at their abolition.” Furthermore, the pseudo-conservative “believes himself to be living in a world in which he is spied upon, plotted against, betrayed, and very likely destined for ruin.” This state of mind pushes him to attack a way of life and institutions he purports to revere, pressing his representatives to insist upon a rash of Constitutional amendments, including abolishing the income tax, cutting spending on welfare, and charging with treason people who try to weaken the government.

Hofstadter believes such a person is attempting to get a fix on his position in the rapidly changing social system in which members of this group believe their material and/or cultural status to be in decline. Moreover, as Hofstadter suggests, they no longer have something to which they may anchor their American identity. Indeed, the pseudo-conservative has lost his bearings amidst a raft of social changes, much as someone suffering from paranoid social cognition does upon induction into a new social order—be it at school, in a neighborhood, or new job. In this environment, the pseudo-conservative in the paranoid style is simply trying to maintain their social status.

Consider the 20th Century. The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s provides the first example. Founded in Stone Mountain, Georgia, in 1915, the second version of the “Invisible Empire” was truly a national movement, spreading beyond the South to the states of Washington, Oregon, New York, Indiana, and Michigan, to name but a few. According to a well-research documentary by the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) by the mid-1920s, “national membership in this secret organization ranged from three million to as high as eight million Klansmen.” The modal Klan member was white (of course), male, middle-class, heterosexual, and native born.

To maintain the dominance of the strata to which they belonged, the Klan stopped at almost nothing. Frequently, they relied upon violence to keep “uppity” blacks in their place, as well as Jews and Catholic immigrants. All of this is well known. What’s not so well known is the fact that the Klan also used violence to police white men. White men who beat their wives, were chronic drunks, cheated on their spouse, among other things, were subject to beatings by Klansmen. In short, the Klan enforced the moral standards of the community. Regardless of the purpose for which it’s used, extra-legal violence is, by definition, a violation of the rule of law.

Law and order, of course, is something by which conservatives typically swear. The fact that the Klan employed lynching and beatings as a means of maintaining social order

10 Ibid., p. 4.
11 Ibid., p. 4.
15 http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amexexperience/features/general-article/flood-klan/
isn’t news. What is new, though, is the theoretical reason behind them doing so: to maintain the group’s social prestige. It’s abundantly clear now that the Klan perceived their way of life under siege. Blacks posed a threat socially, Jews economically, and Catholics politically. In other words, all three threatened the America to which Klan members identified: white, male, middle class, older, Christian, native born, and heterosexual. In the absence of the social-scientific methods and measures to which we now have access, it’s difficult to say what, from an empirical perspective, drove people to identify with the Klan.

Social histories of the KKK suggest the complicity of racism and xenophobia, among other things, in the mobilization of the Klan. Unfortunately, we cannot adjudicate this issue for the Invisible Empire. However, if I’m correct in that the KKK of the 1920s represents a pattern of social change followed by the formation of reactionary movements, I remain confident that we can eventually assay the correlates of the reactionary right. We now turn to this task.

The Reactionary Right of the 1960s

Some 30 years after the Klan’s renaissance another reactionary movement emerged. Retired candy manufacturer, Robert Welch, founded the John Birch Society (JBS). Founded in 1958, the organization was borne of the anxiety associated with the perceived spread of communism at home and abroad: they believed the “American” way of life threatened by communist subversion. During its heyday, the JBS enjoyed a membership that stood at eighty thousand, and six-eight million sympathizers, i.e., non-members who, nonetheless, identified with the organization. By the mid-1960s, though, the movement spread beyond California and Arizona to the remainder of the country, represented by approximately five thousand local chapters. Like the Klan, its members were firmly middle-class. For instance, approximately thirty-three percent of them completed college, with another thirty-two percent that had attended, though not completed, college. The numbers for the general public were ten and twelve percent, respectively. Further, only fourteen percent of Birchers belonged to the manual-labor class versus forty-nine percent of the general public.

Welch was a big believer in small government. This is no surprise given his business background. But it was his belief that the United States was being torn asunder by communism for which he was best known. He accused President Eisenhower of being in cahoots with the Communists, and attempted to impeach Chief Justice Earl Warren for his support of civil rights for blacks. In fact, he suggested that the Civil Rights Movement was, among other things, a means by which communism might gain traction in the United States. Indeed, communism did a lot of heavy lifting for Birchers: anything they perceived as a deviation from the “American” way, they labeled “communist.” This included racial and gender equality, what they believed was the moral “decay” of American society (e.g., homosexuality, pornography, and the absence of deference to authority), and rising crime rates.

At this point, even the skeptical reader must concede the emergence of a strong, consistent pattern. However, as a social scientist, I remain vulnerable on at least one count for our evidence rests, in the main, on interpretive claims. I have no way of identifying what really underpins identification with reactionary movements much less assessing the political consequences associated with them. After accounting for education, age, and income does religion remain a factor? What about racism, nativism, or ideology? Does any of the latter group of possible determinants affect the likelihood of someone sympathizing with reactionary movements? Finally, does membership or identification with a reactionary movement influence individual-level attitudes, policy preferences and behavior beyond competing, more established explanations?

To answer these questions I turn to a group best known as supporters of the late Arizona Senator, and presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater. After losing a close election in 1960 when John F. Kennedy bested Richard M. Nixon, right-leaning factions of the GOP wished to run a “real” conservative instead of a “me too Democrat,” a moniker akin to today’s RINO: Republican In Name Only. In Goldwater, the GOP at last had a candidate that would completely dismantle the New Deal by shrinking government. On foreign policy, the senator promised to roll back the spread of communism instead of simply containing it as President Eisenhower had chosen to do. In 1964, Goldwater’s fidelity to small government resulted in his failure to support the Civil Rights Act, a maneuver that won him support in the South. He had also won the support of Strom Thurmond, Goldwater’s colleague from South Carolina, and the leader of the Dixiecrat revolt of 1948.

These are all important reasons why I have chosen to draw on Goldwater supporters as proxies for reactionary conservatism in the 1960s. But the most important—if not dispositive—factor for us is the fact that the JBS were the senator’s most fervent supporters. In fact, some have even ventured that in the absence of the JBS (including JBS identifiers, i.e., non-members), Goldwater may have failed to secure his party’s nomination.

16 Sara Diamond, Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States (New York: Guilford Press, 1995); see also Parker and Barretta, Change They Can’t Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America.
ter supporters are very similar to the JBS’s constituency: they’re well educated, all white, older, predominantly male, and members of the white-collar crowd.22

Until now, my analysis has been limited by a lack of attitudinal data. Now, however, we can press forward and assay the individual-level underpinnings of reactionary movements, and the extent to which identification with these movements shapes attitudes, policy preferences, and behavior. We begin with the attitudes believed conducive to identification with the reactionary right. We turn to Christopher Towler’s work on the reactionary right in the 1960s for the bulk of the following analysis.23 He hypothesized that anxiety about communists infiltrating America. Towler was right: as anxiety increased among people in the electorate, the probability of identifying with the reactionary right, indexed by support for Goldwater, increased by 33 percent. This effect is above and beyond that which he found for alternative explanations including racism, anti-communism, partisanship, and a preference for small government, each of which increased the likelihood of identifying with the reactionary right by 21 percent, 11 percent, 52 percent (Republican versus Democrat), and 11 percent, respectively.

Now that we’ve pinned down what promotes identification with the reactionary right, it’s time to examine the consequences of attachment to the movement. I turn first to intergroup relations. Net of the effects of racism, anti-communism, partisanship, and ideology, support for Goldwater dampened the way people felt about blacks and Jews. Further, identification with the reactionary right also mitigated against positive attitudes toward the NAACP and CORE, two prominent civil rights organizations. We observe similar, but stronger results when the analysis moves to race-related policies in the 1960s.

Towler examines the ways in which reactionary conservatism informed the electorate’s views concerning the government’s role in school integration, whether or not busing was necessary, and the extent to which they supported integration of their neighborhoods. Conventional wisdom suggests that racism should provide most of the explanatory power we should find once we specify a model. Likewise, in the context of the 1960s, communism and racial equality were often linked in the minds of Goldwater supporters via their association with the JBS. Therefore, anti-communist attitudes must also be taken into account if the results on race-based policy preferences are to be taken seriously.

As it turns out, even after correcting for racism and anti-communism, Towler shows that reactionary conservatism continued to animate people’s views on racial policy preferences in the 1960s. Net of the effects of racism and anti-communism, among other things, reactionary conservatism dampened support for government-backed school integration by 11 percent, and by 9 percent for busing. Yet, for neighborhood integration, the impact of reactionary conservatism dissolves. Given the size of the effect of racism in which it reduced support for integration by 52 percent, reactionary conservatism appears bound up with the negative way in which many whites viewed blacks. This is no big surprise insofar as the prospect of one of “them” moving next door significantly decreases the social distance to which many whites had become accustomed.

Most would agree that the 1960s represents one of the most volatile periods in the relatively short existence of the United States. Many believed, with some justification, that the Soviet Union threatened American security interests. But there were others who subscribed to a way of thinking in which the Communism threat—from without and within—was existential: it threatened the “American way” of life. Among the ways in which this menace became manifest is through the Civil Rights Movement. But as the analysis makes clear, reactionary conservatism—indexed by support for Goldwater—discriminates between the fear of a communist take over and the anxiety related to the perception that social change, i.e., the Civil Rights Movement, was happening too fast. Needless to say, this is roughly the same scenario we observed with the Klan and the JBS. Concern with change also had behavioral implications. Even upon correcting for the usual cast of characters that account for political engagement, reactionary conservatism remained an important predictor. This finding indicates that the negative affect associated with change successfully motivated mobilization.

The totality of the work I’ve reviewed so far suggests continuity on the reactionary right from the 1920s through the 1960s, something that, with Matt Barreto, I’ve argued elsewhere. But times have changed since then. After all, we now have a black president, same-sex rights are on the march, and the demographics of America are rapidly changing. Surely, there’s no place for the reactionary right in America now, is it? Of course there is. The next section presents, what I think, is irrefutable evidence to that effect.

The Tea Party

Around 2009, shortly after President Obama’s first inauguration, a group of loosely organized, highly motivated individuals, organizations, and political action committees coalesced to for what has come to be known as the Tea Party. In 2010 the Tea Party boasted major electoral wins in the U.S. House and Senate defeating both incumbent Republican and Democratic lawmakers alike. These results should come as no great surprise, given the widespread support the movement enjoyed back in 2010. During their height in 2010,

The Tea Party claimed a core membership of approximately 550,000 who have signed up to be members of at least one of the national Tea Party groups: 1776 Tea Party, ResistNet (Patriot Action network), Tea Party Express, Tea Party Nation, and Tea Party Patriots. Beyond this core group are two additional constituencies. One consists of the people who have attended at least one rally, donated, or purchased Tea Party literature: an estimated 3 million people. Another layer consists of Tea Party sympathizers, people who approve of the Tea Party. According to data from a 2010 University of Washington study, 27% of the adult population, or 63 million Americans, strongly approve of the Tea Party.

Given this level of support, what does the Tea Party want? From at least one account, the Tea Party believes in a reduced role for the federal government, more fiscal responsibility, lower taxes, a free market, and a commitment to states’ rights. Indeed, these are core conservative, even libertarian, principles, very much in keeping with traditional American political culture. What’s more, commitment to these values is widely considered patriotic. Yet, time after time, supporters of the Tea Party seem to be united by something beyond a belief in limited government. Specifically, Tea Party sympathizers appear united in their fervent disdain for President Barack Obama, and seem to be squarely opposed to any policies that might benefit minority groups.

In the preceding sections we sought to illustrate a pattern we associate with the rise of reactionary movements. From the Klan to the JBS, individuals appear to react to what they perceive as rapid social change in which the social prestige of “real Americans” is under siege. In this section, we take up the question of the Tea Party’s emergence and common Tea Party attitudes in the age of Obama. We argue that the Tea Party represents a right-wing movement distinct from mainstream conservatism, which has reacted with great anxiety to the social and demographic changes in America over the past few decades. Through a comprehensive review of original data we show that Tea Party sympathizers hold strong out-group resentment, in particular towards Blacks, immigrants, and gays. Briefly, we then assess public opinion data to determine if the findings can be generalized to the population of Tea Party sympathizers at large.

Contemporary observers and Tea Party events gesture towards concerns that transcend limited government and fiscal conservatism. For instance, the NAACP has charged the Tea Party with promoting racism, and Tea Party Express leader Mark Williams has been chastised by other Tea Party leaders for penning an overtly racist letter poking fun at the NAACP. Their activists were a driving force behind the Arizona state statute SB1070 (among other things, this bill proposed to empower local authorities to interrogate the immigration status of people who “looked like” immigrants), which many said would result in the targeting of Latinos for racial profiling. They may be best known for their many caricatures of President Obama, often depicting him as a primitive, African “witch doctor,” and modern-day Hitler, among other things. Consider, moreover, the constant references to President Obama as a socialist. In fact, a recent study issued by Democracy Corps reports that 90% of Tea Party supporters believe President Obama to be a socialist; as such, they view him as the “defining and motivating threat to the country and its well-being.” Perhaps the fact that the movement harbors members of white nationalist groups helps to explain the apparent intolerance of the movement. However, beyond a perception of intolerance, we think there is something deeper in the emergence of the Tea Party that is more in line with studies of conspiratorial beliefs, and out-group suspicion – in short, a right-wing reactionary movement.

Demographic change and the emergence of the Tea Party. We have already mentioned what we believed triggered the emergence of the Tea Party: the election of the country’s first black president. However, it was not just the election of Obama that triggered the Tea Party, but also the changing demographics and political debates in America over the past 40 years. In 1970, 83% of the U.S. population was White, non-Hispanic, and in 2010 63% was White – a 20 percentage-point decline in one generation. Accompanying this change has been an increase in the Black, Hispanic, and Asian populations in the United States and a vigorous debate about civil rights and immigration. Whether we’re talking about blacks or immigrants, the Tea Party and its followers appear to reject the presence of racial “others.”

Racial Resentment. For many, the election of the Nation’s first African American President is evidence of the end of racism in America. Yet, the emergence of the Tea Party in the months following the inauguration of Barack Obama, and the propensity of racially charged antics exposed at many of the group’s events and rallies, warrants a closer look at the immediacy of racism in America today. As research has shown, racism and racial resentment play an important role in determining not only support for Obama, but also support for black candidates in general. The influence of modern day racism is most known for its place in opposition towards affirmative action and other race-conscious programs. The racism that commonly guides contemporary white attitudes has been coined racial resentment.

and relies upon anti-black affect, or a “pre-existing negative attitude toward blacks.” In other words, racial resentment is fueled by the gains and growing demands of black Americans, a resentment that has a new level of fuel with the country led by an African American President for this first time in its history.

Old-fashioned racism, based on biological differences between blacks and whites, is no longer acceptable in society today and a new, more subtle, racism works to predict attitudes and behaviors. This new form of racism relies on stereotypes surrounding African Americans; stereotypes that put blacks in opposition to treasured American values such as hard work, honesty and lawfulness. In addition, ascribing these stereotypes to blacks allows for whites to continue justifying their privileged position in society. The centrality of American values in racial resentment links American individualism to expressions of prejudice. The attributes (or stereotypes) assigned to blacks – laziness, preference for welfare, predisposition to crime – place them in opposition to the values American society rests upon, isolating and alienating blacks from the ideals that go hand in hand with being a good citizen in America.

The timing behind the emergence of the Tea Party in American politics begs for a further examination of a group that is determined to “take back” their country and fight against a government absorbed by socialism. The Tea Party movement’s emphasis on American values and individualism places many of their policy stances and positions in opposition to minority policies, such as an increase in social programs, including spending for the poor and health care reform. Also, the rhetoric of the Tea Party places its members in opposition to minority groups in America as well as the new leadership of the country.

The Tea Party’s focus on individualism and American values alone are not enough to validate claims of racial resentment. In addition, accusations of racism within the Tea Party have existed since its beginning. A 2010 report by the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (IREHR) chronicles the involvement of white supremacy groups in the Tea Party since the movement’s first events on April 15, 2009 and, if nothing more, speaks to the Tea Party’s availability as a vehicle for white supremacist recruitment and thought. Other watchdog agencies, such as tea-partytracker.org, have made it a point to highlight acts of racism and extremism within the Tea Party and at their rallies and events. Beyond the consistent chronicling of individual acts of racism and bigotry, much of the resentment in the Tea Party boiled over at the height of the health care debate. As congressmen and women came together to vote on the proposed health care bill in March of 2010, a Tea Party protest boiled over as racial epithets were launched at Rep. John Lewis, a Democrat from Georgia, and Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, a Democrat from Missouri, was spit upon while trying to make it through the crowd at Capitol Hill (Douglas, 2010).

These instances, among others, led to the denunciation of racism and bigotry in the Tea Party movement on a national stage. Although making it clear that the NAACP was not condemning the entire Tea Party as racist, the following reaction from one of the movement’s prominent leaders brought racial resentment to the forefront. Mark Williams, a leader of the Tea Party at the time, released a satirical commentary in response to the NAACP resolution. The response was a letter to President Lincoln from “colored people” and insinuated not only ignorance on the part of blacks in America, but also reinforced many of the stereotypes central to racial resentment such as blacks are lazy, lacking a work ethic.

Even as the evidence consistently finds the Tea Party rampant with racial resentment and extremism, the movements members argue that they are following their conservative principles centered on small government and limited spending – stances that do not favor minorities or people of color by their political nature. This position, though, is not new: ideological conservatism is often invoked as a means of avoiding to avoid accusations of racism.

To date, scholars have worked hard to separate the influence of conservative principles from racial resentment. Whites’ disapproval for affirmative action and social welfare programs has been justified through a violation of norms central to conservative principles, such as hard work and

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32 Feldman and Huddy, p. 169.


37 Feldman and Huddy, 2005.


self-reliance. The group dominance approach stands in opposition to principled conservatism, explaining that groups will use ideology and political symbols to “legitimize” each group’s claims over resources. Furthermore, scholars have shown that racism not only works in conjunction with the individual values associated with principled conservatism – Kinder and Mendelberg suggests that individualism becomes part of racism – but racism goes beyond individualism to predict negative attitudes towards race-conscious policy and politicians of color. When specifically examining negative attitudes towards President Obama, racism plays a major role regardless of ideological preference. The recent emergence of the Tea Party allows for a closer examination of the racial attitudes held by this unique group of Americans emphasizing the principles of individualism over all else.

Anti-Immigrant Attitudes. Statements about immigration from Tea Party politicians and groups largely portrayed immigration as a threat to Americans or American culture. One glaring example of this is Sharon Angle’s 2010 campaign ad “Best Friend”, which features a voice-over that ominously states, “Illegals sneaking across our borders putting Americans’ jobs and safety at risk”, while showing video of dark-skinned actors sneaking around a chain link fence. Angle was a darling of the Tea Party movement in Nevada and attacked Harry Reid on immigration in both the “Best Friend” ad, as well as a second ad called “At Your Expense” that charged that Reid supported special college tuition rates for undocumented immigrants, which would be paid for by Nevada taxpayers. Both ads juxtaposed the dark-skinned actors portraying illegal immigrants with white Americans working or with their families on the same screen. The implicit racism in Angle’s ad was reminiscent of the now notorious “White Hands” ad of Jesse Helms and the “Willie Horton” campaign ad run by George W. Bush in 1988.

Sharon Angle was not the only Tea Party candidate who tried to use the threat of Latino immigration to capture votes in the 2010 election. In Arizona, J.D. Hayworth, John McCain’s Republican primary challenger similarly made immigration one of the central planks of his campaign. Hayworth had actually written a whole book on the subject of undocumented immigration in 2005 called Whatever It Takes, in which he argued in favor of increased immigration enforcement and notes that while immigration is clearly good for the country, the proportion of immigrants coming from Mexico is too high because it could lead to American becoming a bicultural nation. In Hayworth’s own words, “Bicultural societies are among the least stable in the world.” Hayworth was a strong supporter of Arizona’s SB1070 but believed that even more steps had to be taken against undocumented immigrants, stating at a 2010 rally in Mesa, Arizona, that, “There is a whole new term: birthright citizenship, a view echoed by Russell Pearce, a state senator from Arizona and the architect of SB1070.

Tea Party organizations also sought to portray immigration as a threat to America in the lead up to the 2010 general election. The Tea Party Nation emailed its roughly 35,000 members in August and asked them to post stories highlighting the victimization of Americans by illegal immigrants. The group specifically asked for stories about undocumented immigrants taking the jobs of members, committing crimes, or undermining business by providing cheap labor to competitors. The Americans for Legal Immigration PAC (ALIPAC) assisted two Tea Party groups, Voice of the People USA and Tea Party Patriots Live, in coordinating rallies in support of Arizona’s SB1070. The ALIPAC mission statement points out that, “Our state and federal budgets are being overwhelmed. Schools, hospitals, law enforcement, and public services are being strained while the taxpayers incur more costs and more debt. Our nation’s very survival and identity are being threatened along with our national security.” ALIPAC is supported by the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), a group designated a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center because of its links to white supremacist organizations.

The Tea Party, while disavowing that its anti-immigrant rhetoric was based on racism, has continued to portray immigration in starkly threatening terms, which while not explicitly racist has strong undercurrents of implicit racism, with Sharon Angle’s campaign videos being the most obvious example of this. A New York Times/CBS News poll released in August of 2010 unsurprisingly found that 82 percent of self-identified Tea Party supporters believed illegal immigration was a “serious problem.” The perception of threats from immigrant groups have been shown to be a powerful predictor for immigration restriction and anti-immigrant attitudes in the sociology, psychology and political science literatures.

42 Parker et al., 2009.
43 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tb-Z2Mq-vBo&feature=channel
44 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiC_RmcOytt&feature=channel
46 http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/25/jd-hayworth-arizona-immigration-anger
48 http://www.alipac.us/content-16.html
50 http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/20/us/20immig.html?_r=1
It's plain to see that the Tea Party and its followers are concerned with more than small government and fiscal responsibility. But why is this the case? What do blacks and immigrants have in common? Race. More specifically, the ways in which blacks and immigrants—especially the undocumented, represents a departure from the White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) representation of American identity with which American has become identified. “Real Americans,” in other words, are neither black nor born elsewhere. As Parker and Barreto demonstrate to great effect, Tea Partiers are anxious that the American to which they’ve grown accustomed is under siege from non-WASP groups. For this reason, Tea Partiers are loathe to extend rights and benefits to these “others.”

From the Tea Party to Trump

Six years into its political existence, many now wonder where is the Tea Party headed? Are they still influential after the 2012 election when Tea Partiers failed to help the GOP capture the White House. But failing to secure the Executive Branch of government, as the Tea Party has shown, isn’t the end of the world. In fact, they’ve shown that holding half of the Legislative Branch suffices to arrest the change sought by the president and his party. Indeed, the 50 or so Republican members of the House aligned with the Tea Party in some way, have managed to frustrate not only President Obama and his agenda, but also the conservative establishment.

Since 2010, pundits have declared the Tea Party dead at least eighteen times. Yet, their membership continues to climb. For instance, since 2010 the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (IREHR) reports that card-carrying members of the insurgent group increased from 185K to approximately 550K—a three-fold increase. The number of Tea Party sympathizers, however, has recently declined from a high of around 30 percent in 2010 to 20 percent as of the last quarter of 2013 during the Federal Government shutdown, though the most recent polling data suggests a slight uptick in 2014 with 24 percent now identifying themselves as supporters of the movement.¹ In raw numbers, assuming the movement never recovers its pre-shutdown popularity among sympathizers, it still means that 36 million Americans identify with the Tea Party.

If level of tea-party sympathizers is subject to periodic dips, the financial backing of the reactionary movement resembles the steady growth we see in the ranks of membership. As of February 2014, the New York Times reported that fundraising efforts of Tea Party affiliated organizations outstripped those associated with establishment conservative groups by three-to-one margin. During the early stages of the Tea Party insurgency, questions were asked about the authenticity of movement insofar as the Koch brothers and other big money donors bank-rolled Tea Party organizations. As a result, some on the left derided the Tea Party as a movement funded by wealthy business interests as opposed to the grassroots phenomena many in the movement claimed it was.

If this represented even a sliver of truth in the early stages of the movement, the same cannot be said now. The Institution for Research on Education and Human Rights (IREHR) reports that 82 percent of individual donors’ contributions to Tea Party organizations were limited to no more than $200. We see a similar pattern as it pertains to Superpacs in which 97 percent of their receipts were confined to no more than $1K. If this information is even remotely accurate, and we believe it is, Tea Party fundraising is more democratic, buying itself a measure of independence from big money, special-interest patrons.

So, what keeps the Tea Party thriving? Why does it continue as a major force in American politics? To answer these questions, and many others, we conducted a national survey of 1,000 adults in December 2013. As a way of demonstrating that fear and anxiety is the driving force behind Tea Party intransigence, we contrast the attitudes and preferences of Tea Party conservatives with those of non-Tea Party conservatives. If Tea Party resistance is really about fidelity to conservative principles such as law and order, small government, and fiscal responsibility, we should observe no difference among conservatives. If, however, differences do emerge, we can attribute them to fear and anxiety.

As it turns out, the data suggests important fissures among conservatives. I begin with immigrants. Consider the following: Forty percent of non-Tea Party conservatives believe that “restrictive immigration policies are based on racism,” only 18 percent of Tea Party conservatives agree. Perhaps this is why we see such a large gap among conservatives when it comes to supporting comprehensive immigration reform: 80 percent of mainstream conservatives want to see comprehensive solution to immigration versus 60 percent of Tea Party conservatives. Again, if resistance were really about conservative principles—law and order, in the case of immigration, my findings would’ve revealed no differences between the rival conservative camps, but they did. Piecing together what’s implied from the questions, this leads us to conclude that Tea Partiers, relative to establishment types, believe the current policies are adequate.

Another race-related issue encountered by the American public for which I gathered evidence is the controversial Supreme Court decision on the renewal of the Voting Rights Act (VRA). In June of 2013, in a 5-4 decision, the Court released several states with a record of violating the voting rights of blacks and other minorities from federal oversight in which the covered jurisdictions were required to clear any changes to their voting laws with the Department of Justice. This ruling cleared the way for states to effectively enact legislation that may have the effect—if not intent—of discriminating against some voters in ways that inhibit their ability to vote. An establishment conservative would object to the

¹ NBC News/Wall Street Journal monthly tracking poll, n=1000 each wave, http://pollingreport.com/politics.htm
continuing necessity of the VRA’s preclearance provision as a violation of state sovereignty. Indeed, this constituted a major part of the conservative majority’s opinion. However, we have reason to believe that something beyond conservatism informs the Tea Party’s opinion on the issue.

Our theory suggests that Tea Party conservatives’ support for ruling on the VRA has less to do with the federal government violating states’ rights, and has more to do with the ways in which the ruling will ultimately impede the ability of people of color to vote. We examined our claim by asking people whether or not they believe discrimination remains a problem when it comes to voting rights. As it turns out, roughly 50 percent of establishment conservatives believe discrimination remains a problem versus just 37 percent of Tea Party conservatives. We acknowledge that the difference isn’t especially striking: a mere 13 percentage points. The point, however, isn’t the size of the difference. Rather, the point is that there’s any difference at all.

My assessment of the Tea Party suggests that reports of its death have been overblown. If the Tea Party were truly on its way out, would its membership continue increasing? Would its fundraising be so robust? Would it continue to enjoy such influence on the Republican Party? We don’t think so. In addition to the organizational strength it continues to demonstrate, and the political clout it continues to wield, we have also documented the enduring cleavage that exists between establishment conservatives and reactionary conservatives. Our theory indicates establishment conservatives are committed to conventional conservative principles, whereas reactionary conservatives are motivated more by the fear and anxiety associated with the perception that “real” Americans are losing the country.

Having discussed the continuing strength of the Tea Party, and its animating forces in the present, I now take a moment to touch on the Tea Party’s prospects in the near future. While the Tea Party per se, no longer exists, it’s not unreasonable to suppose that its supporters were in some way responsible for the way the 2016 presidential election turned out, with the election of businessman turned reality show star, Donald Trump’s election. Pushed by the anxiety and anger felt in the aftermath of Obama’s election, the Tea Party can claim credit for the GOP takeover of the House of Representatives in the 2010 midterm election cycle when they won 63 seats—a landslide. As it turns out, Tea Party conservatives were more politically engaged than other conservatives, much less progressives.

The movement saw — and continues to see — Obama as a vessel for the hitherto ignored claims for equality from marginalized groups. While not new, the push for equality by these groups appears to have gained currency on Obama’s watch. The simultaneity, suddenness, and force with which marginalized groups have pressed their claims during the Obama presidency no doubt contributed to the fear, anxiety, and anger felt by Tea Partiers. If there were any doubt that such sentiments would survive Obama, Trump’s ascendance to the White House should remove them. Two reasons dictate this: (1) The data suggests Tea Party support has shifted to support for Trump; and (2) Trump supporters’ intolerance is in line with similar sentiments associated with Tea Party supporters.’

This may come as a shock to some but, yes, Trump’s ascension has everything to do with the Tea Party, and very little to do with the putative economic anxiety associated with working-class whites. Consider the following. First, if we use education as a proxy or class, working-class whites only constituted 34% of the electorate, but he didn’t win all of them: he won 66%. He did, however, win whites beyond the working class. Among American whites who possessed at least a college degree, Trump won their support by a margin of 48% to 45% of the same group who supported Hillary Clinton. lt’s not likely these folks were left behind by globalization and, therefore, anxious. So, how does one account for Trump carrying so many college-educated whites, especially since education is supposed to encourage more enlightened thinking? It’s really quite simple: the same anxiety and anger that propelled the Tea Party —indeed, all American reactionary movements, accounts for Trump’s success among whites, beyond his so-called “white working-class base.” In short, Trump simply mobilized the residual anger and anxiety accruing to the Obama presidency among these whites, mainly Tea Party supporters. To some, this may sound odd because the Tea Party initially stood firmly behind Ted Cruz, the Republican senator from Texas. Compared to Cruz, the Tea Party believed Trump

In a related question, one that asked whether or not race has anything to do with the use of deadly force against blacks, 82 percent of Trump supporters deny that race is an important factor, while 63 percent of establishment Republicans agree with that sentiment. Shifting gears to immigration, we find similar results. Trump’s proposal to build a wall is wildly popular among his supporters: 87 percent of them strongly agree with it. Still, only 37 percent of more mainstream Republican partisans think this valid. When one considers the relative suspicion with which Trump supporters hold “immigrants,” the preference for a wall is easier to see: 59 percent of Trump backers believe that immigrants refuse to abide by American laws versus only 20 percent of their mainstream counterparts in the Republican Party.

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52 Parker and Barreto, chapter 6.  
53 http://www.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls  
54 Ibid.
insufficiently conservative. But, just like they did in 2012 when they harbored similar sentiments toward Mitt Romney in 2012, they ultimately back the Republican nominee. In this case: Trump. It seems that Trump’s hardline position on immigration and refugees “trumped” other views with which they disagreed.\textsuperscript{55}

Now, I’d like to speak on the relationship between Trump and populism: it doesn’t exist. From the American perspective, populism is more about class than anything else: a more or less materialist orientation to politics and society, one driven by a perception that corrupt “elites” are betraying the “virtuous people.”\textsuperscript{56} Indeed, this is what we see with American populism. First instantiated by farmers in the late 19th century as the “People’s Party,” it was a movement designed to deliver a measure of economic justice to “common folk.”\textsuperscript{57} (Postel 2007; Rogin 1967; Woodward 1959-60). Farmers, as “the people,” decried their treatment at the hands of the bankers who played the role of “corrupt elites.” In other words, populism, at least in the American context, is really mainly about economic interests, not the identity politics, rooted in fear, anxiety, and paranoia with which Trump and his supporters are associated. So, if we confine populism to the American context, it’s clear that Trump really isn’t a populist at all. In fact, as I suggest above, he and his followers are firmly in the reactionary conservative camp.

Conclusion

My review of the reactionary right in America is now complete. At least two things are very clear. First, from the Klan to the Tea Party (and now Trump), there’s a certain segment of the country that remains anxious and angry when it perceives rapid social change: white, male, native born, middle class, Christian, and middle-aged folks. This is not to say that EVERY person in this group is reactionary. This is patently untrue. Instead, we invite you to think of it in the following way: someone from this group is more likely to harbor reactionary sentiments than, say, someone who is a black, female, working class, young, Jamaican immigrant. Second, Reactionaries hold beliefs that lead to policy preferences different from both “liberals” and establishment conservatives. That their preferences depart from establishment conservatives belies reactionaries’ claims that they’re merely simple—if angry, conservatives.

Moving beyond sympathy for the Klan, for which we have no hard public opinion data, we see these themes play out in the 1960s, as well as the present moment. Similar to the ways in which the Tea Party and its supporters fail to embrace social change now, as it pertains to racial and sexual minorities,\textsuperscript{58} the JBS and its supporters failed to embrace change if it involved racially progressive policies. In both cases, even after ideology is taken into account, our theory of reactionary conservatism remains a valid alternative explanation for what myself (and Towler) observe. What this suggests is more than fifty years after the height of the civil rights movement, the event that helped spawn the JBS, reactionary forces were once again mobilized to thwart change, in the guise of the Tea Party. The only difference this time is that a single—albeit powerful—person mobilized reactionary forces: the President of the United States.

The discerning reader may ask why it took the prospect of progress for an entire race to jumpstart a reactionary movement fifty years ago, but a single man is capable of doing so now. As we’ve discussed elsewhere, it’s really quite simple. As the Commander-in-Chief, Chief Law Enforcement officer, head of government, etc., the President of the United States wields enormous power. However, perhaps more important, is what the office represents: the leader of the American people, the titular head of the country. For reactionary conservatives, this is simply too much to bear: a black man in the White House. It’s an affront to their identity as Americans. For them, Barack Obama’s “occupation” of the Oval Office symbolizes too much change. They believe the American in which they’ve grown up, the America to which they’ve become attached, is no more. In like fashion, the reactionaries believed the civil rights movement would ultimately result in the undoing of the country.

Unfortunately, there’s no end in sight for reactionary movements. One is always around the corner, waiting to issue a call to arms in response to what its adherents believe too much change occurring. Apparently, these sentiments aren’t confined to the United States. Indeed, over the last 20 years or so, this reactionary impulse has swept across Western Europe.\textsuperscript{59} To the extent that reactionary impulses may be captured by support for right-wing parties in Western Europe, there is some overlap between American reactionaries and what I believe are their European counterparts. Whether they are labeled populist or nationalist,\textsuperscript{60} they share at least one key characteristic with American reactionaries: resistance to change—social and cultural change,

\textsuperscript{55} https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/01/how-the-tea-party-learned-to-love-donald-trump/?utm_term=.2ef02619ab23
\textsuperscript{56} Canovan, Margaret “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” Political Studies (XLVII): 2-16.
\textsuperscript{57} Postel, Charles, The Populist Vision (New York: New Oxford University Press, 2007);
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{60} The scholarship that identifies these parties as populist is too extensive to catalogue here. In no particular order, the following have been most helpful: Cass Mudde, Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Hanspeter Kriesi, “The Populist Challenge,” West European Politics 37(2): 361-378. A contrasting view on what motivates the reactionary parties in Europe, as well as the appellation “radical right,” see, e.g., Maureen A. Eger and Sarah Valdez, “Neo-Nationalism in Western Europe,” European Sociological Review 31(1): 115-130. Other work questions the theoretical validity of populism as a means of explaining the “radical right.” For this point of view, see Paris Aslanidis, “Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective,” Political Studies 64(1): 88-104.
not economic anxiety. For the “European” side of the Atlantic, see Elisabeth Ivarsflaten, “What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe?: Re-examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases,” Comparative Political Studies 41(1): 3-23; On the “American” side, see Parker and Barreto, Change.


63 Parker and Barreto, 2014.