

The Tea Party Movement

The Tea Party movement is a broad American political movement launched in 2009 through a series of protests against government spending and taxation. It has enjoyed great success and considerable media attention in its relatively short existence. The organization cemented its position in the United States' political landscape during the 2010 midterm elections, when several self-identified Tea Party political candidates won seats in the US House and Senate. The Tea Party movement utilizes elements and images from the American Revolutionary period, such as an early flag design bearing the motto "Don't Tread on Me," as an expression of its efforts to reform the federal government according to the ideals of the nation's founders. Tea Party supporters generally favor lower taxes, limited government, and reduced federal spending.

The Boston Tea Party and Fiscal Conservatism

The Tea Party movement takes its name from the Boston Tea Party, an event many recognize as an important precursor to the American Revolution. In 1773, the region that would become the United States consisted of thirteen colonies under British rule. Even though the colonies were subject to control by the British Parliament, the colonies were not represented in Parliament by their own lawmakers. Instead, colonial assemblies were created to enforce the decisions of the British Parliament.

By law, all tea entering the American colonies had to be imported from England. In 1767, the British government began levying a tax on all tea imported into the colonies, meaning colonial distributors were forced to pay money directly to the British government if they wanted to sell tea. This led to protests from colonists, who argued that they could not be taxed by the British government if they were not represented in the British Parliament. The popular protest cry was "no taxation without representation." The tax on tea also resulted in poor sales, and surplus tea piled up in American harbors.

Some protests were successful in turning away British cargo ships filled with tea. In November and December 1773, three ships filled with tea entered Boston Harbor in the colony of Massachusetts. Protesters prevented the ships from unloading their tea, but the governor of Massachusetts—siding with the British government—would not force the ships to return to England. On December 16, 1773, a group of protesters boarded the ships and dumped their tea cargo into the Boston Harbor. This event was later dubbed the Boston Tea Party.

In the centuries since the Boston Tea Party, many American politicians and activists have used the event as a point of reference for their own protests against what they view as excessive taxation—not by a foreign government, but by their own government. The belief that Americans are excessively taxed is closely linked to the ideas of fiscal conservatism and limited government. One of the key components of the Tea Party movement is its commitment to fiscal conservatism. Some supporters even refer to it as the TEA Party movement, with TEA being an acronym for "Taxed Enough Already."

The Growth of the Tea Party Movement

The Tea Party movement began in February 2009, approximately one month after President Barack Obama (1961—) was sworn into office. Early protests centered on two pieces of legislation then being pushed by the Obama administration: the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act, signed into law by George W. Bush (1946—) in October 2008, and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, signed by President Obama just days before protests began. Both bills committed the United States government to massive spending increases. The first was intended to ease the financial crisis faced by American banks and lenders that had started in mid-2008, while the second was designed to prevent the American economy from sinking into an economic depression as a result of the banking crisis.

As the movement grew in popularity, a specific set of goals emerged as the platform for Tea Party supporters. These ten goals are known as the "Contract from America," and focus mainly on balancing the federal budget and limiting the federal government's ability to collect and spend the money of its citizens. One key component of the Tea Party agenda is the simplification of the tax system, with most supporters favoring a "flat tax" system in which all citizens pay a single fixed percentage of their income to taxes. The platform also includes provisions for keeping the power of the federal government in check and preserving the strength of state and local lawmakers. Some Tea Party members focused their protests on specific bills and policies, such as the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA)—the bill aimed at expanding health care coverage for Americans. Despite Tea Party protests, the PPACA was signed into law by President Obama in March 2010.

Prior to the 2010 midterm elections, a number of political candidates became identified with and were endorsed by Tea Party supporters. During Republican primaries across the country, Tea Party candidates won several notable victories over other Republican candidates. The movement enjoyed even more success during the general election, when a number of Tea Party politicians secured important government positions. One of the movement's biggest triumphs was in South Carolina, where Tea Party candidate Nikki Haley won the election for governor. Other Tea Party winners in the 2010 midterm election included Rand Paul, who became a senator for Kentucky, and Ron Johnson, who became a senator for Wisconsin after defeating the Democratic incumbent.

Despite these accomplishments, the movement has faced setbacks. Many major Tea Party candidates, including Delaware's Christine O'Donnell, lost their bids for election in the 2010 midterms. In addition, prominent Tea Party supporter and congressional representative Michele Bachmann ended her bid for the Republican nomination for president early in 2012. Still, the movement continued to have a presence in the 2012 presidential election. Presidential candidate and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich enjoyed support from many Tea Party groups, although he was not endorsed by the movement as a whole.

Criticisms of the Movement

The Tea Party movement has been described by supporters as a grassroots effort launched by people outside the existing Washington political system. However, critics such as economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman have described the movement as "AstroTurf" rather than grassroots—an artificial movement popularized by longtime Washington conservatives and publicized by conservative television personalities. Although the movement has claimed to operate independently of existing political parties, critics have noted that it was launched only after Democratic president Obama, the nation's first African American president, took office. Protesters at some Tea Party rallies have been criticized for making racially charged statements and using imagery on protest posters that have depicted President Obama as everything from a tyrant to a monkey, a witch doctor, and Adolf Hitler.

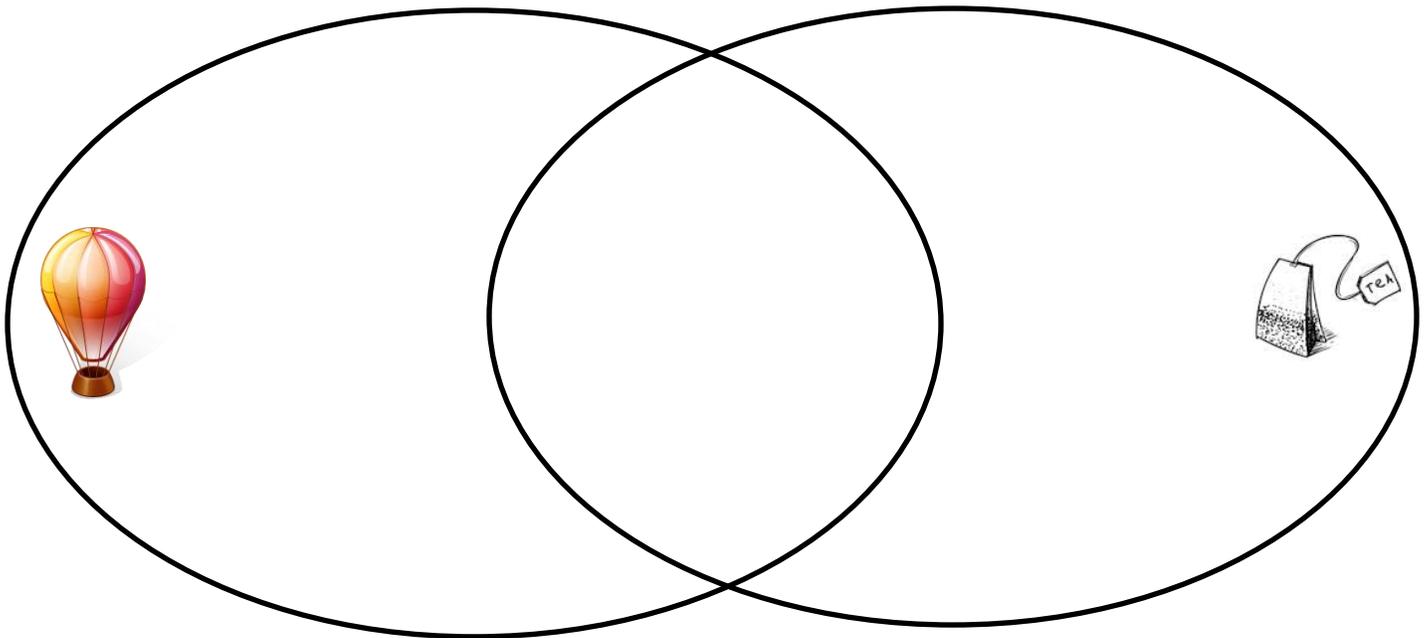
Some critics of the Tea Party movement argue that while balancing the budget and cutting spending are admirable goals, the specifics of the Tea Party platform seem to work at cross purposes with these goals. For example, a flat tax system would mean that less tax would be collected from the wealthy when compared to the current system, while comparatively more tax revenue would be taken from the poorest citizens. Critics of the movement have also pointed out that, despite their stated concerns for balancing the federal budget, very few Tea Party supporters have spoken out in favor of cutting military spending, which makes up a substantial portion of the government's budget.

Though Tea Party supporters have largely sought to distance themselves from mainstream Republican platforms, some critics have noted a striking similarity between Republicans and Tea Party supporters on many issues. For example, Republican politicians such as Dick Armey, a former Congressional representative from Texas, have long supported a flat tax plan, though repeated attempts to pass such a plan through Congress have failed. In addition, according to a June 2010 poll by the University of Washington, Tea Party supporters overwhelmingly favor a ban on gay marriage and harsher restrictions on illegal immigration—positions that are generally recognized as consistent with the more conservative elements of the Republican platform but have very little to do with taxation, budget balancing, or limiting the size of the federal government.

Furthermore, Tea Party politicians have faced criticism from within their own organization. In 2011, members of the movement criticized several congressional representatives affiliated with the Tea Party for voting to increase the debt ceiling and failing to support massive budget cuts. Tea Party supporters argued that these politicians had abandoned one of the movement's key principles: fiscal responsibility.

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Compare People's (Populist) Party Goals to the Goals of the Tea Party.



Why hasn't the Tea Party become a Third Party?