

The Inseparability of the Tea Party

Posted By [Jordan Bloom](#) On May 1, 2013 @ 2:44 pm

I finally got around to watching this Intelligence Squared debate over the motion “The GOP must seize the center or die,” with David Brooks and Mickey Edwards arguing for, Laura Ingraham and Ralph Reed against. Their arguments will be familiar to most, the former arguing the party has become too extreme, alienating growing demographic groups, the latter that standing on principle is the way to success and moderates lost just as badly as conservatives in the last election.

The numbers paint an interesting picture of how the Republican Party’s problems are both more intractable than many realize and misperceived by most. Before the debate, 14 percent voted against the motion, afterward, 28 percent did, whereas the percentage of people voting for the motion remained at 65 percent, meaning the side opposed to the motion changed more minds, and won.

The biggest weakness in Brooks and Edwards’ argument is that they see the Tea Party as a fringe group dragging the party rightward and toward electoral oblivion. But a new [study](#)^[1] out this week shows that isn’t the case; those people *are* the Republican Party’s base—73 percent of Republicans who attended a rally were members of the Tea Party. The main differences between today and ten years ago are that they trust the party’s leadership far less, with 23 percent rejecting the party label entirely. Abby Rapoport [elaborates](#)^[2] on the ideological gap:

But the gap between the two groups is huge. In the YouGov survey the study uses, more than two-thirds of Tea Partiers put themselves in the two most conservative categories on economic policy, social policy, and overall policy. Only 23 percent of non-Tea Partiers place themselves in the most conservative categories on all three issues; nearly 40 percent don’t locate themselves in the most conservative categories for any of the three policy areas.

Most jarring: On some issues, like abolishing the Department of Education and environmental regulation, the establishment Republicans are actually closer to Democrats than they are to the Tea Party respondents. That’s a gap too large to be overcome by a few political action committees and gestures of goodwill.

Today that gap is playing out in everything from [healthcare policy](#)^[3] to minor votes [in the House](#)^[4]. It’s no doubt exacerbated by outside groups picking fights for donor-related reasons, but the problem would still be there in their absence.

To some extent the party is reaping what it’s sown; its reputation for fiscal prudence was deservedly squandered by invading two Middle Eastern countries and trying to buy the senior vote. But there’s a bigger problem baked into the origins of the conservative movement. In *The*

Conservative Movement (the book!) Paul Gottfried characterizes how neoconservatives learned to love the welfare state as having gotten off the train of democratic progress at a certain point and deeming all who've gone beyond feckless liberals, and all who disembarked before as hopeless reactionaries. Conservative intellectuals and party elites thought they could dictate where that point ought to be, and now they're finding out how wrong they were.

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[1] study:

<http://wmpeople.wm.edu/asset/index/rbrapo/republicanfactionalismandteapartyactivists>

[2] elaborates: <http://prospect.org/article/three-new-facts-about-tea-party>

[3] healthcare policy: <http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/30/the-republican-health-policy-trainwreck/>

[4] in the House: <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/05/house-in-chaos-republican-leadership-eric-cantor-90803.html>

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