

Change They Can't Believe In

THE TEA PARTY
AND REACTIONARY
POLITICS
IN AMERICA



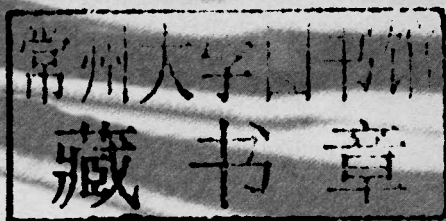
CHRISTOPHER S. PARKER



MATT A. BARRETO

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Christopher S. Parker



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Change They *Can't* Believe In

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK BEGAN ACCIDENTALLY. After promotion, Parker designed what he thought would make an ideal survey on race and politics. By happenstance, the survey coincided with the brewing controversy surrounding what has come to be known as the Affordable Care Act (aka Health Care Reform), when the Tea Party's resistance made national (and international) headlines. Barreto thought it a good idea to ask a question about the extent to which people supported the Tea Party. This was January 2010. Two months later, Tea Party supporters marched on Washington to oppose the bill, during which derogatory posters of President Obama were on display for all to see. Even as the Tea Party claimed their efforts were aimed at shrinking government and restoring fiscal responsibility, their critics charged them with racism. Much has been written about the Tea Party. However, this book departs from many others in at least one important way: it draws on social science as a means to adjudicate the above-mentioned claims and counterclaims about the motivations of the Tea Party, and the ways in which they affect contemporary American politics.

As any honest author will tell you, writing a book forces one to incur many, many debts. It's no different in this case. This manuscript has benefited from the comments of the following

colleagues: Alan Abramowitz, Christopher Adolph, Shaun Bowler, Devin Burghart, Tony Chen, Karam Dana, Michael Dawson, Christopher Federico, Luis Fraga, Zoltan Hajnal, Ashley Jardina, Jose Marichal, Peter May, Naomi Murakawa, Spencer Piston, Gabriel Sanchez, Mark Sawyer, Lee Scheingold, David Smith, Mark Smith, Jack Turner, and Janelle Wong.

Preliminary results were presented at a number of institutions. Ultimately, the book benefited from spirited discussions at the following universities: Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Southern California, California-Berkeley, California-Santa Barbara, Emory, and Stanford. The workshop participants at each place provided timely feedback. We'd like to thank Vince Hutchings, Joe Lowndes, Jane Junn, Cynthia Kaplan, Michael Leo Owens, and Gary Segura for the invitations.

At Margaret Levi's invitation, Parker also presented the research in Australia at the University of Sydney and Australian National University. Workshop participants were both vigorous and generous with their comments at each stop.

We would also like to recognize the hard work of several people at the University of Washington who contributed to this project. Christopher Towler and Betsy Cooper supervised the three surveys conducted through the Survey Research Lab at the University of Washington. Other residents of the Washington Institute for the Study of Sexuality, Ethnicity, and Race (WISER) also contributed, including Francisco Pedraza, Loren Collingwood, Rachel Sanders, Benjamin Gonzales, Kiku Huckle, Sergio Garcia-Rios, and Kassra Osskooii. Parker would also like to thank Towler (again), as well as Rachel North, a precocious undergraduate. These folks logged long hours and provided exceptional research assistance down the stretch. Steve Dunne, our tech guy, kept the servers humming in the survey lab, and Ann Buscherfeld was a big help on the administrative side. Finally, the UW-based Royalty Research Grant provided financial assistance.

We remain indebted to Chuck Myers, our editor at Princeton. He championed the project from the start, shepherding it

through the process with ease. Chuck also deserves credit for selecting excellent reviewers.

Beyond the many colleagues who we have acknowledged already, we also wish to thank our families for their unwavering support during the long process of finishing this manuscript. Barreto would like to thank his parents, Kathy and Guillermo Barreto, and his children, Dan and Clara Barreto. Most of all, he would not have been able to complete this project without the love and support of his wife, Julie Straub-Barreto, who went above and beyond in everything he could ask. He would like to dedicate this book to her.

Parker would like to thank his teachers at San Diego City College, especially Dr. Candace Waltz. He would also like to acknowledge the patience, support, and love of his daughters, Brittani and Bryanna Parker, and even the family pet, Daisy. He now has more time to spend with them. Finally, this book is dedicated to his late cousin and longtime UCLA official, Dr. Winston Churchill Doby, who continues to show him the way.

Change They Can't Believe In

CONTENTS

	<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	vii
	<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
INTRODUCTION	Who Is the Tea Party and What Do They Want?	1
1	Toward a Theory of the Tea Party	20
2	Who Likes Tea? SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR THE TEA PARTY	66
3	Exploring the Tea Party's Commitment to Freedom and Patriotism	102
4	Does the Tea Party Really Want Their Country Back?	153
5	The Tea Party and Obamaphobia IS THE HOSTILITY REAL OR IMAGINED?	190
6	Can You Hear Us Now? WHY REPUBLICANS ARE LISTENING TO THE TEA PARTY	218
CONCLUSION		241
	<i>Appendix</i>	261
	<i>Notes</i>	307
	<i>Index</i>	351

FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures in the Main Text

1.1.	Content of <i>National Review Online</i>	47
1.2.	Content of Tea Party websites	47
1.3.	Percent that believe Obama will destroy country	52
1.4.	Emotional responses to open-ended interviews, by Tea Party support	54
2.1.	Positive statements about the Tea Party	70
2.2.	Negative statements about the Tea Party	71
2.3.	Tea Party approval, by year	73
2.4.	Tea Party action, by movement approval	75
2.5.	Sociodemographics, by degree of Tea Party support	80
2.6.	Political-demographics, by degree of Tea Party support	84
2.7.	Attitude orientations, by degree of Tea Party support	92
2.8.	Probability of supporting the Tea Party	96
3.1.	Support for freedom versus security	119
3.2.	Support for racial profiling, by Tea Party support	120
3.3.	Support for indefinite detainment, by Tea Party support	121

3.4.	Support for free speech, by Tea Party support	121
3.5.	Support for civil liberties, by type of conservatism	124
3.6.	Probability of supporting free speech	128
3.7.	Probability of supporting racial profiling	129
3.8.	Probability of supporting indefinite detention	131
3.9.	Support for national- versus self-interested patriotism	140
3.10.	Support for (un)critical patriotism, by Tea Party support	142
3.11.	Support for economic patriotism, by Tea Party support	142
3.12.	Support for egalitarian patriotism, by Tea Party support	143
3.13.	Patriotism, by type of conservatism	144
3.14.	Probability of supporting (un)critical patriotism	146
3.15.	Probability of supporting economic patriotism	147
3.16.	Probability of supporting egalitarian patriotism	148
4.1.	Attitudes toward immigrants, by degree of Tea Party support	170
4.2.	Support for immigrant equality, by type of conservatism	173
4.3.	Attitudes toward sexual minorities, by degree of Tea Party support	178
4.4.	Support for gay rights, by type of conservatism	180

4.5.	Association between Tea Party support and anti-immigrant attitudes	183
4.6.	Association between Tea Party support and anti-gay attitudes	185
5.1.	Popularity of search term "Tea Party" on Google among US Internet users, by month, 2007–2011	195
5.2.	Popularity of search terms on Google among US Internet users, by month, 2007–2011	199
5.3.	Attitudes toward Obama's traits, by degree of Tea Party support	205
5.4.	Attitudes toward Obama's traits among conservatives, by Tea Party support	207
5.5.	Attitudes toward Obama, by degree of Tea Party support	208
5.6.	Facts about Obama's biography, by degree of Tea Party support	209
5.7.	Attitudes and facts about Obama among conservatives, by Tea Party support	211
5.8.	Agreement with positive Obama traits	215
5.9.	Association between Tea Party support and views toward Obama	216
6.1.	Nonelectoral engagement, by degree of Tea Party support	231
6.2.	Electoral participation, by degree of Tea Party support	232
6.3.	Political interest and participation in last twelve months among conservatives, by Tea Party support	234
6.4.	Influence of Tea Party support on political participation	237

APPENDIX FIGURES

A2.1.	Change in the probability of supporting the Tea Party	291
A3.1.	Change in the probability of supporting free speech	294
A3.2.	Change in the probability of supporting racial profiling	294
A3.3	Change in the probability of supporting indefinite detainment	295
A3.4.	Change in the probability of supporting (un)critical patriotism	295
A3.5.	Change in the probability of supporting economic patriotism	296
A3.6.	Change in the probability of supporting egalitarian patriotism	296
A4.1.	Change in the probability of attitudes toward immigrants and sexual minorities	299
A5.1.	Association between Tea Party support and attitudes and facts toward Obama	302
A6.1.	Change in the probability of expressing high political interest	304
A6.2.	Change in the probability of attending a political meeting	304
A6.3.	Change in the probability of voting in the November 2010 elections	305
A6.4.	Change in the probability of voting Republican in the November 2010 elections	305

APPENDIX TABLES

A1.1.	Mean level of those who believe Obama will destroy the country, by type of conservatism	276
A1.2.	Major Tea Party websites by state	280
A1.3.	Selected demographic characteristics of interviewees	287
A2.1.	Comparison of MSSRP 2011 with contemporaneous national polls by Tea Party support and selected demographics	288
A2.2.	Determinants of support for the Tea Party (ordered logistic regression)	290
A3.1.	Predicting support for civil liberties (logistic regression)	292
A3.2.	Determinants of various forms of patriotism (logistic regression)	293
A4.1	Determinants of attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy (ordered logistic regression)	297
A4.2.	Determinants of attitudes toward gays and lesbians and gay rights (logistic regression)	298
A5.1.	Determinants of attitudes toward President Obama	300
A6.1.	Determinants of political participation (logistic regression)	303

Introduction

Who Is the Tea Party and What Do They Want?

FROM THE BEGINNING, the Tea Party movement, as a loose confederation of leaders, activists, and sympathizers, has said it's about conservative principles: small government, the free market, and governmental fiscal responsibility. On February 26, 2011, at a Tea Party gathering in Portland, Oregon, a thoughtful Tea Party spokesman was heard quoting the famous French social observer Alexis de Tocqueville on liberty, and recommending the audience read Frederick von Hayek's well-known paean to small government, *The Road to Serfdom*. In his address to the audience in the Shiloh Inn's ballroom, Rob Kuzmanich averred, "Conservatives are trying to conserve the liberating ideas of the American Revolution . . . [that while] we retain our moral values, the Tea Party unites around three principles: limited government and the rule of law, free-market capitalism, and fiscal and personal responsibility. The Tea Party slogan is 'No public money for private failure.'"¹

In addition to these largely mainstream conservative claims about the proper place of government in American life, people associated with the Tea Party movement have often referred to President Obama in plainly racialized terms. For instance, barely a month after the meeting in Portland, another Tea Party gathering was convened in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where activists avoided discussions of the bailouts, stimulus, and taxes—issues that form the core of Tea Partiers' grievances. This meeting had something different on its agenda. Devin Burghart, an onsite observer, reports that "Instead [of discussing fiscal issues], speakers at this Tea Party event gave the crowd a heavy dose of racist 'birther' attacks on President Obama [and] discussion of the conspiracy problem facing America." Radio talk show host and Tea Party activist Laurie Roth, based in the eastern part of the state, tore into the president, comparing Obama to the Democrats who preceded him in the Oval Office: "This was not a shift to the Left like Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton. This is a worldview clash. We are seeing a worldview clash in our White House. A man who is a closet secular-type Muslim, but he's still a Muslim. He's no Christian. We're seeing a man who's a socialist communist in the White House, pretending to be an American . . . he wasn't even born here."²

The contrast between the two meetings is striking. The first, consistent with the now familiar retronym the party has adopted, Taxed Enough Already (TEA), speaks to the symbolic nature of its opposition to big government. More to the point, as political scientists Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson argue, invoking the Tea Party calls forth images of "the original American colonial rebels opposing tyranny by tossing chests of tea into Boston Harbor."³ If conservative commentators such as Peggy Noonan and Juan Williams are correct, that at its core the Tea Party is a group of concerned, mainstream—if angry—Americans who are principally worried about bloated government and fiscal irresponsibility,⁴ and if sources sympathetic to the Tea Party are right to argue that the party stands for a reduced role of the federal government, more fiscal responsibility,

lower taxes, a free market, and a commitment to states' rights, then we should understand the Tea Party as part of a long-running conservative reaction to the perceived encroachment of Big Government upon Americans' freedoms.⁵

The difference between the two meetings is obvious, so much so that it begs the question: What causes some people to support the Tea Party? Is it, as mentioned at the Tea Party gathering in Oregon, about ideological conservatism: small government, the rule of law, and fiscal responsibility? Of course, this is something to which Tea Party elites, such as retired House heavyweight Dick Armey, have always held fast.⁶ Or is it more about a general intolerance of "Others," a rejection of out-groups, something that was suggested at the Tea Party gathering in Idaho? In *Change They Can't Believe In*, we go to great lengths to explore sources of the Tea Party movement. We also consider the consequences of Tea Party support, that is, the ways in which support for the Tea Party affects American social and political life.

Our argument is very simple. We believe that people are driven to support the Tea Party from the anxiety they feel as they perceive the America they know, the country they love, slipping away, threatened by the rapidly changing face of what they believe is the "real" America: a heterosexual, Christian, middle-class, (mostly) male, white country.⁷ We think it likely that they perceive such change is subverting their way of life, everything they hold dear. They not only wish to halt change; if we are correct, Tea Party supporters actually wish to turn the clock back. They hope to return to a point in American life before Barack Obama held the highest office in the land, before a Latina was elevated to the Supreme Court, and when powerful members of Congress were all heterosexual (at least publically). Still, the emergence of a Tea Party-like reaction to change isn't altogether new.

Indeed, we argue that its emergence is simply the latest in a series of national right-wing social movements that have cropped up in America since the nineteenth century. In fact, our perspective on the Tea Party is very much in line with a concept