



# The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism

By Theda Skocpol, Vanessa Williamson

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This revised edition features a new afterword, updated through the 2016 election.

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In this penetrating new study, Harvard University's Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson go beyond images of protesters in Colonial costumes to provide a nuanced portrait of the Tea Party. What they find is sometimes surprising. Drawing on grassroots interviews and visits to local meetings in several regions, they find that older, middle-class Tea Partiers mostly approve of Social Security, Medicare, and generous benefits for military veterans. Their opposition to "big government" entails reluctance to pay taxes to help people viewed as undeserving "freeloaders" - including immigrants, lower income earners, and the young. At the national level, Tea Party elites and funders leverage grassroots energy to further longstanding goals such as tax cuts for the wealthy, deregulation of business, and privatization of the very same Social Security and Medicare programs on which many grassroots Tea Partiers depend. Elites and grassroots are nevertheless united in hatred of Barack Obama and determination to push the Republican Party sharply to the right.

*The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* combines fine-grained portraits of local Tea Party members and chapters with an overarching analysis of the movement's rise, impact, and likely fate.

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### Editorial Review

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#### Amazon Exclusive: Author Q & A with Vanessa Williamson



Vanessa Williamson

**Q.** How would you assess the importance of the web in helping to spread and sustain the Tea Party's messaging? **A.** The web has played a crucial role in helping organize what would otherwise be a relatively dispersed group of older, extremely conservative people. In fact, we suspect that those in the Tea Party, particularly the older members, became more Internet-savvy as a result of their Tea Party activity! But the Internet has also allowed for the spread of ideas that are sometimes far outside the mainstream of political discourse. Some of the more conspiratorial concerns we heard (for instance, about the need to revive the gold standard, about the imminent threat of martial law, about the dangers of modernizing the electric grid) occasionally appeared on Fox News or conservative talk radio, but largely survive online. **Q.** Who the "leaders" are of the Tea Party continues to be a subject of debate. Do you expect the Tea Party to ever have a centralized organizational structure? **A.** No. In our book, we discuss the Tea Party as the confluence of three long-standing strands of conservatism, which worked together in new ways in the first years of the Obama Administration. First, older, white, middle-class conservatives, many of whom had been previously involved in politics or local affairs, were demoralized after the electoral defeats of 2008, and looking for new leadership. Second, conservative media outlets, particularly Fox News and talk radio, helped mobilize and direct these grassroots conservatives. Third, long-standing extreme free-market advocacy groups, like Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks, took advantage of the new activism to build connections with grassroots conservatives and to push their agenda in Washington. These groups had similar goals in 2009 and 2010--revitalizing conservatism, derailing the Obama Administration's progressive agenda, and pushing the Republican Party to the right. But, as we discuss in the book, these groups do not always have the same policy goals, and in 2012, the Republican Party will have to appeal to moderates to win back the presidency. So it is unclear that the Tea Party label will continue to be a banner that these various conservative forces can rally behind. **Q.** Does the possibility exist for a split within the Republican Party? **A.** Not because of the Tea Party. There are always factions within a party, and the Tea Party supporters make up a major component of the Republican base. To the extent they are frustrated with the Republican Party, it is because they see the party as inadequately conservative, not because the Tea Party voters are political independents. **Q.** What differences do you foresee in the role of the Tea Party in the 2012 elections versus the role they played in 2010? **A.** First of all, Tea Party sympathizers will make up a far smaller portion of the electorate in 2012. Far fewer people vote in midterm elections, and those who do tend to be older, wealthier, and more conservative. In general elections, like 2012, we tend to see higher rates of turnout among the young and among

minorities. So the influence of the Tea Party at the grassroots will be diluted. The elite aspects of the Tea Party, of course, will still be influence campaign contributors. And we are seeing the Tea Party play a role in the Republican primaries--a point we discuss in detail in our *New York Times* post ("Whose Tea Party Is It?," December 26, 2011).

From [Booklist](#)

Shortly after the election of Barack Obama in 2008, grassroots activism by conservatives spawned the Tea Party, which two years later quashed any hopes that the Democrats were about to take firm hold of government. Political-science scholars Skocpol and Williamson examine how the Tea Party has been able to take command of the political landscape and influence decisions by Republicans and Democrats. They start by studying the election of Scott Brown, with Tea Party support, to replace liberal icon Ted Kennedy and then move on to closely examine the demographics, aspirations, and strategies of Tea Party groups in Virginia and Arizona. Beyond the typical demographics (white male, middle age, middle class, churchgoer), the authors profile the individuals attracted to the movement, including a sizable number of women. The range is from libertarians to social conservatives, from benign believers in less government to extremists who don't eschew violence in getting their point across. They also examine the opposing views and internal conflicts within the party on issues from abortion to drug laws to gay marriage. An interesting look at an influential political movement. --Vanessa Bush

Review

Acclaim for *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*:

"Exceptionally informative."

-- Timothy Noah, *The New York Times* Book Review

"A timely study of a contemporary movement and its far-reaching effects on politics and policy."

--Kirkus Reviews

"This is an indispensable guide to the Tea Party phenomenon, and also an excellent demonstration of the power of first-hand research to add a richness of understanding that survey results can't provide. By spending patient time with Tea Party activists around the country, Skocpol and Williamson have been able to create a far fuller picture of the Tea Party than we have had before."

--Nicholas Lemann, Dean, and Henry R. Luce Professor of Journalism, Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University

"The richest, most nuanced portrait of the Tea Party since it burst onto the political scene in early 2009. Drawing on a wealth of observational, interview, survey, and web-based research, their analysis and presentation is both sympathetic with the participatory ethic of the Tea Partiers and critical of the way they have been used by conservative advocacy groups and press outlets to breed misinformation and shift the Republican agenda sharply to the right."

--Thomas Mann, co-author of *The Broken Branch: How Congress is Failing America and How to Get It Back on Track*

This book delves deeply into what happened in 2010, why it happened, and what the Tea Party means for the

future of American politics. It's a book every student of American politics should read."  
--Mickey Edwards, author of *The Modern Conservative Movement*

"[E]xceptionally informative." -- Timothy Noah, *The New York Times Book Review*

"The authors pepper firsthand anecdotes with extensive-and at times weighty-statistical and polling data...A timely study of a contemporary movement and its far-reaching effects on politics and policy." --Kirkus Reviews

"Readers interested in grassroots political organizations, the influence of outside interests on political parties, or the Tea Party itself, as well as those whose leanings fall elsewhere on the political spectrum will find this an eye-opening book." --Library Journal

"This is an indispensable guide to the Tea Party phenomenon, and also an excellent demonstration of the power of first-hand research to add a richness of understanding that survey results can't provide. By spending patient time with Tea Party activists around the country, Skocpol and Williamson have been able to create a far fuller picture of the Tea Party than we have had before." --Nicholas Lemann, Dean, and Henry R. Luce Professor of Journalism, Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University

"This important book will draw fire from both the political left and right, for contrary to the denunciations of liberal commentators, the Tea Party is not a motley collection of racist crazies. And contrary to the praise of conservative commentators, the Tea Party is not a pure grass-roots citizens' movement. Skocpol and Williamson provide a much-needed dose of analysis that begins to balance out the polemics that dominate discussion of the Tea Party." --Morris P. Fiorina, Wendt Family Professor of Political Science, Stanford University

"Skocpol and Williamson have produced the richest, most nuanced portrait of the Tea Party since it burst onto the political scene in early 2009. Drawing on a wealth of observational, interview, survey, and web-based research, their analysis and presentation is both sympathetic with the participatory ethic of the Tea Partiers and critical of the way they have been used by conservative advocacy groups and press outlets to breed misinformation and shift the Republican agenda sharply to the right. A must-read book for the 2012 election season." --Thomas Mann, Brookings Institution, co-author of *The Broken Branch: How Congress is Failing America and How to Get It Back on Track*

"An interesting look at an influential political movement." --Booklist

"[A] fine-grained nuance and thoughtfulness that resonates." -- Publishers Weekly

"Until three years ago, we knew the tea party as a long-ago event in Boston Harbor, aimed at a government across the Atlantic. In 2010, a new tea party stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific and was aimed directly at Washington. That event changed the Republican Party, the United States Congress, and the Obama presidency. This book delves deeply into what happened in 2010, why it happened, and what the Tea Party means for the future of American politics. It's a book every student of American politics should read." - Mickey Edwards, author of *The Modern Conservative Movement*

..".the best academic work on the Tea Party" - David Frum, *The Daily Beast*

"Skocpol and Williamson have provided us with an excellent roadmap to trace where it came from, where it has been, and where it might be going." --*Contemporary Sociology*

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