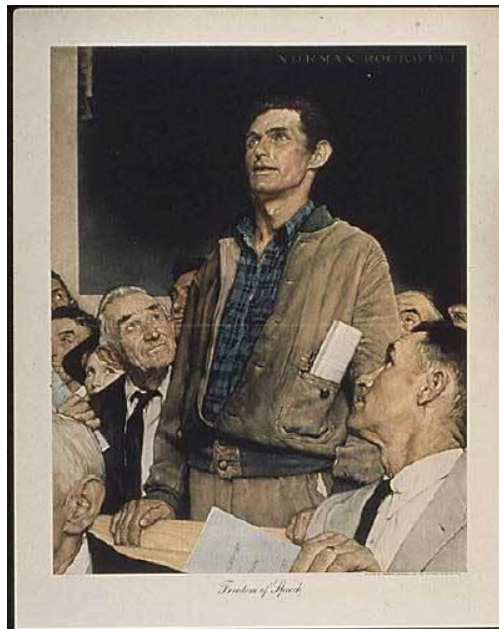


## STANDING UP TO BE COUNTED! – WHO/WHAT IS THE TEA PARTY?

Stephen L. Bakke – April 3, 2011



### *Freedom of Speech*

Thanks to Norman Rockwell for this 1949 illustration of a town hall meeting.

As I reflect on my own enthusiastic participation in the health care debates, and about a possible transformation of our government's relationship to its citizens, I recall my inspiration to write this: **"The right to be heard and taken seriously is precious, and it's one of our most basic FREEDOMS. The process is interesting, energizing, and downright inspiring!"**

This is not an exhaustive look at the nature of "the Tea Party." Nor is it an indication of any ignorance on my part of what the party represents. With all of the focus on this loose affiliation of citizens, I just wanted to do a search of readily available information to try to confirm or correct some of my pre-conceived notions about the Tea Party and its professed members. This is a summary of that project. Hereafter I often refer to the "Tea Party" as "TP".

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### **The Tea Party's Mission and Goals**

The Tea Party's stated mission is:

*To attract, educate, organize, and mobilize our fellow citizens to secure public policy consistent with our three core values of Fiscal Responsibility, Constitutionally Limited Government and Free Markets.*

The core values are derived from the Declaration of Independence, The U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. The name “Tea Party” is an obvious “tip of the hat” to the Boston Tea Party in 1773 which protested excess taxation by the British, as well as “taxation without representation. There doesn’t appear to be any firm central leadership. A canvassing of those claiming membership came up with no consistent answer when asked to name the leader of the TP.

The “planks” in the TP’s unofficial “Contract from America” include these goals:

- Identify constitutionality of every new law
- Reject emissions trading
- Demand a balanced federal budget
- Simplify the tax system
- Audit federal government agencies for waste and constitutionality
- Limit annual growth in federal spending
- Repeal the healthcare legislation passed on March 23, 2010
- Pass an “all of the above” energy policy
- Reduce earmarks
- Reduce taxes

It’s interesting that **a large majority of the U.S. population supports most of these goals!**

### **How the Tea Party Got Its Start?**

While the TP refers to itself as non-partisan, bound together by belief in their core values, I believe it is more objectively accurate to describe their members as mostly conservative and/or libertarian. While a large majority of TPer describe themselves as Republican, nevertheless, the formation of the group was significantly the result of dissatisfaction with many “mainstream” Republican Party leaders.

From my perspective, the organization got its real start in 2009 largely as a reaction to the governments’ passage of huge expenditures for stimulus/bailouts and the proposed health care legislation. Remember the “town hall meetings” during the health care debate in congress? I don’t believe these were purely “Tea Party” protests, but many who participated or watched were slowly drawn into the debate about the country’s direction, and many would later claim “membership” in this non-official political movement.

The TP phenomenon was clearly a “grass roots” movement. Many people were involved in creating local organizations, and lots of “bloggers blogged.” Ultimately it really rattled our cage.

### **Demographics**

Tea Party supporters tend to be white - 79% vs. 75% for the general population. They are slightly more likely to be male 61% are male, compared to 48.5% for the general population. They tend to more likely be married, older than 45, and more conservative than the general population. They are also better educated and wealthier than the general population. They tend to be

Republican. I find no surprises in this information. I wouldn't expect a partisan organization to reflect exactly the demographics of the entire population.

### **Why the Outrage About Their Activities?**

There have been some generalizations made about TP supporters' feelings about social programs, their effectiveness, and the effect on the target population. TPerers tend to express harsh criticism reflecting their common opinion that our social programs have had a negative impact socially, culturally, motivationally and economically on those targeted for help. As expected, TP supporters strongly oppose favorite liberal/democrat/progressive agendas such as:

- Obama engaging Muslim countries
- U.S. coolness toward traditionally strong allies such as England and Israel
- Pro choice policies
- Insistence that unequal outcome implies unequal opportunities
- Gay marriage
- Immigration policies and enforcement – or lack thereof
- Climate change hysteria and cap and trade legislation
- TARP and bailout programs

**These opinions are often represented in the traditional media as being ignorant, uninformed, racially motivated, and glaring evidence of bigotry.**

Yet the Washington Post determined that there was very little concern, among supporters, about Obama's race, religion, or ethnic background. Of course with any group there will be radical extremists with outrageous views. Consider the "birthers" on the one side of the fence and "truthers" on the other. **The mainstream TPerers do not reflect an extreme AT ALL!** A very small percent express Obama/race/religion/ethnic concerns. An analysis done by ABC News' Polling Unit found that views on race "are not significant predictors of support for the Tea Party movement."

As I have written before – **these are quite simply conflicting world views about what should be individual responsibilities as well as the appropriate role of government – both domestically and internationally.**

### **How About Spending?**

According to pollster Scot Rasmussen, TPerers "think federal spending, deficits and taxes are too high, and they think no one in Washington is listening to them." Yet, a majority of TP supporters told the CBS/NY Times poll that they think their own "income taxes this year are fair." And a Bloomberg News poll found that TPerers are not always against new government action. In fact, researchers claim that it is difficult to pin TPerers down to a consistent objection, across the board. It appears that they come together and agree on opposing broad progressive actions and increasing spending and taxing in general, but sometimes they are diverse on the specifics. Also, it appears that concern over economic and fiscal issues prevails. Dick Morris argues that **evangelical or social issues did not dominate these Republican/Tea Party activists in 2010.**

## The Main-Stream Media Considers TPer as Ignorant!

The following cleverly depicts the disdain the media has for middle Americans – like TPer:

### Mallard Fillmore by Bruce Tinsley



The fact that most in the media consistently portray the TP in an unfavorable light, has affected raw polls which also show a fairly significant negative image of the TP name. However, when the public is faced with giving an up or down opinion of the TP mission and goals – without any mention of the TP name – a vast majority support the TP philosophy.

Search the Media Research Center website for interesting information about the biased coverage and treatment given the TP by traditional news sources.

## Obama

Obama has added mightily to the undeserved negative image of the TP. Recall some of the statements and innuendos he has made. He has constantly mocked and treated all TPer as ignorant – all they do is stand there “waving their tea bags around.” Remember when he implied that devoted Christians cling to guns and religion out of bitterness? All of these were inaccurate and mocking put-downs of an important segment of America. Here’s a humorous item about Obama’s comments:



From Townhall.com

Such patent disrespect is inexcusable and un-presidential! But what’s new?

## **What Is the Tea Party – in Just a Few Words?**

Stubborn. Conservative. Sometimes unreasonable. Difficult. Uncompromising. Determined. Loud. Worried. In-your-face! Those are not racist, or un-American, in any way. I don't see how one can accept the importance and current relevance of the U.S. Constitution while at the same time eschewing much of what the TP supports.

## **What the Tea Party Isn't!**

The movement has been consistently compared/described by the mainstream press as Nazi's, terrorists, the Arizona shooter, hate filled, hate mongers, racists, ignorant, uneducated, un-compassionate, violent, angry, selfish, etc.

After this exercise, I challenge you to find evidence that legitimizes those claims. I have tried, but as close as one can come is to find unsubstantiated claims, substantiated claims which turn out to be "plants," and a few isolated substantiated claims that merely depict a foolish, fringe element. While emotional, the TP events were generally orderly, law abiding, and well attended.

By the way, I also feel most on the "other side" of the political spectrum are also generally sincere (although misguided). Challenge those who disparage the TP to bring you the evidence – more than mere impressions and "sound-bites" they can easily find in the mainstream media. They won't be able to do it. Other than **very few** isolated examples of ignorant radicalism, this has proven to be a politically formidable group – but as law abiding as any in America.

## **Tea Party Supporters Believe in American Exceptionalism**

TPers universally express their feelings about the worldwide role the U.S. should play. While they agree on the general concept of American Exceptionalism, they are far from united in the way this should manifest itself in international policies. According to some analysts, a simple analogy would be to contrast Ron Paul and Sarah Palin. Some TPers are more Jeffersonian "neo-isolationists" like Ron Paul and would favor avoiding foreign involvement – these are the "Paulites." On the other hand there are the "Palinites" who tend to favor a more aggressive response to maintaining America's primacy in international relations – while still seeking to avoid being drawn into unnecessary conflicts.

## **How Do You Join the Tea Party?**

At this point you don't – not really. It appears you simply declare your allegiance and otherwise provide support financially, or through time and effort.

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As I stated earlier, this was by no means exhaustive. Want to know more? Search Wikipedia or other sources and look for information directly – it's all there. You will find the good, the bad, and everything in-between – draw your own conclusions.