TEA PARTIES OF OHIO: AN IN DEPTH LOOK

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INRODUCTION

The Tea Party is a fiscally conservative populist political organization that took root in American politics beginning in late 2008 and early 2009. It is difficult to make generalizations about the different Tea Parties scattered throughout the United States because there is no central organization to control the groups or provide them with a singular goal. Most Tea Party groups say that they only focus on fiscal issues, and they insist that social issues either do not interest them or are too divisive. Although each Tea Party has a similar focus, there are many variations of their political message. Often Tea Parties are incompatible because their focuses are too narrow and only concentrate on the local issues affecting their respective cities. However, even in these circumstances there is still something that holds these organizations together besides their shared name. Anup Kumar attempts to give one explanation. He calls the Tea Party a resurgent conservative populist movement. He asserts, “Since the 1970s we have seen that the equivalential component in the Republican populist discourse has been that the liberal coastal elites have undermined the social values of the people in the American heartland” (Kumar 58). This reaction against the progressive populism of New Deal era policies, he states, is the fuel behind the fire of the Tea Party. He continues, “In a way, the reactionary politics of the Tea Party movement [is] a throw back to the early decades of the Republic and a narrative rooted in the founding legends and myths of American nationhood and national identity” (Kumar 54). The formation of Tea Parties around the country started as a reaction to the bank Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), which was a bail out of many of the banks that
contributed to the 2008 financial crisis. TARP was implemented to stabilize the financial system after the 2008 meltdown, and according to the Brookings institute it could result in as much as a $300 billion loss of taxpayer money. Along with TARP the Tea Party has also risen out of disapproval of President Obama’s economic stimulus package the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), which was implemented in order to stimulate job growth. It was the goal of the President for the ARRA to create 3 million jobs by 2010. The reason for the reaction against TARP and ARRA by the Tea Party is the amount of money they contributed to the federal deficit, and these two bills are the source for the Tea Party’s commitment to balancing federal budgets. The Tea Party is a reaction to the amount of debt the American government is in, and the perceived dangers of that debt. Written in April of 2009 on a conservative website called the American Spectator, Peter Ferrara complained;

[Tea Party protesters] recognize that the more resources the government takes out of the private sector, through taxes, borrowing and spending, the less freedom that average working people have left for the pursuit of happiness. Taxes as a percent of GDP, government spending as a percent of GDP, should be taken as reverse indicators of economic freedom. The higher they are, the less economic freedom people have. The lower they are, the more economic freedom we have. In other words, the more the government takes your money to spend on what it wants, the less freedom you have to choose to spend, or to save and invest, your own money as you want. And visa versa (Ferrara).

Also, according to the New York Times, “Tea Party supporters tend to unite around fiscal conservatism and a belief that the federal government has overstepped its constitutional powers” (New York Times). To be sure, the Constitution and how to
interpret it is a point of contention for many Tea Party members. They have a nostalgic view of the Founding Fathers and what makes America great. It is the contention of many Tea Party members that what makes America great is the power of the individual and economic freedom. Jared Goldstein echoes this sentiment stating, “The Tea Party is a nationalist movement that uses originalist rhetoric to advance a narrow conception of what America is, what ideas are American, and who is truly American” (Goldstein 831). An originalist interpretation of the Constitution is focused what the intentions of the Founding Fathers were when they wrote it. This is in contrast to the idea of the Constitution as a living document that must be interpreted in today’s context. Whatever the case, Goldstein goes on to say, “Tea Party supporters believe that the nation is facing disaster because it has abandoned the principles established by its Founding Fathers, and they seek to ‘take back the country’ to restore the government to its foundational principles” (Goldstein 829). But what exactly are those principles? I visited a number of Tea Party organizations’ websites and found that these groups’ principles ranged greatly. The majority of the Tea Parties declared an adherence to a Constitutionally limited government, free markets, and fiscal responsibility, and most of these groups agree not to get involved in social issues. Other groups using the Tea party name fight for as many as fifteen core beliefs stating, “Illegal aliens are illegal,” “Gun ownership is sacred,” and “English as our core language is required” (teaparty.org/about). Such staunch conservatism is lacking in many of the other Tea Party websites. However, these large disparities between Tea Party groups are not uncommon, and it is difficult to see how this “populist”
movement can survive with such a divergence of opinions. Many of these organizations have lasted as long as four years, and this is largely due to their focus on local issues. Recently different media and social groups have accused the Tea Party of being racist and that the Tea Party is a platform for other racial groups to latch on to (Burghart et al). Although they have sizable differences between groups, it does not seem to matter. One group is not answering to the other nor are they even necessarily colluding with one another as long as they have local support.

So, who really makes up the Tea Party? Is it fair to even say *the* Tea Party? What are the common principles between these groups? How do these groups stay connected? Over the past few months I have interviewed eight Tea Party members in Ohio. Each person is part of a different Tea Party organization, and each organization has different values and goals for its respective Tea Party. Some members have been involved in politics for a long time, while others have just recently been mobilized by the Tea Party message. Members of one Tea Party are sometimes skeptical of the legitimacy of the members of another as to whether they are committed to the Tea Party or are just an “arm of the Republican Party.” Some members hate the connotation that Tea Party members are just a rebranding of the Republican base. They view themselves as separate from the Republican Party, but they also agree that the Tea Party is not another political party. When asked about the prospect of forming another political party one member stated that the Tea Party would never form into another political party because “The Republicans take in more money; the Democrats take in more money. We’re not about that. I mean we don’t have any money. We just
want to see our country return to its constitutional principles. We want to return to fiscal responsibility; we want to end corruption in Washington.” What I have found in these interviews is that the term *Tea Party member* or *Tea Partyer* can mean a variety of different things, but one thing all of these people share is an active interest of the politics around them.

Historically, Ohio is a battleground state in presidential elections. It can be swayed one way or the other because its political makeup is balanced in such a way as to make it a toss up state in close elections. Rural Ohio tends to be more conservative, while cites and college towns tend to be more liberal. This makes the Tea Parties of Ohio that much more interesting. How has the conservative populist movement affected Ohio? What kinds of people join Ohio Tea Parties? Each of the eight Tea Party members I interviewed shed light on these questions, as well as provide insight on what exactly keeps this disaggregated bunch of grassroots organizations together. I will have to use made-up names for each of these members to protect their anonymity, and in the following section I will introduce the reader to each member and provide them with a general profile. I will then look at four different aspects of their political ideologies and use these interviews to provide a political profile of the Tea Party as an emerging political organization. First, I analyze what the members claim to be their Tea Party’s principles, what is the main focus, and where members agree or disagree. Second, I examine the claim that Tea Party organizations only focus on fiscal issues, their explanations for avoiding social issues, and whether or not fiscal issues can be completely separated from social issues. Third, I look at the disaggregation of these
groups, their emphasis on local issues, and why some Tea Party groups are skeptical of others. Last, I will analyze the members’ responses to accusations of racism and how their views regarding welfare affect the perceptions of African Americans.

**MEET THE TEA PARTY MEMBERS**

The first person I interviewed was a middle-aged woman from North-Central Ohio. For the purposes of this paper I’ll call her Anna. She was perhaps the most strongly conservative Tea Party member that I interviewed. She was not only fiscally conservative, but extremely socially conservative claiming, “the sanctity of life is my issue, and I will vote for whomever is more pro life. So, over the years there have been candidates that have been third-party that are more pro-life that I vote for.” She believes that Tea Party groups are and should be involved in social issues. She does not like moderate Republicans and loves to use the term RINO (Republicans In Name Only) when referring to them. To put it lightly, it is her view that conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh supports too many RINOs. She is also very skeptical of other Tea Party organizations and their legitimacy in the Tea Party movement. She says that many Tea Parties are “arms of the Republican Party,” but assured me “there are some good Tea parties too.”

The second person I interviewed, Betty, is another middle-aged woman from North-Central Ohio. She is much more moderate than Anna, but loved to emphasize the power of the individual and how that is what made this country great. She discourages the members of her Tea Party from being Independents because “they
have no say” and cannot “influence their party,” although she does not tell them which party to pick. She is concerned that the “progressive agenda is to break down the family unit,” and that we have too much reliance on the federal government. Also, she believes that social issues should not be part of the Tea Party movement, but believes that once fiscal issues are in order social issues will follow in lock step.

Collin was the third person I interviewed, and he is a man in his mid thirties from Western Ohio. He is committed to a Libertarian view of the government, and believes that the Tea Party is approaching its final days. He joined in order to find a group of like-minded people, and, now that he has, he intends to spread what he calls the “Liberty Movement” throughout Ohio. He told me that there are two types of people who joined the Tea Party movement; principle-based, libertarian-minded people, and people who were just frustrated with Barack Obama and not happy with “the direction in which the country is moving.” He thinks that after the “Tea Party moniker” falls, what will prevail are issue-based coalitions supported by online aggregation.

Daisy was the fourth person I interviewed. Another middle-aged woman, she is from a city in Southwestern Ohio. She was perhaps the angriest out of the people that I talked to, but was surprisingly not very talkative. She would often give one-word answers to my questions, and needed to be pushed for elaboration. When I asked why she join/started a Tea Party, she simply said, “Barack Obama.” She did, however, tell me that she had not been politically active prior to joining her Tea Party, but was not
as involved as she could be in all things politics. Along with Anna, she refers to RINOs with disgust.

For my fifth interview I talked to a man much older than the previous four members. At age 65, Elmer is concerned that the media is mischaracterizing Tea Parties as comprised only of Republicans. He states that, to the contrary, “Tea party members are across the board. In my Tea Party we are about 1/3 Democrat, 1/3 Independent, and 1/3 Republican, and a few are none, and we see that in many of the Tea Parties.” Along with many of the others, he emphasizes limiting the government to the powers designated to it by the Constitution, and believes that we are extremely far removed from that.

My sixth interview consisted of the only self-proclaimed Democrat of the members I interviewed. Fred is a 63-year-old man from Eastern Ohio who sees the Tea Party movement as an educational tool. He declares himself a “Scoop Jackson Democrat,” and joked with me that when he gets called out by his more liberal-minded friends he calms them down by saying “Look, we are both Kennedy Democrats, I’m JFK (John F Kennedy) and you’re Teddy.” He also thinks the Tea Party movement is being mischaracterized, and said, “There are a lot of people outside the Tea Party who simply think we are an arm of the Republican Party. Nothing could be further from the truth. It has become a narrative of the political left and many of the mainstream media. What I think we are doing is changing the political discourse in this country.”
My seventh interview was with yet another older male. At 65, George was probably the most locally focused and pragmatic of the whole group. He is part of a Tea Party in Southwestern Ohio and has been politically active for much of his life holding various offices in his city. It was more than once where he would mention his city’s deficit as his main focus instead of the national deficit, or he would talk about a new high school being built that he had to pay for but construction was almost a year behind schedule as a main concern of his Tea Party. As far as social issues such as gay marriage are concerned, he stated, “I never had the time to worry about who was sleeping with whom.” He is the only Tea Party member that I interviewed that was not critical of Obama for passing the economic stimulus package, but was critical of what Obama did afterwards, stating, “I know why we are doing liquidity. Not everybody agrees, but I think we had to do it. But you can’t keep doing it. In other words we have gotten time to react but we have not reacted.”

My last interview was with a middle-aged male also from Southwestern Ohio. Harold is the only member that believes the Tea Party is going to evolve into a political party. He is not necessarily happy about this because he thinks it will draw votes away from the Republican Party and cites Ross Perot as an example, but he believes that the message of the Tea Party is more important than worrying about the Republican Party’s votes. Like many of the others he stresses fiscal responsibility, especially at the local level of government, and claims that the Tea Party movement started because of “a disgust and dissatisfaction with both of the major political parties, and the stagnation or continuation of the status quo in our government.”
It is apparent that there are many similarities and differences between members of different Tea Parties, and I’m sure there are many disagreements between members of the same Tea Party. The next few sections of this paper will look at the issues that link Tea Parties together. Although they are very different on certain issues, there is a reason they all label themselves as part of the Tea Party movement. I contend that the differences speak just as loudly (if not louder) than the similarities, and what is always present is dissatisfaction with our government and the policies, not just of President Obama, but former President George W. Bush and all those who expanded to role of the federal government since Franklin D Roosevelt and Lynden B Johnson.

TEA PARTY PRINCIPLES

The principles of the Tea Party have been under dispute since the beginning of the movement. However, most Tea Party groups agree on three principles. First, there must be fiscal responsibility in government. Second, the government must be limited to the roles set fourth in the Constitution. Last, there must always be an adherence to free markets. Although there are many deviations from this formulation, for the purposes of this section I will focus on these three principles and assess the interesting nature of the deviations later.

The first principle of fiscal responsibility carries with it many connotations. However, I must first ask, what is fiscal responsibility? All eight of my interviewees referenced fiscal responsibility in some way but never bothered to explain what it is. Many talked about the “runaway spending” that has been a characteristic of the
Obama administration, while others constantly talked about America’s “unsustainable $15 trillion debt.” Anna on one hand reminisced about the America she once knew. She stated, “It was never like that before in America. Each generation paid its own debt. We didn’t pass it on to our kids, but now it’s being passed down to our grandkids, and they won’t even have a chance.” Elmer shares a similar sentiment and says that the present generations have a responsibility to future generations to reign in America’s debt problem. He says, “We have a $15 trillion debt that our children and grandchildren are going to be burdened with. By the end of this year, the interest on the debt alone is going to be $10 billion a month, which you know if you get more debt than you can handle, it’s going to drag the whole thing down the road.” Inferring from these accounts, fiscal responsibility consists of paying off America’s debt. However, fiscal responsibility cannot just mean the eradication of America’s debt because, according to the Government Accountability Office, “The federal government has carried debt throughout virtually all of U.S. history” (Gao.gov). If fiscal responsibility does not simply mean managing America’s debt, there must be another part of the equation. Many of the members that I interviewed not only cited a debt problem but also a spending problem. Daisy was of the opinion that, “[The government] cannot restrain spending, they will not restrain spending, they will not hold it back, and I think Washington is out of touch with the rest of the country. I think Washington should be held to the same standards as any family; that you can’t borrow yourself into prosperity.” Also, when talking about fiscal responsibility, Fred states that there is both too much debt and spending. He states, “We also believe in
fiscal responsibility. That obviously translates to the fact that we are just absolutely opposed to the spending and the unsustainable debt that the federal government and in some cases state governments have been engaged in.” It is safe to say Tea Party members would say that an increasing debt coupled with a growth in spending leads to fiscal irresponsibility. It is not within the scope of this paper to analyze whether these concerns are valid or even reasonable because those questions would surely take up many books, and it is not my intention to get in a political debate about government spending. The conclusion I can draw, however, is that the Tea Party is concerned with the amount of debt America currently holds and the spending habits of the government. There is a growing interest in what such a large debt means for the United States, and whether the government can control spending enough to help mitigate that debt.

The next principle that many Tea Parties agree on is a return to a Constitutionally limited federal government. Betty explains that vision most clearly. She states, “Well when you think about it – if you look at the United States Constitution – there’s really – and it’s crazy – there’s really only four areas that the federal government is even supposed to be involved in. And that’s our military, our postal service, which they can’t seem to get that under control, infrastructure like roads, bridges things like that, and coining money. But that’s it. Everything else is supposed to be left to the states.” Six out of the eight people I interviewed called for limiting the government or a reference to the idea the federal government has somehow “overreaching.” This concern has to do with the controversy that has surrounded the “Necessary and Proper Clause” found in Article I Section 8 Clause 18
of the United States Constitution. It states that Congress has the power, “To make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States, or in any Department or Officer thereof” (sec 8 cl. 18). There has been controversy surrounding this clause since before the Constitution was ratified. This clause represents a means to an end, and gives Congress the power to make laws in relation to the responsibilities to which it was given. There were many who believed that this clause would grant Congress boundless power, however Alexander Hamilton was able successful argue for its inclusion (Watkins 2004). The view that Betty and most other Tea Party members hold is that over the past 100 years or so, the federal government has found a way to skirt around the limitations enacted upon them by the Constitution. However, on this assumption, they would either be ignoring or vehemently disagreeing with Supreme Court cases dealing with this very issue. One such case, *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp*, vastly “expanded the role of government” by allowing the government to regulate labor practices according to the Commerce Clause (Article I Section 8 Clause 3). This case subsequently countered the many challenges brought against the implementation of New Deal policies. On this view, the Tea Party wants a regression of precedent, and for the federal government to reduce size on its own accord contrary to Supreme Court precedent. All things considered, the principle of a *Constitutionally limited government* seems all if not impossible. In fact the current healthcare reform bill passed by the Obama administration is facing a similar Supreme Court Case regarding both the Necessary
and Proper clause as well as the Commerce Clause of the Constitution. The question is whether the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) violates the limits of the federal government set forth by the Constitution. Again, it is not within the scope of this paper to get in political debates about these issues. However, the Tea Party principle advocating for a *Constitutionally limited government* is quite unrealistic unless they are prepared to fight against and try to reverse Supreme Court precedent for many years to come. Tea Party members say they want a *Constitutionally limited government*, but it seems like what they really want is the Constitution to be more limiting.

Finally, the last principle that is largely agreed upon by many Tea Party groups across Ohio and the rest of the country is that of an adherence to *free markets*. This is directly linked to the previous principle of a limited government, but does not evoke the same Constitution-based rhetoric. Although this principle also links itself to the past and advocates a lack of regulation by the federal government, it refers to free markets as a way to help grow America’s economy during a time of economic downturn. Harold encapsulates this Tea Party sentiment beautifully and states, “Free markets, going to our capitalism aspects, less government is better and the fewer the regulations on those free markets the more likely capitalism is to sustain itself and perpetuate and actually be a corrective force in the marketplace.” What this reflects is a profound mistrust of the governments ability to regulate the country’s marketplace. In reference to the Obama healthcare plan, Elmer also reflected a free market attitude, “It’s more of the federal government stepping into a role they’re not prepared to do.
The federal government cannot manage the healthcare of millions of Americans, and that’s what that plan does, and I really don’t think they can do it best. I think it can be best done in the private sector.” Elmer’s statement illustrates that many Tea Party members mistrust the government greatly. They want enact change to reduce its size and deregulate our economy towards granting businesses (and individuals) more economic freedom. This profound mistrust of the government is reflected in all of these three principles, but I think it is especially important in relation to free markets. Often in my interviews there is a reference or a justification for a belief simply with an appeal for me to “look back at what made this country great.” What that seems to imply is that we somehow lost our greatness, and what the Tea Party is trying to do is recover it from the depths of our past.

FISCAL ISSUES ONLY

The general consensus of the Tea Party members I interviewed is that the fiscal issues facing the United States are the most important, and they should be the primary focus of this populist movement. At first glance this seems like a nice new way to view politics. Stay out of the more divisive social issues and simply manage the government’s budget and the country will be more efficient in no time. However, many Tea Party groups find it difficult to adhere to this separation of social and fiscal issues. Also, it is unclear whether fiscal and social issues can be separated. In the following section I will look at my interviewees’ views on the idea of only addressing fiscal issues. I will then analyze whether this separation is feasible. I will contend that, although trying to tackle politics from a strictly financial perspective seems to help
simplify issues and provide a level of clarity, fiscal and social issues are inseparable and you cannot ignore that they are intertwined. Although this view is helped by the libertarian philosophy of “live and let live,” this philosophy necessarily promotes a certain social norm that is unavoidable and conservative in nature.

Anna claims that most of the Tea Party groups that she is in contact with openly tackle social issues, and that they approach these issues from a conservative standpoint. She states, “Well okay, the Tea Party Patriots groups say right on their websites ‘we are not a social issues organization.’ I know a lot of Tea Party Patriots groups that are like that, and I contact about 175 Tea Party people (so called leaders) on my list and we have discussions, and some of these Tea Party groups are just fiscal, but most of use are into social issues.” However, most of the Tea Party members I interviewed are on the opposite end of the spectrum. For example, Daisy would not even comment on social issues. She stated, “My thoughts on social politics are not related to the Tea Party. If this is a Tea Party interview, they should not be mixed into the conversation.” Although the other members I interviewed were not as guarded as Daisy about their social convictions, they made sure to specify that their opinions on social issues were not to be affiliated with their views on the Tea Party. For example, I asked Fred what his thoughts about the social wrongs of America. He answered, “Well this is my personal opinion. I’m not speaking as a Tea Party representative. In my opinion the greatest problem we have today is the dissolution of the family unit.” Why is there such a strong emphasis on fiscal issues and a commitment not to address social
issues? Collin says, “It’s not that we don’t believe in [social issues], it’s that they’re not intense issues for us… The fiscal and freedom stuff is more motivating.”

Many Tea Parties have found it more advantageous to be “live and let live” about more “divisive” social issues. Betty says her group does not address religion because, “That’s a personal decision. That’s something you do in your own home or at your own church.” She even continues to say, “[Social issues] ha[ve] nothing to do with what we are, and I personally also strongly believe that if you get your fiscal house in order, all of the other social issues take care of themselves anyway… So if you take away the handout, and now they’re responsible for the decision they made, they may think twice. So I think it has a domino effect without even having to address that stuff.” Reflecting on this last statement for a moment it is apparent that Betty believes fiscal conservatism intertwines itself with social conservatism, and, when referring to handouts, that social conservatism has specific ideas in relation to welfare. It is her belief that addressing social issues are not necessary because a focus on fiscal responsibility, limited government, and free markets will be sufficient enough to move all politics (including social issues) to the right.

This is an interesting point that raises another question: Can fiscal issues be separated from social issues? Many Tea Party members claim that their “live and let live” quasi-libertarian approach allows for them to ignore social issues. However, I contend that this is practically impossible. I think social issues necessarily affect fiscal issues and visa versa. That is not to say that there is no distinction between them. It is to say that they are compliments. There are many social issues ranging from welfare to
illegal immigration to abortion that have an affect on fiscal policy. Moreover, a principle such as limited government directly attacks the very idea of a government with strong social institutions. Less money for social institutions means less social institutions. To say that that a political group is going to essentially ignore these issues is all but impossible. Decisions regarding spending and government reach are in tandem with decisions regarding welfare, Medicare, and Social Security. To say that you want to cut the budgets of these institutions, and then say you do not address social issues is hypocritical. This is reflected in statement made by Fred when talking about a recent “hot-button” political issue regarding abortion and the use of contraception, he stated:

We don’t feel the need to get into that because it is such a divisive issue, and people have very deeply held beliefs on those issues and they are very divisive. We are approaching this issue as it relates to the First Amendment… as it relates to this health and human services mandate is an attack on the First Amendment rights of many people of faith. So that’s where we come down on that, that the First Amendment says that Congress shall make no law with respect to establishing a religion, and that was done because there were certain state that had their own state-religions, and they didn’t want a federal religion dictating that everybody should be a member of a certain religion … and that their tax dollars had to pay for something to which they were diametrically opposed. We don’t come down as pro-life or pro-choice; we have no dog in that fight. We do have a dog in the First Amendment fight.

First, Fred states that he does not want to address the issue because of its divisiveness, but then he immediately provides a social reasoning in favor of a conservative viewpoint. Appealing to the Constitution and a specific way of interpreting it is not providing a financial viewpoint. It is providing an argument for how limited (or unlimited) you think government should be. Issues surrounding abortion and
contraception are social issues, even if you decide to use “fiscal logic” to decide what policy would be best.

Most Tea Party groups say that they do not address social issues. Due to the disaggregation of these groups (discussed in the next section), some disagree with this contention. However, the assertion that Tea Party groups are only going to confront fiscal issues run rampant throughout many of these groups. However, I believe I have shown that this stance is all but impossible. Fiscal issues and social issues are inseparable. Especially in the United States, fiscal policy is influenced by social issues and institutions such as welfare, immigration policy, and gay marriage to name a few. The Tea Party principles of limited government, fiscal responsibility, and free markets point to the conclusion that they would simply like to get rid of all the social issues that plague the American political system. This would, however, require an intense shift in the way that most Americans look at politics, completely ignore that Civil Rights and Women’s Rights Movements, and unravel decades of Supreme Court precedent about the limits of the federal government. “Fiscal issues only,” is an inventive way to try to simplify American politics, but it does not stand up to critical analysis.

WE ARE NOT MONOLITHIC

During my interviews I asked members of the Tea Party questions about their goals for the Tea Party movement as well as about goals for their specific Tea Party, and I learned that many of these groups do not answer to a larger group as
Republicans do to the GOP. Most of these groups are focused only on local issues on the city, county, and state levels rather than simply focusing on national politics. Also, many members informed me that the Tea Party is not a “monolithic” organization, and the Tea Party that they speak for does not necessarily represent other Tea Parties across the nation. Often members of one Tea Party are skeptical of the credentials of other Tea Parties and their commitment to the Tea Party rather than being an “arm of the Republican Party.” The Tea Party is something different than an emergence of another political party. It is not organized enough to be a political party, and most Tea Parties have no intention of organizing with others. Also, even with a high level of disaggregation, the Tea Party has continued to have a loud political voice and influence at local and national levels. According to the Huffington post, “The Tea Party already is reshaping the Republican Party. Once-moderate lawmakers are shifting sharply right, fearing primary challenges more than Democratic opponents” (Siegel). In the following section I explain how the disaggregation of Tea Party groups influences their politics, their organization, and their message. I will conclude that the focus on local issues necessarily disaggregates their groups.

How is there so much divisiveness between groups that share that same name? Tea Parties have sprung up across the nation, but there lacks an organizational epicenter. Contrary to the organizational model of America’s two political parties, there is no central brain giving each Tea Party orders or talking points. A political party is defined as “an organization [established] to gain political power” (political party Wordnet 3.0). One explanation is that, since the Tea Party is still blossoming as
a movement, it has not yet had time to properly formulate its principles, or an
organizational core. However, each group is so committed to its decision not to
collude with other groups, it is unclear whether any of these groups will change their
mind in order to promote a more broad political or philosophical goal. Some Tea Party
organizations have tried. The Tea Party Patriots have groups throughout the United
States promoting a singular message of fiscal responsibility, limited government, and
free markets, but this seems futile because of local Tea Parties’ intense focus on local
issues. Ana states that, “Some people think [the Tea Party] is just some bug monolithic
thing, but it’s not.” Collin reflects a similar sentiment when talking about Tea Party
beliefs. He says:

So, to say that they’re the Tea Party, well I don’t know, pick one of them. There’s a hundred and fifty [liberty groups] in Ohio, and then across the country there’s literally thousands. So it’s not a national organization, or a national brand, or a national entity or a singular monolithic thing that you can go well I identify with that. It’s literally; it’s an impossible question to answer. I can speak for the organizations that I helped found … but if you ask Tea Party ‘x’ in Florida, the same question I mean most assuredly they probably would sift through their most passionate issues and belief systems completely different than I would, and neither one of use would be right or wrong in saying ‘well that’s a Tea Party value’ because there is no defined set of values, it truly isn’t.

So what do we make of these groups of organizations united under the same
name yet separate in design? In his article, Social Movements and the Focus of
Emotional Attention, Randall Collins outlines three ingredients of “highly mobilized
social movements.” He states these as such; “The physical assembly of people… A
shared focus of attention… [And that] the focus of attention becomes a mutual focus
of attention” (Goodwin et al. 28). How does that fit in to the Tea Party model of
disaggregation? First, it is clear from the first protests and the groups that have sprouted up across the country that the Tea Party meets the criterion of physical assembly as much that it has a lot of people that identify with the Tea Party name. Where the Tea Party diverges from the conditions is in regard to the last two points about a *shared focus of attention*. However, they do share an indirect focus in that they focus on local issues meaning each group is individually tailored to its needs on a local level, but they are missing a more broad focus of attention that can be applied across all groups. George’s interview is a good example because, although he recognized that the Tea Party formulated around the debt crisis and he had various opinions on national issues, his main focus was on local issues. He stated:

> I think [many people] are surprised to even participate about the local issues about finance and everything. It’s difficult to explain the budget issues without getting down in the weeds and people’s eyes glaze over. And we are trying to present real-world solutions to local issues. Not that it is going to hurt a kid to walk 300 yards to a bus, but they have cut down bussing and we are a very large area school district and bussing and diesel fuel is a big issue here. So we have even surprised some of our people you wouldn’t think would come to Tea Parties. It’s like we are nuts for being Republicans but we are not that nuts on that particular issue. We try to work with the university’s young Republicans too. Sometimes we are successful with the issues, sometimes they just don’t care about the local issues as much because they’re going to be here and gone.

Compare this to the idea that the Tea Party is an emerging political party. A political party is defined as “an organization [established] to gain political power” (political party Wordnet 3.0). At first glance this may seem a more proper fit for the Tea Party, however the Tea Party, as a whole, does not seek political power in the same sense as
the Republican or Democratic Party. What most Tea Party members and organizations seek is political education.

What does this mean for the Tea Party’s politics? First, it means that there must be a departure as to how people think about the Tea Party. To be sure, Tea Party groups consist of mainly conservatives, but their motivation for politics at the local level cannot be overlooked. According to a Pew research poll, a mere 15% of Americans are “an active member of a group that tries to influence public policy or the government” (Smith et al). Additionally, according to the same poll, only 4% of Americans have attended and organized protest (Smith et al). However, what is interesting about the Tea Party members I interviewed is that six out of the eight claimed that they had not previously been actively involved in influencing politics until they joined the Tea Party. There is something that has mobilized these people and something that is holding them together. There was a tipping point in these people’s minds that motivated them to form these groups, and not just in one part of the country but all over. When asked what motivated them to join their respective Tea Party many referenced a frustration with one or more of three things: the policies of President George W. Bush, the policies of President Barack Obama, or the general direction the country was moving in. There was only one person, Harold, who did not reference one of these three sources of frustration as a reason for joining his Tea Party. He simply wanted, “To see an improvement, especially in the local government, in terms of fiscal responsibility.” The other seven all talked about a concern or frustration that they had that motivated them to try and enact a change in their local and federal government.
Returning to Randall Collins’ ingredients for highly mobilized social movements (The physical assembly of people… A shared focus of attention… [And that] the focus of attention becomes a mutual focus of attention), I think, in order to understand the Tea Party and why they are connected yet disconnected is to change how we look at their shared attention. It is not that their shared focus has to do with a specific set of political issues. Their share focus is a shared feeling, and that feeling is one of frustration toward the government local and federal. So they do not have to share the same opinions on every issue fiscal or otherwise. What they must share is a frustration or dissatisfaction with their government. This also helps to explain why many groups take issue with being described as simply part of the Republican Party. The Washington Post put out an article by Chris Cillizza in July of 2010 entitled Tea Party = Republican Party? in which he used a Gallop poll to show that eight of ten Tea Party members consider themselves Republicans (Cillizza). This led him to the conclusion “[Tea Party members] are, at heart, Republicans -- only by a different name at the moment” (Cillizza). However, I believe this misses the point. Just because, given no other choice than that of one between a Democrat and a Republican, Tea Party members would almost always choose a Republican does not mean that they are just a rebranding. As stated before, many Tea Party members cited George W. Bush as a source of their frustration. The reason Cillizza misses the point is that he analyzes the Tea Party as if it were trying to formulate its own political party with specific policy goals across the board. As I have explained, this is not the case. The Tea Party is a reactionary conservative populist movement. It just so happens that the
Republican Party is more conservative than the Democratic Party, so, given the choice, most Tea Party members will vote for the Republican. However, the Republican Party must be careful that they do not alienate the Tea Parties across the country especially in regard to House of Representatives and Senate races where their local influence can be more effective because these groups are trying to change both parties, not just the Democratic Party. In fact, the Tea Party has already ousted an Indiana Senatorial incumbent Dick Lugar in the 2012 primary in favor of a more conservative candidate. To say that the Tea Party is a rebranding of the Republican party not only underestimates their conservatism, but also underestimates the influence that a reactionary populist movement can have.

The Tea Party may not be a “monolithic” organization that has a central political focus, but it could be something much more influential. If the Tea Party were to try and become a third party, it would risk falling by the wayside or simply undermine the established conservative party, the Republican Party. However, this conservative populist movement allows each group to have its own local political focus that shares a reactionary intent. This makes the Tea Party different from many other political organizations because its reactionary motivations have mobilized its members, and this mobilization does not seem to be fading away. It will be interesting to see how the Tea Party influences the Republican Party and politics in general in the future.

WELFARE AND RACISM
Throughout my interviews I asked the Tea Party members to respond to the accusations of racism that have been aimed at them by many media and social justice groups. For example the Washington Post exclaimed, “according to [a new Washington Post-ABC News] poll: About 61 percent of tea party opponents say racism has a lot to do with the movement, a view held by just 7 percent of tea party supporters” (Gardner et al 2010). Although the perception of the Tea Party as a racially motivated group is rising, Tea Party members continue to exonerate themselves as simply a fiscally-minded conservative political group. In my interviews I asked the Tea Party members, “What would you say to the people that are calling the Tea Party racist?” They used this question as a way to respond to the accusations of racism, but what I found is that their reasoning was often rooted in what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls “contemporary racetalk.” What this means is that the respondents used a series of linguistic techniques to camouflage their racial views. They often claimed that they were not racist because they support black candidates, or they blamed a liberal bias in the media for trying to play the ‘race card.’ In the following section I analyze two aspects of the racial tendencies of the Tea Party. First, I show that their responses to accusations of racism are linguistic camouflages proposed by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva as contemporary racetalk intended to hide racial prejudices. Second, I show that their views on welfare reflect a deep prejudice regarding the work ethic of African Americans. I conclude that the Tea Party - as reflected by the views of the members I interviewed and polls conducted by the University of Washington - displays an overall tendency to hold racial resentment towards African Americans.
In an article entitled *The Linguistics of Color Blind Racism: How to Talk Nasty about Blacks without Sounding “Racist,”* Eduardo Bonilla Silva argues “that color blind racism, the central racial ideology of the post-civil rights era, has a peculiar style characterized by slipperiness, apparent nonracialism, and ambivalence” (Bonilla-Silva 41). In the article he proceeds to show how certain phrases are used to try to appear race neutral while still holding racist views. One in particular he calls “The ‘Some of my best friends are…’ phrase.” Some sort of incarnation of this phrase came up in four out of the eight responses to the question “What would you say to the people that are calling the Tea Party racist?” When attempting to show that their Tea Party was not racist four people stated that their support for an African American candidate showed that they were not racist. When answering the question Anna stated:

Alan West was my number one choice to be president of the United States and Alan West is a black man from Florida… Alan West was my number one candidate, and I’m only speaking for our Tea Party group but we always have a guest speaker that we pay big buck for on the Tea Party movement (that’s why we had Michael Regan). Well last year we were going to have Alveda King. Do you know who she is? Alveda King is Dr. Martin Luther King’s niece, and we were going to have her because she’s big on the sanctity of life. We thought that would be a great event to have a Mansfield senior high because the black kids would see a black conservative who would hear about individual freedom and not relying on the government.

This is a perfect example because, at first she expresses that she could not possibly be racist because she supported a black candidate for president, but continued with a racist statement about blacks relying on welfare, stating that she wanted “black kids [to] see a black conservative who would hear about individual freedom and not relying on the government.” This kind of veiled racism is characteristic of a “colorblind”
society where people must veil their prejudices with a series of linguistic tricks. As I stated before, four out of the eight Tea Party members I interviewed used a similar justification to show that they and their Tea Party groups are not racist, and many of them also held similar views on welfare and reliance on the government.

Similar to the linguistic aspect of the Tea Party’s racial motivations, the Tea Party members’ views on welfare also have indirect racial implications. They use their principles of fiscal responsibility and limited government to attack welfare as a “government handout” that encourages people to “sit at home and collect a check” rather than work for a living. In his book, *Why American Hate Welfare*, Martin Gilens contends, “Many of the findings of this book confirm what most people already believe: that Americans oppose welfare, that they hold cynical views of welfare recipients, and that their thinking about poverty and welfare is permeated by their beliefs about blacks” (Gilens x). Many of the Tea Party members I interviewed simply referenced a commitment to individualism as reasoning for their views on welfare. This sentiment is reflected by Betty’s views on individuality. She states, “And it’s been engrained in [people] over the years, where the government is supposed to be there to take care of you, but they’re not. It’s not I mean you’re supposed to take care of yourself. It’s what individuality is all about.” Similarly, Harold contends, “I think that we have a situation where there’s an overreliance on state and federal programs whether it be entitlements or welfare or things of that sort that people have just realized that it is easier not to work, but to manipulate the system. Again we have gone from self-reliance to reliance on the government.” However, Gilens asserts that,
“Americans’ individualistic ideology, rather than resulting in a principled rejection of welfare as such provides a basis for judging the moral worthiness of welfare recipients” (Gilens 63). Although he acknowledges that, “Compared with the more socially minded Europeans, Americans are thought to place a higher value on self-reliance and individual initiative and to recoil from the idea of government responsibility for individuals’ well-being” (Gilens 32), and that, “welfare has been viewed by the public as a long term substitute for economic self-reliance” (Gilens 37). He states, “between 80 and 90 percent of Americans support government help for the poor, believe that the government must be involved in combating poverty, and favor the government helping people who are unable to support themselves” (Gilens 37). It is apparent that these views are not simply born from a commitment to self-reliance, but are a broader mischaracterization of welfare recipients’ attitudes. Gilens believes that many Americans oppose welfare because they feel that most welfare recipients are undeserving of such assistance and they use welfare as a substitute for hard work. However, he states that, “What is remarkable, though, is that so many Americans believe that the majority of welfare recipients could get along fine without it” (Gilens 67 italics mine). In my interviews Fred directly reflected this sentiment:

We have not eliminated poverty, all we have done is by spending so much money is encourage people to sit on the sidelines and collect their check rather than go out and contribute to society. We encourage women to have more children because with each child that they have they get more government assistance, and then we have also then encouraged the fathers to leave the family because that also has an affect on the amount of government assistance and so the family breaks up and so we end up with all kinds of social issues.
It is easy to see that Fred believes that many people are relying on the government rather than working to make a living as a way to game the federal welfare system, however it may be difficult to see how these sentiments have anything to do with race and racial attitudes. To address this I will use two more examples from Gilens’ book. First he states, “It is now widely believed that welfare is a ‘race-coded’ topic that evokes racial imagery and attitudes even when racial minorities are not explicitly mentioned” (Gilens 67). Second he states, “To the extent that opposition to welfare is race-based it does not primarily reflect a general dislike of blacks … nor does it stem from the belief that helping blacks is simply not the government’s job… The most important race-based source of opposition to welfare is the perception that blacks’ economic problems stem from their own lack of effort” (Gilens 77-78). This sentiment is not only reflected in the responses of many of the Tea Party members I interviewed, but also by a series of polls conducted primarily by Christopher Parker at the University of Washington. A poll that analyzed whites’ perceptions of blacks’ work ethic showed that, “Approximately 45% of Whites either strongly or somewhat approve of the [Tea Party] movement. Of those, only 35% believe Blacks to be hardworking, only 45% believe Blacks are intelligent, and only 41% think that Blacks are trustworthy” (Parker).

To characterize the Tea Party a racist group or say that most Tea Party members are racist is a little unfair. Especially in relation to my interviews, there were a wide variety of views held by the respondents, and many a couple of them did not reference welfare. Additionally, as I have characterized in previous sections of this
paper, the Tea Party is a very disaggregated group that is difficult to generalize, but, short of profiling each group individually, I must generalize with and draw conclusions with the evidence I am given. All things considered, I think that there is overwhelming evidence Tea Party members are more likely to have implicit negative racial attitudes towards African Americans and other minority groups. Also, that the presence of racist views and sentiments in many of my interviews is a contribution to that evidence that could not be ignored.

CONCLUSION

The Tea Party is a political movement that is continuing to emerge as an influential part of the American political system. It has its roots in conservative populism that stresses limited government, fiscal responsibility, and free markets. Although these groups vary in their political message, they make sure that they focus on local issues and get involved in trying to change the political outlook of the community around them. I focused on the Tea Parties of Ohio not just because I have lived here my whole life, but also because Ohio is politically important state with an array of different opinions that make up its demographic. Additionally, the people that I interviewed for this paper have contributed enormously to how I and hopefully other people understand the Tea Party. As I have stated previously, not all Tea Parties are the same, and they can take many different forms. Also, Tea Parties in Ohio are more than likely different than many Tea Parties in other states, but these interviews and the subsequent analysis are simply building blocks for a broader conversation about what the Tea Party is.
In this paper I have analyzed many different aspects of what makes up the Tea Party. Their goal is not only to change how politics is viewed, but also to change how members of communities interact with politics. The Tea Party members I interviewed are perhaps some of the most politically involved and ambitious people I have ever talked to, and there is something to be learned from their passion. I have analyzed some of their common principles and some are more practical than others. For example, their views about how limited the federal government should be are simply out of the question because of the history of Supreme Court precedent. I have looked at their contention that they only concern themselves with fiscal issues and concluded that this contention is all but impossible. Fiscal issues are inseparable although distinct from social issues. I have also shown that the Tea Party’s disaggregation both helps and hurts their political goals. It allows them to tackle more local issues without being overly complex, but it hurts their national message. Finally, I looked at the racial motivations of the Tea Party groups as well as the members I interviewed and concluded that, although these groups are not overtly racist, they carry with them a potent combination of racial resentments and views about welfare recipients that lead to implicit racism that must be checked and overcome.

Overall the Tea Party is a complex organization that has many positive and negative aspects. The people that I interviewed represent a small portion of the much broader national movement, but they help shed light on the variety of people that help shape the movement. These people are politically active on many levels and represent how people of all differing opinions should approach their local politics. Ohio has
been a perfect state to do a study like this because it is so politically important and complex, and it is a state that allows movements like this to flourish. The term *Tea Party* will continue to grow and change until it is either firmly rooted within the American political system or it has fallen out of importance. However, the Tea Party today represents a certain part of America that cannot be ignored.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


