

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

developed by the late historian Richard Hofstadter in his path-breaking work *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Hofstadter argued that some members of dominant social groups will use any means at their disposal to forestall what they believe is a loss in social prestige as social change takes root.⁸ For him, the paranoia wasn't a clinical diagnosis. Rather, he used it as a means of describing the ways in which dominant groups, and the right-wing movements to which they become attached, perceived social change as an attempt to subvert their group's status in American society. At the crux of the paranoid style, according to Hofstadter, is the perception of a "vast and sinister conspiracy . . . set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life." In response to such threats, in order to protect itself from "forces of almost transcendent power," Hofstadter suggests that right-wing movements must dispense with the "usual methods of political give-and-take." Instead, "an all-out crusade" is needed to defeat the enemy.⁹ Oddly enough, exaggerating the perceived threats from their political enemies causes the paranoid to resort to policy preferences that threaten the very system they claim to cherish.¹⁰ Ultimately, Hofstadter's interpretation received some empirical support from the work of sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset twenty-five years later.¹¹

Hofstadter and Lipset's comprehension of the Far Right helps us understand the emergence of right-wing movements, including the nativist Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s, the white supremacist (and nativist) Ku Klux Klan as a national movement in the 1920s, and the rise of the anticommunist John Birch Society (JBS). The Know-Nothings, also known as the American Party, were, among other things, concerned with the growing presence of immigrants. They feared the immigrants' attachment to Catholicism as a political and moral threat, and perceived them prone to criminality, something that threatened the security of the country.¹² The Klan and its supporters perceived a threat from blacks, Jews, Catholics, labor unions, and the increasing independence of women. In each case, members of the Invisible Empire, as the Klan was also known, believed themselves to be

vulnerable to the emergence of these groups.¹³ Similarly, members and supporters of the JBS believed the “American way” of life to be under siege, arguing that the expansion of the federal government threatened to subvert their freedom and transform the United States into a totalitarian country.¹⁴

If the Tea Party is in any way similar to right-wing movements of the past, we think it likely that President Obama represents a threat to the mostly male, middle-aged and older, middle-class, white segment of the population on par with the ethnocultural and political threats that motivated participation in right-wing movements. Consider the fact that a recent study issued by Democracy Corps reports that 90 percent of Tea Party supporters believe President Obama to be a socialist; as such, they view him as the “defining and motivating threat to the country and its well-being.”¹⁵ As American history suggests, this is the same kind of conspiratorial language often deployed by the Far Right when it perceives change of some kind is taking place.

Ultimately, we think it’s possible that the Tea Party and its supporters may perceive social change as subversion, and come to fear it.¹⁶ A much-celebrated (or derided, depending on where you sit) column by former *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich crystallizes the point in his observation that “the conjunction of a black president and a female speaker of the House—topped off by a wise Latina on the Supreme Court and a powerful gay Congressional committee chairman—would sow fears of disenfranchisement among a dwindling and threatened minority in the country no matter what policies were in play . . . When you hear demonstrators chant the slogan ‘Take our country back!’, these are the people they want to take the country back from.”¹⁷ This account suggests that the change witnessed in America in the past three years is simply too much change for some people; social change is also reinforced by allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the U.S. Armed Forces. As Rich indicates, these people believe their country is being stolen from them, the connection to their beloved America is rapidly dissolving.

When all is said and done, we argue that support for the Tea Party is motivated by something beyond the more conventional view of conservatism in which economic freedom and small government as well as social and fiscal responsibility are prized. We also believe it isn't completely motivated by hostility toward out-groups in which people of color, immigrants, and sexual minorities are the objects of derision.¹⁸ Instead, we argue that people who are attracted to the Tea Party are *reactionary* conservatives: people who fear change of any kind—especially if it threatens to undermine their way of life. Similar to other motivations that shape the ways in which people see politics, reactionary conservatism is a product of social learning. By this, we mean to say that the impulse to believe that change represents subversion of some kind, a threat to all that one holds dear, is part of a socialization process inculcated during childhood.¹⁹

As we will soon make clear, reactionary conservatives differ in a number of ways from more conventional conservatives, including the way in which change is viewed. While it's true that more conventional conservatives don't embrace social change, they realize incremental, *evolutionary* change is sometimes necessary as a means of preventing *revolutionary* change. The reactionary conservative doesn't want to stop at the prevention of change: he prefers to reverse whatever progress has been made to that point. He hopes for America's return to a point in history during which the cultural dominance of the group to which he belongs remained unchallenged.²⁰ This appears consistent with the Tea Party's desire to "take their country back."²¹

CONVENTIONAL EXPLANATIONS FOR TEA PARTY SUPPORT: CONSERVATISM AND RACISM

Now that we have outlined our approach to sources of Tea Party support, we want to expand on the conventional views upon which we've briefly touched. We have already referenced Noonan's rationale for the existence of the Tea Party, as well as Williams's. Indeed, even the most casual perusal of Tea Party web-

sites support their contention that the Tea Party sits astride conservative principles. Ideological conservatism derives its validity from long-standing American values, including a preference for small government, the rule of law, and fiscal responsibility. However, as we shall see, intolerance of perceived out-groups has an equally long history in American social and political life, in which racism, among other in-group/out-group distinctions, has long divided Americans. For illustrative purposes, we return to the vignettes.

We begin with the Tea Party meeting in Oregon. The ideas presented at this gathering represent core conservative, even libertarian, principles, very much in keeping with traditional American political culture. Debates over the size of government, economic freedom, and fiscal responsibility are easily traced to the Founding Fathers, some of whom thought too much government would leave the new nation scarcely better off than what it was under the thumb of the British Crown.²² The same principles spurred the negative reaction to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal; for instance, many conservative elites thought the programs and agencies created by Roosevelt encroached much further on American freedoms than necessary.²³ Similarly, some conservatives in the early 1960s thought government had overreached with civil rights legislation and the Great Society programs, and they pushed back. Of course, the Tea Party's reaction to Barack Obama and his policies can be interpreted in the same way: they believe he's overreaching.

The meeting convened in Idaho represents another way to interpret the Tea Party's resistance. However, the source of their resistance is quite different from the above-described, largely conservative perspective, but with its own historical lineage, one rooted in race and racism. This perspective suggests that the Tea Party represents bigotry. By now, charging the Tea Party with racism is old news. In fact, a principal architect behind the movement, Mark Williams, was banished for penning an overtly racist letter, from the "Coloreds" to "Abe" (Abraham Lincoln), in which he went out of his way to ridicule the NAACP.²⁴ But

even with Williams gone, Tea Party rallies remain known for participants' many caricatures of President Obama, which often depict him as a primate, an African "witch doctor," and a modern-day Hitler, among other things. Quite recently, California Republican Party official and Tea Party activist Marilyn Davenport portrayed the president as a chimpanzee.²⁵

Moreover, claims that President Obama is an alien of some kind, that is to say, that he was born in Kenya or Indonesia and is a practicing Muslim, are advanced by activists at rallies. The leader of the congressional Tea Party caucus, Michele Bachmann, refuses to deny them.²⁶ Furthermore, the Tea Party was a driving force behind Arizona's immigration legislation, which many believe will ultimately result in the targeting of Latino citizens for racial profiling. The Tea Party supported similar legislation in Georgia and South Carolina. Another bill, recently made law in Alabama, essentially calls for the racial profiling of Latino schoolchildren. If we take seriously the ways in which race and racism has helped shape American social and political life, none of this should come as a surprise.

Beginning with the American colonial period, racism permitted many settlers to view American Indians as savages, incapable of making good use of their land much less possessing the intellectual and cultural resources necessary for citizenship. Viewing American Indians in this light made it possible for the settlers to make war against them and drive these people from their ancestral homes.²⁷ Of course, by the mid-seventeenth century, racial arguments—not wholly unrelated to the ones that permanently disqualified American Indians from national membership—were deployed to justify the institutionalization of chattel slavery during which Africans and their descendants were permanently branded inferior. In the late eighteenth century, the Naturalization Act of 1790 took racism to new heights (or lows), restricting naturalization (citizenship) to "free whites of good moral character." Eventually, the intersectional rivalry between North and South over slavery shook the nineteenth century, culminating in

the Civil War. The war settled the issue of slavery and *national* citizenship for the time being. However, the South ultimately remained wedded to its racist practices, finding ways to avoid compliance with the law of the land, which eventually resulted in the Jim Crow laws that would regulate black Southerners well into the next century.

Racism also provided a rationale for the appropriation of more than half of Mexico's territory in 1848 (including California and Texas), and the mistreatment of the (now) Mexican Americans who opted to remain as the Mexican border moved south.²⁸ The early twentieth century saw the objects of racism continue to spread beyond the mainly black-white model to include people of Asian descent who were barred from immigrating to the United States. Even after the law was adjusted to permit Asian immigrants to naturalize, racism permits native-born American citizens of Asian extraction to be seen as aliens in their own country.²⁹ Needless to say, the effects of racism have endured far beyond the beginning of the twentieth century, giving rise to a range of suboptimal outcomes for people of color. These include relatively high rates of unemployment, incarceration, and poverty, as well as wealth and educational disparities, to name just a few.³⁰

Tea Party activists and spokespeople deny that racism or out-group hostility of any kind have anything to do with either the motivations or objectives of the Tea Party movement. Indeed, it may well be the case that the meeting to which we referred in Idaho is part of a group of fairly isolated incidents, ones that don't fairly represent the sentiments of the millions of Tea Party leaders, activists, and supporters across the country. Still, based on the enduring impact of race on American social and political life,³¹ we must consider how, if at all, it may influence arguably the most vigorous movement in the last thirty years. Indeed, similar to the arguments that Americans continue to have over the size of government and economic freedom (among other types of freedom), racism and out-group hostility are also foundational

to American life.³² In fact, award-winning historian Barbara J. Fields insists that race is *the* dominant theme in American life.³³

In sum, it's not hard to see why people perceive that the Tea Party may be motivated by either conservatism or racism: both have structured American social, economic, and political life from the beginning.³⁴ Even so, we don't think these are the only explanations for Tea Party support. As we discuss below, we think it's possible that other factors animate not only the Tea Party, but right-wing social movements more generally.



To reiterate, this book strives to answer two questions. First, can the apparent negative reaction to the presidency of Barack Obama, and what it's believed to represent, add anything meaningful to the discussion about what drives people to sympathize with the Tea Party? If the history of right-wing movements is in any way indicative of the dynamics of the Tea Party, it suggests that its supporters are motivated by both politics and racism. The vignettes support this claim. However, this raises the issue of whether or not the anxiety associated with Obama's presidency can meaningfully inform how people feel about the Tea Party beyond what we believe will be the powerful influence of racism and politics. We also think it's important to apprehend the social and political consequences of Tea Party support. Hence, our second question: Does the anxiety associated with the change in America represented by the election of Barack Obama have the potential to affect American politics? In other words, does it have the capacity to influence how people think about public policy and how people vote, *independent* of typical explanations, ones related to long-standing social and political predispositions such as political ideology, political partisanship, and how one feels about out-groups?

If we are correct, the answer to both questions is yes. If there is any validity to our contention that the Tea Party is in the tradition of right-wing movements of the past, supporters of the Tea Party are driven by their *reaction* to Barack Obama's

presidency, and what they believe it represents. Our explanation draws on symbolic politics to explain why people support the Tea Party, and why sympathy for the movement shapes their preferences beyond more conventional explanations, including ideology, partisanship, and hostility directed toward out-groups.³⁵ That is, beyond the ways in which politics can affect material and cultural status, it becomes a means through which people may express hopes and fears. Often, these emotions are projected onto political objects, including high-ranking public officials and important political issues. So, for many people, politics is more about what the issues *represent* in the way of larger social conflict, than anything else.³⁶ For reasons we discuss in chapter 1, we suspect that Barack Obama *represents* change in which the Tea Party, and their many supporters, cannot believe; change they don't support. Because, as we argue, his rise, and everything perceived to be associated with it, threatens to displace the segment of America that the Tea Party has come to represent: mostly white, middle-class, middle-aged men.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE TEA PARTY

An avalanche of Tea Party–related books, many of them journalistic accounts, supports both the purely political approach as well as the more racialized account of the Tea Party.³⁷ Academics have recently joined the debate, bringing with them more rigorous analytical frameworks within which to analyze the Tea Party. Even so, their accounts appear to mirror the alternative interpretations of the Tea Party offered by the aforementioned, more journalistic renderings of the movement.

For instance, historian Jill Lepore's interpretation of the Tea Party confirms Hofstadter's impression that those on the Far Right are dogged in their determination to restore America's greatness by turning to times past as a means of addressing contemporary problems. Lepore's Tea Party features an anti-intellectualism that has a hard time with both political and social difference, an interpretation that reminds us of the tendency

in America to derogate out-groups. Florida International University law professor Elizabeth Price Foley has a different interpretation of the Tea Party. Rather than seeing the Tea Party as motivated by an aversion to change remedied by a return to the past, she believes the movement is animated by enduring fidelity to three constitutional principles: limited government, U.S. sovereignty, and constitutional originalism. Ultimately, this reminds us of the fights Americans have had from the beginning over the role the national government should play in American life.³⁸

Other scholarship appears to split the difference, offering a more balanced portrait of the Tea Party. For instance, political scientists Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson reveal often thoughtful, knowledgeable, and resourceful people and groups among Tea Party supporters.³⁹ It's fair to say, therefore, that this set of observations is compatible with Foley's version of the Tea Party. Still, Skocpol and Williamson were taken aback by the willingness of Tea Party members, many of whom were relatively well educated, to believe incredible rumors and anecdotes about the Obama administration and its liberal supporters. Of course, this confirms the anti-intellectual tendency reported by Lepore. They also describe the zeal with which Tea Party members and activists demonized people with whom they disagreed politically and those perceived as different from them in some way: the poor, illegal immigrants, and Muslims.

These are all valid explanations of what motivates Tea Party activists. In *Change They Can't Believe In*, we too, aim to understand the motivations and beliefs of the people who identify with the Tea Party. Still, our work departs from existing scholarship on the Tea Party in at least five important ways. First, unlike current work on the Tea Party that explores the motivations associated with membership and activism, we examine sympathizers. We do so because we wish to consider the broader political impact of the movement beyond those who have the time, resources, and availability to become activists or members. As we shall see below, restricting our analysis to Tea Party

members and activists permits us to say less about social and political outcomes than the approach other scholars have taken.

Second, we develop an original theory of Tea Party support, one irreducible to racism or politics (i.e., ideology and party identification). Third, unlike examinations of the Tea Party that precede ours, we follow Hofstadter's work: we take seriously the fact that the Tea Party is nothing new. Following his model, we believe the Tea Party represents an extension of right-wing movements of the past. This leads to the fourth way in which our book departs from our predecessors' work on the Tea Party. As we develop our theory for the sources of Tea Party support and beliefs associated with it, we do so with the objective of developing a more general analytical framework, one we think capable of explaining sources of support for right-wing movements in general, beyond the Tea Party. Moreover, our framework will also permit a better understanding of the social and political implications of supporting right-wing movements. Fifth, given the array of evidence we marshal, this book represents the most rigorous analysis to date of the sources and consequences of Tea Party support, one that accounts for several competing explanations, including politics, conservatism, racism, and more general intolerance.

WHY THIS BOOK?

This book is timely for at least two reasons. In the first place, there is no denying the political force that has come to be known as the Tea Party in American politics. Consider its impact on the 2010 midterm elections. The six major Tea Party factions backed ten Republican senators, in addition to eighty-five members of the House,⁴⁰ and are credited by some as key to Republicans' success.⁴¹ More recently, the impact of the Tea Party has been evident in Indiana's Republican Senate primary as well as elections in Wisconsin, where Governor Scott Walker, and "other Tea Party-supported candidates were victorious."⁴² The

party has at least 350,000 core members who are part of one of its six major factions.⁴³ This number is supplemented by the three million or so who aren't members per se but who have attended a rally, donated to one of the factions, or purchased Tea Party literature. Perhaps most important, we cannot discount those who support the goals of—or sympathize with—the Tea Party. According to a recent Pew poll, 20 percent of American adults “agree” with the Tea Party.⁴⁴ In raw numbers, this means that roughly forty-five million Americans are Tea Party sympathizers.⁴⁵ As the recent fight over increasing the debt ceiling suggests, if support for the Tea Party remains at such robust levels, it will continue to pull the Republican Party to the right, making political compromise—and therefore governance—much more difficult by increasing the polarization of the parties. Moreover, the Tea Party, and its supporters, are a driving force in both the Voter Identification efforts that threaten to disenfranchise at least 5 million voters across more than a dozen states, and the erosion of women's rights.⁴⁶

This volume's immediate purpose is to investigate the sources of support for the Tea Party and how it informs mass attitudes and behavior. We also hope to contribute to a broader conversation in which we may better understand why people identify with reactionary movements. Research on right-wing movements stretches back several decades. Thanks to interpretive work relying on historical accounts, we have a firm grasp of the macrohistorical forces that provoke the emergence of right-wing movements. At the individual level, however, beyond race, ethnicity, class, and religious orientation, we know relatively little about why people are drawn to right-wing movements. We know even less about whether or not supporting right-wing movements can explain social and political attitudes and preferences beyond the influence of other factors, including ideology, partisanship, and racial group membership. In *Change They Can't Believe In*, we bring an array of evidence to bear on the study of right-wing movements and their sympathizers. In doing so, we are able to tease out the sources and consequences of

supporting right-wing movements as no other investigation has to date.

We understand if some readers object to our lumping the Tea Party in with right-wing movements, including the Know-Nothings, the Klan of the 1920s, and the John Birch Society. Quite frankly, however, we run the risk of intellectual dishonesty by avoiding what seems to us an obvious comparison. The following suggests why the comparison is appropriate. Right-wing movements, according to sociologist Rory McVeigh, are “social movements . . . act[ing] on behalf of relatively advantaged groups with the goal of preserving, restoring, and expanding the rights and privileges of its members and constituents. These movements also attempt to deny similar rights and privileges to other groups in society . . . [something that] distinguishes right-wing movements from progressive movements.”⁴⁷ Sarah Diamond, another sociologist, adds to our understanding of right-wing movements by describing them as “political activists who . . . bear a coherent set of policy preferences,” including the protection of free market capitalism, the desire for a strong national defense and the maintenance of American international hegemony, and the “preserv[ation] of traditional morality and the supreme status of native-born white Americans.”⁴⁸

Recent research has shown that the Tea Party’s supporters belong to relatively advantaged groups. They tend to earn more money on average, are less likely to be unemployed, are overwhelmingly white, and predominantly male. They are also more likely than other people to favor strong military presence, support stricter moral codes, back free market capitalism, reject government policies that give minorities a shot at equality, and prefer to maintain the advantaged status of native-born whites more than non-Tea Party supporters.⁴⁹ Further, as we illustrate in chapter 1, the Tea Party has more in common with these prior right-wing movements than demographics. As middle-class white males with a stake in America—both cultural and economic—members and supporters of the Klan, the JBS, and the Tea Party committed (and commit) to fighting what they

perceive(d) as tyrannical forces. Moreover, they defended freedom in the face of what they argued were unjust laws and court decisions, ones they cast as oppressive. Finally, each suggested that sometimes intolerance is necessary to protect liberty.⁵⁰

APPROACH: TEA PARTY SUPPORTERS AS MOVEMENT SYMPATHIZERS

Our goal is to gain a better understanding of the broader impact the Tea Party movement is enjoying, beyond the participation of members and activists. We think the best way to accomplish this is through an examination of Tea Party sympathizers. Consider the gains made by the Republican Party in the 2010 midterms. In several states, U.S. senators were elected with the backing of fairly small groups of Tea Party *members*: Florida, a state with approximately 20 million residents and 12,000 members of the Tea Party, elected Marco Rubio; Wisconsin, with approximately 6 million residents and 1,800 members of the Tea Party, elected Ron Johnson; and Pennsylvania, 12 million strong, which has more than 5,400 members of the Tea Party, elected Pat Toomey. It's hard to believe that Tea Party-backed candidates would have achieved this level of success in the midterms absent of support from sympathizers. Remaining confined to movement members doesn't come close to explaining the success the Tea Party achieved in these races. Only if we consider those who sympathize with the Tea Party can we begin to appreciate these results. The fact that social movement *sympathizers* tend, in general, to outnumber social movement *members* by a factor of *twenty* helps to explain the above-cited outcomes in Florida, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, among many other places.⁵¹ For this reason—one that suggests the broader impact of social movements on attitudes and behavior—we think it wise to cast our lot with Tea Party sympathizers versus activists and members.

Myriad reasons help to explain why an individual may choose to remain a sympathizer rather than become a member or activist in a social movement. (One doesn't have to be a member to

be an activist.) Generally speaking, sympathizers “take a positive stand toward a particular movement,”⁵² but may not know anyone connected to the movement, or may not have been targeted by a local organization—that is, they may not be part of a recruitment network. Then there are always cases in which the perceived costs of participating outweigh the benefits.⁵³ Even if one is connected to someone in the movement and thinks participation is worthwhile, other barriers such as family obligations or work may prevent activism. Even if these barriers are overcome, research suggests that for one to move from supporter to activist, the person who has yet to make the transition must have encouragement from someone who already identifies with movement goals. Equally important, if the potential activist is to eventually participate in movement activity, he or she normally *cannot* face strong opposition from people in the wider network. A spouse or sibling who fails to share the potential activist’s identification with the movement makes it difficult for the sympathizer to participate.⁵⁴

Needless to say, surmounting all of these barriers, to participate is difficult even for those who have positive feelings about a movement’s goals and objectives. Thus, we argue that people’s inability to free themselves of the constraints prohibiting activism does not render their attitudes or behavior irrelevant, nor should those who believe that the cost associated with activism exceeds the benefit be ignored. For one thing, if Clyde Wilcox’s research on the Moral Majority is any indication, right-wing sympathizers are markedly less conservative than right-wing members and activists, who tend to be on the Far Right. Indeed, activists and members’ attitudes and behavior are more in tune with movement goals than those who are sympathizers, because issue positions are solidified *after* one becomes a member or an activist.⁵⁵ Our point is simply that our task is all the more difficult because we aren’t focusing on members and activists whose opinions and behavior are easily distinguished from the broader public. By all rights, we should find no differences between Tea Party sympathizers and the broader public, because

sympathizers tend to be less extreme than movement members and activists.

Again, we argue that the election of Barack Obama to the presidency, his policies, and what he represents have driven many people to support the Tea Party. We also believe that supporting the Tea Party has important social and political consequences. We bring considerable evidence to bear on our claims, which allows us to rule out rival explanations for both why people support the Tea Party and on the ways in which it influences how people think about politics. Along the way, our data permits us to gauge what Tea Party elites and activists are saying, and the way(s) in which their discourse informs how rank-and-file supporters think about social and political life in America. In sum, our evidence allows us to draw firm conclusions about what Tea Party sympathizers believe, and why they believe it.

At this point, we'd like to take a moment to stress that this book is intended to account for reasons why people are sympathetic to the Tea Party, and some of the consequences associated with such an orientation. While we think accounting for the rise of the Tea Party as a movement—including the development of its intellectual and financial infrastructure—is important, it remains beyond the scope of this book. In like fashion, *Change They Can't Believe In* isn't about why people *join* the Tea Party or become activists per se. These, too, are questions worthy of pursuit, ones that we hope to answer in the near future. For the moment, though, we leave these questions aside in order to pursue the broader social and political implications attached to support for the Tea Party.

CHAPTER PREVIEW

As social scientists addressing an issue of great public interest and vital national importance, we take great care to base all of our claims on social scientific evidence and historical patterns. Chapter 1 outlines our theoretical approach, but not before placing the Tea Party movement in historical context. In

chapter 2, we test the claim that Barack Obama, and what he is perceived to represent, plays a key role in why people support the Tea Party. In chapter 3, the emphasis shifts from explaining support for the Tea Party to assessing the ways in which it informs political attitudes and behavior. We begin by examining how closely people who sympathize with the Tea Party adhere to themes the movement often promotes: patriotism and freedom. Chapter 4 explores claims made by the Tea Party's critics, who argue that the movement is one rooted, at least partly, in bigotry. In chapter 5, we consider the extent to which a positive orientation toward the Tea Party influences attitudes and opinions about the president, beyond ideology, partisanship, general out-group hostility, and racism. Chapter 6 explores the proposition that the Tea Party promotes political mobilization beyond other factors known to promote activism. In the conclusion, we close with a summary of our findings and a discussion of the implications.