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The Tea Party

An Insurgent Social Movement

In the wake of what threatened to be a major economic depression, nearly one million frustrated citizens banded together in communities across the US in the spring of 2009, calling for a reduction in federal taxes and government spending. They were motivated, in part, by newly elected President Barack Obama's proposal for federal stimulus legislation to revive the deteriorating economy. The economic upheaval amounted to a deep recession, but one with profound, lasting effects. The activists met, they organized, and they protested. On April 15, 2009, the deadline for filing federal income taxes, adopting the mantle of the "Boston Tea Party" rebels, Tea Party activists rallied in more than a thousand communities. By 2010, the Tea Party had achieved a series of remarkable victories. The Tax Day rallies happened again in 2010, this time with over one million activists turning out. Local Tea Party chapters[1] were popping up across the country to sustain and support these efforts. The Tea Party had also made significant inroads in reshaping the Republican Party. By 2010 many Republicans aligned themselves with the Tea Party. Few episodes of contentious political activity in American history have been so consequential, especially considering how quickly the Tea Party came to dominate politics.

Multiple indicators show that grassroots Tea Party activism had almost completely disappeared less than a decade later. By 2015, the candidacy of Donald Trump remade the Republican Party in ways that deviated sharply from the core principles promulgated by the Tea Party. The hope of a more fiscally responsible Republican Party, a cornerstone of the original Tea Party

[1] We use the terms groups and chapters interchangeably throughout this book in reference to the local social movement organizations that were formed by Tea Party activists. We do not intend to imply any strong and stable relationship with an umbrella organization by our use of the term chapter.

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orthodoxy, lay in ruins. Matt Kibbe, President of FreedomWorks, a major conservative advocacy group and organizing hub for the Tea Party, lamented in early 2018, "Republicans, now controlling both the legislative and executive branches, jammed through a 'CRomnibus' spending bill that strips any last vestiges of spending restraint from the budget process" (Kibbe 2018). The bill that had so disheartened Kibbe was the Trump administration's Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. It reduced tax rates for businesses and individuals, increased the standard deduction and family tax credits, reduced the alternative minimum tax for individuals, eliminating it for corporations, and more than doubled the taxable threshold for the estate tax. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated that implementing the Act would add an estimated $2.289 trillion to the national debt over 10 years, or about $1.891 trillion after taking into account macroeconomic feedback effects (Congressional Budget Office 2018). After regaining control of the levers of power, the Republican Party spent like the proverbial drunken sailor.

And it continued to do so. In the wake of the several trillion-dollar 2020 bipartisan federal legislative response to the raging COVID-19 pandemic, eventually signed by President Trump, a leader of another major Tea Party group vacillated in her support. Jenny Beth Martin, the founder and decade-long president of Tea Party Patriots sent the following appeal for guidance to the group's email list, asking supporters:

> We need to know where you stand so that we can reflect your thoughts in our response to these policies. In light of the public health crisis that is occurring due to the Coronavirus, the federal government has been proposing many responses to try to relieve the American economy. However, many of these solutions are the very types of things that inspired the protests that launched the tea party movement. We would like to know your thoughts on these proposals as well as if you have any ideas on how the government can help in this time of crisis. We support President Trump and want to do everything we can to help him succeed, but many of these policies go against everything we've stood for since the beginning of our movement – i.e., bailouts, stimulus packages, and reckless government spending. (Martin 2020)

After this last halting nod toward fiscal restraint, Martin's appeals to her electronic mailing list wholeheartedly continued its support of the erratic trajectory of the Trump administration, despite her acknowledgment of its fiscal irresponsibility. A decade after the Tea Party had begun, one of its few remaining national leaders caved on its most cherished principle: fiscal responsibility.

What happened to the Tea Party, and why was its vision lost so quickly? Tracing the movement back to its beginnings, in this book we assess the trajectory of the Tea Party and its political consequences. Much of the earlier research on the Tea Party emphasized its initial phase of mobilization (DiMaggio 2011; McVeigh et al. 2014; Skocpol and Williamson 2011), its early maturation (Brown 2015; Westermeyer 2019, 2022), and its relationship to the Republican Party (Blum 2020; Gervais and Morris 2018). The best of the

existing research record on the Tea Party is outstanding and robust, but, nevertheless, incomplete. Surprisingly, any systematic research examining the subsequent obvious signs of the Tea Party's decline is almost entirely absent, except for work by Berry (2017). The full story of the Tea Party movement has yet to be told, but its details are essential to understanding the current state of American democracy. It is a story we endeavor to tell in great detail in this book.

In the remainder of this chapter, we provide a general summary of the Tea Party, then outline the key components of the theoretical arguments we develop to explain its rise, fall, and political consequences. Next, we ask seven substantive research questions that together motivate our work, and briefly summarize our answers. We then highlight the unique body of evidence we accumulated for this book. The extent and quality of that body of evidence, we believe, establishes the credibility of our empirical claims. We conclude by summarizing each of the chapters and our major conclusions.

WHAT WAS THE TEA PARTY? AN OVERVIEW OF ITS DEFINING FEATURES

Since its origins, researchers and journalists have struggled to classify the Tea Party, which we characterize as an *insurgent social movement*. Some have suggested that the Tea Party was heavily dependent on the elite manipulation of conservative citizens (e.g., Fallin, Grana, and Glantz 2014), with some claiming that it was entirely driven by elite actors without any tangible grassroots base (DiMaggio 2011). Others have treated the Tea Party as a party–movement hybrid existing within the Republican Party. For example, Blum (2020) treats the Tea Party as an insurgency, as we do, but she emphasizes that it was an insurgent party faction within the Republican Party (or "Grand Old Party" [GOP]). Blum argues that the Tea Party aimed to take over the GOP from within by any means necessary. Another group of scholars have framed the Tea Party as a hodge-podge of mostly disconnected grassroots activists, elite conservative activists and media stars, GOP leaders, and billionaire financiers of a variety of conservative causes, the Koch brothers (Gervais and Morris 2018:3; Skocpol and Williamson 2011:11). We are most sympathetic with the latter group, though caveat that the grassroots activists who comprised the primary manifestation of the Tea Party generally maintained few sustained ties with the elite conservative facilitators.

We conceptualize the Tea Party movement as an *insurgency* rather than a social movement because it turned out to be so fragile. This is not to deny that the Tea Party was a social movement; it categorically was and emerged within a swelling of conservative grassroots enthusiasm. Certainly, the Tea Party was a vigorous insurgency while it lasted. Yet as we will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, the outburst of grassroots activism was short and by 2014 only a few local groups remained, those organizations having virtually no public

protest presence. Durable organizations and the sustained and wide use of disruptive tactics are two of the most important characteristics of sustained social movements (della Porta and Diani 2020; Tarrow 2011).

The Tea Party emerged in early 2009 and substantially demobilized by the end of 2014. Its first actions occurred in February 2009, when leaders staged about 20 coordinated protests that expressed an anti-tax, anti-spending vision in response to the Great Recession that was ravaging the American economy. These events were organized by a coalition of conservative advocacy groups who had similarly tried to stoke a mass movement several times previously, with little to show for it. This attempt was different because it worked. The rest of this section will provide executive summary of the Tea Party's main features, including its origins, main actors, message, tactics, and eventual decline. We also introduce the distinctive conceptual language we use for the different factions of the Tea Party.

How Did the Tea Party Start?

The forceful opposition to Barack Obama, the newly elected Black president, and his economic policies resonated with conservatives during a time of widespread economic precarity and White animosity. Elite conservative groups were instrumental in launching the Tea Party. These included Americans for Prosperity and its spin-off, FreedomWorks, along with DontGo, Smart Girl Politics, and the American Liberty Alliance. The coalition of conservative groups seized the moment, setting up a website, taxdayteaparty.com, encouraging another set of rallies on April 15, 2009. Because it marks the final date for Americans to file their federal taxes with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), April 15 is symbolically powerful. The groups provided primary messaging, set the tone of the rallies, and created the online infrastructure for local activists to stage events. The website was essential to the Tea Party's origins, as it provided the tools for disconnected activists nationwide to independently plan and stage a protest. More than 1,000 protests occurred on Tax Day, jump-starting the Tea Party into motion as a national force.

What Was the Tea Party About?

The Tea Party's primary claims focused on federal economic policies, taxation, and government spending, as already mentioned. Activists proposed a variety of policy solutions, including significant cuts to corporate tax rates, ending the estate tax, and reducing rarely specified bloat in government programs. These positions were far from novel, and indeed, a direct extension of decades of anti-tax mobilization funded by rich conservatives and elites. A main reason that the Tea Party became such an important political force was that its elite-driven claims were uniquely connected to a credible mass movement of grassroots activists.

Alongside the anti-spending and anti-tax rhetoric was a logic of racialized resentment animating the Tea Party, giving voice to White Christian trepidation about their perceived decline in social power. Though the Tea Party's economic arguments were on the face of it race neutral, they embedded a logic claiming that government spending disproportionately benefited "undeserving" minority groups, and that these groups were responsible for the Great Recession. Such views were rooted in a longstanding campaign by conservative politicians and activists linking government spending and the social safety net to racialized groups. The Tea Party adopted a form of exclusive patriotism, where they claimed to represent the silent majority of Americans whose livelihoods were threatened by reckless spending aimed at helping those responsible for the Great Recession.

Who Were the Main Actors in the Tea Party and What Did They Do?

After the 2009 Tax Day rallies, the three core constituencies of the Tea Party came into focus. First, the *elite facilitators of the Tea Party*, comprising several national Tea Party umbrella groups, emerged in 2009 and early 2010. They formed an elite-led "Astroturf movement" – so-called as participants were deemed to represent manufactured grievances rather than authentic ones emerging from aggrieved communities themselves. Tea Party umbrella groups emerged in 2009 and early 2010. They built and maintained the Tea Party's websites, created its core messaging of tax minimization and spending reduction, and provided logistical assistance in the first wave of protest events. These national groups each claimed to speak for the grassroots Tea Party and included the 1776 Tea Party, FreedomWorks, Patriot Action Network, Tea Party Nation, and Tea Party Patriots. With rare exceptions, the national groups subsequently provided no resources to local activists. Nor did they help link the local groups to each other, making sustained regional or national coordinated activity quite infrequent.

Second, *the Tea Party was a grassroots insurgency*, comprising somewhere between 140,000 and 310,000 dedicated activists, 1–2 million protest participants, and several thousand local chapters at its peak. These activists staged protests, organized town halls, held meetings, and mobilized for change. By the end of 2009, close to 1,000 local Tea Party groups had formed, a number ballooning to more than 2,000 by the end of 2011. Groups were forming and disbanding from the beginning of the insurgency in 2009 through 2014. We identified more than 3,500 groups that were active at some point between 2009 and 2014. Nearly all the groups were independently organized by local activists, exhibiting only loose ties with the national Tea Party umbrella groups.

Last, the Tea Party was an intraparty faction within the Republican Party (Blum 2020; Rubin 2017), which we refer to as the *institutionalized Tea Party*. Several political leaders loosely adopted the aggressive style and main policy

agenda of the Tea Party. After the 2010 election Michelle Bachman, an incumbent Representative from Minnesota, helped found the Tea Party Caucus in the House of Representatives. We identified 71 Republicans who joined the Tea Party Caucus, only a small minority of whom were first elected in 2010. The Tea Party Caucus emphasized fiscal restraint, strict constitutionalism, and small government, making its rhetoric consistent with the other constituencies of the Tea Party. Members of the Caucus pursued a non-compromising and obstructionist, "take-no prisoners" legislative style. The Caucus was effectively defunct by 2014.

The three components of the Tea Party were loosely connected but operated largely as independent entities. The local chapters and activists used the web platforms created by the elite actors, but the ties between the two were quite thin. Similarly, the elite actors provided the main framing for Tea Party politicians but provided only marginal financial support of the insurgency's agenda in Congress. The politicians who adopted the Tea Party name had few strong ties to the grassroots activists who mobilized across the country.

What Did the Tea Party Do?

The Tea Party rose to prominence as a protest movement. After the successes of the 2009 Tax Day rallies, activists continued staging events maintaining the momentum of the movement. Between 2009 and 2014, we identified almost 20,000 protests, rallies, meetings, and other events staged by Tea Party groups. A notable example of such mobilization was the town hall protests that occurred in the summer of 2009. These were characterized by Tea Party activists attending and disrupting the gatherings staged by political leaders to oppose the health care reform legislation being drafted by the Obama administration. By 2010, activists staged a second set of Tax Day rallies. This time, 674 protests took place – a decline from 2009 – with over one million activists turning up to demonstrate. Over time, Tea Party activists concluded that protests were ineffective and were reluctant to stage future rallies or demonstrations. Instead, they focused on hosting meetings, book clubs, and discussion groups that were highly localized. This tactical decision further removed the Tea Party from the public eye, making it increasingly difficult to sustain mobilization.

As the protests staged by the grassroots Tea Party activists declined, the elite facilitators did little to restart mobilization or to actively expand the Tea Party's organizational network. While these umbrella groups maintained their websites for the local Tea Party groups, they otherwise remained at arm's length from the grassroots activists. Though the institutionalized Tea Party achieved little in terms of major legislative victories, affiliated politicians gladly took credit for obstructionist tactics aimed at slowing down or stopping the Obama administration's policy agenda.

Is the Tea Party Still Active?

The main period of Tea Party mobilization occurred between 2009 and 2014. After that, the insurgency effectively ceased to exist as a significant force in American politics. We use several related measures to make a case for the Tea Party demobilization. By 2014, fewer than 300 local chapters showed any signs of activity, and street-level protests had almost completely vanished. The annual Tax Day rallies that initially demonstrated the Tea Party's strength had dwindled to just 22 events nationwide by 2014. A similar trajectory was evident in the institutionalized Tea Party, which significantly declined in power and influence. By 2015, the Caucus officially dissolved, although it had been mostly inactive for several years preceding its formal demise.

Small remnants of the Tea Party's elite facilitators persist, maintaining websites, sending out emails, and serving as fundraising vehicles for the broader conservative movement. The mobilizing structures built by the facilitators have nearly entirely disappeared. To the degree that any grassroots Tea Party activism persisted, it was largely the result of the efforts of a small number of independent activists rather than any semblance of an active national coalition. Though the Tea Party now shows few signs of life, we argue that its political legacy altered the course of American democracy. The Tea Party's aggressive, uncompromising approach to politics has become mainstream in the Republican Party, further widening the divide between major political parties.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEA PARTY

Our theoretical approach to understanding the Tea Party draws heavily upon the *resource mobilization* (McCarthy and Zald 1977) and *framing* perspectives (Snow et al. 1986). We also emphasize more recent work on the role of social movements within *institutionalized politics and political parties* (McAdam and Tarrow 2010, 2013; Tarrow 2021). Our perspective is also grounded in the view that social movements are composed of citizens acting collectively in attempts to bring about social change. Accordingly, it is essential to emphasize the dual importance of *structure* and *agency* in generating social change (Sewell 1992). These ideas are central to our account of the timing, extent, and location of collective action. We distinguish theoretically between the Tea Party's emergence, maturation, and decline. Given these areas of focus, we concentrate on explaining the Tea Party's demands, the grievances that motivated activists, and the tactical and organizational decisions made by movement leaders.

The first theoretical building block to our analyses is *sentiment pools*, or concentrations of individuals supportive of a movement's goals but inactive in mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 2002). Movements that emerge with preexisting, widely available support for their goals are advantaged. Lacking such blessings, movements must accomplish the hard work of what Klandermans (1997) calls consensus mobilization. The goals of the Tea Party – lower taxes

and reduced government spending – had already found wide support among conservatives ahead of the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Elite conservative groups and activists had done the hard work of consensus mobilization around these issues for several decades. Due to these efforts, broad swaths of American conservatives believed that government spending primarily benefited the "undeserving" poor, who were widely understood to be members of racial minority groups, and that White, middle-class economic hardship was primarily the result of high taxes and reckless spending.

The mobilization of citizens out of a preexisting sentiment pool rarely occurs without agency. Organizers, whether organic or elite, are often regularly trying to mobilize sentiment pools without success. This was true for the Tea Party too – elite actors had attempted to foment something like the Tea Party several times, none of which had been successful. Sometimes historical circumstances help organizers succeed in their mobilization efforts. Such historical opportunities are most impactful if they succeed in creating mass disruptions of the quotidian or "the threatened interruption of the taken-for-granted routines of everyday life" (Snow and Soule 2010:36). We treat such disruptions as *suddenly imposed grievances*, which were essential to understanding the Tea Party's emergence. We particularly emphasize the role of *material threats* and the *status threats* in shaping collective action. These threats were linked to two historical occurrences. First, we argue that the Great Recession created a looming sense of economic precarity as its effects spread. These material threats were powerful motivators of Tea Party activism. Second, we turn to the election of Barack Obama in November 2008, which hastened a growing sense of status threat for White, conservative Christians, as they became alarmed that their social power was in decline. This was further exacerbated by the Obama administration's call for a massive spending bill to blunt the effects of the Great Recession, legislation that was widely opposed by conservatives.

The third component of our theoretical argument emphasizes the role of the *organizational and mobilizing structures* activists choose, and the consequences of these decisions. For the Tea Party, elite facilitators disseminated an organizational template that was widely adopted by grassroots activists, resulting in the rapid proliferation of local groups. These efforts spawned a mass insurgency, but one where local chapters were not connected in any coherent way with one another, or to the elite facilitators that put the Tea Party into motion. The organizational and mobilizing structures chosen by activists laid the groundwork for the Tea Party's rapid decline. We draw from scholarship emphasizing the *tactical decisions* (Tilly 2006) made by activists and how movements *frame their grievances* (Snow et al. 1986). The decoupled mobilizing structures made it difficult for local activists to coordinate broadly when planning events or honing their political messaging. Over time, the Tea Party's message became increasingly unfocused, and activists became steadily more disconnected as local organizations ceased their activities.

Last, our theoretical account seeks to describe and explain the Tea Party's impact on electoral politics, and the Republican Party more generally. The Tea Party was not a political party, but a social movement linked to a *Republican intraparty faction* (Blum 2020). Grassroots Tea Party activists were quite hostile to Republicans, and GOP leadership particularly, who were derided as weak politicians who routinely caved to Democratic demands. The emergence of the Tea Party Caucus in the House by 2010 created what Tarrow (2021) calls a *blended hybrid* form of movement–party interaction. We extend Skocpol and Williamson's (2011) argument that the Tea Party served as a *watchdog* for congressional Republicans. Activists used a variety of tactics to pressure politicians to act in accordance with the movement's goals, including threatening to support primary challengers to incumbents and actively opposing any semblance of Republican compromise with the Democrats. The cumulative result of these activities, we argue, was that Tea Party activism hastened radicalization within the GOP.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Insurgencies occur unevenly across local communities (Smelser 1962), a pattern also true for the Tea Party. Community conditions become more or less conducive to generating activism, and in some cases help to sustain it (Cunningham and Phillips 2007; McVeigh 1999; Snyder 1979). For several decades, scholars deemphasized the role of grievances as precursors to collective action. More recently, grievances have received renewed attention (Simmons 2014). Our research questions build on these insights by emphasizing how local social structural characteristics enabled Tea Party mobilization by helping the movement's activists make their grievances more relevant to their immediate surroundings. The local contexts where a disproportionate segment of residents share the grievances articulated by a social movement should see heightened levels of activism. Importantly, we argue that the individuals most likely to become active, due to a perception of heightened risk, need not be personally affected by the social forces motivating their activism.

Seven questions shape the intellectual backbone of the chapters that follow. We emphasize the central importance of local community characteristics where Tea Party mobilization occurred, along with the significance of time in understanding evolving patterns of activism. This strategy affords us a unique ability to engage in a granular examination of the evolution of the Tea Party from its genesis, into its maturation, and through its eventual decline. No other research has examined both the spatial and temporal dynamics of the Tea Party, particularly over an extended period of time. As a result, our findings generate important new insights into existing questions about the Tea Party, and provide answers to new questions that remain unasked or unresolved. The research questions are: Why did the Tea Party emerge when it did? Who were the Tea Party activists and what were their motivations? Was the Tea Party an

Astroturf movement, a more organic grassroots insurgency, or something else? What tactics did the Tea Party use? What were the consequences of the Tea Party's mobilizing structures? What became of the Tea Party? What were the political consequences of the Tea Party? We now elaborate each question in more detail.

Question 1: Why Did the Tea Party Emerge When It Did?

Episodes of collective action do not appear randomly and are almost never completely spontaneous. Developing a comprehensive analysis of the Tea Party therefore requires consideration of the longer-run social, political, and economic developments along with the occurrence of any suddenly imposed conditions that together may have facilitated its mobilization. From its earliest moments, the role of elite conservative advocacy groups and activists in putting the Tea Party into motion was heavily scrutinized by both researchers and observers. The insurgency's elite facilitators, however, had been proselytizing a variety of conservative causes for decades. This importantly explains the substance of the Tea Party's anti-tax, anti-spending platform, but cannot account for its timing.

We argue that the timing of Tea Party insurgency requires deliberate attention to the local social, economic, and political contexts where mobilization occurred. National conservative elites had been attempting to spark credible grassroots mobilization like the Tea Party for some time, but with little success. Scholars have already noted that while elite facilitation of the Tea Party did take place, it was relatively thin and fleeting (Skocpol and Williamson 2011). We move beyond the Tea Party's elite facilitators and focus on areas where the Tea Party idea disproportionately resonated. These were communities that were more profoundly impacted by the economic upheaval of the Great Recession, and those areas where there were larger populations of would-be activists, especially White, conservative, evangelical Christians. Both factors are essential to understanding the spatiotemporal dynamics of Tea Party activism.

Question 2: Who Were the Tea Party Activists and What Were Their Motivations?

Many earlier studies on the Tea Party sympathizers suggest they were generally White, older, Christian, and quite conservative politically (Arceneaux and Nicholson 2012; Maxwell and Parent 2012; Perrin et al. 2014). Others have noted the importance of race and racism in motivating Tea Party support (Parker and Barreto 2014), which became particularly pronounced in the ferocious, sometimes explicitly racist rejection of Barack Obama that animated conservative opposition (Barreto et al. 2011). Supporters of a social movement, however, are not necessarily the same as a movement's activists. Some research using ethnographic methods to study Tea Party activists appears to affirm an

initial overlap between the characteristics of supporters and activists (e.g., Hochschild 2016), but whether and how Tea Party activists differ from supporters largely remains an open question, particularly since there is still so little research on the activists themselves.

Many explanations about what particularly motivated participants in the Tea Party have been advanced. Some emphasized the role of distributive justice (McVeigh et al. 2014) while others have centered on the mobilizing impact of the conservative media ecosystem (Banerjee 2013; DiMaggio 2011). We agree with these scholars but distinctively expand our scope to include the outsized role of the Great Recession in motivating Tea Party activists. Scholars have not treated the Great Recession as a major catalyst of the Tea Party, despite the temporal coincidence of the two and the insurgency's categorical rejection of the Obama administration's plans to blunt the recession. We stress, therefore, the importance of considering the role of material threats resulting from the Great Recession as essential motivators of Tea Party activism. Our inclusion of both material and status threats as precursors to Tea Party activism both complements and extends earlier understandings of the insurgency.

Question 3: Was the Tea Party an Astroturf Movement, a More Organic Grassroots Insurgency, or Something Else?

A common strategy to delegitimize collective action is to claim that mobilization is a product of the hidden work of "outside agitators" who represent a "loud minority" (Gillion 2020). One manifestation of this strategy is to brand a movement as "Astroturf" and, as we noted above, the Tea Party was almost immediately accused of being an Astroturf movement that was manufactured by elite conservative groups. There is some truth to this claim, as the earliest wave of Tea Party mobilization was put into motion by well-funded and long-standing conservative groups. Given its origins, it is well worth directly asking: Was the Tea Party wholly or in part an Astroturf movement?

We provide a nuanced answer to this question. Yes, the Tea Party began as an Astroturf movement, but it rapidly took on a grassroots life of its own that was mostly uncoupled from the elite groups who helped launch it. The Tea Party's elite facilitators rapidly withdrew from the field, providing virtually no additional support to the thousands of local groups that had formed by 2010. While the national groups did maintain a web infrastructure for local Tea Party groups, they provided little else in terms of guidance or leadership, and competed with one another in their claims to represent the "authentic" Tea Party (Skocpol and Williamson 2011). Yet, the Tea Party's evolution did not end with the grassroots ascendency. As grassroots activism began to fade, largely disappearing by 2014, the elite facilitators returned. Leaders of the main umbrella groups widened their set of claims and eventually came to be strong defenders of the Trump administration despite initial trepidations. Overall, we characterize the Tea Party as exhibiting a top-down, bottom-up, top-down trajectory.

Question 4: What Tactics Did the Tea Party Use?

The Tea Party began as a protest movement, when more than one thousand nationally coordinated rallies took place on Tax Day in 2009. These protests and the demonstrations that followed became a cornerstone of research on the insurgency. There were fewer Tax Day rallies in 2010, with about 680 events that year, but more participants. Beyond the initial Tax Day rallies, surprisingly little research has systematically tracked the subsequent protest activities of the Tea Party, other than a study by Cho and colleagues (2012). No research has tracked the Tea Party's activities over time and place.

The tactical choices made by social movement actors are not static (McAdam 1983). A specific tactic effective in one place or time may have little impact later or elsewhere. Though social movements draw from a culturally and temporally informed repertoire of activities (Tilly 2006), the strategies and tactics embraced by social movements to produce social change generally tell a story of diversity. Much the same was true for the Tea Party. We focus on asking which tactics the insurgency used and when, how they evolved over time, and the impact of these decisions on subsequent patterns of mobilization.

Question 5: What Were the Consequences of the Tea Party's Mobilizing Structures?

Soon after Tea Party activism emerged several national coalitions formed, each authoritatively claiming to represent the insurgent activists. The most important of these groups, as we saw earlier, were the 1776 Tea Party, FreedomWorks, Patriot Action Network, Tea Party Nation, and Tea Party Patriots, all of which have been studied extensively by researchers (Blum 2020; Brown 2015; Burghart and Zeskind 2010, 2015; Skocpol and Williamson 2011). We refer to these groups as the *Tea Party umbrella groups*, as they were the main national social movement organizations that sustained the diverse set of local groups that emerged. The umbrella groups were the most important *mobilizing structure* of the insurgency, a concept referring to the social and organizational infrastructures created by activists to sustain mobilization.

Tea Party umbrella groups, to varying degrees, had ties to elite conservative circles. FreedomWorks, for instance, was a descendant of the Koch empire (Leonard 2020). While the umbrella groups varied in their access to resources, all adopted a hands-off strategy to their engagement with local Tea Party chapters, providing little more than access to their web platforms. The insurgency, in short, did not have a central set of leaders and instead operated in a highly decentralized manner. A significant body of research has examined the implications of mobilizing structures. In particular, federated mobilizing structures, which are more centralized, bureaucratic, and professionalized, increase the growth, local strength, and longer-term survival of many social movement groups (McCarthy 1987, 2005; McCarthy and Wolfson 1996) and civil society

organizations (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000). With only minor exceptions, the national Tea Party groups did not follow this historical template in designing their own organizations or in their interactions between umbrella groups and local chapters groups, leaving open questions about the long-term impacts of the choices they made on the trajectory of Tea Party activism.

Question 6: What Became of the Tea Party?

The extensive evidence we present below indicates that the main arc of Tea Party activism occurred between 2009 and 2014. By 2014, there remained scant signs of grassroots activism that had animated the insurgency at its peak. This is the typical trajectory for social movements, which almost always demobilize in the end. Consider, for instance, the relatively rapid rise and fall of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) insurgency (Sale 1973). While relatively short-lived, SDS lasted for approximately 14 years, which was quite a bit longer than the Tea Party. Like the Tea Party, however, SDS disappeared with relatively few remaining traces of organized activism.

Why did the Tea Party disappear so quickly? Social movement researchers have advanced several explanations that we employ to analyze and explain the demobilization of the Tea Party. We emphasize 1) the role of the insurgency's chosen organizational structures; 2) a fear of state repression; and 3) the changing economic and political conditions that had so powerfully motivated early activism. In short, a combination of changes in specific internal and external dynamics made local Tea Party mobilization more difficult to sustain. The lessons from the Tea Party's rise and fall, we believe, are widely applicable to other recent episodes of rapid mobilization such as Occupy Wall Street (Calhoun 2013) and Black Lives Matter (Nummi, Jennings, and Feagin 2019).

Question 7: What Were the Political Consequences of the Tea Party?

The Tea Party activists were almost all Republicans, and as a collective force, the insurgency dramatically influenced the GOP by moving the party toward a particular type of fiscal conservatism. Discussions of the political impacts of the Tea Party have disproportionately focused on the political activities of elected Republicans either embedded in, or adjacent to the insurgency. This is for good reason: the founding of the Tea Party Caucus occurred just over a year after the Tea Party emerged. The rapidity of the insurgency's impact on a major political party was astonishing. The emphasis on politicians working in varying proximity to the Tea Party leaves open a series of questions about the impact of local activist efforts on political processes. During its existence, the Tea Party Caucus maintained tenuous ties with the grassroots activists in the Tea Party, many of whom were sharply critical of the Republican Party and its leadership (Blum 2020).

To address this issue, we focus on the political consequences of the Tea Party in two areas. First, we examine how local concentrations of grassroots Tea Party events and organizations were consequential in the political primaries for the GOP in 2010, and how such efforts continued in subsequent electoral cycles. Primaries provide fertile grounds for social movements to influence institutionalized politics (McAdam and Kloos 2014), and communities that are hotbeds of activism can signal dissatisfaction to incumbent politicians (Gillion and Soule 2018) or indicate openings to aspiring leaders (McAdam and Tarrow 2013). We then turn to the ascendency of Donald Trump as the leader of the GOP, a party-level rebuilding that was in many ways at odds with Tea Party dogma. Tea Party activists and leaders admired certain aspects of Trump's Make America Great Again movement (Westermeyer 2022), but reactions to Trump as a political candidate were mixed and often extremely negative. As a result, it remains quite murky what role, if any, Tea Party activism had in the rise of Trumpism.

PRIORITIZING EVIDENCE-BASED CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE TEA PARTY

A distinguishing characteristic of our work is the unique, extensive, and systematic data we have compiled on the Tea Party. Digging deeply into both the scholarly and popular literature on the Tea Party as our research unfolded, we were sometimes concerned by the gap between the data and conclusions. This was especially the case for discussions about the Tea Party's consequences. This realization led us to engage in extensive original data collection for nearly a decade to carefully document the Tea Party using a variety of sources. These data are grounded in a combination of quantitative and qualitative information that together provides an unprecedented body of evidence about the granular activities of the Tea Party. Our data collection efforts focused on compiling information about where and when Tea Party events occurred, and how activism was related to local community characteristics. We use new research technologies, including web crawlers and text mining, along with traditional techniques such as surveys and newspaper data on protests. In the end, the comprehensive databases we built for this book span several hundred gigabytes and millions of files that are both wide and deep. The variegated body of evidence we have accumulated allowed us to have greater confidence in our substantive conclusions and provided important insights that became essential to our deeper understanding of the Tea Party.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

The remainder of this book is organized around eight chapters which address our research questions, followed by a conclusion and an appendix describing

our research designs. Chapter 2 outlines our *main theoretical claims about the Tea Party*. We begin by drawing on decades of research on efforts by conservative activists and elites to encourage the consensus mobilization of White, conservative Christians. We emphasize 1) the role of the elite-driven tax revolt that emphasized cutting or eliminating most forms of taxation; 2) the legacy of Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy; 3) the amplification of White grievances by conservative media; and 4) repeated elite efforts to build a grassroots conservative movement. Together, these efforts created a large, angry sentiment pool whose members were disproportionately drawn to the Tea Party and ready to act. These factors were not sufficient to explain the timing of the Tea Party. Instead, we argue that the Tea Party emerged during the *perfect interpretive moment*, a product of the expanding economic precarity brought about by the Great Recession and the spillover of status threats linked to the electoral victory of Barack Obama.

Chapters 3 and 4 establish the *origins, activists, and mobilizing structures of the Tea Party*. Chapter 3 develops an explanatory account of the earliest wave of Tea Party protests, the Tax Day rallies on April 15, 2009, and the first set of local chapters that emerged following the rallies. We show that in 2009, the Tea Party was set in motion by powerful, well-resourced conservative groups, who honed the insurgency's message and provided an accessible platform to plan events. The influence of these groups on Tea Party mobilization quickly faded, and very likely surprising all involved, the grassroots roared to life. At least 1,022 rallies occurred on Tax Day, and by the end of 2009, 743 local chapters came into existence, which we refer to as the early riser Tea Party groups. We show that Tea Party activism was rooted in a combination of material threats brought about by the Great Recession, and status threats that animated White, conservative Christians.

Chapter 4 focuses on the core characteristics of the Tea Party supporters and activists, how the two groups differed, and the mobilizing structures developed to support the insurgency. Activists were substantially more conservative than supporters, with smaller differences in demographics and educational attainment. Using several sources of evidence, our best estimate is that the Tea Party included between 140,000 and 310,000 dedicated activists, while roughly 30% of US adults supported the insurgency. We then focus on the major mobilizing structures of the Tea Party, outlining the role of five Tea Party umbrella groups that emerged to sustain grassroots activism. These include the 1776 Tea Party, FreedomWorks, Patriot Action Network, Tea Party Nation, and Tea Party Patriots. The mobilizing structures adopted by the Tea Party greatly facilitated its rapid expansion, with 3,587 groups appearing between 2009 and 2014, but individual groups were almost entirely independent in their daily operations.

Our next major theme is the *maturity, evolution, and decline of the Tea Party* in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Chapter 5 examines the tactical evolution of the Tea Party between 2009 and 2014 using a unique sample of nearly 20,000 protests, meetings, and other activities. The Tea Party captured national

attention as an aggressive protest movement, but protest declined quickly and never returned. By 2012, protests were rare, and instead activists shifted their energy to staging what we term maintenance events, including discussion meetings and listening to invited speakers. We explore several reasons for the disappearance of protests, including the role of activist disillusionment with protest's effectiveness, decreasing media attention, the difficulties in staging coordinated events, and a fear of government repression.

In Chapter 6, we turn our focus to the trajectory of the 3,587 local groups that ever participated in the Tea Party insurgency, emphasizing when and where chapters were formed, when they stopped showing any signs of organized activity, and how long they survived. Between 2011 and 2012 – the peak years of the Tea Party's organized actions – there were more than 2,000 active chapters. Beginning in 2012, chapters began to disappear while the establishment of new groups plummeted. By the end of 2014, only 274 chapters remained minimally active, representing only 9% of all Tea Party groups that had ever been established. We demonstrate that the decline in organizational vitality of the Tea Party's local groups was a product of lessening material threats as the economic chaos caused by the Great Recession receded, while status threats and racial politics continued to play a consistent role in organizational survival. Finally, our evidence shows that local insurgent groups located in communities that had elected politicians affiliated with the Tea Party were equally likely to disband.

Chapter 7 describes the evolution in how the Tea Party articulated its grievances between 2009 and 2018. Upon its emergence, the Tea Party occupied a unique discursive space within the conservative movement, embracing an elite-driven vision of lower taxes and reduced government spending in combination with genuine grassroots enthusiasm and an exclusive vision of patriotism. Using a sample of nearly 92,000 Tea Party blog posts published between 2009 and 2018, we show that the Tea Party's initial framing of spending and taxation faded over time and was replaced by more generic conservative talking points. As a result, the insurgency lost its distinctive place within the conservative movement. We argue that this resulted in the discursive demobilization of the Tea Party, which hastened the insurgency's decline.

We close by turning to the *political consequences of the Tea Party* in Chapters 8 and 9. We begin in Chapter 8 by analyzing how grassroots Tea Party activism intervened and shaped institutionalized politics. The impact of Tea Party activism was felt in the 2010 cycle, but its effects varied in the form of activism. The number of Tea Party protests in a district, which we call *mobilization effects*, predicted the number of challengers who ran in its 2010 primary, but not who won. However, the number of local Tea Party groups in a district, which we term *movement infrastructure effects*, did predict who won, but not how many ran in that district. Together, these findings suggest that widespread protests serve to energize individual candidacies, but their effects do not necessarily spill over into electoral success. More organized Tea Party collective

action appears to have affected those electoral outcomes. Second, we demonstrate that the members of the Tea Party Caucus were significantly more conservative than their Republican peers originally, but by 2018, only 23 Caucus members remained sitting in the House. Finally, our analyses indicate that local concentrations of Tea Party activism appear to have increased ideological radicalization in the House of Representatives. Overall, grassroots Tea Party mobilization served as a vigorous congressional watchdog for the GOP and was relatively successful in its attempts to ensure that members of Congress voted in alignment with the insurgency's goals.

Chapter 9 analyzes the relationship between the Tea Party and the eventual rise of Donald Trump as the leader of the GOP. Casual observation suggested to many that there was continuity between the Tea Party and Trumpism in that the insurgency and Trump's Make America Great Again movement were both grounded in a surge of grassroots enthusiasm and fierce rhetoric. Upon closer inspection, clear gaps between the Tea Party and Trumpism are evident. Starting in 2009, Tea Party activists enthusiastically endorsed Trump's racist birther[2] attacks on Barack Obama, but most were sharply critical of Trump as a political candidate. A much smaller group of activists expressed measured support. As a result of this ambivalence, grassroots Tea Party mobilization was not associated with support for Trump in the 2016 primaries nor in the general election. Once Trump was elected, however, there was a sea change within the small remnant of the Tea Party, whose members quickly embraced Trumpism at the cost of abandoning their earlier emphasis on fiscal restraint.

Chapter 10, the conclusion, draws on the comprehensive evidence we presented to make several synthetic points about the emergence and demobilization of the Tea Party. While some of the original Tea Party umbrella groups remain, they exist largely as political action committees with few remnants of the grassroots enthusiasm that had defined the insurgency. After its grassroots heyday, we argue that the Tea Party has now returned to its elite origins, evolving between a top-down to bottom-up structure, before finally returning to the top-down dynamic where it began. We close by emphasizing the legacy of the Tea Party, which we believe will persist into the foreseeable future, and the larger theoretical lessons scholars can draw from our work and findings.

The appendix describes the details of the major research designs that we used to assemble the extensive original data collection we completed for this book. Our model of data collection is a template that other scholars can refine, improve, or extend for studying insurgencies like the Tea Party, and social movements and contentious political activity more generally.

[2] The birther conspiracy theory rests on the false claim that Barack Obama was not a natural born US citizen, making him ineligible to serve as president.