The (Seeming) Power of (Seemingly) Leaderless Organizations: The Tea Party Movement as a Case Study

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Introduction

In 2009, as newly elected President Barack Obama started to implement the Democratic agenda for economic recovery and healthcare reform, a right-wing populist movement that claimed to be ‘mad as hell’ (Rasmussen and Schoen, 2010) emerged in vigorous opposition to expanded government. Since then, the Tea Party has never been long out of the headlines, and its triumphs and travails have provided scholars with considerable food for thought (Formisano, 2012; Godet, 2012; Horwitz, 2013; Huret, 2014; Kabaservice, 2012; Lepore, 2010; Libby, 2013; Skocpol and Williamson, 2012; Parker and Barreto, 2013; Van Dyke and Meyer, 2014).

Available empirical evidence, however, shows that Tea Party activity has been declining sharply since 2010. A 2011 report from ThinkProgress examined the total number of events across the country listed on the Tea Party Patriots (TPP) and Americans for Prosperity (AFP) websites each month between January 2010 and September 2011. It then compared the number of Tea Parties that occurred in 2010 with the number that took place in the first seven months of 2011. The results were startling. Fewer than half the number of Tea Party Patriots events took place in the first seven months of 2011 compared with the same time period in 2010 (Keyes, 2011). A more recent survey by the Pew Research Center showed that negative views of the Tea Party among the general public have nearly doubled since 2010, reaching an all-time high in October 2013 (49 per cent). Only 19 per cent of Americans now say they agree with the Tea Party movement, down from 27 per cent in November 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2013a).
While this post-2010 decline has often been ascribed to voter las-
situde and to the intransigence of Tea Party members in Congress, we
believe another hypothesis must be taken into consideration – that of
an internal, organizational deficiency.

Since its emergence six years ago, the Tea Party movement has regu-
larly prided itself on being a grassroots movement, denying claims that
it is just another cog in the Republican political machinery. Our theory
is that the Tea Party movement belongs to the category of ‘hybrid organ-
izations’ described by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom in *The Starfi-
sh and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*,
that is, organizations in which some parts can be termed ‘organic’, ‘informal’
or ‘decentralized’ while others reflect different leadership paradigms.
In a business context, Brafman and Beckstrom have argued that these
organizations are the most powerful because they are agile in imple-
mentation, more responsive to market forces and employee variety,
and are consistently adaptive to innovative processes (Brafman and
Beckstrom, 2006). Is this also true for political organizations and social
movements? Doesn’t the low degree of operational leadership, and
more specifically the absence of grassroots-connecting leaders in their
midst, hurt them in the long run? Should the post-2010 decline of the
Tea Party movement be seen as testimony to its success or, on the con-
trary, as evidence of a structural failure? This chapter will seek to expand
the existing body of both political movement and leadership literatures
by providing a new interpretation of the Tea Party movement’s rise and
decline in terms of leadership patterns.

The Tea Party as a (seemingly) leaderless social
movement organization

Ever since the early nineteenth century, populist social movements and
third parties have frequently upset the tempo established by the two
major parties by challenging ‘politics as usual’ and established elites.
In this regard, the Tea Party is walking on a well-worn path. The main
debate about the Tea Party movement, however, has to do with authen-
ticity and leadership.

**Conflicting interpretations of the Tea Party phenomenon**

Tea Partiers generally insist that they are a mass movement of ordi-
nary Americans who had not previously been involved in politics but
are concerned about losing the right to live their lives as they choose.