



Tea Party Groups: Patriots and Profiteers

Among conservatives, the current of resentment and fury-fired indignation at a Congress and President consistently overstepping their constitutional bounds runs deep and swift. Now come those who would divert this wide channel of displeasure into a percolating stream of revenue.

Peddling every type of ephemera and collateral from bumper stickers to t-shirts, a phalanx of savvy merchandisers has attached itself to the burgeoning Tea Party movement like a caravan of camp followers trailing a battalion of troops.



There are a number of profit-pursuing entities seeking ways to turn the Tea Party movement into a brand and sell that brand to a growing segment of the American electorate eager to manifest their exasperation with the growth of government and the crushing burden of taxation used to fund this expansion. Many of these groups are headed by commercially minded entrepreneurs only too willing to provide the headline and crowd-pleasing talent to fill convention halls and hotel ballrooms around the country.

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Many of those voluntarily parting with their money even in these hard tack times are small-time donors convinced that through cooperation with other like-minded citizens and through well-financed organizations they can counterbalance the weight of liberal political action committees such as MoveOn.org. This impressive legion of newly animated and dedicated patriots reckon that by pooling their resources they can infuse enough money into a like-minded candidate's coffers, thus positively affecting the outcome of close congressional contests.

No one can doubt that there is a substantial amount of money flowing from the patriot pocketbooks, but some of those who consistently and faithfully donate time and money to the cause are looking around and warily noticing the lots of sizzle and very little steak. "There are a lot of questions about money and where all the money has gone," said Erick Erickson, editor of a conservative news blog. Erickson and other Tea Party and affiliated activists worry that unwise and seemingly self-aggrandizing spending on cross-country bus tours and celebrity meet and greets by event planners is diluting the strength of the patriot message. Furthermore, there is growing anxiety that all the flash and fancy parties will enervate the movement and leave it unable to wield any significant influence in the upcoming 2010 election cycle.

Paradoxically, the movement that sprang from frustration with unauthorized and unwieldy congressional spending is spawning a number of splinter groups complaining of just such fiscal malfeasance on the part of the larger confederation of Tea Party participants. Some of the bigger organizers get the message. "A lot of these folks are not in a great financial position to begin with. It's one of the reasons that they're out protesting is because they are feeling the pain," explained Pete Sepp



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on November 30, 2009

of the National Taxpayer's Union. Accordingly, grass-roots donors and volunteers are refocusing the effort's attention on the small donors and on local fundraising campaigns. This retrenchment is designed to purge the party of profiteers and part-time patriots and thereby revitalize the body of dyed in the wool Tea Party zealots.

Eric Odom is a Tea Party pioneer and is an ardent advocate of the pruning now underway. "If you take the million people who turned out on April 15 [Tea Party demonstrations staged throughout the country on federal tax due date], and you can get even half of those to contribute \$100, that's pretty significant and that's what we're working on," Odom stated. To that end, Odom has helped found a Tea Party inspired political action committee (PAC) called Liberty First PAC founded in order to solicit contributions from the "average Joe" activists and use that money to finance the campaigns of congressional candidates committed to abiding by the movement's articles of faith.

Recently the power of the PAC (and others of similar provenance and purpose) was put to the test in two closely contested congressional races. In New York's 23rd Congressional District, the Conservative Party candidate Doug Hoffman benefited from at least \$265,000 from contributions garnered from outside of his home district, most of which came from Tea Party-affiliated donors. Despite this substantial income, Hoffman was unsuccessful in his bid to represent the District, losing to a liberal Democrat.

The second race in which the Tea Party movement is testing the strength of its muscle is in the Republican primary for Senator in Florida. As it stands now, the Tea Party favorite, Mark Rubio, trails his competitor, the incumbent Governor Charlie Crist, in their quest for the Senate. Rubio has raised over \$300,000 from small-time donors, again, mostly from out of state.

While many Tea Party supporters would classify themselves as Republicans, there is a vocal minority of members who resent the apparent co-opting of the Tea Party momentum and good will for the betterment of the Republican Party. They see enlargement of either major political party as anathema to the spirit of independence and the "principle over party" doctrine that ostensibly informs the Tea Party gospel.

Much of the rancor rising in smaller pods of activists stems from phone solicitations for donations that they receive from national Tea Party associated groups that have purchased donor and volunteer rolls from local organizers. "You just become another name of their e-mail list to ask for money from," complained Glenn Gallas, a Tea Party volunteer organizer located in Hot Springs, Arkansas. He avers that the true power in the movement comes from the passing of the hat in living room fundraisers, not from phone banks in cubicle farms.

For all the internecine struggle for power, the lack of a central authority has not as yet decelerated the momentous growth being experienced by both national and local Tea Party groups. Whether the funds are raised in \$5 and \$10 increments or from \$1,000,000 donations from corporate sponsors, the membership continues swelling, and the movers and shakers are touting the corresponding boost in the weight of their influence. The only question that remains is will these patriot politicos learn by the 2010 campaign season the best way to spend this political and financial capital.



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