



Tea Party, RIP?

Does the Tea Party now support politicians who favored bailouts and the ObamaCare individual mandate? Such a statement sounds like an oxymoronic joke, about as likely as a pacifist who backs war or an atheist for Jesus. But the answer, according to exit polls from New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Florida primaries, is an emphatic “yes.” According to each of these exit polls, the vast majority of self-identified Tea Party supporters have backed either former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney (left) or former House Speaker Newt Gingrich over anti-bailout candidates such as Texas Congressman Ron Paul, former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, and Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann.



The contradiction between the putative philosophy of the Tea Party movement and its recent voting habits was anticipated by Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, who penned a December 2011 [op-ed](#) for the *Des Moines Register*:

Both Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich supported the outrageous \$700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program, or TARP, bailouts — “one of the most unpopular government programs in American history,” even according to President Obama’s own Treasury Department.

Both Romney and Gingrich have been outspoken and unapologetic supporters of the individual mandate. This is the heart and soul of Obama-Care.

Since the tea party started as a reaction to Republicans who voted for TARP, and was strengthened into a national political force during the fight over ObamaCare, I believe this disqualifies both Romney and Gingrich from tea party support.

According to exit polling, it hasn’t worked out that way. Writing prior to the first vote being cast in this election cycle’s series of caucuses and primaries, the Kentucky Senator [concluded](#): “Can we really afford to nominate a candidate who doesn’t have a leg to stand on when it comes to critical issues such as TARP and ObamaCare?” But these minimum standards of the 2010 midterm elections are, apparently, no longer standards.

A Trail of Tea

One might argue that the Tea Party is an amorphous movement that many people claim to support, but don’t really understand, and that exit polls don’t show real Tea Party support. But those who argue that Tea Party activists are better informed will be disappointed in their search for evidence. Even among active Tea Party organizations, the bailout politicians are winning.

Newt Gingrich [won the Tea Party Patriots presidential straw poll](#) January 30 with 35 percent of the



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vote, compared with 31 percent for Rick Santorum (and Mitt Romney, 18 percent; Ron Paul 11 percent). “Last night’s Tele Forum and Straw Poll demonstrated again that the tea party values are winning in America,” Jenny Beth Martin, co-founder and national coordinator for Tea Party Patriots, said in a [press release](#) on the events. The Tea Party Patriots bill themselves as the largest Tea Party organization in the country, and Gingrich, Romney, and Santorum attended their event. Martin continued: “The three participating candidates all pledged to decrease spending below the current spending level their first fiscal year in office, and vowed to repeal government controlled health care. As long as tea party supporters hold the elected officials accountable, regardless of whom is elected, our priorities will be addressed.”

But how can Martin realistically expect current spending levels to be cut and Tea Party priorities to be met by any candidate who fails to offer specifics as to where the cuts would be made and where past performance contradicts his record? “I would go in and start by looking through how much could we save, how much could we cut immediately,” Gingrich told the Tea Party Patriots, which was nothing more than coded words for the fact that his campaign hasn’t proposed — and hasn’t yet given any thought to — any specific spending cuts. [Gingrich’s campaign website lists no spending cut proposals](#) other than the standard fare of vaguely ending “waste” (which even liberal Democrats claim they are for) and repealing ObamaCare.

Likewise, Mitt Romney has no plan to actually cut overall federal spending. He claims he’ll cut, touting his record as Governor of Massachusetts. “I’ve got a record of cutting government I don’t think anyone else can match in this race,” Romney [told](#) the Tea Party Patriots convention. But Romney signed budgets increasing spending by several billion dollars per year during his four years as Massachusetts Governor. Massachusetts libertarian activist Carla Howell [pointed out](#), “The Massachusetts state budget was \$22.7 billion a year when he took office in January of 2003. When he left office four years later, it was over \$25.7 billion — plus another \$2.2 billion in spending that the legislature took “off budget.” (Romney never reminds us of this fact.) The net effect of budgets proposed and signed into law by Mitt Romney? An additional \$5.2 billion in state spending — and a similar increase in new taxes. Every year.” Romney proposes to reduce non-defense discretionary spending to 2008 levels as a cost-cutting measure as President. In short, he proposes to balance a federal government that spends 40 percent more than it takes in by limiting the growth of only 17 percent of the federal budget (the proportion of non-defense discretionary spending in the budget). Even if Romney called for elimination of all non-defense discretionary spending, it wouldn’t even cut the deficit in half.

Romney’s numbers just don’t add up, but Romney expects to hoodwink conservatives into accepting his dubious claims. And it appears to be working.

In a like manner, Newt Gingrich has hoodwinked more than a few Tea Party leaders. Sarah Palin [wrote](#) on her Facebook page January 27:

Newt is an imperfect vessel for Tea Party support, but in South Carolina the Tea Party chose to get behind him instead of the old guard’s choice. In response, the GOP establishment voices denounced South Carolinian voters with the same vitriol we usually see from the left when they spew hatred at everyday Americans “bitterly clinging” to their faith and their Second Amendment rights. The Tea Party was once again told to sit down and shut up and listen to the “wisdom” of their betters. We were reminded of the litany of Tea Party endorsed candidates in 2010 who didn’t win. Well, here’s a little newsflash to the establishment: without the Tea Party there would have been no historic 2010 victory at all.



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Palin's semi-endorsement of Gingrich in advance of the Florida primary prompted Conor Friedersdorf of *The Atlantic* magazine to [comment](#):

How could the movement survive a standard-bearer who once favored bank bailouts, No Child Left Behind, an individual mandate in health care, a guest-worker program, the costly prescription-drug benefit, and the nomination of Harriet Miers? Or a politician who lobbied for Freddie Mac? Tea Partiers once pledged that if they had their way, the GOP would never again have as its champion a federal-government-enlarging, entitlement-expanding Bush Republican, nor a career politician who sells influence to D.C. insiders. Elevating such a man would split the coalition's earnest reformers from its tribal partisans.

Friedersdorf noted that there was a backlash of sorts on Sarah Palin's Facebook page after she urged Florida voters to back Gingrich as an alternative to Romney. The backlash against Palin's support of Gingrich, however, had little to do with opposition to bailout politicians — a major Tea Party theme during the 2010 election cycle — but with other issues, including concerns about Gingrich's personal integrity. From the 2010-election-cycle-Tea Party perspective, Palin should know, there's really no difference between Romney and Gingrich.

Tea Party Wanders Widely

Meanwhile, the other two remaining candidates for President opposed all the bailouts and have proposed real spending cuts. Ron Paul has an [ambitious plan to cut \\$1 trillion in his first year as President](#), including eliminating five Cabinet-level agencies. Yet Rep. Paul seems to be getting the least Tea Party support, despite the fact that his supporters arguably organized the first modern [Tea Party rally in December of 2007](#) and his son, now Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, became a national figure in the Tea Party movement in 2010 by unseating the establishment-favored GOP nominee.

Likewise getting tepid Tea Party support is Rick Santorum, who has [called for \\$5 trillion in cuts over the next five years](#) from projected federal spending increases. Although some of these spending "cuts" are just the standard "waste" cuts that every politician touts on both sides of the aisle, also included are some genuine cuts such as ending energy and farm subsidies. Much of Santorum's "cuts" are largely freezes in spending that are cut from projected increases (some of which, such as freezing Medicare payments, are politically impractical). Though Santorum's proposals are less ambitious than Rep. Paul's, Santorum's plan is miles ahead of the Gingrich/Romney plans to cut nothing from the federal budget and instead continue to increase spending.

Tea Party Patriots are not the only prominent Tea Party organization that has become cozy with bailout politicians. Tea Party Express [criticized](#) President Obama's State of the Union address in January with the following language by the organization's chief strategist Sal Russo:

Americans are no longer fooled by his empty promises of hope and change. The President says, "No bailouts, no handouts, and no cop-outs." However, after 3 years as President, he has embarked on a path of bailing out company after company, giving handouts to his friends through crony capitalism, and blaming everyone but himself for the horrendous state of our economy.

No constitutionalist could argue with that description. But then the Tea Party Express press release took on a decidedly partisan tone, [claiming](#), "There are no twisting words here — Obama has not only failed at showing any leadership, but has done so while blatantly deceiving Americans with empty promises." By itself, this also would have been understandable. Obama did back the TARP bailout, the auto bailout, and the "stimulus" bill that so angered and fueled the Tea Party movement back in



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2008-09. But the Tea Party Express picked TARP [bailout supporter](#) and former presidential candidate Herman Cain to give its [response](#) to the President's State of the Union address. Cain had also been a Federal Reserve Bank Chairman and [praised Alan Greenspan's policies](#) that blew up the housing bubble by suppressing interest rates during the presidential debates.

The question becomes "Why Cain?" when there was no shortage of former Republican presidential candidates available who had opposed the bailouts and criticized the Federal Reserve to give such an address for the Tea Party Express. Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann had voted against TARP and opposed all the bailouts and was a cosponsor of Ron Paul's bill to audit the Fed. Former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson had the same positions. Why did the Tea Party Express pick a pro-bailout former candidate to reply to Obama, especially since it had decided to criticize Obama's bailouts in its press release?

One possible answer is that some Tea Party organizations have become nothing more than partisan shells. Tea Party Express [press releases](#) during the Florida primary "bus tour" read like partisan minutes from Republican National Committee-distributed talking points, and less like issue-based advocacy that the Tea Party movement was originally formed to fight.

The Tea Party movement was widely criticized by then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in 2009 as being an "[astroturf](#)" movement artificially generated by functionaries of the Republican Party. Back then, the charge was demonstrably untrue. Tea Party activists ousted establishment, pro-bailout Republicans in a number of states, including several incumbents:

- In Utah, three-term U.S. Senator [Bob Bennett](#) was ousted in a five-way 2010 GOP primary — coming in a distant third — after voting for the TARP bailout.
- Tea Party activists in Kentucky propelled Rand Paul into the U.S. Senate over establishment candidate Trey Grayson, favored by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell. Grayson had [toyed with the idea of bailouts](#) for major European nations in a Fox News Channel interview, and the Kentucky Secretary of State lost the primary handily to political novice Paul.
- Tea Party activists in New York backed third-party candidate Doug Hoffman of the Conservative Party in a special congressional election in 2009 over liberal Republican candidate [Dede Scozzafava](#), and they so undercut Scozzafava's campaign that she dropped out of the race to endorse the Democrat. (Newt Gingrich [publicly backed](#) the pro-abortion, pro-bailout, pro-"stimulus" Scozzafava over Hoffman, against the local Tea Party activists.)
- The Tea Party also propelled Marco Rubio to the U.S. Senate in Florida over the [establishment liberal Republican Governor Charlie Crist](#), first by giving Rubio the GOP nomination and then by creating a surge of support to overcome in a three-way race both the Crist independent run as well as the Democrat.

Despite the 2009-10 record of opposing establishment Republican candidates, the majority of self-proclaimed Tea Party supporters today are backing the same candidates for political office who opposed their views just two years ago. There's no significant level of bailout politicians losing primaries this time around.

The "astroturf" label, while not true when Nancy Pelosi affixed it in 2009, may have become accurate over time. Or perhaps the Tea Party movement is fading out entirely. The nationwide Tea Party street protests of 2008-10 against bailouts and ObamaCare have largely faded in the past year.

Though diminished, the Tea Party may still hold some sway in the presidential and congressional races in the 2012 election cycle. But to what extent? And how much of this sway will be directed to promoting



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the establishment wing of the Republican Party, as opposed to genuine fiscal conservatism?



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