



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on December 21, 2009

Voters Prefer Tea Party to GOP

If the conservative Tea Party rebellion should move from the soapbox to the ballot box, it might well beat the Republican Party, according to a recent Rasmussen Reports survey. In what the pollsters called a "three-way Generic Ballot test," voters were asked in a national telephone survey to assume the Tea Party movement had become a political party and then to say whether they would be likely to support a Democratic, Republican, or Tea Party candidate for Congress in their districts.



Democrats drew 36 percent of all respondents, while 23 percent said the Tea Party would be their choice. Only 18 percent said they would be inclined to support a Republican candidate. Among voters not affiliated with either major party, the Tea Party comes out on top, with 33 percent of the independent voters preferring the Tea Party, 25 percent choosing the Democratic Party, and only 12 percent preferring the Republicans. In what could be a real problem for the GOP, amongst registered Republicans, 33 percent of the Republicans favor the Tea Party to 39 percent choosing the Republican brand.

The standard (two-party) Generic Congressional Ballot survey shows Republicans holding a modest lead over Democrats, according to the survey. "It appears that the policies of the Obama administration and the Democratic Congress are currently enough to unite both those who prefer Republicans and those who prefer the Tea Party route," the Rasmussen report said. But if the Democratic policies are uniting conservatives, they are not all unifying under the Republican banner. Rasmussen's daily Presidential Tracking Poll shows just 55 percent of self-described conservatives consider themselves Republicans. Even worse for the GOP, 73 percent of Republican voters "believe their leaders in Washington are out of touch with the party base," the report said. And Republican voters are paying more attention to the Tea Party movement than Democrats are. Forty-three percent of GOP voters are following news about the movement "Very Closely," the survey found, while another 30 percent are following it "Somewhat Closely." Only 12 percent of Democrats are following stories about the Tea Party movement "Very Closely."

Seventy percent of Republican voters have a favorable opinion of the Tea Party movement while only seven percent offer an unfavorable view. Nearly half, or 49 percent, of Democrats surveyed said they



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had no opinion about the movement.

What, if anything, all of that might mean for 2010 or beyond is yet unknown. No candidates or potential candidates were named and the congressional races are still nearly a year away. But the numbers are a sign of both the peril and the promise for the Grand Old Party. The danger is that if either the Tea Party or some other populist movement on the right should develop into a serious third-party threat, Republican candidates could come in third in some districts. However, congressional races are usually not nationalized, notwithstanding the extraordinary mid-term elections of 1994, with Newt Gingrich and his Contract With America, engineering a stunning and sweeping Republican victory. The more likely threat might come in the form of a presidential race in which a charismatic third-party leader might make a serious run at the White House.

The late Alabama Gov. George Wallace staged that kind of rebellion in 1968 and managed to pull 13 percent of the popular vote, while carrying five southern states. Political analysts may still be debating which of the major party candidates was adversely affected by Wallace's third-party candidacy, former Vice President Richard Nixon, the Republican, or his Democratic opponent, Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Nixon won the election, taking 44 percent of the vote to Humphrey's 43 percent in a race that was nearly as close in the Electoral College vote. Wallace and Nixon both ran on conservative, law-and-order platforms, with promises to put the reins on an activist judiciary and overly large and intrusive federal government. Humphrey, on the other hand, ran as the heir to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

Some analysts believed that the majority of the votes that went to Wallace, a Democrat, came from disaffected Democrats, mainly in the South, who were alienated by the liberalism of their national party on racial and other issues. Thus, Wallace may have cost Humphrey the election. Others believe that in a two-way race, most of the Wallace votes would have gone to Nixon, who ran on a states rights' platform, promised to appoint "strict constructionists" as federal judges, and was backed by the populist Southern hero, U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, the presidential candidate of the States Rights, or "Dixiecrat," Party 20 years earlier. And, in fact, the five Southern states won by Wallace had been won in the previous election by Republican nominee Barry Goldwater in a losing race against the then-popular President Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

In 1992, Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot posed a serious threat to the two major parties, at one point leading both President George H.W. Bush and his Democratic opponent, Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton, in the polls. But Perot mistook the starting gate for a revolving door, dropping out for a time and then reentering the race, and he never did regain his lost momentum. Still, Perot won 19 percent of the popular vote, though he won no electoral votes.

In 2000, Pat Buchanan, who had won the New Hampshire Republican presidential primary four years earlier, captured the nomination of Perot's Reform Party, but won less than one percent of the total vote. Looking ahead to next year's congressional races, the Rasmussen report said the prospects for a new party are not as promising as the poll numbers indicate. "In practical terms, it is unlikely that a true third-party option would perform as well as the polling data indicates," the report said. "The rules of the election process — written by Republicans and Democrats — provide substantial advantages for the two established major parties. The more conventional route in the United States is for a potential third-party force to overtake one of the existing parties."

That happened, of course, in the 19th century, when the Whig Party supplanted the Federalists and again when the Republicans replaced the Whigs. On rare occasions, an independent or third-party



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candidate has won a congressional or Governor's race, but the closest to victory any third-party presidential campaign has come was the 1912 campaign of former President Theodore Roosevelt as the candidate of the Progressive or "Bull Moose" Party. Roosevelt finished second to the Democratic candidate, New Jersey Gov. Woodrow Wilson. Significantly, the President of the United States, Republican William Howard Taft, finished third — which is where the new Rasmussen poll, in its "three-way Generic Ballot" survey, shows Republican candidates finishing in the 2010 congressional elections if voters have the choice of voting for a Tea Party candidate.

Could someone lead a conservative Tea Party rebellion in 2010, or more likely 2012, that would wreak the kind of havoc on the Republican Party that Teddy Roosevelt created in 1912? If so, who might it be? Might it be Sarah Palin, the former Alaska Governor who remains popular with the public, despite being dismissed time and again by many of the political analysts in the "mainstream" media? The "Team Sarah" support that began last year when Palin was the Republican vice presidential candidate would appear to be an unlikely successor to the Roosevelt and Wallace rebellions, but who knows what sort of events may take place in the next three years and what sort of reactions they may trigger?

The positive results of the Rasmussen poll for the Republicans is simply that the combination of the voters who said they would vote Republican and those who said they would vote for the Tea Party candidate in those mythical three-way races yields a plurality-41 percent, compared to 36 percent for the Democrats. What the Republicans need to do is hold on to those restless Republicans, while appealing to those independent and even Democratic voters who have expressed support for the Tea Party.

They can only do that by nominating and supporting candidates who share the enthusiasm for small government, reduced spending, low taxes, and individual freedom that the Tea Party espouses. That means Party leaders need to stop doing what former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and others did this past fall when they endorsed the candidacy of Dede Scozzafava, a liberal Republican who supports abortion "rights," same-sex "marriage," and cap-and-trade legislation, in the special election for Congress in New York's 23rd District. Palin and Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty took an approach more appealing to the Tea Party rebels, by endorsing the Conservative Party candidate in that race.

Republicans need to demonstrate that they are not, in Pat Buchanan's memorable phrase, "Leap Year conservatives," remembering their principles only in election years, and that there is more than what George Wallace called "a dime's worth of difference" between the two major parties.

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