



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on January 9, 2012

Whither the Tea Party: Is the Movement Now Irrelevant?

While there yet remain other Tea Party-affiliated groups in the Volunteer State, the end of even one of them may augur a decline in the electoral influence of the Tea Party.

This perceived de crescendo of the Tea Party symphony is distinctly different from the loud and animating drumbeat that helped march scores of Tea Party-backed candidates into Washington in 2010.

There is no question that the Tea Party wasn't without failure in the 2010 midterm elections (for instance, the defeats of Sharron Angle and Christine O'Donnell), but Sarah Palin became a household name and legitimate constitutionalists such as Rand Paul now sit in Congress, faithfully protecting the Constitution from enemies, foreign and domestic.



The voting trends developing in the presidential election campaign reveal the rapidity of the decline in Tea Party clout, however.

For example, in the Iowa caucuses, the three candidates most closely associated with the Tea Party — Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry, and Newt Gingrich — finished very far down the tote board. Bachmann, in fact, bowed out of the race after failing to make a respectable showing in a very conservative state.

Let's not forget Herman Cain. Cain, the former CEO of Godfather's Pizza, [was being wooed by Tea Partiers](#) (who actually briefly shot the candidate to the top of the leader board) around the country and being touted by them as the favorite to replace President Obama in the White House.

As everyone knows, Cain dropped out of the race for the Oval Office amid [allegations of sexual harassment and marital infidelity](#).

Regarding the sub-par showing of these Tea Party favorites, Judson Phillips takes a very pragmatic approach: "God bless them, they're good people, but, for whatever reason, their campaigns did not take off," he mused.

Republican voters in Iowa instead voted for one man — Mitt Romney — who is perhaps the Tea Party's least desirable candidate, and another — Rick Santorum — a "conservative" who voted repeatedly while serving in the Senate to increase the federal debt ceiling and to exponentially expand the size and scope of the Department of Education as a result of his vote in favor of the "No Child Left Behind" program.

Toby Marie Walker, founder of the Waco (Texas) Tea Party, was "upset" by the success of the former Senator from Pennsylvania. As reported by [Business Mirror](#), "She [Walker] said that Santorum would appeal to some socially conservative voters but that he violated the core tenet of the Tea Party — fiscal responsibility — during his tenure in the Senate.



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In light of the dearth of genuine constitutionalists among the slate of Republican presidential hopefuls, one would think that Tea Party adherents in the Hawkeye State would gleefully get behind a legitimate conservative such as Ron Paul. While it is true that 26,000 Republicans participating in that party's Iowa Caucus voted for Ron Paul, a significant number of those were Independents.

According to [data breaking down entrance polls conducted by Edison Research](#), Ron Paul won 43 percent of Independents who voted in Tuesday's caucus.

The question, therefore, of why those who align themselves with the Tea Party would not rally behind a man with unassailable constitutional bona fides such as Ron Paul, remains unanswered. This inexplicable contradiction may contain a clue to the Tea Party's slouch into electoral irrelevance.

Another state, one of indisputable impact on the outcome of presidential elections, has shown a weakening of Tea Party power, as well. Witness [this report](#) from local Florida media:

Less than 30 days from the Florida primary and Tampa Tea Party leader Sharon Calvert is still undecided.

"There is no candidate, at least at this point, that the Tea Party appears to have coalesced around," said Calvert, though she did have a favorite.

"I was behind Herman Cain."

And therein lies the problem. Candidates most favored by Tea Party voters, including Herman Cain, Michelle Bachmann, Rick Perry, are either out of the game or losing badly. Ron Paul, fairly or not, is widely considered unelectable as a Republican. And Tea Party members have serious issues with the current front runner, Mitt Romney starting with "Romney care" enacted during his term as Massachusetts Governor.

The Tea Party fervor has died down for other reasons. Their chosen gubernatorial candidate in 2010, Rick Scott turned out to be a historically unpopular Governor. The galvanizing issue of high speed rail is dead, and though the national debt is still a hot issue, *Creative Loafing* political writer Mitch Perry believes the Occupy Wall Street movement has helped call attention to other issues including corporate influence and income inequality.

"It's not all about cutting the deficit and the debt. That's still an important part of it, but it's broadened out and the Occupy Wall Street movement has had a significant affect [sic] on the discourse if nothing else they've done so far," says Perry.

Beyond Tennessee, Iowa, and Florida, there is evidence of the Tea Party's approaching denouement on the national stage, as well. In a [national poll](#) conducted by the Pew Research Center in November, more Americans say they disagree (27 percent) than agree (20 percent) with the Tea Party movement. A year ago, in the wake of the sweeping GOP gains in the midterm elections, the balance of opinion was just the opposite: 27 percent agreed and 22 percent disagreed with the Tea Party.

According to [one published report](#) of the survey, "The poll's authors said it appeared that voters increasingly blamed the tea party and its champions in Congress for the gridlock in negotiations over the federal budget."

In fairness, however, despite its decline, there is no question that the Tea Party's shoulder to the wheel pushed the GOP to the right on many issues and changed the American political landscape.

Proof of this legacy is found in this year's campaign rhetoric. Every GOP presidential candidate does his



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best to contort himself in order to fit in the “conservative” box. As [one observer commented](#):

Even Romney, whose greatest achievement as a governor was mandatory health insurance, now says he supports a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution that would cap spending at 20% of gross domestic product, a deep cut below the current 24%. Santorum goes even further, proposing a spending cap of 18%.

And, in truth, the failure of Bachmann and Perry to pull down big numbers in Iowa is not to be laid solely at the feet of the Tea Party. Bachmann famously struggles to perform well under the bright lights of presidential politics, and Rick Perry’s debate debacles likely scared off many who would have preferred a more competent candidate to represent them in November.

Perhaps the longevity of the Tea Party was doomed from the beginning. As a loose coalition of various simpatico organizations that prided themselves on the lack of a central authority, it is a difficult proposition to expect them to coalesce behind any one candidate. Binding a few groups together long enough to propel this or that local or state candidate into office is one thing, but finding a candidate who can appeal to a significant majority of groups across the country is probably too much too hope for out of any movement.



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