



Independents & the Tea Party Movement

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About The Center for Social Leadership

The Center for Social Leadership (CSL) is a think tank and action organization dedicated to building [social leaders](#) for the 21st Century.

Humanity is experiencing dramatic changes. Traditional leadership is broken. Conventional human organization based on hierarchies and formal authority is outdated. Technology has transformed the way we interact and enhanced our ability to have impact—for good or ill. The Center for Social Leadership was formed to steer these changes to improve the health of society, preserve freedom, and ensure peace and prosperity for humanity. A new vision of leadership is needed. Not the old, hierarchical, positional, authoritative, privileged-elite leadership, but a new democratic, action-determined, service-oriented leadership. Through this social leadership mankind can achieve unprecedented happiness and fulfillment.

Learn more and engage with CSL by [reading our e-book](#) and joining our mailing list at www.TheSocialLeader.com.

“It’s not about someone doing everything. It’s about everyone doing something.”



Much of the media represents what it calls a “third” view as sometimes [independents](#) and other times the [Tea Party](#). In recent elections, these two groups have often voted together. They both tend to vote against [entrenched power](#), and they both support better fiscal discipline from our leaders.

Beyond these two similarities, however, they bear little resemblance.

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The Tea Party is angry at Washington. Independents want to see Washington get its act together. The Tea Party is comparatively extreme in its views and strident in the tone of its arguments. Independents are typically moderate in viewpoint as well as methodology.

A majority of Tea Party supporters are former Republicans who feel disenfranchised from the GOP. Independents come from all parts of the political spectrum.

Tea Party enthusiasts tend to promote [“revolution”](#)—although [their platform is more clearly defined by what they object to](#) than by what they propose to do about it. Independents want substantive and tenable reform.

Tea Party crowds often act like [football fans during big rivalry games](#). Independents most often talk like accountants analyzing today's financials.

The Tea Parties want big, symbolic, massive change. They're pretty clear on whom they think is to blame for America's problems and they frequently recur to [name-calling and sarcasm](#) to make their point. Independents want certain policies to be passed that significantly improve government and society.

Tea Party supporters see themselves as part of a big fight, and they want to win and "send the bad guys packing." Independents want the fighting, name-calling, mudslinging and partisan wrangling to stop and for our leaders to just sit down together and calmly work up solutions to our major national challenges.



Voting

Tea Parties are bringing out more conservative voters to take on the Democratic majority. [Independents are voting against Democrats](#) right now because they want to see real progress, just like they voted against Republicans during much of the

last decade.

If the Republican Party swings right, most of the Tea Partiers will consider their work done. If the Republican Party swings right, most independents will give it far less support.

Tea Parties are viscerally against liberalism. Independents will vote against Democrats on some issues and against Republicans on others, always throwing their support behind the issues and projects they think will best help America.

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Few Tea Partiers voted for Obama. Many independents did. A lot of Tea Partiers see [Sarah Palin](#) as a viable presidential candidate. Hardly any independents support Palin or consider her a viable candidate for high federal office. Most Tea Party members vehemently disliked Ted Kennedy. Many independents like him a lot.

Many Tea Party supporters want Obama to fail, and in fact believe that he has already failed. A majority of independents are frustrated with President Obama's work so far but sincerely hope he will turn it around by shifting his

focus and adopting what they consider moderate and needed changes.

The Tea Party tends to [compare Obama to the likes of Hitler](#), while most independents admire and like Obama personally even while disagreeing with the substance of some of his policies.

In short, Tea Partiers and independents aren't cut from the same cloth and actually have very little in common. But, as mentioned, they have been voting together for the last six months and will likely continue to do so for some time ahead.

That being said, they are unlikely to stay connected in the long term.

Of course, there are a number of independents who have aligned themselves with the Tea Party or Tea Party events in order to have an impact right now. That's what independents do.



How Populism Succeeds

Which group is most likely to last? The answer probably depends on upcoming elections.

The Tea Parties are a [populist movement](#), meaning that their popularity requires at least three things:

1. An agreed upon enemy with enough power to evoke strong fears, anger and emotion
2. An upcoming event to rally around, such as elections or national seminars
3. A sense that they can actually change everything quickly and drastically

The first and second factors will stay around as long as a Democrat is in the White House. Tea Party fervor may be lessened by the midterm elections if, and only if, a lot of Democrats lose—but will likely resurge again as the next presidential election nears.



The third requirement is what has generally doomed all historical populist movements. The Tea Party revolt is new and may gain energy. But things will change as soon as one major (and inevitable) event occurs. When the Tea Party wins a major election and then watches its newly-elected candidates take office and join the system, it will turn its energy from activism to cynicism and lose momentum.

If those the Tea Party elects make a splash and take on the establishment, or symbolically seem to do so, the Tea Partiers will breathe easy, congratulate themselves on their victory and go back to non-political life. If the new officials make few changes and Washington seems as bad as ever, many Tea

Party enthusiasts will lose faith and give up on activism. More on this later.

The History of Conservative Populism

This series of events is cyclical, and the pattern has repeated itself many times. The [Anti-Federalists](#), [Whigs](#) and [Moral Majority](#) all, in their day, fizzled out on this cycle.

Likewise, “constitutionalism” arose during the 1960’s, gained influence with publications and seminars in the 1970’s, and culminated in the election of Ronald Reagan. After his inauguration, most constitutional organizations saw their donations and budgets halved—or worse—and many disappeared. The term “constitutionalist” lost it power—indeed, became a label for energetic irrelevance—and the nation moved on.

After Reagan, [Rush Limbaugh](#) increased in popularity and influence leading up to and throughout the Clinton years, and his radio show became the rallying point of conservative populism. The press worried about the growing power of talk radio and both major political parties listened daily to Limbaugh’s commentary and strategized accordingly.

[“Dittoheads”](#) (Limbaugh fans) saw Clinton as the great enemy and rallied around elections, the [Contract with America](#), and (between elections) Limbaugh’s show. But with the election of Republican George W. Bush, Dittohead Nation

congratulated itself on victory and mostly turned to non-political life. Today there is little excitement about or commentary on becoming a Dittohead.

It should be acknowledged that conservative populist movements have often added positive ideas to the national discussion and many of its leaders have helped raise awareness of freedom and promote citizen involvement. In this sense, Anti-Federalists, Whigs, the Moral Majority, Constitutionalists, Dittoheads and the Tea Parties are not insignificant to American politics. They have had, and likely still will, huge impact.

Liberal *versus* Conservative Populism

Note, in contrast, that liberal populism typically follows a different path. Movements such as Abolition, Feminism, Civil Rights and Environmentalism build and build until they are legislated. At that point, liberal populists get really serious and set out to expand legislation.

Not being saddled with trying to establish a negative, liberal populists don't lose momentum like conservative populists—because the liberal objective isn't to *stop* something but rather to *achieve* specific goals.

The challenge of conservative populism is that its proponents are, well, conservative. They see life as fundamentally a

private affair of family, career and personal interests. To the conservative, political activism is a frustrating, anomalous annoyance that shouldn't be necessary—an annoyance that sometimes arises because of the actions of “bad” people abusing power.

The conservative soul idealizes being disengaged from political life; as a result, conservative populism is doomed to always playing defense. The conservative will embrace politics when to continue to avoid politics poses a clear and present danger. When conservatives engage politics in popular numbers, they do so in order to “fix things” so they can go back to not thinking about government.

The liberal soul, on the other hand, sees political life as a part of adulthood, natural to all people, and one of the highest expressions of self, society, community and the social order—not to mention a great deal of fun. Many liberals greatly enjoy involvement in governance.

The liberal yearns for participation in society, progress and politics. They care about family and career as much as conservatives, of course, but many liberals consider involvement in politics to be at the same level of importance as family and work.



The Future of Tea & Independents

Tea Parties will likely grow and have impact for some years, but they are unlikely to become a long-term influence beyond Obama's tenure.

In contrast, independents may well replace one of the major parties in the decades ahead. Few independents are populists and are therefore not swayed by the political media or party politics. They watch Fox and MSNBC with equal skepticism, and prefer to do their own research on the detailed intricacies of the issues. They generally distrust candidates and officials from all parties, believing that politics is a game of persuasion and spin.

Also: Independents really do stand for something. They want government to work. They want it to provide effective national security, good schools, responsible taxes and certain effective government programs.

Like conservatives, independents want government to spend less and stop trying to do too much. Like liberals, independents want government to tackle and fix our major challenges and where helpful to use effective government programs. Independents want health care reformed, and they want it done in common-sense ways that really improve the system. They apply this same thinking to nearly all major issues.

Like many liberals, a lot of independents enjoy closely watching and participating in government. They take pleasure in

activism and involvement. They prioritize political participation up there with family, career and personal interests.

All indications are that the Tea Parties are a short-term, albeit significant, movement, while the power of independents will be here for a long time ahead. When the current political environment shifts and conservative populists lose their activist momentum, independents will still be studying the issues and making their views known.

In fact, a serious question now is whether the Republican and Democratic parties can both outlast the rise of independents. The answer is very likely “no.”

About the Author



Oliver DeMille is the founder and former president of [George Wythe University](#), a founding partner of [The Center for Social Leadership](#), and the author of [A Thomas Jefferson Education](#). Presently, he serves as a mentor directing graduate and doctoral programs and devotes a majority of his time to writing. Oliver is a popular keynote speaker, writer and business consultant. He is married to the former Rachel Pinegar. They have eight children.

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