THE DECENTRALIZED SOCIAL MOVEMENT: HOW THE TEA PARTY GAINED RELEVANCY IN THE NEW MEDIA ERA

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how a decentralized social movement evolved into an effective political apparatus. A central claim of this research is that the Tea Party movement has been politically influential because of its decentralization. This research suggests that the Tea Party’s decentralized structure made it necessary to operate within decentralized online echo chambers. The original research includes a content analysis of a Tea Party candidate’s Twitter account, a content analysis of 300 e-mails sent by a leading Tea Party group, and a content analysis of the September 2011 Republican primary debates, including one that was dubbed the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate. The findings suggest that the Tea Party movement in December 2011 is fundamentally different than the movement that first emerged in January of 2009. In order to stay politically influential, the decentralized Tea Party movement became more centralized. These findings suggest that the Tea Party movement’s future political relevance is relative and depends entirely on how the movement continues to evolve.
For Dad.
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INTRODUCTION

“I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a "community organizer," except that you have actual responsibilities.” -Sarah Palin, RNC Convention on September 3, 2008

On November 4, 2008, a “community organizer” was elected President of the United States. Barack Obama’s experience as a community organizer in Chicago was a central theme of his campaign narrative, but it was also an important aspect of his campaign strategy. Obama’s campaign used new media technology to build an unprecedented grassroots following. The same organizing experience that Palin had mocked in her vice presidential nomination acceptance speech was arguably one of the reasons that Obama was ultimately triumphant.

As Obama transitioned into The White House, conservatives were upset. They had just lost an historic election, the economy was worsening and their future electoral prospects were looking dim. They were frustrated, but more importantly, they were motivated to do something about it. Young Republican members of Congress began planning a grassroots strategy to win back the majority on the day that Obama was inaugurated (Dennis, MacGillis & Montgomery, 2011). Meanwhile, outside the halls of Congress, ordinary Americans who had never participated in politics before had become frustrated with their elected officials in Washington. Utilizing some of the same organizational tools that had been successful for Obama, conservative activists started what is now commonly known as the Tea Party movement.

By design, to synthesize the Tea Party movement is nearly impossible. The Tea Party movement is many different things to many different people. The name itself is a contradiction of sorts. The Tea Party is not a traditional political party. It is also not a prototypical political
protest movement. The movement does not have a clear leader, no central headquarters, or even a unifying political platform. Put simply, the Tea Party movement is a decentralized community of citizens upset with the status quo. In many ways, the movement is still to this day struggling to find its identity. Despite these challenges, in a short period of time, the movement has unquestionably reshaped the American political landscape.

This research seeks to explore how a decentralized social movement evolved into an effective political apparatus. A central claim of this research is that the Tea Party movement has been politically influential because of its decentralization. By a decentralized movement I simply mean a movement that is brought together in spite of many seemingly disparate and distributed elements. This research posits that the Internet’s decentralized structure both facilitated and maintained the movement’s decentralization. For instance, former House Majority Leader Dick Armey (2010: 91) argued, “Like the Tea Party movement itself, access to information is completely decentralized by the infinite sources online.” In other words, the Tea Party movement’s decentralized structure mimics that of the Internet.

This research suggests that the Tea Party’s decentralized structure made it necessary to operate within decentralized online echo chambers. Jamieson and Cappella (2008: 76) define the echo chamber as a “bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal.” These types of echo chambers have historically occupied traditional media spaces like television or newspapers. However, with the advent of new media technologies on the Internet, these echo chambers have moved into new media spaces like Twitter and Facebook. These new media spaces allow for echo chambers within the movement to be both geographically and ideologically decentralized. These
decentralized online echo chambers allow supporters to belong to ideologically disparate subsections, while still belonging to the larger Tea Party movement. They also serve to bring together supporters who are geographically dispersed.

This study also posits that decentralization was not only a structural descriptor but also an ideological worldview. Many within the movement saw the movement’s decentralization as an ideal model for the federal government, one that returned governing power and freedom back to individuals. Therefore, this research also explores how decentralization has been used to not only build the movement, but also how it has helped shape its governing ideology.

Part I explores the origins of the movement and how new media were used to organize a decentralized grassroots protest movement. It explores how people who had never been involved in politics were able to influence the national political conversation. It also examines the Tea Party’s contentious, yet mutually beneficial, relationship with the mainstream media.

Part II examines how the movement transitioned from a decentralized grassroots protest movement into a powerful campaign apparatus that organized on behalf of Tea Party candidates across the country. Specifically, it looks at the 2010 midterm election cycle and explores some of the successes and failures of Tea Party backed candidates. It includes a content analysis of a Tea Party candidate’s Twitter account during a Republican primary for the U.S. Senate. The analysis explores the issues that were discussed on the campaign’s Twitter account and to whom the messages were targeted. The findings suggest that during the 2010 midterm election cycle Tea Party candidates targeted decentralized national audiences using Twitter.

Part III examines the movement’s influence on governance. In particular, it explores how the movement influenced the 112th Congress during the debt limit debate. This section includes
a content analysis of 300 e-mails sent by a leading Tea Party group to its members between January and May of 2011. The analysis examines the issues most often discussed in the e-mails and compares them to the issues being discussed in the mainstream media at the time. The findings suggest that the Tea Party continued to maintain a decentralized ideology, one that was often dictated by the mainstream media’s agenda.

Finally, Part IV examines the 2012 Republican presidential primary candidates and how the Tea Party electorate influenced their campaigns. It examines how discontent and dissatisfaction with the Republican candidates amongst Tea Party supporters led to a particularly tumultuous primary season. The section includes a content analysis of the September 2011 Republican primary debates, including one that was dubbed the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate. The findings suggest that the Tea Party’s ideology had a significant agenda setting role on the issues that were discussed by the candidates in the debates. It also discusses how the decentralized nature of the movement made it difficult to coalesce behind a single presidential candidate.
PART I: DECENTRALIZED GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATION

According to one narrative, the Tea Party movement was inspired by a rant that went viral on YouTube (Zerinke, 2010). Another narrative suggests that a congressman from Texas started the movement (Rasmussen & Schoen, 2010). Yet another narrative suggests that it was simply a manifestation of populist anger at the federal government (Armey & Kibbe, 2010). The many different explanations for the origins of the Tea Party demonstrate the decentralized makeup of the movement itself. These differing narratives are also part of the reason that the movement has become so influential in American politics. Decentralization has allowed the movement to be many things to many different people.

Part I explores the origins of the Tea Party movement. Chapter 1 examines how the decentralized grassroots movement emerged online in early 2009 and how it manifested itself in offline protests across the country. In particular, it looks at how the movement organized early protest events using new media tools. The chapter also outlines the movement’s decentralized grassroots narrative and ideology. Chapter 2 explores how the mainstream media’s coverage gave the movement credibility. Despite their contentious relationship with the media, the chapter explores how the coverage of the Tea Party’s new media activity gave the movement’s decentralized ideology a much larger platform.
Chapter 1: Grassroots

Viral Anger

The emergence of a conservative movement at the outset of a new Democratic administration was perhaps inevitable. Jamieson and Capella (2008) found that members of the political minority tend to be skeptical of the majority party’s ability to govern. One political consequence of this skepticism has been the formation of oppositional political movements. In the past, political movements often manifested at the local level in places like churches or community centers (Putnam, 2000). What was unique about the Tea Party movement was that it manifested itself in decentralized grassroots communities on the Internet prior to their offline activities.

President Obama had been in office for less than a month when an Internet video became a conservative rallying call. Rick Santelli’s outburst on CNBC on February 19, 2009, has been credited by many as the initial inspiration for the Tea Party movement (Zernike, 2010). In the clip, which became a viral Internet sensation, Santelli bombastically criticized the Obama Administration’s recently announced foreclosure plan (Santelli, 2009). The administration had proposed to spend $75 billion to help homeowners refinance their mortgages in light of the drastic decline in real-estate values. Santelli was upset that the federal government would be subsidizing what he called “losers’ mortgages.” The line that garnered the most attention was when Santelli said, "We're thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July. All you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I'm gonna start organizing” (ibid).

What was significant about the rant was the way in which it spread. The segment first appeared on CNBC, a low rated cable network, on which only a few hundred thousand viewers were watching at the time of the original broadcast (Stelter, 2009). Before the advent of the
Internet it is likely that the rant would have gone largely unnoticed. However, realizing that the outburst had touched a nerve, CNBC quickly uploaded the video clip to their website. The Santelli rant would go on to become the most popular clip ever on CNBC.com (ibid). The popularity of the clip suggests that Santelli’s frustration with the Obama administration’s economic policies resonated with many Americans. The viral spread of the video also emphasized the importance of the platform on which it was disseminated. Simply by being linked to by *The Drudge Report*, a conservative online news aggregator, the clip immediately became an Internet sensation (ibid). The decentralized Internet made it possible for the clip to quickly have a much larger and diverse audience.

The viral popularity of the clip was so significant that the White House felt the need to directly respond. Robert Gibbs, the President’s Press Secretary at the time, responded saying,

> I'm not entirely sure where Mr. Santelli lives, or in what house he lives . . . I would encourage him to read the president's plan and understand that it will help millions of people, many of whom he knows. I would be more than happy to have him come here and read it. I would be more than happy to buy him a cup of coffee - decaf (Dinan, 2009).

Jenkins (2006: 2) defines media convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries.” The media convergence of a White House spokesperson directly responding to the mainstream media about a video clip that had been made popular on the Internet demonstrates how new media can fundamentally change the political conversation. The viral nature of the online video had forced the White House to address an issue that they otherwise might not have.

The re-appropriation of Santelli’s outburst as a grassroots call to action also speaks to the decentralized structure of the Internet. Traditionally, the mainstream media have acted as
gatekeepers, selecting how and which stories get coverage (Graber, 2010). The mainstream media gatekeeper’s editorial decisions directly influenced how the public interpreted the news. Some scholars have suggested that the decentralized structure of the Internet has limited the influence of traditional media gatekeepers because there are no gates on the Internet (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000). The viral spread and subsequent re-appropriation of the Santelli video on the Internet is an example of how new media technology allows the general public to not only interpret, but also influence the mainstream media’s narrative. New media had allowed the Tea Party to effectively become their own gatekeepers.

Almost immediately, conservatives around the country latched onto what they interpreted as a call to action. O’Hara (2010: 5), an early Tea Party activist, observed, “Already Facebook Groups were multiplying, each carrying in its descriptions iterations of the phrase “Rick Santelli is right,” or “Tea Party!” People we did not even know contacted us simply because we had listed ourselves as conservatives on social media.” Conservatives also started organizing Tea Party groups using the micro-blogging tool Twitter. Using the hashtag #TCOT, short for “Top Conservatives on Twitter,” conservatives began organizing their own Tea Party groups (Zernike, 2010).

The online grassroots response to the video was significant, but perhaps misguided. On March 2, 2009 Santelli responded,

First of all let me be clear that I have NO affiliation or association with any of the websites or related tea party movements that have popped up as a result of my comments on February 19th, or to the best of my knowledge any of the people who organized the websites or movements… It was unique in that it obviously struck a chord with the public thus inciting what can only be described as a groundswell of feedback from the public, the White House, the Internet, and the media at large (Santelli, 2009).
Santelli went on to reiterate his objections with the mortgage plan, but insisted that he did not have a political agenda. Regardless of Santelli’s original intentions, the message had already become an organizing lightening rod for conservative activists.

The first phase of the Tea Party’s offline action was protests. The first protest was held on February 27th, 2009 in Washington, DC. The rally that was held in front of the White House is said to have attracted nearly 300 people (O’Hara, 2010). Encouraged by the turnout, Tea Party activists scheduled another day of rallies for April 15th, 2009. The estimated turnout for the “Tax Day Rallies” was 615,000 nationwide (Radman, 2009). These numbers, while likely exaggerated, showed that the movement had gained considerable momentum, most of which online, in a short period of time. This incredible exponential growth of the movement was likely a consequence of the movement’s decentralization (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006).

The new media on which these early rallies were organized are significant because of the people that became engaged. Brafman and Beckstrom (2006) argue that decentralized organizations encourage people to want to contribute. O’Hara (2010: 10) when discussing how he organized the first Tea Party rally said,

Freire and I hardly knew or know 400 free-market people we could call on to show up outside the White House with a week or less notice. A decade ago there would have been absolutely no way to make this possible. The multiplier effect of Facebook, for example, was amazing. To be able to forward an invite to 10 friends who could in turn forward it collectively to 100 and so on was invaluable. Folks that barely knew how to check their e-mail were signing up for Facebook just to stay in the loop on protests in their area.
New media were allowing political novices like O’Hara to become engaged and engage with other activists around the country in their decentralized online echo chambers. It also allowed the movement to expand quickly and engage people it otherwise would not have been able to reach.

*The “Establishment”*

The Tea Party movement, while conservative, also did not support many Republican members of Congress. The Tea Party used the term the “establishment” to refer to legislators, both Republican and Democrat, who had supposedly embraced the status quo. Christine O’Donnell (2011: 6), a Tea Party backed candidate, defined the “establishment” as, “those who share an eagerness to compromise their supported principles and willingness to step on people in order to get ahead.” Jim DeMint (2011: 3), a U.S. Senator from South Carolina, defined the “establishment” as “a powerful system of inertia that protects the status quo.” Other terms used by the movement with similar connotations were “Washington” and “Congress.” The classification was meant to set the Tea Party movement apart from those whom they deemed part of the “establishment.”

The “establishment” also symbolized the centralization of the federal government. As DeMint (2011: 214) said, “Decentralization is not a new idea for American government; it is the idea. It’s called federalism. In America’s original design, individuals held most of the authority and responsibility in America.” In other words, decentralization was also the Tea Party’s vision for how the federal government should be structured. A decentralized federal government would return the majority of governing power back to the individual States. In theory, this
A decentralized governing structure would take power away from the entrenched Washington “establishment.”

The Tea Party’s animosity towards the “establishment” suggests that what had emerged out of these grassroots groups was what is referred to as a social movement organization (SMO). Zald and Ash (1966: 329) define SMO’s as a “purposive and collective attempt of a number of people to change individuals or societal institutions and structures.” In the case of the Tea Party, they were trying to fundamentally change what they saw as the “establishment” elements of the federal government. SMO’s differ from third parties in that they are trying to fundamentally change society or individuals (ibid). In fact, the Tea Party steadfastly rejected the third party label saying it was, “an attempt by the left to sabotage the strength of the Tea Party” (Zernike, 2010: 103). Zald and Ash (1966: 329) argue, “if the society changes in the direction of the MO’s (sic) goals, the organization’s reason for being no longer exists.” In other words, SMO’s operate in opposition to societal norms or the status quo. Rather than trying to offer an alternative bureaucratic organization, SMO’s try to change the bureaucracy itself.

Astroturfing

One of the earliest criticisms of the Tea Party was that it was not a grassroots movement, but rather “Astroturf.” McGrath (2010) defines “Astroturf” as an “imputation of a synthetic, top-down structure to contrast with the outward appearance of grassroots independence.” On April 15, 2009, Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the House, when asked about the Tea Party movement said, “This initiative is funded by the high end - we call it astroturf, it's not really a grassroots movement. It's astroturf by some of the wealthiest people in America to keep the
focus on tax cuts for the rich instead of for the great middle class” (Beutler, 2009). In other words, it was alleged that Republican strategists were actually financing a centralized top-down movement, with the appearance of a decentralized grassroots movement. The Democrat’s argument was that the Republican Party had framed the Tea Party movement as a grassroots uprising in order to suggest widespread populist outrage with the Democrat’s policies.

Members of the Tea Party steadfastly rejected the “Astroturf” accusation. Instead, O’Hara (2010: 62) claims,

Many organizations played a role in facilitating, not funding protests. You can’t get people off their couches and out of their houses to protest because an organization says so. You can get the word out through networks on Facebook and Twitter and through web sites and e-mail. Hundreds of thousands of highly motivated citizens make up and utilize these networks created by people at groups like Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks. Their explicit mission is to facilitate genuine grassroots movements. They do not need to, desire to, nor have a history of paying people to protest.

One of the early facilitators of the movement was a conservative political action committee (PAC) named Our Country Deserves Better. The PAC, which was originally formed in 2008 in opposition to Obama’s candidacy, founded The Tea Party Express in the summer of 2009. In September of 2009 The Tea Party Express bus tour travelled to 33 cities across the country (NPR, 2009). The tour expanded in 2010, stopping in 47 cities in the lead up to the midterm elections (Altman, 2010). Special guests along the tour have included Sarah Palin (the 2008 Republican Vice-Presidential nominee), “Joe the Plumber” (an Ohio resident who gained notoriety after challenging then-candidate Obama about taxes) and Ann Coulter (a conservative pundit).
However, PAC support was a contentious issue within the movement since its inception. For instance, one Tea Party Patriot lamented,

> When people donate to Tea Party Express, they think that they are donating to a tea party, because they don’t read the fine print at the bottom of their e-mails that says it is a PAC . . . And that hurts the local grass-roots tea party organizers, since a lot of that is actually taking some money away from them. (McGrath 2010).

The Tea Party’s skepticism about PAC support was perhaps because they centralized certain aspects of the movement. PAC’s had clear top-down leadership structures and well articulated political agendas, which was the antithesis of the early Tea Party movement’s decentralized makeup.

Traditionally, a PAC’s primary purpose is to raise money for political causes or candidates. As it turns out, the Tea Party Express’ support of the Tea Party movement might not have been entirely financial. Joe Wierzbici, a prominent Republican strategist and chief architect of The Tea Party Express said in a memo,

> We can probably pull off a phenomenally successful tour without these big-ego establishment types,”

Wierzbicki wrote in his proposal, cautioning his colleagues that in any effort to woo them “We have to be very, very careful about discussing amongst ourselves anyone we include ‘outside of the family’ because quite frankly, we are not only not part of the political establishment or conservative establishment, but we are also sadly not currently a part of the ‘tea party’ establishment (Vogel, 2010).

Wierzbici’s memo suggests that the rejection of “establishment” Republicans was a strategy employed by the PAC in order to influence the Tea Party movement’s ideology. The Tea Party Express was rejecting the “establishment” not because they necessarily disagreed with them, but because it was the only way for Republicans to assert their influence on the Tea Party. In
essence, by rejecting the “establishment” the Republican strategists in charge of the Tea Party Express were able to co-opt the Tea Party movement’s message.

Another early facilitator was FreedomWorks, a conservative nonprofit led by former U.S. House Majority Leader Dick Armey. The nonprofit sponsored the very first Tea Party Patriot’s protest on February 27, 2009 (Markon, 2010). FreedomWorks purports to be a conservative grassroots organization. Their website describes their mission as “driv(ing) policy change by training and mobilizing grassroots Americans to engage their fellow citizens and encourage their political representatives to act in defense of individual freedom and economic opportunity” (FreedomWorks 2011). However, FreedomWorks, which merged with Citizens for a Sound Economy in 2004, has been heavily funded by corporate interests including Phillip Morris, ExxonMobil, Verizon and AT&T (Noah, 2003; Pilkington, 2009). The corporate sponsorship of FreedomWorks is further evidence that some early Tea Party facilitators were not necessarily the grassroots organizations they purported to be. In fact, these early facilitators of the movement raised nearly $79 million dollars in 2010 (Vogel, 2011).

Leadership

Decentralized SMO’s do not typically have top-down leadership (Zald & Ash, 1966). Brafman and Beckstrom (2006: 21) argue that in decentralized organizations, “if and when a leader does emerge, that person has little power over others.” The Tea Party’s lack of leadership was a deliberate decision made by the early organizers of the movement. According to Armey and Kibbe (2010: 65) this was because, “When you have principle to guide your activism, you do not need an organizational hierarchy.” Armey and Kibbe (2010: 166) also argued that another
benefit of not having a leader was: “If they knew who was in charge, they could attack him or her.” The Tea Party movement believed that the decentralized leadership structure actually made the movement stronger.

Despite the Tea Party’s efforts to forgo top-down leadership, some “establishment” Republicans became influential voices within the movement. The first major “establishment” politician to embrace the Tea Party movement was former Republican vice presidential candidate, Sarah Palin. Despite no longer holding an elected office, Palin was still incredibly popular amongst Tea Party supporters. A February 2010 Washington Post-ABC News poll found that 55% of Americans had an unfavorable view of Palin (Cohen & Rucker, 2010). In contrast, a March 2010 Quinnipiac poll found that 72% of Tea Party Members had a favorable opinion of Palin (Quinnipiac, 2010). That being said, members of the Tea Party movement did not necessarily see Palin as their leader. One Tea Party activist when asked about Palin said, “She’s flamboyant. She’s matured a lot. She has the right mind-set, but she’s not our leader. We don’t need a leader. We’re all about devolution” (Lepore, 2010: 111).

Even Palin acknowledged that the Tea Party did not need a leader. In her keynote address at the Tea Party Movement’s first national convention held in Nashville, Tennessee on February 5, 2010, Palin said, “I caution against allowing this movement to be defined by any on leader or politician. The Tea Party movement is not a top-down operation. It’s a ground-up call to action that is forcing both parties to change the way that they’re doing business, and that’s beautiful” (Palin, 2010). Palin went on to say, “And each of us who is here today, we’re living proof that you don’t need an office or a title to make a difference” (ibid).
Chapter 2: Media Credibility

**MSM Credibility**

The initial influence of the Tea Party was magnified by its coverage in the mainstream media. Cook (1998: 92) argues that “reporters do not only reflect authority; they reinforce if not confer it as well.” In other words, simply by covering the Tea Party movement, the mainstream media reinforced the movement’s narrative. Jamieson & Cappella (2008: 156) make a similar argument in their examination of conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh when they observe, “When Democrats respond to Limbaugh, they enhance his prominence by increasing his access to the mainstream media.”

However, despite the mainstream media’s coverage lending credibility to the movement, many Tea Party members distrusted what they derogatorily referred to as the “MSM.” For instance, one Tea Party activist at the first Tea Party convention told a reporter, “The mainstream media is the enemy” (McGrath, 2010). Another activist said, “the information they trusted most of all came from others in the movement, not from the mainstream media” (Zernike, 2010: 10). Other terms used by the movement with similar connotations were the “drive-by-media,” and the “lamestream media.”

SMO’s like the Tea Party see the mainstream media as biased facilitators of the “establishment” they are challenging (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). For instance, the Tea Party movement believed that the mainstream media had an extreme liberal bias. Andrew Breitbart (2011), a Tea Party supporter and conservative blogger who runs the website *Big Government*, argues that the mainstream media, which he calls the “Democrat-Media Complex,” has a liberal agenda. To support his argument, Breitbart lists examples of when the mainstream media
neglected to cover stories that were unfavorable to liberals. For instance, he talks at length about *Newsweek*'s decision to not break the story about President Clinton’s affair with a White House intern. Breitbart believes this failure is clear evidence of the mainstream media’s liberal bias.

However, the movement’s disdain for the “MSM” was also because they thought that they were not getting sufficient coverage. Discussing early media coverage of the movement, O’Hara (2010: 71) claims, “The vast majority of the news media, rather than speaking truth to power, opted to serve as enablers of the defunct status quo, choosing to protect the political elite in lieu of leveraging and magnifying a powerful movement of citizens attempting to keep them in check.” The first major national rally held by the Tea Party Patriots was on April 15, 2009 and was covered almost exclusively by the Fox News Channel (ibid). However, as the movement gained support, the mainstream media began to focus more coverage on their events. For instance, the first The Tea Party Convention hosted on February 5, 2010, was covered by all of the major cable news organizations. According to *Politico*, the convention was covered by 11 correspondents from CNN, 8 from Fox News, 5 from NBC news, 4 from ABC News as well as various national newspapers (Vogel, 2010). The increased media coverage had a two-fold effect, both conferring and further reinforcing the movement’s credibility.

*Covering New Media*

Early activists within the Tea Party movement used new media as a way to usurp mainstream media gatekeepers. One supporter explained the Tea Party’s use of new media saying, “The media is filtered in this country . . . the new media has made it so the old media can’t get away with it anymore.” (Lepore, 2010: 38). Breitbart (2011: 2) similarly argued that the
Tea Party effectively, “instigate(d) a winnable New Media war against the Progressive movement and its standard-bearer, President Obama, as well as the vast left-wing media apparatus that rigs the national narrative in the pursuit of partisan politics.” For instance, his website, Big Government, released a series of internet-only videos that sought to discredit liberal politicians and organizations. His most popular videos featured a conservative activist dressed as a pimp seeking advice from the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). ACORN was a federally funded organization that advocated for liberal causes and candidates, which made it a natural target for conservative activists like Breitbart. The undercover videos, which were released on the same day that President Obama addressed Congress about his plans for health care reform, purported to show ACORN employees giving advice about illegal activities. Ultimately, the viral success of these videos led to ACORN losing its federal funding and completely disbanding by March of 2010. ACORN’s closure was seen as a significant victory for conservative activists, but more importantly, demonstrated the power of online video to affect significant political change.

The Tea Party’s use of new media forced the mainstream media to focus an unprecedented amount of coverage on the Tea Party movement’s new media activities. Hindman (2009) argues that the mainstream media’s coverage of new media leads us to interpret “online victories” as momentum. In other words, the mainstream media’s coverage of the Tea Party movement’s online activities gave the perception of momentum for the movement. Mainstream media coverage of new media also gave the Tea Party movement a much larger platform. When the mainstream media reported on these messages, the effect is to extend and amplify the opinions of the decentralized online echo chambers.
What Hindman (2009) calls the “online echo chamber,” is possible because of the misperception that the Internet is a truly trickle-up medium devoid of gatekeepers. However, the majority of content created on new media is not actually consumed on a large scale. The mainstream media still must lend coverage to new media content for it to get any mainstream attention. Therefore, what seems like unfiltered ideology is still filtered by the mainstream media gatekeepers. While the Internet appears to foster grassroots movements by eliminating gatekeepers, the selective coverage of new media by the mainstream media functions as a type of gatekeeping, and further gives these movements credibility and momentum (ibid).

Perhaps the best early example of mainstream media’s coverage of the Tea Party’s new media leading to increased momentum for their ideology was during the health care reform debate of 2009. The movement branded the Affordable Care Act “Obamacare” and said it was yet another example of the federal government’s overreach. The term “Obamacare” is often used in a derogatory way to suggest that the President forced unwanted health insurance reform on the American people. Members of the Tea Party movement saw stopping the legislation as their best opportunity to assert their influence on Obama’s political agenda. DeMint (2011: 74) recollected, “If we could stop Obama’s top priority initiative, we could hopefully break his momentum on the multitude of other new government programs he was promoting. Then perhaps he would slow down and listen to the American people.”

In August of 2009, the Tea Party’s opposition to the health care legislation manifested itself in protests at town halls across the nation. Members of the Tea Party became vocal and disruptive presences at Congressional town halls. These town hall protests represented a marked change in strategy from the early Tea Party protest rallies, because they were focused on a
particular policy. Disrupting the town halls was actually a strategy that was encouraged by members of the movement. In a memo sent to Tea Party activists, they were instructed on how to best disrupt the proceedings:

– Artificially Inflate Your Numbers: “Spread out in the hall and try to be in the front half. The objective is to put the Rep on the defensive with your questions and follow-up. The Rep should be made to feel that a majority, and if not, a significant portion of at least the audience, opposes the socialist agenda of Washington.”

– Be Disruptive Early And Often: “You need to rock-the-boat early in the Rep’s presentation, Watch for an opportunity to yell out and challenge the Rep’s statements early.”

– Try To “Rattle Him,” Not Have An Intelligent Debate: “The goal is to rattle him, get him off his prepared script and agenda. If he says something outrageous, stand up and shout out and sit right back down. Look for these opportunities before he even takes questions (Fang, 2009).

These disruptions were often filmed and subsequently went viral on the Internet. What made the disruption strategy especially effective was that the mainstream media covered the online videos of the rowdy town halls. This coverage further validated and gave momentum to the movement’s objections to the legislation. In other words, the new media facilitated and gave momentum to the Tea Party’s opposition to the legislation because the mainstream media chose to rebroadcast the new media content.

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*a* [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yX4F_cb9AXk&feature=player_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yX4F_cb9AXk&feature=player_embedded)
**Discussion**

By the beginning of 2010, the Tea Party movement was already having a significant effect on the national political conversation. Early attempts to co-opt, attack and centralize the movement had for the most part failed. This might have been because, as Brafman and Beckstrom (2006: 21) argue, “when attacked, a decentralized organization tends to become even more open and decentralized.” Members of the movement believed that the Tea Party’s early success was because of this decentralization. Rasmussen & Schoen (2010: 168) argued,

> The movement’s decentralized nature is more a strength than a weakness . . . While some organizational streamlining may be inevitable in the future, the Tea Party movement’s power lies in the way it mirrors the diversity, nonconformity, and individuality of the American people. This “disorganized” quality has put the political class on the run and changed American politics.

The Tea Party had effectively become what McGrath (2010) called “a centralized Web destination for decentralized malcontents.”

However, the movement was also beginning to realize that they needed to work with the mainstream media in order to gain momentum for the movement. A movement that had started almost exclusively on the Internet was now regularly garnering mainstream media coverage. Public figures like Palin and DeMint, despite being part of the political “establishment,” were regularly able to attract mainstream media coverage to the Tea Party movement. While the movement was reluctant to have spokespeople, the mainstream media coverage of these political figures ultimately benefited the movement. DeMint (2011: 172) justified his increased mainstream media appearances saying, “the media coverage was encouraging grassroots activists around the country and helping to convince them their voices were being heard in Washington.” By using new media as their mouthpiece, they had been able to usurp what they saw as the
liberal “MSM” gatekeepers. However, a higher profile alone was not enough to affect major political change. The question became whether a decentralized grassroots movement could achieve legitimate political results.
PART II: DECENTRALIZED CAMPAIGNS

On March 23, 2010, President Obama signed into law the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. It was a landmark achievement for the President, and a seemingly devastating blow to the Tea Party movement. Despite months of protests, special election victories and large rallies, the controversial law was still passed. On the same day that the bill was signed, Sarah Palin (2010) posted a note to her Facebook account entitled, “Don’t Get Demoralized! Get Organized! Take Back the 20!” The post went on to encourage conservatives to continue to organize at a grassroots level against vulnerable Democratic candidates in Congress. Below her post was a map of the United States with images of a targets over the most vulnerable congressional districts held by Democrats (See Figure 2.1.1). The post got widespread mainstream media attention, many of the stories focusing on the violent connotations of the cross hairs. Perhaps more importantly, the post signaled a new strategy and the second phase in the Tea Party movement: campaigning.

Part II explores how the Tea Party transitioned from a decentralized grassroots protest movement into a decentralized campaign apparatus. Chapter 3 explores Tea Party backed

\[\text{\textsuperscript{b} On January 8, 2011, Gabrielle Giffords a Democrat from Tuscon, Arizona, who had been one of Palin’s 2010 congressional targets, was the victim of an attempted assassination. In the aftermath of the horrific event, Palin steadfastly denied that the cross hairs were meant to incite violence of any kind. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhcDh0-__5m4)}\]
candidates campaign victories and defeats. It will show evidence that the Tea Party candidate’s “anti-establishment” message proved successful in primary elections against “establishment” Republicans, but how this strategy did not always have the same success in general election contests. Chapter 4 is a case study that examines Christine O’Donnell’s Twitter activity during the 2010 Delaware U.S. Senate Republican primary. The analysis explores the issues discussed on her campaign’s Twitter account and to whom the messages were targeted. The findings suggest that during the 2010 midterm election cycle Tea Party candidates targeted decentralized national audiences as well as local audiences on Twitter.
Chapter 3: Campaigns

Scott Brown

The first major test for the movement occurred on January 19, 2010, with the special election for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Ted Kennedy in Massachusetts. The seat, which Kennedy had occupied for 47 years, was widely considered to be a Democratic lock. However, during the contentious health care reform debate, it became clear that the seat might represent the deciding vote in the U.S. Senate. Scott Brown, the Republican nominee, vowed to vote against the bill if elected, effectively making the special election a referendum on the Affordable Care Act. It was also considered a highly symbolic election because Kennedy had been one of the most vocal proponents of universal health care during his time in the Senate.

Despite his unlikely chances, the Tea Party rallied behind Brown’s candidacy. The Tea Party’s support of Brown signaled a major ideological turning point in the movement. Brown held some relatively liberal positions on social issues, which in different circumstances might have branded him a “Republican In Name Only” (RINO) to supporters of the Tea Party movement. As Rasmussen & Schoen (2010: 181) argue, “The decision by FreedomWorks to commit to the Brown campaign illustrates an important truth about the Tea party movement: it is far more pragmatic than its critics want to admit. If electing Scott Brown could stop Obama’s healthcare plan, then there was no point in worrying about his being perfect on every issue.”

The most significant indicator of the Tea Party’s influence on the election came from online donations. The Tea Party tapped into their decentralized online network of donors and raised

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c Since his election to the U.S. Senate, some Tea Party groups turned on Brown based on his support for some Democratic legislation, threatening him with a primary challenge in 2012.
over $12 million for Brown in January, making $1.3 million in a single day “money bomb” (Ruffini, 2010). A “money bomb” is when a candidate or organization solicits large donations from their supporters in a short period of time. By consolidating all of their fundraising around a single “money bomb,” these fundraisers often raise millions of dollars in donations. By design, these “money bombs” are meant to maximize both the financial and political impact of the money raised from the fundraiser. The sheer magnitude of the money raised in such a short period of time often garners increased media coverage, which gives further credibility to the strength of the movement. However, as will be discussed in Part III, Tea Party groups rarely asked for financial donations from their members. The lack of regular fundraising appeals by the Tea Party therefore made the large “money bomb” totals look more significant than they perhaps actually were. In light of the fact that they rarely ask for money, these “money bombs” likely exaggerated the overall financial strength of the Tea Party movement. That being said, the amount of money raised by the Tea Party on behalf of Brown undoubtedly had a significant impact on the election.

The Tea Party also used new media “bombs” during the campaign in order to flood the Internet with negative messages about Martha Coakley, the Democratic nominee. For instance, in what is called a “Twitter-Bomb”\textsuperscript{d}, The American Future Fund manipulated Twitter by,

- Set(ting) up nine anonymous Twitter accounts in early morning hours prior to the election that sent hundred
- of tweets accusing Martha Coakley of taking money from health insurance lobbyists to other influential 
- Twitter accounts around the state, linking back to anonymous websites containing further details. 

\textsuperscript{d} Derives its name from the term “Google Bomb,” which is a similar strategy employed on Google to manipulate search engine results. By linking en masse to a particular website, campaigns are able to improve their placement in search results. This strategy has also been used to spread and lend credibility to misinformation about political opponents.
realized the messages were spam and shut down the accounts two hours later, but by that point the messages had reached nearly 60,000 people. The sudden spike caused the attacks on Coakley to turn up in Google searches for her name, effectively gaming Google’s real-time search functions (Keller 2010).

On January 19th, Brown decisively defeated Coakley, seemingly dealing a crippling blow to the Affordable Care Act. Although Brown’s vote was widely expected to give the Republicans the necessary votes in the Senate to filibuster the legislation, thanks to procedural maneuvers invoked by the Democratic leadership, his vote ultimately did not block passage of the bill. Despite not achieving their ultimate goal, the Tea Party was emboldened by the victory heading into the 2010-midterm elections.

**RINO Primary Challenges**

Many Republicans struggled with whether or not to embrace the movement. One of the reasons for their hesitation was that many incumbent Republicans had been threatened by the Tea Party with primary challenges. The movement was unabashedly conservative and if incumbent Republicans did not reflect this ideology, they were threatened with being replaced by more conservative candidates. As DeMint (2011: 6) argued, “The only way to change the Republican Conference and the Washington establishment was to change the people in Congress.” Many incumbent Republicans were labeled RINO’s by the movement, a term used in order to suggest that a politician did not actually hold the conservative values traditionally associated with the Republican Party. The RINO accusations and threats of primary challenges effectively forced some incumbent Republicans to take more conservative positions in order to appease the Tea Party movement. For instance, Republican U.S. Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah,
who had frequently worked with his Democratic colleagues in the past, began to take hard-line conservative stances once he was threatened with a primary challenge (Pareene, 2011).

The RINO accusations were a direct consequence of many conservative’s disappointment with George W. Bush’s administration. Bush, who had campaigned in 2000 as a compassionate conservative, had in their opinion turned his back on limited government conservatism. For instance, they pointed to his support of the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), which bailed out banks during the 2008 financial meltdown, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which required states to meet certain academic standards in order to receive federal funding (Rasmussen & Schoen, 2010). As Armey & Kibbe (2010: 49) argued, “Personally, we find it hard not to blame Republicans for much of current predicament. The Bush administration, aided and abetted by many Republicans in the House and Senate, virtually erased any practical or philosophical distinction between the two parties.”

The first victim of the RINO primary challenges was Dede Scozzafava, a Republican from upstate New York. On July 22, 2009, Scozzafava was chosen as the Republican nominee in a special election to fill a congressional seat in New York’s 23rd congressional district (NY-23). The Tea Party movement deemed Scozzafava a RINO based on her more liberal positions on some social issues. The movement instead backed Doug Hoffman, a more conservative candidate, eventually forcing Scozzafava to suspend her campaign. Scozzafava then endorsed the Democratic candidate, Bill Owens, who went on to win the special election. Regardless of the final result, the Tea Party movement considered the election a victory; as Rush Limbaugh would later say, “We kept a horrible Republican from possibly winning” (Markon, 2010). While the movement was ultimately unsuccessful at electing their candidate, NY-23
demonstrated that the Tea Party was able to affect what type of Republicans would compete in
general elections. What the election also demonstrated was the ability of the Tea Party to engage
and mobilize decentralized national supporters in local elections. New media tools allowed Tea
Party supporters from across the country to have a significant impact on NY-23.

Their next victim was three-term Republican Senator Robert F. Bennett of Utah, who was
defeated in a contentious primary on May 8, 2010 by Tea Party backed candidate, Mike Lee\(^e\).
Bennett was targeted by the Tea Party because of his support for the TARP and health care
reform (Gardner, 2010). Democrats saw Bennett’s surprising loss as evidence of the Tea Party
movement’s extreme ideology. Tim Kaine, then chairman of the Democratic National
Committee, responded to Bennett’s defeat saying, "That the Tea Party would consider Bob
Bennett -- one of the most conservative members of the U.S. Senate -- too liberal just goes to
show how extreme the Tea Party is" (ibid). What it actually demonstrated was how effective the
movement had become at organizing their decentralized online network against “establishment”
Republicans in the primaries.

Another “anti-establishment” figure that emerged during the 2010 Republican primaries
was Rand Paul. Paul was the son of Ron Paul, whose 2008 presidential campaign is credited by
some as being the precursor to the Tea Party movement (Rasmussen & Schoen, 2010). Paul ran
against Kentucky’s Secretary of State Jim Bunning, in the Republican U.S. Senate primary.
Many “establishment” Republicans including U.S. Senate Minority leader Mitch McConnell,
endorsed Bunning during the primary. On May 18, 2010, Paul defeated Bunning by an 11.6%

\(^e\) Lee would go on to win the general election on November 2, 2010.
Again the Tea Party interpreted his victory as a blow to the Republican “establishment” because of Bunning’s high profile “establishment” support. As Paul (2011:11) would later write, “That the Tea Party has so many enemies in the establishment media and government should tell its members they’re doing something right.”

During the Republican primaries, the “anti-establishment” Tea Party candidates were at a clear disadvantage to the “establishment” Republicans that they were running against. Many of the candidates were political novices running against incumbents with well-established campaign operations. As a consequence, new media proved to be an effective tool against “establishment” Republicans during the primaries because it afforded Tea Party candidates the ability to run their campaigns as outsiders within the Republican Party. New media technology allowed decentralized Tea Party supporters with no direct interest in an election to band together online against anyone they deemed a RINO or part of the “establishment.” For the most part, it also allowed these candidates to operate under the radar and the scrutiny of the mainstream media. While they did not have the same financial resources as their “establishment” opponents, new media gave them a national platform and passionate decentralized online network of Tea Party supporters to whom they could completely control their message. The strength of the Tea Party’s decentralized online networks will be further explored in depth in Chapter 4’s discussion of Christine O’Donnell’s Twitter activity.

Paul would go on to win the general election on November 2, 2010.
The General

On January 15, 2009, Joe Biden vacated the U.S. Senate seat he had held since January 3, 1973 to become the Vice-President of the United States. This set the stage for former Republican Governor and U.S. Representative Mike Castle to become Delaware’s next U.S Senator. On September 2, 2010, Castle had an 11% advantage in the polls against the Democrat’s nominee, Chris Coons (Rasmussen Reports, 2010). Castle’s only competition in the Republican primary was Christine O’Donnell, a Tea Party backed perennial candidate with no previous governing experience.

On September 14, 2010, O’Donnell unexpectedly defeated Castle in the Republican primary. Like the other Tea Party backed candidates, O’Donnell’s surprising victory was facilitated by the decentralized online national support she had received from the Tea Party. O’Donnell (2011: 330) herself later said, “Our Primary victory is due in large part to the online activists who fed the momentum leading up to election day.” One reason her victory was considered so surprising was because her vast online national support allowed her to campaign largely under-the-radar throughout most of the primary. In other words, O’Donnell was not considered a viable threat to Castle because her support came from a seemingly invisible online network. This invisible decentralized network of support allowed O’Donnell to “sneak up” and overwhelm Castle (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006). Because there were less than 183,000 eligible Republican voters in the primary, which will be discussed more in Chapter 4, this invisible online network was able to have a significant impact on the primary’s result (Yellin, 2010).

However, the general election would prove to be more challenging for O’Donnell. On November 2, 2010, O'Donnell lost the general election to Coons by 17%. It was a significant
loss, and one that many pundits have said might have cost the GOP the Senate majority in the 2010-midterm elections.

One of the biggest contributing factors to her general election defeat was the increased mainstream media coverage that O’Donnell received after her primary victory. As O’Donnell (2011: 230) recounted in her book,

Wherever we went, it seemed, we were followed by a big-time news organization. Kelly O’Donnell –(no relation!) – NBC’s Capitol Hill correspondent, was meeting us at the farm for a Today show interview. Jessica Yellin, a CNN political reporter, was joining us later that afternoon. I was honored by the national attention, but I didn’t want to take time from the campaign, so I told these reporters I’d be happy to talk to them if they met me on the campaign trail.

According to Pew’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, O’Donnell was the number two newsmaker in the entire 2010-midterm elections, trailing only President Obama in the amount of media coverage she received (Pew, 2010). The amount of national media attention she received was so significant that when CNN hosted a debate between O’Donnell and Coons at the University of Delaware, had an audience of 1.7 million, nearly double Delaware’s entire population (O’Donnell, 2011).

However, with increased mainstream media coverage also came increased scrutiny of O’Donnell. For instance, Bill Maher, a popular liberal talk-show host, released a series of embarrassing statements that O’Donnell had made on his show in the late 1990’s. In one clip, O’Donnell said she had “dabbled in witchcraft.” In response to the backlash, O’Donnell’s campaign released an advertisement in which she proclaimed, “I’m not a witch.” Instead of

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iWRw3oZdg4
mitigating the situation, the advertisement went viral, and was widely parodied, most notably by *Saturday Night Live*. O’Donnell (2011) now claims that she never approved the message and that the advertisement was never meant to be released.

O’Donnell, like many other Tea Party candidates in the 2010 midterm election, responded to the increased media scrutiny by shunning the mainstream media during the general election, instead choosing to communicate almost exclusively through new media. For instance, one of the most popular newspapers in Delaware, *The News Journal*, complained that they were not given access to O'Donnell during the general election (Somashekhar 2010). O’Donnell (2010: 272) explained her decision in her book saying, “Mass media lends itself to a nation’s slide into socialism because it reduces all policy into sound bites.” Similarly, Paul (2011: 97) would later say, in reference to a disastrous interview with MSNBC Rachel Maddow, “In retrospect, the biggest mistake I made was thinking I could go on a liberal network and be treated fairly.” What the Tea Party candidates had learned was that the same mainstream media outlets that had given them a platform and magnified their “anti-establishment” narrative during the primaries had become highly critical of the candidates during the general election. The candidates attributed this increased scrutiny as “MSM” bias against conservatives (Paul, 2011; O’Donnell, 2011).

O’Donnell’s new media strategy during the general election was similar to the one that Palin took after the 2008 election. Palin shunned most mainstream media outlets (with the exception of Fox News, where she is now a pundit), because she felt they had given her unfair coverage during the campaign. Instead, Palin chose to disseminate her political message almost exclusively through new media. A spokesperson for Palin said after the election, "Facebook
itself is a true testament to American ingenuity and the entrepreneurial spirit; it will remain one of many great sources through which the governor will communicate directly with Americans’” (Clilitza, 2009). In other words, Palin preferred Facebook messages because they were unfiltered by the mainstream media’s gatekeepers. Weigel (2009) in his discussion of Palin’s new media presence argued, “She is allowed to shape the public debate without actually engaging in it.”

The “anti-establishment” and RINO accusations during the primaries also made it difficult for some Tea Party candidates to work with the “establishment” Republicans during the general election. For instance, O’Donnell’s campaign blamed her loss on the GOP’s lack of support during the general election. Doug Sachtleben (2010), an O’Donnell campaign spokesperson said,

In mid-July a Rasmussen poll showed that Christine would have defeated Chris Coons. Had the NRSC and State GOP backed O’Donnell after the primary, like Sen. McConnell did with Rand Paul Kentucky’s Senator-elect, we may have seen the victory that the poll predicted. Instead, we experienced a stall and Republicans didn’t come together until there were less than 2 weeks left before the election. Clearly, Christine and the campaign would not have been alone in defending against the mischaracterization aimed at her.

In her book, O’Donnell (2011: 223) claims that the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) was actively spreading rumors about her to the press during the general election. The RINO campaign she had run against Castle during the primary had clearly upset the Republican “establishment,” which made it difficult to work with them during the general election. While this lack of GOP support might have been related to some of the controversies that emerged
during her candidacy, it also demonstrated one of the consequences of running against the “establishment.”
Chapter 4: Christine O’Donnell’s Primary Tweets

The Delaware Primary

What successful primary challenges demonstrated was that the Tea Party movement was capable of getting highly conservative candidates nominated. The “establishment” was proven vulnerable when challenged by the Tea Party. Nowhere was this vulnerability more apparent than in the Delaware U.S. Senate Republican primary. During the primary, O’Donnell used Twitter as a means of decentralized grassroots organization against the “establishment.” In a fragmented media environment, Twitter allowed Tea Party candidates to communicate directly with highly active decentralized online echo chambers around the country. One of the advantages of Twitter for these candidates was that they gained a large decentralized invisible network of national supporters as well as local supporters during the primary elections. These large networks of national Tea Party supporters were especially important because they generated millions of dollars for Tea Party candidates during the primaries.

In order to better understand how the Tea Party used new media in the 2010 Republican primaries, this analysis examined O’Donnell’s Twitter activity during the Delaware U.S. Senate Republican primary. As this analysis will show, Twitter’s decentralized structure allowed O’Donnell to gain national recognition and fundraise from like-minded national Tea Party supporters during the primary.

Research Question

This study seeks to explore how a Tea Party candidate uses Twitter’s functionality to engage both local and national Tea Party supporters. While the functions themselves are the same, the
way in which they were targeted engaged different local and national audiences. Thus, this paper addresses the question: How did Christine O’Donnell use Twitter’s functionality to communicate with decentralized national Tea Party supporters during the Delaware Republican primary?

The following hypotheses will be tested in this study:

- $H_1$: Christine O’Donnell’s Twitter activity during the primary was targeted more frequently at a national audience than a local audience.
- $H_0$: Christine O’Donnell’s Twitter activity during the primary was not targeted more frequently at a national audience than a local audience.
- $H_2$: Christine O’Donnell did not use national Twitter organizational functions (e.g. Hashtags and @replies) in conjunction with local Twitter functions.
- $H_0$: Christine O’Donnell used national Twitter organizational functions (e.g. Hashtags and @replies) in conjunction with local Twitter functions.

**Literature Review**

**Twitter**

Twitter is a micro-blogging tool that allows users to send 140 character text based messages known as “tweets” to their “followers.” Users “follow” other users on the site in order to receive updates in their timeline. Messages can be sent from Twitter.com, mobile devices, or third party applications. Twitter is currently a free service and open to the public. Twitter’s website describes the service as an, “evolution of mobile messaging, not replacing SMS, IM, or email but introducing a new public dimension to messaging.” In other words, Twitter allows
users to communicate with large numbers of people as if it were a person-to-person message. Since all tweets are public by default, messages posted on the site can be accessed by anyone.

Twitter’s functionality is user specific because it is entirely user dependent. Users control the site’s functionality by choosing which users to follow. Java, Song, Finn, and Tseng (2007) categorize Twitter users as either information sources, friends, or information seekers. In any given user’s timeline there might be many different categories of users. Java et. al., (ibid) also categorize the content of Twitter messages as daily chatter, sharing information or URLs, or reporting news and conversation. Because of the size restrictions on the length of the message, most tweets are “informal communication,” which is a brief water-cooler type conversation (Zhao & Rosson, 2009). Again, the functionality is highly variable depending on whom the user has chosen to follow.

Another major aspect of Twitter’s functionality is its mobility. According to Jack Dorsey, one of the co-founders of Twitter, “It was really SMS that inspired the further direction - the particular constraint of 140 characters was kind of borrowed” (Sarano, 2009). The ability to update one’s Twitter account from a mobile device allows users to stay connected to their followers from virtually anywhere. This mobility is significant because it eliminates traditional media gatekeepers by giving users the ability to broadcast and receive information from anywhere at anytime.

As with other forms of new media, Twitter is a high choice medium that allows users to follow a large number of different feeds. Some users use the service simply as a means to communicate with their personal networks, while others use it as a consumption medium for popular culture. Some companies have even begun to use it as a way to communicate directly
with their customers. The one common functionality seems to be the ability to create and communicate with a community of like-minded individuals.

Demographics and Engagement

Twitter’s number of registered members and tweets has increased exponentially since its inception (Weil, 2010). As of October 20, 2010, Twitter reportedly had 175 million registered users and was adding nearly 370,000 new users each day (Miller, 2010). In June of 2010, Twitter announced that they had over 190 million unique visitors per month (Schonfeld, 2010). Twitter’s explanation for the difference in the number of registered users and unique visitors is that the majority of visitors do not actively produce content, instead using the service primarily as a consumption medium (Schonfeld, 2010). In other words, the number of users consuming Twitter content is not limited to registered content producing users. These “consumer” users likely find Twitter content on other mediums like blogs or news websites. Twitter’s unique form also allows users to engage in the community without actually creating content. For instance, by simply following another Twitter feed, a user is in effect lending support to another user’s content. Therefore, Twitter user engagement cannot be interpreted based solely on traffic and content metrics.

In December of 2010, Pew Internet (2010) reported that of all online adults, eight percent used Twitter, a small fraction of which use the medium for political purposes. They also found that young people were significantly more likely to use the service than older adults; African Americans and Latinos were twice as likely to use Twitter as white users; people residing in urban areas were twice as likely to use Twitter as those in rural areas. In a similar study
conducted in October of 2009, Pew found that significantly more people used update services if they had broadband or wireless access. Pew (2010) found that “55% of these Twitter users share links to news stories. One in ten (12%) do this at least once a day . . . 53% of these Twitter users use Twitter to re-tweet material posted by others, with 18% doing so on a daily basis.” In other words, a majority of Twitter users use the service to actively share content created by others to their network of followers. For instance, Tea Party supporters use Twitter to share content they discover on the Internet with other Tea Party supporters.

Whether Twitter’s functions are passive or active forms of engagement can be difficult to quantify. Some media critics have argued that passive user engagement demonstrates the limitations of organizing through social media. For instance, Gladwell (2010) argued, “social networks are effective at increasing participation—by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires. The Facebook page of the Save Darfur Coalition has 1,282,339 members, who have donated an average of nine cents apiece.” Gladwell’s point is that “following” does not necessarily generate active user engagement in what they are following. Simply following a cause on social media is, in his opinion, an empty form of support. What Gladwell’s argument fails to consider is that the economics of social media may not be the only way to accurately gauge the engagement of “followers.” In other words, social media engagement creates different forms of participation. For instance, the act of “following” is a form of participation because it disseminates information to a larger network of users. Whether this information leads to further engagement is hard to know, but the increased reach of the information is significant. It is also important to acknowledge that followers might not necessarily be supporters of a cause. Undecided followers might follow a cause in order to gain the information necessary to make an
informed decision. The mainstream media’s coverage of social media also often reaches more people than actually “follow” the groups themselves. Therefore, the impact of these social media groups should not be solely understood within the medium.

Most political Twitter accounts fall primarily under the category of “information sources.” For instance, many Tea Party Twitter accounts provide links to news stories that may be of interest to supporters of the movement. Users follow these informational Twitter accounts in order to gain information “directly” from the candidates. Many of these tweets are not substantive and are simply used as a means to drive traffic to other new media. The content of these messages can include chatter, the sharing of links, news reportage and conversations with supporters.

Twitter data can also be both inaccurate and misleading because of the potential to manipulate follower counts and tweets. For instance, Indiana researchers found that many Tea Party groups strategically manipulated Twitter functions in order to expand their reach. The research found,

A number of accounts sending out duplicate messages and also re-tweeting messages from the same few accounts in a closely connected network. For instance, two since-closed accounts, called @PeaceKaren_25 and @HopeMarie_25, sent out 20,000 similar tweets, most of them linking to, or promoting, the House minority leader John Boehner's website, gpleader.gov (Lach, 2010).

The importance of this finding is that the “audience” might perceive the influence of a Twitter account to be greater than it actually is. By inflating the number of followers and tweets about a candidate, it might give the perception of credibility.

Despite being considered “spam” by Twitter’s terms of service, mass spamming can have a wide reach. Social media spamming strategies can therefore have significant effects on the
Search engine hierarchy of information (Pariser, 2011). Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the system used by websites to maximize their placement within search results. Search engines like Google have algorithms that determine where and how a website appears in their search results. The details of the algorithms are often considered proprietary because companies like Google do not want websites to “game” or manipulate their system. For instance, what is known about the algorithm is that it determines the relevancy of a website based on the quantity and quality of the websites that link to that website. Spamming tools allow both information and disinformation to gain more credibility and prominence on the Internet, as was the case with the Coakley “Twitter Bomb.” Rather than focusing on what we traditionally consider the “audience” of the medium, perhaps future research should examine how the audience was exposed to information.

ChristineOD Demographics

O’Donnell’s Twitter account maintained around 1,000 followers for most of the Republican primary campaign. Many of these followers likely knew and supported O’Donnell from her previous unsuccessful campaigns. These users were likely from Delaware and strong O’Donnell supporters who were actively involved in her campaign, who followed O’Donnell’s Twitter account to get updates about the campaign and to show their support for the candidate. In other words, they followed the account in order to be actively engaged in her candidacy.

Between July and August of 2010, O’Donnell’s Twitter followers had doubled from 2,000 to 4,000. One possible explanation for the sudden increase in followers was the increased interest in the midterm elections. As the electorate became more engaged in the primary, they
were more likely to follow a candidate on Twitter. While many of these new followers were likely O’Donnell supporters, there were also likely some users who supported her opponent, Mike Castle. Another possibility was that these users were undecided Republican voters who were following both candidates on Twitter so that they could make a more informed decision. Regardless of their motivations for following O’Donnell’s Twitter account, it is clear that users became more active on the medium as the election neared.

There was also a clear increase in O’Donnell’s Twitter followers immediately after Sarah Palin’s endorsement. Palin’s endorsement on September 9, 2010 (Palin, 2010), garnered national media coverage which likely generated more national interest in the Delaware primary. However, the most significant increase in the account’s followers occurred the day after O’Donnell’s surprise upset of Castle in the Republican primary. The national media coverage that her surprise victory generated was likely a major cause for the increase in O’Donnell’s followers. While it is difficult to determine where these new followers were from geographically, the increased national media attention likely generated more national followers. Many of these national followers were likely Tea Party supporters from outside of Delaware showing their support for a like-minded candidate. These decentralized national followers were most likely not directly involved in the Delaware campaign.

To further put some of these numbers into perspective it is also important to compare O’Donnell’s Twitter follower data to the Delaware electorate. As of 2009, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that the population of Delaware was 885,122 (Census Bureau, 2010). There were fewer than 183,000 registered Republicans in Delaware in September of 2010 (Yellin, 2010). This is significant because Delaware holds a closed primary, which meant that the
293,000 registered Democrats and 146,000 registered independents were not allowed to vote in the primary (ibid). In other words, on the day of the Republican primary, O’Donnell’s Twitter account was being actively followed by about 2% of Delaware’s potential Republican primary electorate. This percentage is likely exaggerated because many of the 4,000 followers were likely from outside of Delaware due to her national notoriety. This relatively small percentage further underscores that the reach of social media messages has less to do with followers than how and to whom that message is spread. In other words, the media coverage of O’Donnell’s Tweets played a more significant role in the ultimate reach of the message than the Tweets themselves.

**Method**

The data set, *Primary Tweets*, consists of 289 tweets I individually coded that appeared on Christine O’Donnell’s official Twitter account (http://twitter.com/#!/ChristineOD), between March 11, 2010, the day that O’Donnell officially announced her candidacy for U.S. Senate, and September 14, 2010, the day that O’Donnell defeated Mike Castle in the Republican primary. I individually hand coded each Tweet using inductive parameters that were adapted as new patterns emerged in the data analysis (Eaton, 2010).

Twitter users can use hashtags, “#”, followed by a word as a way to aggregate tweets about a particular subject. For instance, users can aggregate tweets about Georgetown by typing “#georgetown.” Popular hashtags become “trending topics,” which are the topics that are the most discussed on the site at a given time. The hashtag functionality was actually created by Twitter user, Chris Messina, on August 23, 2007, when looking for a way to aggregate Twitter
messages (Gannes, 2010). Hashtags therefore function as a way to create and organize a large collective conversation about a specific topic. Hashtags have become a particularly effective organizational tool for the Tea Party. Many political Twitter accounts encourage users to use specific hashtags in order to draw attention to particular messages. For instance, the hashtag “#obamacare” is often used as a way to voice displeasure with President Obama’s health reform legislation. Hashtags are used by Tea Party candidates for both national and local organization.

This content analysis coded hashtags as either “#national” or “#local.” National hashtags are used to engage a national audience. For instance, a popular national hashtag, “#tcot,” stands for “Top Conservatives on Twitter.” Their website (Top Conservatives on Twitter, 2010) describes the hashtag as “The Top Conservatives on Twitter list was started on November 28, 2008. The online conservative community it created launched the Tea Party movement on February 20, 2009.” The “#tcot” hashtag therefore functions as a way to both aggregate and engage with prominent conservatives on Twitter. When a Tea Party candidate uses this particular national hashtag, it engages other likeminded national conservatives on Twitter that follow this particular hashtag. These national hashtags are likely used in order to gain national recognition and support from the decentralized Tea Party networks.

Local hashtags on the other hand are more specific to local campaigns and are meant to engage local audiences. These hashtags are used as a way to engage local supporters who have a direct involvement in the local campaign. Because these hashtags are local-specific, they are likely only followed by people with a direct interest in the local election. For instance, Sharron Angle used “#dumpreid” and “#nvsen” in order to aggregate posts about her Nevada Senate race, whereas Christine O’Donnell’s account primarily used “#desen” and “#netde.” These local
hashtags are therefore used in order to engage local audiences. When used in conjunction with a national hashtag, a local hashtag might function as way to garner national attention to the local election.

Users can also tweet at a particular user by using”@reply.” For instance, a user can ask a question to The White House by including “@whitehouse” in their tweet. While this is a way to directly engage a particular user, it is also broadcast to all of the user’s followers. In other words, because this one to one communication is done in a public forum, it allows other users to actively engage in the conversation.

This analysis coded @replies as either “@national” or “@local.” A tweet was coded “@national” if O’Donnell @replied a nationally recognized Twitter user. For instance, if O’Donnell @replied Sarah Palin, a nationally recognized conservative leader, using “@SarahPalinUSA.” These tweets were likely meant to engage directly with the nationally recognized figure and their followers. A tweet was coded “@local” if O’Donnell @replied a Twitter user from Delaware that did not have a national following. For instance, if O’Donnell @replied a user with the Twitter handle “@DEgrandma.” These tweets were likely meant to directly engage with a local Delaware Twitter user.

Links included in Twitter messages direct followers to external websites. Links posted on Christine O’Donnell’s Twitter account were coded as either “national” or “local.” National links went to websites that catered to a national audience. For instance, a national link might direct users to a story found on CNN.com. Local links went to websites with more targeted local audiences. For instance, a local link might direct users to a story found on a Delaware-specific blog.
Candidates often refer to their political opponents in their Tweets. This analysis coded opponents referenced in O’Donnell’s tweets as either national or local opponents. For instance, a Tweet coded “local opponent” included a direct reference to Representative Mike Castle, O’Donnell’s Republican primary opponent. Tweets coded “national opponent” included direct references to either Congress or President Obama.

It is important to acknowledge that the content analysis results are potentially incomplete because Twitter allows users to delete Tweets. While a tweet’s deletion might cause an initial stir, the offending tweet no longer exists in the user’s timeline. This can become especially important when a user, or the person tweeting for the user, Tweets something controversial (Simon, 2010). There were however no publicized instances of Tweets disappearing from O’Donnell’s Twitter account during the primary election.

Results

The Primary Twitter analysis showed that national @replies were used more often than local @replies (Table 2.4.1 shows the percent frequency that each function was used in Primary Tweets). O’Donnell’s used national @replies (20.8%) more often than she used local @replies (14.2%). This suggests that O’Donnell primarily used @replies to engage nationally recognized Twitter users. By engaging with these national figures on Twitter, O’Donnell was likely attempting to expand the reach of her political message. This was likely a deliberate strategy employed by O’Donnell in order to gain recognition and endorsements from national conservative leaders like Sarah Palin. Therefore, directly engaging nationally recognized Twitter
users more often than her local Delaware constituents might suggest that O’Donnell primarily used @replies as a way to raise her national profile.

Table 2.4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Primary Twitter</th>
<th>#National</th>
<th>#local</th>
<th>@national</th>
<th>@local</th>
<th>Link-National</th>
<th>Link-Local</th>
<th>Opponent-National</th>
<th>Opponent-Local</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50.5%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=289

The Primary Twitter analysis showed that local hashtags (57.1%) were used more often than national hashtags (50.5%), local links (25.3%) were used more often than national links (23.2%), and local opponents (19.0%) were referenced more often than national opponents (12.8%). These findings suggest that we cannot reject the null hypothesis that O’Donnell’s Twitter activity during the primary was not targeted more frequently at a national audience than a local audience. However, what these findings do suggest is that O’Donnell used Twitter to engage with national audiences almost as frequently as she did local audiences. The implication of this finding is that O’Donnell used Twitter not only as a means to engage her local constituents, but also as a way to raise her national profile. The frequency that O’Donnell targeted national audiences in her Tweets is further evidence of the Tea Party’s decentralized makeup. In other words, O’Donnell considered engaging decentralized national audiences on Twitter almost as important as targeting the people who could actually vote in the Delaware Republican primary.

In the Primary Twitter analysis, national hashtags were often used in the same tweet as a local hashtag. Table 2.4.2 shows the frequency of O’Donnell’s use of a national hashtag in the
same tweet that she used a local hashtag (41.5%). The local hashtag used in conjunction with a national hashtag strategy was likely employed in order to engage national Tea Party supporters in the Delaware primary.

Table 2.4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#national, #local</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Pearson Chi-Square was statistically significant (p<.00). n=289

However, O’Donnell rarely used local hashtags in the same Tweet that she used a national @reply. Table 2.4.3 shows the frequency of O’Donnell’s use of a local hashtag in the same tweet that she used a national @reply (8.3%). This finding suggests that O’Donnell’s use of national @replies in the Primary Twitter analysis (20.8%) was not necessarily used to bring attention to the Delaware primary, but instead meant to increase her own national profile.

Table 2.4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>@national, #local</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Pearson Chi-Square was statistically significant (p<.00). n=289

These findings suggest that we can reject the null hypothesis that Christine O’Donnell used national Twitter functions in conjunction with local Twitter functions. The Primary Twitter analysis demonstrates that O’Donnell frequently used national hashtags in conjunction with local hashtags to engage decentralized national Tea Party supporters. However, O’Donnell frequently used national @replies without using local hashtags. This further suggests that O’Donnell used
nationally targeted Twitter functions during the Republican primary as a way to increase her national profile rather than engage with constituents in the local election. Therefore, while these findings show that O’Donnell frequently used Twitter as a means to engage local audiences, they also demonstrate that she often used it as a means to engage decentralized national audiences.

These results suggest that O’Donnell actively engaged both national and local audiences on Twitter during her Republican primary campaign. Considering the fact that she was a clear underdog to an “establishment” opponent throughout the primary, engaging national audiences was likely a strategy employed to raise her national profile. Twitter allowed O’Donnell to cheaply and efficiently gain decentralized national Tea Party support, which allowed her to be competitive against Castle. In other words, the new media allowed a local election to be affected by decentralized national networks.
Discussion

The Tea Party’s decentralized ideology guided their 2010 midterm campaign strategy. New media’s decentralized organizational structure allowed these groups to support and organize for candidates from across the country that they otherwise would not have had any affiliation with. National Tea Party support during the primaries allowed candidates to raise large amounts of money online, gain mainstream media coverage and be competitive with incumbent Republicans during the primaries. Tea Party candidates during the Republican primaries increased their vote shares by 20 points (Karpowitz, Monson, Patterson & Pope, 2011). However, this strategy did not necessarily work as effectively in the general election. Candidates associated with the Tea Party in the general election had almost no statistically significant effect on the Republican vote share (ibid). Simply being against the Republican “establishment” put some of these candidates at a clear disadvantage in the general election, because the local and national GOP leadership often withheld their support. While it is true, as Paul (2011: 20) argued, “the Tea Party brings more votes” it is also likely that candidates like O’Donnell lost votes from moderate Republican voters who would have supported incumbent Republicans.

One reason that the Tea Party backed candidates might not have been as successful in the general election is that the members of the movement were not as engaged. According to an October 2010 poll conducted by The Washington Post that surveyed every active Tea Party group in the nation, “Seventy percent of the grass-roots groups said they have not participated in any political campaigning this year. As a whole, they have no official candidate slates, have not rallied behind any particular national leader, have little money on hand, and remain ambivalent about their goals and the political process in general” (Gardner 2010). In other words, a majority
of Tea Party supporters were not actively involved in getting Tea Party candidates elected. This disorganization is further evidence of the movement’s decentralization. The movement’s decentralization made it incredibly difficult to organize around individual candidates. It could also suggest that getting Tea Party candidates elected to Congress was not necessarily the movement’s top priority.

Despite their disdain for the mainstream media, the 2010 midterms once again demonstrated the importance and influence of the mainstream media’s coverage of the Tea Party movement. PEJ found that during the midterm elections, “Four of the 10 top election newsmakers are representatives of the tea party movement” (Pew, 2010). The mainstream media coverage gave Tea Party candidates a higher profile for better and for worse. During the general election, Tea Party candidate’s higher mainstream media profiles often backfired like it did for O’Donnell. The Tea Party’s adversarial relationship with the mainstream media was not an effective campaign strategy. In fact, Armey & Kibbe (2010: 198) encouraged Tea Party candidates to, “have a big list of reporters and producers who have covered local, state, and national politics . . . They need you as a source as much as you need them to write a fair piece about your group and your events.”

What became evident during the 2010 midterms was that there was no clear roadmap for a Tea Party candidacy. Balancing local and decentralized national support was difficult for some Tea Party backed candidates; increased mainstream media coverage was both a blessing and a curse; embracing and being embraced by the same GOP “establishment” that they had campaigned against was also difficult. However, what was clear was that Americans were upset with Washington. According to exit polls, 73% of Americans reported being angry or
dissatisfied with the federal government (Pew, 2010). Consequently, despite their many challenges, 32% of the Tea Party backed candidates went on to win on November 2, 2010 (MSNBC, 2010). On January 3, 2011, 45 freshman members of Congress were associated with the movement (ibid).
"And so the challenge, I think, for the Tea Party movement is to identify specifically what would you do. It's not enough just to say, get control of spending. I think it's important for you to say, I'm willing to cut veterans' benefits, or I'm willing to cut Medicare or Social Security benefits, or I'm willing to see these taxes go up."

- President Barack Obama, September 20, 2010

For all intents and purposes, the Tea Party movement had been incredibly successful in the 2010 midterms. Tea Party backed candidates had won five seats in the U.S. Senate and 40 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives (MSNBC, 2010). It was an historic victory for conservatives, and gave the Republicans the majority in the House of Representatives. Despite the large gains by the Republicans, exit polls showed that 53% of voters still expressed an unfavorable opinion of the GOP (Pew, 2010). The Democrats, despite losing seats, still retained a slim majority in the Senate. The Congress and the nation were divided. Perhaps the challenge that President Obama should have issued the Tea Party was, what could they do?

Part III examines how the Tea Party movement used new media to influence governance. Chapter 5 explores how the movement influenced the 112th Congress in the 2011 debt limit debate and explores the difficulties that the decentralized movement had when it came to working with the “establishment.” Chapter 6 is an analysis that examines 300 e-mails sent by a leading Tea Party group, Tea Party Nation, to its members between January and May of 2011. The analysis examines the issues most often addressed in the e-mails and compares them to the issues being discussed in the mainstream media at the time. The findings suggest that the Tea

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Party continued to maintain a decentralized ideology, one that was often dictated by the mainstream media’s agenda.
Chapter 5: Symbolic Legislation

How the freshman Tea Party representatives would govern was one of the biggest challenges for the 112th Congress. As was discussed in Part I, SMO’s like the Tea Party are a “purposive and collective attempt of a number of people to change individuals or societal institutions and structures” (Zald & Ash, 1966: 329). Rather than trying to offer an alternative bureaucratic organization, SMO’s try to change the bureaucracy itself. The Tea Party candidates had campaigned on the platform that government itself was the problem. As Paul (2011: 174) argues, “Spending, debt, high taxes, burdensome regulation – these are the problems the Tea Party now targets and all are almost entirely created by a “helpful” government trying to find “solutions.” While this proved to be a compelling campaign platform, the freshman Tea Party members were now part of the very “establishment” that they had campaigned against. Moving forward, this dichotomy would prove challenging for many members of the Tea Party movement.

Tea Party Caucus

One of the first signs of the Tea Party’s influence on Congress was the formation of the House Tea Party caucus. A caucus, which is formally known as a Congressional Member Organization (CMO), is an organized working group of Congress members that pursue common legislative goals. Michele Bachmann, a Republican congresswoman from Minnesota, who would later make a run for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, first formed the House Tea Party caucus on July 15, 2010. In a statement announcing the caucus Bachmann (2010) said,
This caucus will espouse the timeless principles of our founding, principles that all Members of Congress have sworn to uphold. The American people are doing their part and making their voices heard and this caucus will prove that there are some here in Washington willing to listen.

The implication of this statement was clear: members of Congress were not representing the Tea Party’s principles. The caucus, as of July 12, 2011, consisted of 60 members of Congress, all Republicans (ibid). Interestingly, of the 40 freshman Tea Party representatives in the 112th Congress, only 15 opted to join the caucus (Allen, 2011; See Figure 3.5.1). That meant that 75% of the members of the House Tea Party caucus were incumbent Republicans. This begs the question, how representative of the Tea Party movement was the House Tea Party caucus?

Senators Rand Paul, Mike Lee and Jim DeMint started their own Tea Party caucus on January 27, 2011, in order to promote the Tea Party’s ideals in the Senate. However, the Senate Tea Party caucus was also not embraced by some members of the movement. Senators Ronald H. Johnson, Marco Rubio and Patrick J. Toomey, who had all been elected with Tea Party support, opted to not join the Senate caucus. Johnson explained his decision to The Washington Post saying, “The reason I ran for U.S. Senate was to not only stop the Obama agenda but reverse it, I believe our best chance of doing that is to work towards a unified Republican Conference so that’s where I will put my energy” (Rucker, 2011). Johnson believed that in order to achieve the Tea Party’s legislative agenda, he had to work with, rather than against the “establishment” Republicans.

To some within the movement, the formation of congressional caucuses seemed at odds with the Tea Party’s decentralized narrative. For instance, Rubio explained his decision to not join the Senate caucus saying he feared that they were trying to co-opt the grassroots mantle
Rubio went on to say, “If all of a sudden being in the tea party is not something that is happening in Main Street but rather something that’s happening in Washington D.C., the tea party all of a sudden becomes some sort of movement run by politicians” (ibid). While both Lee and Bachmann claimed that the caucuses did not speak for the movement, the members of the caucuses effectively became the congressional representatives for the leaderless movement.

The Tea Party caucuses ultimately proved to be ineffective when it came to significantly influencing legislation. The House Tea Party caucus met only four times in the first eight months of the 112th Congress, and never took a formal position on any legislation (Berman, 2011). As it turns out, members of the House Tea Party caucus actually voted with the Republican Party position more often than Congress members who did not identify with the House Tea Party caucus (Allen, 2011). This is perhaps not entirely surprising considering that 75% of the House caucus members were incumbent Republicans. The lack of legislative action taken by the caucuses demonstrated that incumbent Republicans had simply adopted the Tea Party mantle for political purposes. The caucuses were fundamentally at odds with the decentralized ethos that had sustained the movement up to that point. Centralization within Congress had effectively made the movement unable to assert their influence as effectively as they had as a decentralized grassroots movement. In many ways, the Tea Party Caucuses were symbolic of what the Tea Party became after the 2010 midterms: a movement that found itself with a good deal of political capital, but no clear path forward.
Figure 3.5.1: Members of the House Tea Party Caucus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sandy Adams (FL-24)</th>
<th>Phil Gingrey (GA-11)</th>
<th>Rich Nugent (FL-05)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robert Aderholt (AL-04)</td>
<td>Louie Gohmert (TX-01)</td>
<td>Steven Palazzo (MS-04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd Akin (MO-02)</td>
<td>Vicky Hartzler (MO-04)</td>
<td>Steve Pearce (NM-02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodney Alexander (LA-05)</td>
<td>Jeff Duncan (SC-03)</td>
<td>Mike Pence (IN-06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michele Bachmann (MN-06)</td>
<td>Blake Farenthold (TX-27)</td>
<td>Ted Poe (TX-02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roscoe Bartlett (MD-06)</td>
<td>Stephen Lee Fincher (TN-08)</td>
<td>Tom Price (GA-06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Barton (TX-06)</td>
<td>John Fleming (LA-04)</td>
<td>Denny Rehberg (MT-At large)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob Bishop (UT-01)</td>
<td>Trent Franks (AZ-02)</td>
<td>David Roe (TN-01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gus Bilirakis (FL-09)</td>
<td>Phil Gingrey (GA-11)</td>
<td>Donald Ross (FL-12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Black (TN-06)</td>
<td>Louie Gohmert (TX-01)</td>
<td>Edward Royce (CA-40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Broun (GA-10)</td>
<td>Vicky Hartzler (MO-04)</td>
<td>Steve Scalise (LA-01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Burgess (TX-26)</td>
<td>Wally Herger (CA-02)</td>
<td>Pete Sessions (TX-32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Burton (IN-05)</td>
<td>Tim Huelskamp (KS-01)</td>
<td>Adrian Smith (NE-03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Carter (TX-31)</td>
<td>Lynn Jenkins (KS-02)</td>
<td>Lamar Smith (TX-21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Cassidy (LA-06)</td>
<td>Steve King (IA-05)</td>
<td>Cliff Stearns (FL-06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard Coble (NC-06)</td>
<td>Doug Lamborn (CO-05)</td>
<td>Tim Walberg (MI-07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Coffman (CO-06)</td>
<td>Jeff Landry (LA-03)</td>
<td>Joe Walsh (IL-08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ander Crenshaw (FL-04)</td>
<td>Blaine Luetkemeyer (MO-09)</td>
<td>Allen West (FL-22)</td>
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<td>John Culberson (TX-07)</td>
<td>Kenny Marchant (TX-24)</td>
<td>Lynn Westmoreland (GA-03)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeff Duncan (SC-03)</td>
<td>Tom McClintock (CA-04)</td>
<td>Joe Wilson (SC-02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake Farenthold (TX-27)</td>
<td>David McKinley (WV-01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Stephen Lee Fincher (TN-08) | Gary Miller (CA-42) | *
| Trent Franks (AZ-02) | Randy Neugebauer (TX-19) | |

The Debt Ceiling

“Look, here’s my expectation -- and I’ll take John Boehner at his word -- that nobody, Democrat or Republican, is willing to see the full faith and credit of the United States government collapse, that that would not be a good thing to happen. And so I think that there will be significant discussions about the debt limit vote. That’s something that nobody ever likes to vote on. But once John Boehner is sworn in as Speaker, then he’s going to have responsibilities to govern. You can’t just stand on the sidelines and be a bomb thrower.” – President Barack Obama (The White House, 2010).

Despite suffering historic losses in the 2010 midterms, President Obama was still able to achieve significant legislative victories during the 111th Congress’ lame duck session. Congress was able to repeal “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” (the ban on allowing homosexual members of the military to serve openly), they were able to extend unemployment benefits, approved a new
President Obama made the statement above at a press conference announcing these achievements in response to a question about the impending debt ceiling increase. In the wake of these significant bipartisan achievements, it seemed almost inconceivable that the incoming 112th Congress would not increase the debt ceiling.

The debt ceiling, also known as the debt limit, is the amount of money that America is allowed to borrow in order to pay for things that Congress has already authorized (Cooper & Story, 2011). Occasionally, Congress must raise the debt ceiling in order to pay for existing financial obligations. If the Congress were to not agree to raise the debt ceiling, the nation would default on its financial obligations. Since 1960, Congress had raised the debt ceiling 78 times (ibid). President Ronald Reagan (1983), a staunch advocate of small-government and inspiration to many in the Tea Party movement, once said with regards to raising the debt ceiling,

> The full consequences of a default – or even the serious prospect of default – by the United States are impossible to predict and awesome to contemplate. Denigration of the full faith and credit of the United States would have substantial effects on the domestic financial markets and on the value of the dollar in exchange markets. The national can ill afford to allow such a result.

In May of 2011, the federal government reached the $14.29 trillion debt ceiling; however, the Treasury department was able to temporarily extend the deadline to raise the debt ceiling to August 2, 2011.

The impending debt ceiling increase presented the freshman Tea Party representatives with a unique opportunity to assert their ideological influence on the federal government. In their first seven months, more than 80 bills were passed in The House of Representatives (Fahrenthold, 2011). The Republican majority in the House passed bills repealing “Obamacare,”
getting rid of federal limits on greenhouse gases, and ending federal mortgage assistance programs put in place by the Democratically controlled 111th Congress. The legislation was highly partisan and reflected the Tea Party’s decentralized vision for the federal government. However, many of these bills were simply symbolic gestures because they stood no chance of passage in the Democratically controlled Senate. In other words, their legislation up to that point had made it clear what they were against, but had little chance of achieving actual results. Obstructing an increase in the debt ceiling on the other hand would have significant repercussions on the size of the federal government.

The *Tea-Mail* analysis in Chapter 6 will show that the Tea Party felt betrayed by Speaker of the House John Boehner’s decision to cut only $30 billion from the 2011 budget after he had promised $100 billion in cuts during the midterm elections. So when on April 25, 2011, John Boehner told members of the Tea Party at a private meeting that Republicans would raise the debt ceiling, and that they would have to raise it again in the future, they became incensed (Carey, 2011). After the April 25th meeting, members of the Tea Party threatened to primary challenge both Boehner and Eric Cantor, the House Majority Leader, in retaliation for raising the debt ceiling (ibid). By May 9, 2011, Boehner was publicly saying that in order to raise the debt ceiling there would have to be trillions of dollars in cuts to the federal government (ibid).

Blocking the debt ceiling increase had been a Tea Party priority well before the negotiations became headline news (Dennis, MacGillis & Montgomery, 2011). The fact that “establishment” politicians like Boehner were insistent on raising the debt ceiling was even more justification for the Tea Party to oppose the increase. Members of the Tea Party did not think the full consequences of default were nearly as dire as the Obama administration had suggested.
For instance, Herman Cain, a Republican presidential candidate popular within the Tea Party movement, when asked what would happen if a deal had not been reached by the August 2\textsuperscript{nd} deadline said, “I don’t buy that there is going to be a catastrophe” (Cogan, 2011). Jenny Beth Martin, cofounder of the Tea Party Patriots, acknowledged that default might hurt, but said, “If it injures the people that we represent, but its benefiting the whole country, that’s what we need to be concerned about” (McMorris-Santoro, 2011).

The only alternative to not increasing the debt ceiling offered by some in the Tea Party was to include a balanced budget constitutional amendment. For instance, in early 2011, Paul (2011: 244) argued, “If the Democrats want to make it a choice between either raising the debt ceiling or shutting down the government, how about we don’t raise the debt ceiling and fund government based on receivables?” What Paul was advocating was a constitutional amendment that forced the federal government to balance the nation’s spending with its current revenues.

After many Tea Party representatives rejected Boehner’s “grand deal” with President Obama, Boehner attached a balanced budget amendment to the proposed legislation. Again though, this was considered a largely symbolic add-on because it stood no chance of passage in a Democratically controlled Senate.

However, the Republican leadership also saw the debt ceiling debate as an opportunity. In January of 2011, Cantor told the freshman Republicans that the debt ceiling increase could be used as “leverage” against President Obama (Dennis et al., 2011). While the Tea Party was insistent on not raising the debt ceiling, Cantor saw a unified Republican caucus’ threat of default as a bargaining chip to make significant cuts to the federal government. The Republican leadership’s centralized approach is an example of how “when attacked, centralized
organizations tend to become even more centralized” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006:139). The distinction between Cantor’s and the Tea Party’s approaches to the debt ceiling negotiations is demonstrative of one of the challenges that faced the movement when it came to governing. The decentralized movement was not capable of working within the centralized system to get legislative results. The Republican leadership’s centralized front on the other hand was able to work within the “establishment” to achieve similar, albeit more incremental results.

After months of negotiations, a budget deal was finally reached that cut trillions of dollars in federal spending and increased the debt ceiling through 2012. Although the Tea Party freshman were disappointed that the deal did not contain a balanced budget amendment, they were pleased with the historic cuts to the federal budget (Dennis et al., 2011). The Republican leadership acknowledged that the freshman Tea Party representatives had had a significant influence on the final deal (ibid). The Tea Party’s obstructionism was perhaps influential, but ultimately not as impactful as the Republican “establishment’s” centralized approach.

Compromise

On July 25, 2011, in an address to the nation, President Obama said that the American people were, “Fed up with a town where compromise has become a dirty word” (White House, 2011). Some freshman Tea Party Representatives must have agreed with this sentiment. Despite not getting everything they wanted in the debt ceiling deal, they were still able to achieve historic spending cuts. The limited-government ideology that had echoed throughout the Tea Party movement since its inception was beginning to show political results. However, even this was not enough for some members of the Tea Party movement.
Allen West, a freshman congressman from Florida, was one of the earliest and most vocal supporters of the Tea Party movement. However, during the debt ceiling negotiations he was criticized by many in the Tea Party for siding with the Republican leadership. In response to the criticism being levied against him, West accused the Tea Party of being “schizophrenic” (Isenstadt, 2011). West explained, “One of the things that I think conservatives have a problem with is what I call incrementalism. We believe that when we run a marathon and we start at mile zero, we’re automatically supposed to be at 26.2, but I tell you there are miles in between” (Milbank, 2011). For West, who had swept into office in 2010 on a largely “anti-establishment” message, compromise with the “establishment” was a marked change in approach. A West supporter argued, “Is there a shift in ideology? No. Is there a shift in his view of himself as a leader? Yes. He views himself as a leader in Congress, someone who the outside world can trust to govern” (Isenstadt, 2011).

West’s newfound leadership role within the Republican Party was representative of an emerging trend amongst elected Tea Party representatives. Freshman members of Congress who had campaigned against the “establishment,” were now becoming part of the very “establishment” they had so passionately opposed. Once in Congress, they began to realize that compromise and incremental steps were fundamental to achieving one’s legislative goals. Even Rasmussen (2010: 298), who had praised the Tea Party’s decentralized structure in the past now argued,

The Tea Party supporters must find a way to harness the collective energy of the various protest groups across the nation in order to make the changes they demand. They must establish clear, well-articulated, and feasible set of goals that everyone in the movement can rally around. Only once they are well
organized and they have developed a coherent agenda will they be able to become something more advanced than disjointed groups of angered citizens trying to have their voices heard.

In other words, the decentralized movement would need to become more centralized in order to achieve its legislative goals. The disorganization that had been fundamental to the movement’s ideology was not achieving legislative results.
Chapter 6: The Tea Party Nation’s E-Mail Strategy

In order to better understand how the Tea Party movement transitioned into governing, this analysis examined how a decentralized grassroots Tea Party group, Tea Party Nation, used e-mail correspondence in the first five months of the 112th Congress. The analysis shows that the group used e-mail to disseminate and foster a collective oppositional ideology. The primary purpose of Tea Party Nation’s e-mails was to negatively characterize political opponents of the Tea Party, rather than galvanizing around specific political issues.

An article in the *Washington Post* tracked the genesis of a conservative talking point to a single e-mail (Markon, 2010). The political power of a single e-mail is evidence of an emerging new media echo chamber. Both conservatives and liberals use e-mail much in the same way that they have used mainstream media echo chambers. The use of e-mail as a political communication tool is a significant evolution in the media landscape because it is not subject to the same filters and regulations that control the mainstream media. As a consequence, new media technologies have allowed political echo chambers to become even more ideologically polarized (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008).

The Tea Party had effectively used new media tools like e-mail to organize a decentralized movement, but how would this change once they had representatives in Congress? The movement did not have a clear leader, a headquarters, or even a unifying political platform. However, the Tea Party had been successful *because* of this lack of centralization. Nowhere is this lack of centralization more evident than in their e-mail communications with their members. Therefore, the purpose of this analysis is to explore how the Tea Party communicated using e-mail and to what effect.
**Research Question**

This study seeks to explore how a grassroots protest movement organized using new media. Thus, this paper addresses the question: How does Tea Party Nation use e-mail to organize around issues?

The following hypotheses will be tested in this study:

- **H<sub>1</sub>**: Tea Party Nation’s e-mails focus on issues that are popular in the mainstream media.
- **H<sub>0</sub>**: Tea Party Nation’s e-mails do not focus on issues that are popular in the mainstream media.
- **H<sub>2</sub>**: Tea Party Nation uses e-mail to organize by negatively characterizing ideological opponents.
- **H<sub>0</sub>**: Tea Party Nation does not use e-mail to organize by negatively characterizing ideological opponents.

**Literature Review**

**Online Community**

Online communities are “manufactured” in that they are often built and marketed like a product (Eaton, 2010). Unlike offline communities, people must actively seek to become part of an online community. As a consequence, members of online political communities are often highly motivated and active political participants (Krueger, 2006).

Another important distinction between online and offline communities is geography. Online communities are not as dependent on physical proximity as offline communities. Because group members are not bound by geography they are often brought together by...
collective ideology (Shumate & Pike, 2006). One of the advantages of online political communities is that they foster opinions by less powerful groups who otherwise might not be heard (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). However, collective identity in an online space can also have negative effects. For instance, Shumate and Pike (2006) argue that the lack of group proximity can lead to tensions between local and larger collective identities. They found that the structure of many online networks made it difficult to distinguish between local, national and global issues (ibid). In other words, the lack of geographical proximity leads groups to favor certain group priorities over others.

The manufacturing of collective political ideology in online communities can foster polarized groupthink. Groupthink, as defined by Irving Janis, is when groups suppress dissent in order to maintain group harmony (Myers, 2005). Similarly, in order to maintain an online community, the group must constantly reinforce a collective purpose or ideology. Postmes and Brunsting (2002) found that collective action on a “socially isolating medium” could encourage social unity, but can also induce de-individuation effects. In other words, the online medium might encourage groupthink rather than individual thought processes. This type of groupthink can also lead to what is called an echo chamber. Jamieson and Cappella (2008: 76) define the echo chamber is a “bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal.” Sunstein (2007) argues that these online echo chambers can lead groups to become even more polarized.

Part of the reason for online groupthink is due to the structure of the online communities. Scott and Johnson (2005) argue that because many online communities are self-governed, it is easy to distinguish between “visitors” and “members,” which further establishes in-groups and
out-groups. This type of self-governance also makes it harder for individuals to pose opposition towards the larger group (ibid). One of the most important political functions of online communities is their ability to organize “action” amongst their members. Postmes and Brunsting (2002) define collective action as actions that advance the ideology of the group. In other words, these political actions are meant to further advance the goals of the group. Collective actions can include activities like political rallies, signing petitions, contributing money or calling a neighbor.

Online political actions are often organized by social movement organizations (SMO). As discussed in Chapter 1, Zald and Ash (1966: 329) define SMO’s as a “purposeful and collective attempt of a number of people to change individuals or societal institutions and structures.” In other words, SMO’s operate in opposition to societal norms. Rather than trying to offer an alternative bureaucratic organization, SMO’s are trying to change the bureaucracy itself. Shumate and Pike (2006: 804) found that collective calls to action in SMO’s typically take the form of, “framing of external demands, managing mobilization and latency, framing a collective identity, and forming affective bonds.” These functions are especially suited for online networks because they allow groups to discuss, test and determine their collective group ideology (ibid).

The influence of SMO’s online organization can be magnified by its coverage in the mainstream media. Cook (1998: 92) argues that “reporters do not only reflect authority; they reinforce if not confer it as well.” In other words, simply by covering a SMO the mainstream media reinforces the movement’s narrative. Hindman (2009) argues that mainstream media’s
coverage leads us to interpret “online victories” as momentum. Therefore, reporting on the Tea Party SMO’s online activities also gives momentum to the movement.

E-mail

E-mail lists have emerged as an effective tool in online political organizing and community building. For instance, Obama for America is said to have had over 13 million e-mail addresses (Graber, 2010). One reason that political e-mail lists have been successful tools is because political organizations can deliver information directly to their members (Cornfield, 2005). Rather than depending on a member to find political information on a website, e-mail is a form of one-way communication with their members (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2007). A one-way e-mail is an e-mail that is sent to a large number of recipients that is not meant to elicit a direct conversational response. Their function is often to inform rather than engage the recipient.

Another reason that e-mail blasts can be an effective political community-building tool is the collective rhetoric used in the messages. Eaton (2010) found that e-mail was an effective way for MoveOn.org group members to establish and reinforce what the community collectively believed. Perhaps more importantly, these e-mails are a cheap and effective way to spread an SMO’s ideology, as many traditional media outlets often report on newsworthy e-mail blasts (Graber, 2010). Pliskin and Romm (1997) found that e-mail also helped facilitate members lower in the group’s hierarchy to feel more involved in the group.

Another popular rhetorical tool used in political e-mail is the vilification of political opponents. Vanderfor (1989) argues that vilification of opponents is an effective rhetorical strategy because it acts as a call to action and helps groups to further define their collective
ideology. Vilification over e-mail blasts often takes one of two forms - personal vilification or categorical vilification. Personal vilification is when an individual is characterized as evil or greedy. For instance, referring to the “Obama Regime” is a form of personal vilification. Categorical vilification is when an abstract group or larger ideology is characterized as villains (Eaton, 2010). For instance, referring to the ‘left’ or “The Mainstream Media” is a form of categorical vilification.

However, not all political e-mail is effective. Krueger (2006) found that 78% of respondents define “unsolicited e-mail containing political message” as spam.” Unsolicited political e-mail violates basic “netiquette” and can sometimes have adverse effects on political campaigns (Grossman, 2004). If however a user has signed up to be on a political mailing list, he/she is more likely to be politically active and receptive to this type of communication (Williams & Tramell, 2005). Krueger (2006) argues that this is because “the internet transfers the costs of mobilization from the institution to the individual.”

The Tea Party Nation

This research expands on Eaton’s findings by contrasting how a conservative SMO manufactures an online community using e-mail. The Tea Party Nation (TPN) is a conservative grassroots organization within the Tea Party SMO. TPN is primarily an online community for Tea Party members. TPN’s site administrators closely moderate access to the TPN community, limiting membership to Tea Party supporters. As of April 1, 2011, the community had 39,487
members. In order to “join” TPN, a user must actively seek to become a member of the community. These barriers to membership likely mean that only the most politically active online Tea Party supporters are members of the community.

Because TPN is an online community, its members are dispersed around the country. TPN’s members are brought together by shared ideology rather than shared geography. The community’s lack of geographical proximity leads to a nationalized group dynamic. Rather than targeting local issues, the group focuses most of their attention on national issues in order to gain maximum exposure. For instance, TPN talks extensively about the national debt and health care reform. These national issues affect a large cross-section of America and are therefore easily accessible. The group rarely discusses issues at the state or regional level as they affect a smaller percentage of the general populace.

TPN has an active one-way e-mail listserv. E-mails from the listserv are sent to the entire TPN community. The primary function of these e-mails is to drive traffic to the TPN website and they are not meant to elicit a direct conversational response from the recipients. On average, TPN sends nearly four e-mails per day. The content of e-mails are primarily abstracts and links to blog posts on the TPN website. The e-mails are similar to MoveOn.org’s in that they attempt to establish a collective ideology.

However, TPN’s e-mails are different from other SMO’s because they rarely attempt to organize beyond ideology. Typically, one-way e-mail listservs often “ask” recipients to donate money, volunteer their time, or to contribute ideas to the cause. In other words, e-mails are meant to further engage and encourage offline participation by the recipients. TPN’s e-mails

\[ ^{1} \text{http://www.teapartynation.com/profiles/members/} \]


rarely if ever make any type of “ask” of their recipients. TPN’s singular focus on establishing a collective ideology effectively creates a decentralized online echo chamber. As McGrath argues, TPN e-mail effectively creates “a centralized Web destination for decentralized malcontents” (2010).

**Methods**

The goal of this research was to find patterns in TPN’s e-mail correspondence with its members. In order to test these hypotheses I conducted an original content analysis of e-mails sent to the TPN e-mail list. The data set, *Tea-Mail*, is composed of a content analysis of 300 e-mails sent by TPN between January 17, 2011 and April 1, 2011. All of the e-mails were copied into a document in order to have a permanent record of the e-mail correspondence. Each e-mail was individually hand coded by the researcher using inductive parameters that were adapted as new patterns emerged in the data analysis (Eaton, 2010). Representative and noteworthy e-mails were flagged based on patterns that emerged over the course of the analysis. For instance, if a particular e-mail received mainstream media attention or represented a marked shift in ideology it was highlighted for further review.

E-mails were coded for their organizational functions. An e-mail was coded “ask” if it asked the recipients to do an action. For example, one e-mail that was coded “ask” said, “But we do have expenses and because of this, we need your help.” This particular e-mail was asking for a financial contribution, which is a type of organizational function.

E-mails were then coded for their overall tone. An e-mail was coded “negative” if it had an overall negative tone. For example, an e-mail used the words “danger” or “war” in reference
to an ideological opponent of TPN. These e-mails often vilified individual or categorical opponents in order to further reinforce TPN’s ideological positions. For example, one e-mail that was coded “negative” said, “The battle against the public sector unions is switching fronts this week and will be in Ohio, where a major battle is being fought.” This particular e-mail was coded “negative” because it both demonized a political opponent, and warned of an impending danger.

An e-mail was coded “positive” if it had an overall positive tone. For example, an e-mail that discussed the success of an important goal of the SMO’s was coded “positive”. These e-mails rarely referenced ideological opponents and were often celebratory in tone. For example, one e-mail that was coded “positive” said, “Sarah Palin has been making waves the last few days. Rick Perry may well jump in and even former New York Governor George Pataki may enter the race.” This particular e-mail was coded “positive” because it had an overall upbeat tone about some of the potential Republican presidential nominees.

E-mails were then coded to determine the individual and categorical subjects. An e-mail was coded “Opponent” if it referred directly to an individual political opponent of the Tea Party SMO. For example, one e-mail coded “Opponent” said, “This is a victory for Obama, a defeat for Mubarak and the American people may end up being the biggest losers of all. How would that be?” An e-mail was coded “GOP” if it categorically referred to the GOP as an opponent of the Tea Party SMO. For example, one e-mail coded “GOP” said, “If there is anything consistent about John Boehner, it is his willingness to surrender. Boehner may have the greatest political mandate since Ronald Reagan, but his actions are more akin to Jimmy Carter or Barack Obama. What is Boehner surrendering on now?” An e-mail was coded “Media” if it referred directly to
the media as an opponent of TPN. For example, one e-mail coded “Media” said, “Be afraid. Be very afraid. The drive by media worships at the alter of Obama. Obama has been a disaster, yet they continue to worship him. Lloyd Marcus says we should all be very afraid, as the lap dog media refuses to do its job.”

E-mails were then coded for the content and issues discussed in the e-mails. An e-mail was coded “Economy” if it referred directly to issues surrounding the economy. For example, one e-mail coded “Economy” said, “The hallmark of the liberal control of the American government from 2007 through 2011 has been staggering unemployment. Officially, the unemployment rate hangs at ten percent. The real rate of unemployment, including under employment is closer to twenty.” An e-mail was coded “Race” if it referred directly to racial issues. For example, one e-mail that was coded “Race” said, “Lloyd Marcus is one of the brightest voices in the Tea Party movement. This year, Lloyd has made it his mission to call out those who exploit the race issue. Today he nails one who has made race exploitation into a cottage industry.” An e-mail was coded “Muslim” if it referred to Muslims or the Middle East. For example, one e-mail that was coded “Muslim” said, “As the internet is being restored to Egypt, we are hearing horror stories of Christians being murdered by the Muslim majority in Egypt.” An e-mail was coded “Obamacare” if it referred directly to the Affordable Care Act as “Obamacare.” For example, one e-mail that was coded “Obamacare” said, “Yesterday, Federal Judge Roger Vinson invalidated the Obamacare law. He declared the act, in its entirety to be unconstitutional. This is not finished. These cases will be appealed.”
**Results**

**Opponents**

The one issue that unifies the various Tea Party groups has been opposition to President Obama. The *Tea-Mail* analysis showed that political opponents were mentioned in 73% of the e-mails (See Figure 3.6.4). According to a New York Times/ CBS poll (Zernike & Thee-Brenan, 2010) of Tea Party members, “Ninety-two percent believe Mr. Obama is moving the country toward socialism, an opinion shared by more than half of the general public.” While the majority of opponents were either liberals or President Obama (84.5%), there is also evidence that TPN considered certain members of the GOP their political opponents.

From its inception, the Tea Party SMO has organized against both Republican and Democratic candidates. After historic Republican gains in the 2010 mid-term elections, the GOP took control of the House of Representatives. Many in the Tea Party SMO claimed credit for these large GOP gains. However, as the new Congress took control in January 2011, members of the SMO began to show disappointment in the GOP leadership. The main target of their ire was the new House Speaker, John Boehner. After pledging spending cuts of $100 billion dollars during the 2010 campaign, Boehner proposed only $61 billion in cuts once the new Congress took over.

TPN’s e-mails started to show their disappointment with the new speaker on February 22, 2011, just 50 days after the start of the 112th Congress. In an e-mail entitled “John Boehner cried again,” TPN criticized Boehner for not having the courage to stand for his beliefs. The e-mail went on to ask, “Is it asking them too much to go out on a limb and actually risk their careers for America and what they say they believe in?” Just two days later, another e-mail entitled
“Playing Poker with John Boehner,” Judson Phillips complained that, “I would love to play high stakes poker with John Boehner. He is not a player and that is a problem.” The common theme in the e-mails that criticized Boehner was that he was either unwilling or incapable of acting on the economic promises that he and other Republicans had made in the lead up to the mid-term elections.

Boehner was not being criticized by TPN for his political beliefs, but rather his political actions as the Speaker of the House. Boehner was a TPN opponent because of his inability to have the “courage” to limit the scope of the federal government. As the budget debate continued to disappoint the SMO’s expectations, TPN’s e-mails started to target more GOP opponents. The Tea-Mail analysis found that 14% of the e-mails were critical of the new GOP congress. TPN’s refocused opposition to the GOP leadership is further evidence that their movement is oppositional regardless of party.

Mainstream Media

The Tea-Mail analysis found that TPN contributors were highly critical of what they call the “drive by media.” TPN’s contributors believe that the mainstream media has a liberal bias and does not represent their political convictions honestly or accurately. Other factions of the SMO have also expressed negative opinions about the mainstream media. For instance, McGrath (2010) was told at the first Tea Party convention, “The mainstream media is the enemy.”

The Tea-Mail analysis showed that while critical of the mainstream media, TPN contributors rarely mentioned the media in their e-mails. The analysis showed that in only 8.3%
of the e-mails did TPN contributors mention the media as an opponent of the SMO. One possible explanation for TPN’s reluctance to openly criticize the mainstream media is because the media has focused an unprecedented amount of coverage on the Tea Party SMO. As discussed earlier in the thesis, this coverage reinforces and gives credibility to the SMO’s various narratives. In other words, mainstream media’s coverage of TPN’s e-mails allows their messages to be heard by a much larger audience. For the mainstream media, the Tea Party’s oppositional ideology offered consistent political conflict frames for their political coverage. Therefore, perhaps the reason that TPN was reluctant to criticize the media was because they enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. This mutually beneficial relationship helped both maintain and expand the decentralized movement’s political influence, while also providing the media with a constant stream of stories.

Dissention Within the SMO

TPN actively tries to distinguish its community from other Tea Party groups. For instance, TPN’s e-mails often criticize the Tea Party Patriots and the Tea Party Express. As discussed in Chapter 1, dissention within the SMO primarily stems primarily from funding concerns. Groups like TPN, who consider themselves grassroots organizations, are especially distrustful of the Tea Party groups who receive money from PAC’s.

The tensions between the various Tea Party groups are reflected in TPN’s e-mails. For instance, in a February 16, 2011 e-mail entitled “Tea Party Nation Chapters” TPN says, “Mother Jones is doing an expose this week on Tea Party Patriots. The expose goes into unpleasant details about Tea Party Patriots financial dealings.” The “financial dealings” refers to the PAC
money that funds the Tea Party Patriots. In effect, this e-mail is meant to reaffirm to their members, TPN’s “grassroots” superiority to other groups within the SMO.

Issues

Despite the amount of mainstream media coverage given to the Tea Party SMO, not many people actually know what issues the movement stands for. According to a 2010 Washington Post-ABC News poll:

Nearly two-thirds of those polled say they know just some, very little or nothing about what the tea party movement stands for. About one in eight says they know "a great deal" about the positions of tea party groups, but the lack of information does not erase the appeal: About 45 percent of all Americans say they agree at least somewhat with tea partiers on issues, including majorities of Republicans and independents. (Cohen and Rucker, 2010).

As demonstrated earlier in the thesis, the lack of a unifying ideology has also been a contentious issue within the movement. Adam Brandon, a FreedomWorks organizer discussing the 2010 Tea Party Convention in Nashville said:

A number of people in Nashville might be focused on social issues, like being anti-gay, or being anti-immigration and that is not a good way of building a movement. We want to focus on what we have in common, which is opposition to big government and taxes (Luce, 2010).

One consequence of the dissent within the SMO is the constant need to establish what the SMO actually stands for. Not surprisingly, factions within the movement disagree with other factions about which issues are the most important. This disagreement becomes even more evident in the wide array of issues that are addressed in TPN’s e-mails.
Supporters of the Tea Party SMO were some of the most vocal opponents of the Affordable Care Act that passed in March of 2010. According to a Gallup poll at the time, “87% of Tea Party supporters -- versus 50% of all Americans -- say they consider passage of healthcare reform a bad thing” (Sadd, 2010). The Tea Party SMO labeled the law “Obamacare,” as a way of directly linking President Obama’s name to the controversial legislation. The Tea Party argued that the legislation was an example of the overreach of the federal government.

However, less than a year since the law passed, The Affordable Care Act was only mentioned in 4.7% of the e-mails in the Tea-Mail analysis. While 85% of the e-mails that referred to the law were negative, this result might be a reflection of the time period in which the analysis was conducted. Despite repeated attempts by House Republicans to repeal the Affordable Care Act, the Democratic majority in the Senate was able to block all legislation that defunded the law. Consequently, during the time period in which the analysis was conducted, the legislation was not regularly being discussed by the mainstream media (see Figure 3.6.1). The Pearson Correlation between the percentage of coverage given to health care in the Tea-Mail analysis and the Pew News Index is very strong (0.82) and statistically significant (p<.00). This result is surprising considering how passionately the Tea Party SMO had opposed the legislation.
The issue that was discussed the most in the *Tea-Mail* analysis was the economy. While the economy was the most discussed issue in *Tea-Mail* analysis, it was still only discussed in 18% of the e-mails. During the time period in which the analysis was conducted, the 2011 budget negotiations were a major topic in the mainstream media (see Figure 3.6.2). The Pearson Correlation between the percentage of coverage given to the economy in the *Tea-Mail* analysis and the Pew News Index is moderately strong (0.39). TPN’s focus on economic issues is not a surprising result. The Tea Party SMO started partly in response to the passage of TARP in the last months of George W. Bush’s presidency. This result might be misleading because many issues discussed by TPN have indirect links to the economy. For instance, their anti-union
stance is because of their belief that collective bargaining rights contribute to budget shortfalls.

Middle East

The Tea-Mail analysis showed that Muslims were discussed in 9.3% of the e-mails. For instance, TPN contributors made the argument that we should live in a post-multicultural America. In a February 8, 2011 e-mail entitled “Multiculturalism is dead” TPN argue, “David Cameron, the Prime Minister of Britain made that shocking admission a few days ago. He said Muslims in particular, need to embrace British values. The same is true for America. Multiculturalism is dead. It needed to die a long time ago.” Again, this particular result might be a reflection of the time period in which the analysis was conducted. During the time period in which the analysis was conducted, the “Arab Spring” uprisings in the Middle East were a major event.
topic in the mainstream media (see Figure 3.6.3). The Pearson’s Correlation between the percentage of coverage given to the economy in the *Tea-Mail* analysis and the Pew News Index is weak (0.14) and not statistically significant. Regardless of the impetus, TPN’s war against multiculturalism is further evidence of intolerance within the SMO.

**Figure 3.6.3**

![Graph](image)

**Race**

A common criticism of the Tea Party SMO is that it has racial underpinnings. For instance, a poll conducted by Parker (2010) demonstrated, “much higher levels of intolerance among whites who sympathize with the tea party movement.” According to Parker, members of the SMO were significantly more intolerant towards African Americans, Latinos and homosexuals. This was also reflected in a 2010 New York Times/CBS poll that found Tea Party
members “are more likely than the general public, and Republicans, to say that too much has been made of the problems facing black people” (Zernike, 2010). This polling seems to suggest that racial tensions are prevalent within the SMO.

The Tea-Mail analysis found that members of TPN were acutely aware of the criticism and occasionally tried to debunk the claims in their e-mails. However, the Tea-Mail analysis found that issues directly addressing race were only discussed in 3.7% of TPN’s e-mails. For instance, in a January 22, 2011 e-mail entitled “First Black Tea Party Form in Houston,” TPN contributor James Simpson cites the existence of a Black Tea Party group as evidence that the Tea Party SMO is not racist. While TPN acknowledges the racial criticisms that surround the SMO, race is rarely addressed in their e-mail correspondence with their members.

Organization

TPN and other Tea Party SMO e-mail lists require members to be “approved” before receiving e-mails. Membership walls and e-mail verification are often used by websites as a way to prevent spam robots from automatically signing up for e-mail lists. However, Tea Party groups seem to use membership walls as a way of confirming a member’s allegiance to the SMO. For instance, when signing up for the Tea Party Patriots online community, users are presented with the following message:

This forum is for tea party activists only of all nations to discuss issues or legislation that fall under Tea Party Patriots three core values. (Limited government, fiscal responsibility, free markets). No discussions on social issues are allowed. You must adhere to those topics or your posts will be deleted. We don't allow advertising by anyone or campaigning by candidates. Advertising includes promoting another web site or posting information about items you are trying to sell. No profanity is allowed and advocating violence will
not be tolerated. We will not tolerate racism. No attacks on other posters are allowed. This is our private blog for our tea party activist members only. We have the right to set the rules. If you don't follow the rules, you will be suspended without warning. Do you understand and agree to abide by these rules and do you state that you are a tea party activist that agrees with our core values? j

By including a terms of use statement, the Tea Party Patriots are attempting to moderate the ideology of the people who have access to their site. In other words, they are actively attempting to have a closed network of supporters, limiting dissention and further exacerbating the echo chamber effect. The statement also makes clear which issues can and cannot be discussed on their website. Limiting discussion to limited government, fiscal responsibility and free markets suggests that the SMO’s goals are primarily economic.

TPN does not require that members digitally sign a pledge, but they do require membership approval. No requirements of approval are outlined on the website, but users must verify their e-mail address before gaining access to the website. Once a user’s e-mail has been verified, the user receives a message entitled “Your Tea Party Nation membership has been approved.” The word “membership” implies that a user has been granted access to a larger group or community. Psychologically this in-group acceptance might give a user a feeling of belonging (Myers, 2005).

The content of the e-mail also encourages the new member to become more involved in the community by inviting friends, adding content, sharing on Twitter and adding information to their profile. It is interesting that despite being a closed network, TPN encourages new members to share the network with others. All of the prompts in the follow-up e-mail are organizational

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j From the splash page displayed when a user attempts to sign up for the Tea Party Patriots’ e-mail listserv.
functions meant to increase the number of TPN members. The implication of this series of asks is that members will share the website with ideologically like-minded individuals. In other words, this is a ideologically targeted membership appeal. In doing so, TPN is again further controlling, or “manufacturing”, the types of people allowed membership in their community.

Ask

The Tea-Mail analysis found that only 11% of TPN’s e-mails contained asks. The lack of “asks” contained in these e-mails seems to be a deliberate strategy by TPN. In a February 25, 2011 e-mail entitled “A letter from Tea Party Nation,” Judson Phillips says,

At Tea Party Nation, we do not have people on salary. In fact, we do not have a paid staff at all. We do not have unknown persons giving us million dollar donations for mysterious purposes. We do not fly around in private jets, take our administrators on cruises or pay for luxurious meals in 5 star hotels . . . At Tea Party Nation, we like to say we do more with less money than any other major tea party group. We do not bombard you with constant requests for funds, nor do we sell your email address. But we do have expenses and because of this, we need your help.

Phillips’ point that TPN does not operate on a large budget is meant to both emphasize the grassroots nature of TPN and the questionable finances of other groups within the SMO. By vilifying other Tea Party group’s financial dealings, Phillips is attempting to discredit other Tea Party group’s grassroots credibility.

Grassroots organization on the Internet fosters ideological echo chambers. On the internet, decentralized SMO’s are centralized around ideology. Online SMO’s organize not through action, but through unified ideology. That being said, the Tea-Mail analysis suggests that online SMO’s ideology is not always clearly defined. This analysis shows that online
grassroots organizations are either unable or unwilling to unify around specific issues. However, they are able to actively unify against their opposition.

TPN’s lack of focus on any one particular issue further emphasizes the decentralized structure of the SMO. For instance, the dissention within the SMO further emphasizes the decentralized organization of the movement. The disagreements amongst the various Tea Party groups underscore the lack of unifying ideology within the SMO. However, while the groups struggle to agree on what issues they are for, they do seem unified in their ideological opponents. By never clearly establishing a unifying ideology the Tea Party SMO has been able to succeed as an opposition movement. The movement will always be ideologically at odds with whoever is in charge at the time.

One explanation for TPN’s diverse and decentralized ideological positions might be to maximize their coverage by the mainstream media. The Tea Party and the mainstream media share a symbiotic relationship. The high correlation between the percentages of mainstream media coverage and Tea-Mail coverage suggests that the mainstream media has an agenda setting effect on TPN (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This might be because the Tea Party SMO’s relevance is dependent on what the mainstream media decides to cover. For instance, TPN’s opposition to Speaker Boehner and other Republicans received extensive coverage in the mainstream media. Part of the reason it got so much coverage was because of the “shock” value that a conservative SMO would oppose a conservative Speaker of the House. In other words, TPN’s oppositional e-mails might have been an attempt to get mainstream media attention rather than an actual rebuke of Boehner’s actions. Without coverage by the mainstream media, the SMO would not be considered credible. The SMO’s lack of a clear ideology therefore might be
a deliberate strategy to remain relevant to the mainstream media.

The success of the Tea Party SMO is relative. For the most part, they have been unable to get their preferred candidates elected. However, they have been able to nominate more conservative candidates and influence the national conversation. Paradoxically, their disorganization and inability to be unified might actually to be part of the reason that they remain relevant. By simply being opponents of issues and people with whom they disagree, they continue to get coverage by the mainstream media.
Table 3.6.4

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Discussion

“So, voters may have chosen divided government, but they sure didn’t vote for dysfunctional government.” –President Barack Obama, August 2, 2011

The President made the above statement after Congress had finally reached a deal to raise the debt ceiling. It was in stark contrast with the statement he had made in December of 2010, and it reflected a new reality in Washington: the days of bipartisan compromise were over. Prolonged budget negotiations, symbolic bills that had no chance of passage, and partisan bickering meant that not much was actually getting done in Congress. As Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, told The Washington Post, “The Republican Party is sort of united in terms of what they’re against. But there’s not a great deal of consensus right now in terms of what they’re for” (Fahrenthold, 2011). This oppositional approach to governance was a direct reflection of the Tea Party’s oppositional ideology, as was demonstrated in the Tea-Mail analysis in Chapter 6. The lack of legislative action in Congress was in some ways the Tea Party’s greatest achievement, and perhaps its most lasting legacy. The Tea Party’s obstructionism meant that nothing they had opposed was getting accomplished, but it also did not necessarily achieve their legislative goals either. As a consequence, freshman representatives like West began to embrace centralization and align themselves with the “establishment” in order to achieve incremental results.

Clearly, the Tea Party’s transition into governing had not been a smooth one. The decentralized ethos that had served them so well in the past was seemingly the primary reason

\[^k\] \url{http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/02/statement-president}
they could not accomplish their goals once in Congress. The extended obstructionism had also taken its toll on the Tea Party itself. The Tea Party movement, whom many credited for exacerbating the debt ceiling debate, was not faring well in the polls. A New York Times/CBS News poll found that in August 2011, 40% of the public viewed the Tea Party unfavorably, with 43% saying that they have too much influence on the Republican Party (Cooper & Thee-Brenan, 2011). Symbolic caucuses made up almost entirely of “establishment” Republicans did not reflect the grassroots ethos that had originally inspired the movement. It had become clear that in order to maintain their political influence, the Tea Party would need to once again enter a new phase in their evolution.
PART IV: THE MAKING OF THE TEA PARTY PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

“I don't think you carry cards in the Tea Party.” – Mitt Romney

One of the consequences of the lack of progress in the 112th Congress was that it took a toll on the Tea Party’s approval ratings. As discussed in Part III, disapproval for the Tea Party had intensified ever since the 112th Congress took power. According to AP-GFK polls, people who did not support the Tea Party went from 30% in April 2010, to 46% in August of 2011 (Associated Press, 2011). This dramatic shift in public opinion about the Tea Party was thought to be because of their obstructionist role in the contentious debt ceiling debate (See Chapter 6). Even if the Tea Party representatives had somehow been able to advance their legislative agenda through Congress, President Obama would have undoubtedly vetoed any bill that repealed any of his signature achievements. Therefore, heading into the 2012 presidential election in order to achieve meaningful legislative victories, the Tea Party needed to support a candidate who shared its conservative ideology.

Despite the Tea Party’s low approval ratings, for the Republican presidential candidates to ignore the movement would have been a mistake. According to a July 2011 report by Pew Research Center, 44% of Tea Party supporters had given a lot of thought to the 2012 election, as compared to only 18% for those who do not support the Tea Party (Pew, 2011). The same poll found that 83% of Tea Party supporters were very likely to vote in the Republican Primary, compared to 69% of Republicans that did not support the movement (ibid). As was discussed in Part II, the Tea Party had been highly effective in the 2010 Republican primaries and would likely also have a major impact on the 2012 Republican presidential primaries. Therefore, the
fact that Tea Party supporters were more likely to vote during the Republican presidential primaries meant that the candidates needed to pay attention to their ideology.

However, the presidential race also offered a new challenge for the Tea Party movement’s decentralized ideology. As was shown in Party II, during the 2010 midterms, challenging “establishment” Republicans was an effective strategy that forced “establishment” Republicans to adapt more conservative stances. Heading into 2012, it was still unclear whether this “anti-establishment” strategy would work in a national nomination process. Matt Kibbe, the President of FreedomWorks, articulated this dilemma saying, “When it comes down to the question of voting for President Obama or voting for the Republican nominee, I think Tea Partiers have a challenge, and that’s why we’ve weighed in on this conversation early so we have a better choice” (Streitfeld, 2011). In other words, the Tea Party was equally as concerned about the Republican nominees conservative credentials as they were about defeating President Obama. By asserting their influence on the Republican primary, they were attempting to nominate a Republican candidate who best reflected their conservative ideology. Could they centralize their support around a single presidential candidate that united the movement?

Part IV examines the Republican Presidential primary candidates, and their relationships with the decentralized Tea Party electorates. Chapter 7 briefly explores each of the candidates and their support within the Tea Party. It examines how discontent and dissatisfaction with the Republican candidates amongst Tea Party supporters led to a tumultuous primary season. Chapter 8 delves into the September 2011 Republican primary debates in order to better understand the Tea Party’s influence on the nomination process. It consists of a content analysis of three debates, including one that was dubbed the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate. The
findings suggest that the topics most important to the Tea Party were discussed more at the Tea Party debate than in the other debates.
Chapter 7: The Candidates

A prominent narrative that emerged in the lead up to the 2012 Republican primaries was that the candidates were catering to the Tea Party movement. For instance, on September 5, 2011, Jim DeMint, a U.S Senator from South Carolina and Tea Party favorite, held a presidential forum about the U.S. Constitution. DeMint (2010: 213) described the importance of the 2012 presidential race saying,

> 2012 will not only be a competition between political parties; it will be a decision by Americans to live either in freedom or subjugation – our moment to decide whether future generations of Americans will have the opportunity to work for a better life or be forced to settle for the false promises of government dependency.

DeMint’s presidential forum therefore sought to establish where the candidates stood with regards to Tea Party’s limited government ideology. Mitt Romney, the frontrunner at the time, had initially turned down an invitation to the event, but with the sudden emergence of Rick Perry as a Tea Party favorite, Romney decided to participate in the forum. At the forum all of the candidates appealed directly to Tea Party’s decentralized federal government ideology by voicing, “unanimous support for eliminating government spending, reducing the national debt and upholding the Defense of Marriage Act” (Gardner, 2011).

The decentralized ideological positions taken by many of the Republican candidates led the Democrats to conclude that the Republican Party had embraced the Tea Party. For example, the Obama re-election campaign sent a memo saying, “From economics to immigration, Governor Perry, Governor Romney and the Republican field have embraced policies that the American people oppose. The campaign to win the Republican nomination has become a campaign to win the hearts and minds of the Tea Party” (LaBolt, 2011). This talking point was
similar to the one used by Tim Kaine during the 2010 midterms, in order to suggest that the Republicans were capitulating to the Tea Party “extremists” (See Part II). The Democrats believed that this meant that the Republican Party was fundamentally out of touch with the American people.

However, there were some leaders within the Tea Party that suggested that the Republican candidates should not cater to the Tea Party, but rather that the Tea Party should begin to cater to the candidates. For instance, Kibbe argued, “Unswerving dedication to political ideal could be the tea party’s “Achilles heel” in the presidential election, where simply refusing to accept the GOP candidate could force the group into irrelevancy” (Streitfeld, 2011). After some of the legislative setbacks (See Part III), some within the Tea Party started to call for national leaders to unite the movement. For instance, a blog post on *Big Government* argued, “The Tea Party is not dead. It is at a different stage. It now needs a national leader who can embody its sentiment to preserve America as a free nation and crystallize these sentiments into a practical, believable, and inspiring message” (Parker, 2011). In other words, some members of the movement were suggesting that the Tea Party had evolved from a decentralized grassroots movement into a movement that needed more top-down leadership. Therefore, the Republican presidential nomination was the Tea Party’s first opportunity to influence which presidential candidate would best reflect their ideology on a national stage.

The following analysis of the Republican presidential candidates examines the first five months of the Republican presidential primary campaign from June 2, 2011, the day that the Mitt Romney became the first official candidate, and November 2, 2011. Specifically, the analysis examines the candidacies of Mitt Romney, Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry, Herman Cain and
Ron Paul. It also explores each candidate’s relationship with the Tea Party and their decentralized ideology.

**Mitt Romney**

Running for a second time, Mitt Romney, the former Governor of Massachusetts, was polling as the early frontrunner for the Republican nomination (Jones, 2011). He was considered by many pundits to be the “inevitable” nominee (Rucker, 2011). However, many conservatives were not satisfied with Romney. Prominent conservative pundits like Rush Limbaugh proclaimed, “Romney is not a conservative. He's not, folks. You can argue with me all day long on that, but he isn't” (Real Clear Politics, 2011). Matt Kibbe, the President of FreedomWorks, said, “There’s this long tradition in the Republican Party to simply elect the next guy in line. That’s how we got John McCain, and that’s how we got Mitt Romney. If somebody says that early and often, you have a better potential to see if someday can emerge as true competitor to Romney.” (Gardner, 2011). Romney’s “inevitability” was one of the reasons he was so unpopular amongst many in the Tea Party movement. Their concerns with Romney primarily had to with some of his more moderate positions. For instance, the health care bill he had passed while Governor, which they labeled “Romneycare,” was said to be the model for President Obama’s Affordable Care Act.

Romney also did not seem to embrace the Tea Party movement as much as some of the other presidential candidates. For instance, in the Republican Debate at the Reagan Library on September 7, 2011, Romney said this when asked if he was a member of the Tea Party:
I don't think you carry cards in the Tea Party. I believe in a lot of what the Tea Party believes in. The Tea Party believes that government's too big, taxing too much, and that we ought to get -- get to the work of getting Americans to work. So I put together a plan with a whole series of points of how we can get America's economy going again. Tea Party people like that. So if the Tea Party is for keeping government small and spending down, and helping us create jobs, then, hey, I'm for the Tea Party.

While his answer showed support for some of the Tea Party’s ideology, it was hardly a ringing endorsement of the movement. The tone of the answer suggested that Romney felt detached from the movement’s supporters, and certainly did not consider himself a member of the movement. Perhaps most importantly, the Tea Party’s discontent with Romney allowed other more conservative candidates to emerge as contenders.

*Michele Bachmann*

Michele Bachmann, a Congresswoman from Minnesota, announced her candidacy on June 13, 2011 during a Republican presidential debate in New Hampshire. Bachmann was an early presidential favorite amongst many Tea Party supporters. This was in large part because she had actively reached out to the Tea Party since its inception. As I discussed in Part III, in 2010 she founded the House Tea Party Caucus and had been a vocal supporter of the movement ever since.

One of her most infamous moments was her response to the 2011 State of the Union Address (SOTU). Traditionally, the opposing party offers a response to the President’s SOTU. On January 25, 2011, Bachmann gave what she called the “Tea Party Response.” Bachmann’s response was hosted by the Tea Party Express and Tea Party HD and broadcast live on CNN immediately after the SOTU. Bachmann started her remarks by saying, “The Tea Party is a
dynamic force for good in our national conversation, and it's an honor for me to speak with you.” Bachmann (2011) went on to outline some of the Tea Party’s “suggestions for fixing our economy” such as,

- The president could stop the EPA from imposing a job-destroying cap-and-trade system. The president could support a Balanced Budget Amendment. The president could agree to an energy policy that increases American energy production and reduces our dependence on foreign oil. The president could also turn back some of the 132 regulations put in place in the last two years, many of which will cost our economy $100 million or more. And the president should repeal Obamacare and support free-market solutions, like medical malpractice reform and allowing all Americans to buy any healthcare policy they like anywhere in the United States.

However, the primary reason that the response garnered the media’s attention was because of where Bachmann was looking. On the CNN broadcast of the response, Bachmann appeared to be speaking directly off camera. It was later revealed that Bachmann was actually speaking directly to the Tea Party Express camera. The fact that Bachmann was more interested in speaking directly to the Tea Party viewers than the CNN viewers was perhaps part of the reason that she had become so popular within the movement.

Bachmann’s early candidacy was dogged by gaffes, like when she mistakenly claimed that John Wayne, the movie star, was from her hometown of Waterloo, Iowa, when in actuality it was John Wayne Gacy, the notorious serial killer (Burns, 2011). Despite these early missteps, on August 13, 2011, Bachmann narrowly defeated Ron Paul in the Ames Straw Poll. Some pundits questioned the importance of the victory, considering that Romney, who at the time was leading in the national polls (Jones, 2011), chose to not participate in the straw poll. Bachmann’s victory did however lead Tim Pawlenty, the former Governor of Minnesota, to
withdraw from the presidential race the very next day. Bachmann’s ascendency was short lived though, because the Republican field was not yet completely set.

Rick Perry

In his book, *Fed Up!* Rick Perry, the Governor of Texas said, “Now, cynics will say that I decided to write this book because I seek higher office. They are wrong: I already have the best job in America” (2010: Preface). Less than a year later, on August 13, 2011, Perry announced he would run for President. Perry almost immediately vaulted to the top of the polls, with 29% of Republicans saying they were likely to support his candidacy (Jones, 2011). Perry’s support amongst the Tea Party was even stronger, with 35% saying they supported his candidacy (Jones, 2011). Perry’s popularity within the movement was not surprising considering that many within the Tea Party had urged Perry to join the race because of their dissatisfaction with the other candidates (See Chapter 6). Romney still led Perry, 23 to 20, with Republicans who did not support the Tea Party movement (Jones, 2011). In other words, this early polling suggests that much of Perry’s initial momentum was generated by his Tea Party support.

Perry had become popular within the Tea Party because of his strong limited government ideology. For instance, in *Fed Up!* Perry outlined his vision for an America with as little federal government as necessary, instead advocating returning most governing power back to the states. Perry believed that each state was unique, and that they should be governed accordingly. Perry (2010: 13) argued, “If you don’t support the death penalty and citizens packing a pistol, don’t

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1 The same day that Bachmann won the Ames Straw Poll
come to Texas. If you don’t like medicinal marijuana and gay marriage, don’t move to California.” He went on to argue,

I do not care which descriptor you use – whether they are Democrat of Republican, whether they are well intention or ill-, whether they deny it or not – they simply do not believe in those things that have made our nation the greatest in the history of the world. They do not believe what I believe (2010: 13).

This animosity towards the Washington “establishment” would also become the basis for his Presidential campaign. In his announcement speech he said, “And I’ll promise you this: I’ll work every day to make Washington, D.C. as inconsequential in your life as I can” (Perry, 2011). However, after several disappointing debate performances that will be discussed in Chapter 8, Perry too began to slip in the national polls.

Herman Cain

After Perry’s disappointing debate performances, Herman Cain, the former CEO of Godfather’s Pizza, started to gain momentum. On September 24, 2011 Cain surprisingly won the Florida Straw poll, soundly defeating both Perry and Romney\(^m\). Cain’s “9-9-9” tax plan started to gain national attention, and Cain began to be considered by the media as one of the Republican “frontrunners” (Burns, 2011). The “9-9-9” tax plan called for a 9% business flat tax, 9% individual flat tax and a 9% national sales tax (Friends of Herman Cain, 2011). The plan especially appealed to the Tea Party because it simplified the tax code, which they believed was far too complex. As will be discussed in Chapter 8, Cain would often repeat the phrase ad nauseam at the Republican primary debates.

\(^m\) Romney again opted to not compete in the straw poll, although his name still appeared on the ballot.
Cain’s ascendency in the polls happened concurrently with Perry’s decent in the polls (Jones, 2011). By October, Cain had a 69% favorable impression within the Tea Party, while Perry had slipped to 15% from 45% in August (Schoen, 2011). While there were perhaps other contributing factors, it is likely that Cain’s newfound support came from disaffected former Tea Party supporters of Perry. Figure 4.1.1 shows the Gallup Positive Intensity Scores (Gallup, 2011) for all of the candidates in this analysis. This score is calculated by the percentage of strongly favorable opinions minus the percentage of strongly unfavorable opinions of each candidate among Republicans and Republican leaners familiar with the candidate. As can be seen in Figure 4.7.1, Cain’s positive intensity scores raised precipitously as Perry’s drastically decreased. Therefore, its is likely that this discrepancy was a result of the Tea Party shifting its support from Perry to Cain.

Cain’s support within the Tea Party might also have been because of his anti-“establishment” background. Of all the Republican presidential candidates, Cain was the only one who had never held political office. Perhaps more importantly, Cain’s ascent further demonstrated the volatility of the Republican presidential field, and the clear distaste by many conservatives for Romney.
Figure 4.7.1

Gallup calculates candidate Positive Intensity Scores as the percentage of strongly favorable opinions minus the percentage of strongly unfavorable opinions of each candidate among Republicans and Republican leaners familiar with the candidate.

Ron Paul

As I discussed in Chapter 1, Ron Paul’s 2008 presidential campaign was considered the inspiration for many of the early Tea Party protests. Paul’s libertarian ideology had remained popular amongst many within the Tea Party. Despite Paul’s increased popularity since 2008, his candidacy was still not gaining mainstream media coverage. Despite enthusiastic support for Paul by many within the Tea Party, Paul was never considered a “frontrunner” as was reflected in the national polls (Gallup, 2011; Figure 4.7.1). That being said, his influence on the field was
undeniable, as many of the themes from his 2008 campaign (Auditing the Federal Reserve, eliminating the EPA and Department of Education) were adopted by many of the candidates in the 2012 cycle (See Chapter 8).

The Frontrunners

The ever-changing “frontrunner” during the primaries was perhaps the best reflection of the Tea Party’s influence on the Republican presidential nomination. The decentralized leaderless organization could not decide on whom to support. When one candidate faltered, the Tea Party could easily throw their support behind another candidate. As can be seen in Figure 4.7.1, Bachmann’s support fell as Perry’s increased and then Perry’s fell as Cain’s increased. These shifts are likely because of the ongoing shifts in the Tea Party’s support. It also further demonstrated the Tea Party’s distrust of moderate Republicans like Romney. Their ever-changing allegiance had as much to do with their dislike of Romney as it did their support of the other candidates. In their view, for the Tea Party to “settle” for Romney would have effectively undone three years of conservative progress. They were fundamentally incapable of centralizing around a candidate.
Chapter 8: The GOP September Debates

The September 2011 Republican presidential primary debates offered a unique perspective into how the Tea Party movement had influenced the Republican party. The volatile “frontrunner” status for the Republican nomination became even more pronounced over the course of the September 2011 debates. For instance, as can be seen in Figure 4.7.1, Rick Perry’s positive intensity scores began to drop almost immediately after his first debate appearance on September 7, 2011. While there were certainly other contributing factors to Perry’s precipitous decline, his disappointing debate performances are thought to have played a major role in his losing his “frontrunner” status (Balz, 2011).

The Tea Party was actively watching the debates, with 53% saying they watched a GOP debate, compared to only 21% of Republicans that did not identify with the Tea Party (Pew, 2011). Tea Party supporters were more likely to say that the debates were helpful in learning about the candidates (83%) than Republicans that did not identify with the Tea Party (75%) (ibid). Perhaps most pertinent to this debate analysis, Tea Party supporters were also more likely to say that the debates led them to change their mind about who to support (51%) than Republicans that did not identify with the Tea Party (43%) (ibid). In other words, the debates played an integral role for supporters of the Tea Party when it came to choosing whom they would support. Therefore, in order to further explore how the Tea Party influenced the Republican primary race, this analysis took a closer look at the content of the three Republican primary debates that took place in September 2011: the Republican Debate at the Reagan Library, the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate and the Fox News-Google GOP Debate.
Research Question

This study seeks to explore how the Tea Party movement’s ideology influenced the Republican presidential primary debates. Thus, this analysis addresses the question: Was the Tea Party presidential primary debate significantly different than other Republican presidential primary debates?

The following hypothesis will be tested in this study:

H₁: Topics important to the Tea Party movement (e.g. taxes, health care, federal government) were discussed more at the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate than at the other Republican presidential primary debates.

H₀: Topics important to the Tea Party movement (e.g. taxes, health care, federal government) were not discussed more at the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate than at the other Republican presidential primary debates.

Republican Debate at the Reagan Library

On September 7, 2011, NBC News and POLITICO hosted the Republican Debate at the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, California. Participants in the debate included Mitt Romney, Rick Perry, Michele Bachmann, Jon Huntsman, Ron Paul, Rick Santorum, Herman Cain and Newt Gingrich. The debate was notable because it was the first in which Rick Perry participated since announcing his candidacy. Because the event was hosted at the Reagan Presidential Library, President Reagan’s legacy played a prominent thematic role throughout the debate. Brian Williams, the co-moderator of the event, previewed the debate saying, “They're all here tonight ready to explain and defend their positions on job creation, on spending, debt, and taxes,
on America's costly dual wars, and the toxic gridlock that is Washington, D.C” (Republican Debate at the Regan Library, 2011).

**CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate**

On September 12, 2011, CNN hosted the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate in Tampa, Florida. Participants in the debate included Mitt Romney, Rick Perry, Michele Bachmann, Jon Huntsman, Ron Paul, Rick Santorum, Herman Cain and Newt Gingrich. The event was touted as the first-of-its-kind debate, as it was co-sponsored by the Tea Party Express. According to a CNN press release (2011), the debate would touch on subjects important to the Tea Party “including the role, seize and scope of government, with a specific emphasis on issue number one to tea party members and all Americans, the economy.” In other words, what made this particular debate “Tea Party,” was that the questions addressed issues important to the Tea Party’s ideology. Wolf Blitzer, the moderator of the debate, claimed at the beginning of the broadcast that the debate was also sponsored by “more than 100 state and local Tea Party groups from across the United States.” Throughout the debate, Blitzer took questions from Tea Party watch parties in Florida, Virginia, North Carolina, California, Ohio and Arizona. The number of participating Tea Party groups and their distribution throughout the country further reaffirmed the decentralized movement narrative.

**Fox News-Google GOP Debate**

On September 22, 2011, Fox News and Google hosted the Fox News-Google GOP Debate in Orlando, Florida. Participants in the debate included Mitt Romney, Rick Perry,
Michele Bachmann, Jon Huntsman, Ron Paul, Rick Santorum, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich and Gary Johnson. The debate was notable because it was Johnson’s first debate appearance of the primaries. All of the questions that were asked to the candidates during the debate were submitted using Google and then voted on by the general public. Many of the questions were asked to the candidates using user submitted videos selected from over 18,000 questions submitted via YouTube (Fox News, 2011).

Methods

The data set, *GOP September Debates*, is composed of a content analysis of three Republican presidential primary debates: the Republican Debate at the Reagan Library hosted by MSNBC on September 7, 2011, the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate hosted by CNN on September 12, 2011, and the Fox News-Google GOP Debate hosted by Fox News on September 22, 2011. These debates were chosen for this analysis because they were the first debates to include the entire field of Republican presidential candidates. Each debate was individually hand coded by the researcher from debate transcripts using inductive parameters that were adapted as new patterns emerged in the data analysis (Eaton, 2010).

For the purpose of this analysis, a “speaking turn” was defined as each individual case when either the debate moderators or candidates spoke. Speaking turns were coded based on the topic discussed in that turn. In speaking turns that contained multiple topics, the two-thirds rule was applied, meaning that the speaking turn’s topic was determined based on what two thirds of the statement dealt with. Cross-talk and non-sequiturs were not counted as speaking turns. For instance, if one of the candidates unsuccessfully tried to interject, this speaking turn was not
included in the analysis. The candidate’s introductions were not coded for this analysis because they did not occur during the question and answer portion of the debate itself. Set video pieces were also not included in this analysis. For instance, during the Republican Debate at the Reagan Library, a video about former President Reagan was not included as a speaking turn.

The content of a speaking turn was coded ‘Federal Government’ if the question or answer had to do with fixing the federal government, whether that is cutting the spending, or eliminating an entire government agency. These speaking turns often dealt with the size of the federal government. The content of a speaking turn was coded ‘Immigration’ if the question or answer had to do with issues pertaining to either legal or illegal immigration to the United States. For instance, if the candidates discussed the merits of the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM act), or building a fence along the entire United States-Mexican border it was coded as ‘Immigration.’ The content of a speaking turn was coded ‘National Security’ if the question or answer had to do with terrorism or the ongoing wars and international conflicts involving the United States military. For instance, if the candidates discussed the United States’ involvement in the ongoing conflict in Libya, it was coded ‘National Security.’ The content of a speaking turn was coded ‘Economy’ if the question or answer dealt with the United States’ economy. For instance, if the candidates discussed how their jobs plan was superior to the President’s proposed American Jobs Act, this speaking turn was coded ‘Economy.’ The content of a speaking turn was coded ‘Entitlements’ if the question or answer had to do with Medicare, Medicaid or Social Security. For instance, Rick Perry calling Social Security a ‘ponzi scheme” was coded as ‘Entitlements.’ The content of a speaking turn was coded ‘Health Care if the question or answer had to do with the current state of health care in the United States. For
instance, a speaking turn was coded ‘health care’ if the candidates discussed repealing the Affordable Care Act. The content of a speaking turn was coded ‘Taxes’ if the question or answer had to do with their position on taxes. For instance, Herman Cain’s discussion of his “9-9-9” tax reform plan was coded as ‘Taxes.’ The content of a speaking turn was coded ‘Other’ if the question or answer dealt with any issue that did not fit under the other categories. For instance, if the candidates were asked what item they would bring with them if elected to the White House, this question was coded ‘Other.’

Results

The results suggest that for the most we can reject the null hypothesis that the topics important to the Tea Party movement (e.g. taxes, health care, federal government) were not discussed more at the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate than at the other Republican presidential primary debates. For instance, the role and size of the federal government was discussed in 16.9% of the GOP September Debates, the most for any topic in this analysis (See Figure 4.8.1). The federal government was discussed the most in the Fox News-Google GOP Debate (20.4%) and the least in the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate (14.4%). This is a surprising result because of the Tea Party’s emphasis on limited government. For instance, in Blitzer’s introduction to the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate he emphasized the importance of this particular topic. What it might also suggest is that the Tea Party’s limited federal government message had permeated throughout the Republican primaries. In other words, the Tea Party’s limited government ideology had become a prominent narrative across the Republican nominating process.
Health care was discussed in 14.4% of the *GOP September Debates*, making it the second most discussed topic. Health care was discussed the most in the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate (20.0%) and the least at the Fox News-Google GOP Debate (9.9%). This result supports the argument made in Part I that repealing health care reform, or “Obamacare,” was one of the Tea Party’s top legislative priorities. The fact that it was discussed substantially more in the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate than in the other Republican debates further supports the argument that the debate was framed for a Tea Party audience.

Taxes were discussed in 7.3% of the *GOP September Debates*. Taxes were discussed the most in the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate (10.0%) and the least in the Fox News-Google GOP Debate (5.5%). This result supports the hypothesis that the Tea Party debate would focus more on taxes. That being said, taxes were the second least discussed topic in all of the debates.

The economy was discussed in 14.4% of the *GOP September Debates*. The economy was discussed the most in the Republican Debate in the Reagan Library (18.6%) and the least at the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate (9.4%). According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s news index, the economy was the number one topic discussed during all three weeks in which the debates were held (PEJ, September 5-11, 2011, September 12-18, 2011, September 19-25, 2011). While the economy was one of the most discussed topics during the debates, the fact that it was talked about the least in the Tea Party debate might suggest that it was not a top priority for the Tea Party.

Immigration was discussed in 12.6% of the *GOP September Debates*. Immigration was discussed the most in the Republican Debate at the Reagan Library (14.9%) and the least in the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate (11.1%). This is a surprising result because in the past Tea
Party supporters have been shown to be more likely than registered voters to think that better border security is the most important priority in dealing with illegal immigration (Clement, 2011).

Entitlements were discussed in 10.5% of the *GOP September Debates*. Entitlements were discussed the most in the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate (20.6%) and the least in the Fox News-Google GOP Debate (11.1%). Entitlements, especially Social Security, were discussed more than any other topic at the Tea Party debate. This CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate result might also be because of the increased scrutiny of Perry’s statement at the Republican Debate at the Reagan Library the week prior that Social Security was a “Ponzi scheme.”

National security was discussed in 8.6% of the *GOP September Debates*. National security was discussed the most in the Fox News-Google GOP Debate (9.9%) in the least at the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate (6.7%). Energy was discussed in 1.9% of the *GOP September Debates*. Energy was discussed the most in the Republican Debate at the Reagan Library (3.1%) and the least at the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate (0.6%).

Finally, topics that were classified as “Other” were discussed in 13.4% of the *GOP September Debates*. The “Other” topics were discussed the most in the Fox News-Google GOP Debate (19.9%) and the least in the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate (7.2%).

These results suggest that we can for the most part reject the null hypothesis. Most of the topics that the Tea Party consider important were discussed more in the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate than in the other debates. The one exception was the topic of the federal government, which was actually talked about more in the Fox News-Google GOP Debate.
However, the fact that this was the most popular topic in the *GOP September Debates*, might actually suggest that the Tea Party has had a larger influence on all of the debates. While the topic is certainly not exclusive to the Tea Party movement, the increasing importance of the topic in the 2012 election might be a sign of the Tea Party’s larger influence on the 2012 narrative.

**Table 4.8.1**

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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2.2%</td>
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The Pearson Chi-Square for the *GOP September Debates* was statistically significant (p<.00). The *GOP September Debates* had n=522, Republican Debate at the Reagan Library had n=161, CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate had n=180, Fox News-Google GOP Debate had n=181.
Discussion

Heading into the 2012 presidential election, supporters of the Tea Party movement were asking themselves whether defeating President Obama was more important than the Republican candidate’s conservative qualifications. It was a movement that had thrived because of its strict adherence to an oppositional ideology, but could they maintain their political relevance if they did not unite around a Republican who could realistically defeat Obama? This was the dilemma that the Tea Party found itself when deciding on which presidential candidate to support.

While the Republican presidential primary debates held in September 2011, more than a year away from the 2012 election, might not be predictive of the Tea Party’s eventual influence on the presidential race, they did offer an opportunity to see the Tea Party’s influence on national politics. The issues most important to the Tea Party’s ideology, were also popular with most Americans. According to Campbell and Putnam (2011),

The strange thing is that over the last five years, Americans have moved in an economically conservative direction: they are more likely to favor small government, to oppose redistribution of income and to favor private charities over government to aid the poor. While none of these opinions are held by a majority of Americans, the trends would seem to favor the Tea Party.

And yet, as the 2012 election approached, the Tea Party was becoming increasingly less popular (See Part III).

Some Tea Party groups were even beginning to see the presidential election as a potential distraction from their larger goals. For instance, Amy Kremer, chair of the Tea Party Express, argued, “We’ll maintain the House without a problem. We absolutely have to take back the Senate and focus on that and not let presidential politics consume all of our time and energy” (Zengerie & Johnson). In other words, despite co-sponsoring a presidential debate, the Tea Party
Express’ primary focus would be on the upcoming congressional races. This might simply have been the Tea Party’s most pragmatic strategy, because their political influence might not have worked as well on a national stage. The lack of centralization amongst the Tea Party made it difficult for them to settle on whom to support in the presidential contest. Ironically, the volatility of the Tea Party’s support might ultimately allow Romney to win the Republican nomination.
**Conclusion**

*The Devolution*

The movement started as a series of decentralized online echo chambers. Decentralized activists from across the country were brought together online by a mutual opposition to the status quo. Within their decentralized online echo chambers they were able to feel a sense of mutual frustration, even if an overarching mutual ideology was never clearly defined. As Zernike (2010: 124) observed, “For many people, there was enough appeal in simply having that community, a place to get out their frustrations.” Above all, the early movement wanted to maintain its decentralized makeup because it meant that they could not be co-opted. They rejected leaders because they did not want to be defined by individuals; they framed themselves as political outsiders fighting against the “establishment” in order to maintain their populist appeal. By never establishing what unified the decentralized factions of the Tea Party, the early movement was able to be many things to many different people.

The 2010 Republican primary campaigns demonstrated how the decentralized online echo chamber could be an incredibly effective organizing platform. Tea Party backed candidates successfully used new media tools to target and mobilize national Tea Party members in support of local elections. As a consequence, they were able to mount formidable primary challenges against many powerful “establishment” Republicans. By tapping into the decentralized national Tea Party networks, these Tea Party backed candidates were able to make much larger impacts than they otherwise might have. However, the general elections demonstrated some of the difficulties that social movements face when forced to work outside of the confines of their decentralized online echo chambers. The increased reach of their ideology during the general
elections also brought increased scrutiny to the Tea Party candidates. The mainstream media coverage given to the decentralized movement and its candidates forced them to communicate with people outside of their decentralized echo chambers. Candidates like Christine O’Donnell, who had sought increased national exposure, were unable to adapt once they received the increased national media coverage. The candidates who were able to make smoother transitions into the general elections, were often the ones that were able to embrace the “establishment” that they had opposed so vehemently during the Republican primaries. It became clear that in order to make an impact in the general elections, the movement had to embrace centralization and abandon certain aspects of their decentralized ethos.

The challenges of governing also showed some of the limitations of a decentralized movement. Once elected, some Tea Party representatives tried to bring their decentralized ethos to Congress. The movement’s decentralized ideology stood in stark contrast with the centralized federal government, which made it incredibly difficult to work with the “establishment” in Congress. One of the most immediate challenges for the Tea Party representatives was that they did not have a unified legislative platform. Senator Rand Paul (2011:13) agued, “Though the movement is heavily decentralized – and what some might call disorganized – advocating for a much smaller, leaner federal government continues to be its one unifying principle.” This particular unifying principle though manifested itself in the Tea Party’s blanket opposition to the “establishment” and their legislative proposals. This prolonged obstructionism and their adversity to compromise was likely the reason that the movement’s approval ratings fell so dramatically once in Congress. Their desire to fundamentally change how the bureaucracy
worked from within the bureaucracy itself, just further exacerbated the partisan divides and lack of progress being made in Congress.

The movement’s decentralized structure also made it difficult to rally behind a single presidential candidate. From the beginning, the movement had been opposed to supporting individual leaders because they effectively centralized the movement. As a consequence, they were unable to coalesce behind a single presidential candidate. The movement’s search for the perfect candidate to represent all of their decentralized values made it incredibly difficult for them to support any one candidate. Aside from their unified opposition to Mitt Romney, it was clear that the movement was continuing to resist centralization in any form.

However, the movement’s lasting impact on American politics was perhaps best demonstrated by the fact the Republican presidential candidates framed their messages during the debates for the Tea Party electorates. Not only did the candidates address the Tea Party’s ideology during the CNN-Tea Party Republican Debate, but also significant amounts in all of the September 2011 Republican Debates. The Tea Party had effectively set the agenda for the entire Republican presidential primary. While the movement might not have been able to coalesce behind a single candidate, they had been able to fundamentally change the political conversation. In fact, one could make the argument that the movement’s inability to unite behind a single candidate forced all of the presidential candidates to continue to pander to the many Tea Party electorates. In other words, the movement’s disorganization forced the candidates to continually adapt their campaign messages in order to gain the Tea Party’s support.
The Mainstream Media

One of the recurring themes in this thesis has been the role of the mainstream media in the Tea Party’s evolution. The movement’s relationship with the mainstream media was as contentious as it was symbiotic. The movement saw the “MSM” as their opposition, but also desperately desired their coverage. The mainstream media were seen as facilitators of the very “establishment” which they were fighting against, but also the most effective way to spread their decentralized message.

In the beginning, the movement’s decentralized online echo chamber allowed them to usurp what they saw as the biased mainstream media gatekeepers. However, as the movement expanded, they realized they needed to venture outside of the safe confines of new media in order to gain mainstream credibility. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993: p. 122) argue, “If a media outlet offers a primetime forum with national or global reach, it is valuable enough for the movement to make some compromises in the purity of the message.” This is why the movement started to embrace media spokespeople like Jim DeMint and Sarah Palin whose celebrity ensured that the movement would get coverage. However, when the increased coverage led to increased scrutiny, they often retreated back to the safe confines of their decentralized online echo chambers.

An issue that merits further research is whether the movement’s decentralized success was a symptom of an increasingly fragmented media industry. Lepore (2010: 41) argues, “In 2009, while the Tea Party was forming, the newspaper was dying, all over again. This was more than a coincidence; it was a cause. The decline of the newspaper had destabilized American politics.” This analysis is apt, but perhaps the emergence of a decentralized social movement
was also a symptom of the emerging agenda setting power of the decentralized new media. While Chapter 6 demonstrated that the mainstream media still plays a significant agenda-setting role, the decentralized online echo chambers also allowed the Tea Party to disseminate and usurp traditional media gatekeepers. As these new media tools become more powerful and ubiquitous the destabilization of American politics might actually be a consequence of the increasing agenda-setting role of the decentralized new media.

*Occupy Wall Street and Beyond*

While this thesis has focused exclusively on the Tea Party movement, it has become clear that other groups have begun to use similar decentralized social movement models. The most recent, and the one that merits further research, is the Occupy Wall Street movement. The movement started on September 17, 2011 in New York’s Liberty Square, and has subsequently spread across the country. One Occupy Wall Street website describes the movement as a,

Leaderless resistance movement with people of many colors, genders and political persuasions. The one thing we all have in common is that We Are The 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%. We are using the revolutionary Arab Spring tactic to achieve our ends and encourage the use of nonviolence to maximize the safety of all participants (Occupy Wall Street, 2001).

This statement could easily have been mistaken as one made by the early Tea Party movement. Occupy Wall Street’s resistance to leaders and their decentralized oppositional ideology was nearly identical to how the Tea Party first emerged. Some have even suggested that the two movement’s ideologies share a lot of common ground (Wolverson, 2011).

Some leaders within the Tea Party movement were vehemently opposed to the Occupy Wall Street movement from the outset. For instance, Sal Russo (2011), the leader of the Tea
Party Express, sent an e-mail to supporters saying, “Have you noticed the media’s obsession with the Occupy Wall Street movement? Yes, the same movement that has launched a smear campaign against capitalism and Tea Party principles – it is a pathetically perfect fit.” This reaction is perhaps not surprising considering the Tea Party movement’s intrinsic oppositional ideology. However, some former supporters of the early Tea Party movement saw similarities between the two movements. In an open letter posted to the social news website Reddit, one former Tea Party supporter told the Occupy Wall Street movement, “I don’t agree with everything your movement does, but I sympathize with your cause and agree on our common enemy” (Fisher, 2011). This message was particularly interesting because it acknowledged that the Tea Party movement had changed drastically since its inception.

In order to stay politically influential, the decentralized Tea Party movement became more centralized. As Brafman and Beckstrom (2006) argue, organizational mutation like this is both a fundamental and inevitable element of any decentralized organization. As a consequence, the Tea Party movement in December 2011 is fundamentally different than the one that first emerged in January of 2009. The Tea Party movement’s future political relevance is relative and depends entirely on how the movement continues to evolve. If the movement remains decentralized and oppositional, the mainstream media will likely continue to cover them, but they might not achieve their legislative goals. If however the movement continues to centralize, they will likely become more politically influential. What has become clear is that the decentralization that initially brought the movement together is likely also the reason that their political impact might be short-lived. Decentralization allowed the Tea Party to change the political conversation, but not the political system that they so opposed.
**GLOSSARY**

**Astroturf** – An organization that appears to have a decentralized grassroots infrastructure, but is actually funded and organized by private interests in a top-down manner. With regards to the Tea Party, the term has been used to suggest that the movement is not a genuine grassroots organization.

**Compromise** – The Tea Party has used the word as a derogatory term that implied capitulating to the “establishment.” Their use of the word suggests that bipartisan “compromise” means unnecessary sacrifice of one’s principles.

**Establishment** – An all-encompassing term used by the Tea Party to symbolize their disdain for the status quo. Legislators in both parties who have worked in government for many years are considered part of the “establishment.” These are people who have supposedly embraced the status quo, and are therefore in direct contrast with those in the Tea Party movement, who see themselves as outsiders. Other terms used to similar effect are “Washington,” and “Congress.”

**FreedomWorks** - A conservative nonprofit led by former U.S. House Majority Leader Dick Armey. The nonprofit sponsored the very first Tea Party Patriot’s protest on February 27, 2009. FreedomWorks purports to be a conservative grassroots organization.

**Money Bomb** – When large national networks of Tea Party supporters generate millions of dollars in a short period of time for Tea Party candidates. These fundraisers are often conducted online. By consolidating all fundraising into a single event, these fundraisers are designed to maximize the mainstream media’s coverage.

**MSM** – Shorthand for the mainstream media, which consists of the major newspapers, broadcast networks and cable networks. The Tea Party movement believes that the MSM has an extreme liberal bias, and therefore consider them their opposition. The movement often uses the term in a derogatory way in order to emphasize the media’s liberal bias. Other terms used to similar effect by the movement are “drive-by-media,” and the “lamestream media.”

**Obamacare** – The term used by opponents of President Obama’s Affordable Care Act to refer to the legislation. The term is used in a derogatory way to suggest that the President forced undesirable health insurance reform on the American people.

**Primary Challenge** – When an incumbent is threatened with being replaced by a more conservative candidate in a Republican primary election.

**RINO** – Shorthand for Republican in Name Only, a term used in order to suggest that a politician does not actually hold the conservative values traditionally associated with the Republican Party.
Romneycare – A term used in reference to the health care law passed by Mitt Romney while he was the Governor of Massachusetts. The legislation is said to have been the inspiration for the federal health care reform passed by President Obama. The term is used in the same derogatory manner as “Obamacare” and is used by Romney’s opponents in order to draw negative parallels between Romney and Obama.

TCOT – Shorthand for “Top Conservatives on Twitter,” it is a list on Twitter that aggregates the most influential national conservatives on Twitter.

Tea Party Express – A group founded by Our Country Deserves Better PAC in the summer of 2009. In September of 2009 The Tea Party Express bus tour travelled to 33 cities across the country, expanding to 47 cities in the lead up to the 2010 midterm elections.

Tea Party Nation - A conservative grassroots organization within the Tea Party movement founded by Judson Phillips. As of April 1, 2011, the community had 39,487 members.
REFERENCES


