

//Notas de Análisis//

Reading the Tea leaves: Will Tea Partiers dominate the next Congress?

**By Maria L. Fornella*

“The news from Delaware is crystal clear: it’s Sarah Palin’s party now.”
Senator John Kerry

The Tea Party insurrection against the establishment is causing some headaches for the Republican leadership. Republican primary elections everywhere are being won by Tea Party candidates, some of which are credible and electable in national contests (Marco Rubio in Florida, Joe Miller in Alaska), but many of which are an embarrassment to the party. Christine O’Donnell, who won the Delaware primary, last week, falls into the latter category. The Republican Party had fielded a very strong candidate, Mike Castle, who had already been elected seven times to Congress, and would most likely have won the coveted seat in the national election. But he was considered “too liberal” and “too wedded to the establishment” by the Tea Party. Instead, victory went to Tea Party candidate O’Donnell, who had been endorsed by Sarah Palin. During her campaigning the 41-year old O’Donnell, fresh faced and attractive, adopted the dress style, body language and folksy speech of her flashy mentor, lending some credence to Senator John Kerry’s claim that the GOP “is Sarah Palin’s party now.”

O’Donnell had been signed out as not credible by the GOP: not only does she lack any experience and qualifications, but she has a questionable personal finance history and a bizarre background that includes having “practiced witchcraft” before becoming a Christian youth counselor and defender of sexual abstinence. She had run for a House seat twice before and lost, getting only about 4.5% of the vote statewide. Her story brings into focus the dire position the GOP finds itself in: by stirring up the anger and frustration of a public deeply affected by the Great Recession and worried about their economic future, and by using the Tea Party movement’s energy and populism to mobilize the electorate, Republicans now find themselves in the awkward situation of having to support and fund fringe candidates for the November election.

The Tea Party upheaval has been compared to the Reagan Revolution of 1980. Ronald Reagan transformed the Republican Party by creating a new coalition of social and fiscal conservatives and foreign policy hawks. He brought in the Southern Democrats and the Christian Right, and many moderates from the North East were purged from the party. He forged a new majority, renewed the party’s cadre and dominated the national political agenda at least for a decade.

Similarly, the Tea Party is imposing a “purity test” on Republicans that

includes long-held party principles such as fiscal discipline, balanced budgets and low taxes. But it also demands adherence to more intrusive social dogmas such as opposition to abortion and gay marriage, and blatantly reactionary ideas against immigration and free trade, and in favor of the right to carry guns. With its populist, nativist rhetoric it is feeding the frenzy and anger prevalent in certain sectors of the country today to the point of rendering it ungovernable. Indeed, in order to win, Republican candidates everywhere find that they have to adopt Tea party language and principles even when some of these run counter to the realities of governing.

In deep contrast with their extreme views of closed borders, Reagan gave amnesty to a huge mass of illegal immigrants, and was a staunch supporter of free trade, a central tenet of the conservative business class that is anathema to the Tea Party insurgents. Their brand of rampant populism was quite absent from the Reagan revolution: he was a leader who understood where the country was historically and emotionally, and he had the convictions and the policies to move it forwards. His philosophy of hard work, sacrifice, fiscal responsibility and smaller government has endured and influenced many conservative and moderate politicians around the world. In addition, he had the great gift of communication and persuasion, and knew how to use history and logic to back up his actions. Few would compare the Great Communicator with the grammatically challenged elements that lead the Tea party: they tend to speak in sound bites, have poor syntax and grammar, and make obscure, often absurd references that few people are able to follow (for example, Sarah Palin's 2008 comment that "as Putin rears his head and enters U.S. airspace, the first thing he sees is Alaska" as a justification of why being governor of that state gave her some foreign policy experience; or Christine O'Donnell's "mice with human brains" reference when explaining her opposition to stem cell research). Their inexperience, rampant populism, and contempt for intellect and knowledge do not bode well for next Congress.

Others consider late Senator Barry Goldwater, a blunt-spoken conservative libertarian from Arizona, as the predecessor of the Tea Party. Goldwater, who ran for president in the 1960s against Lyndon Johnson, wanted to abolish the whole welfare state established by the New Deal, and advocated the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. He lost to LBJ by a landslide, bringing the Republican Party down with him. But he was a libertarian and this put him at odds with the Christian right agenda of the 1970s. Although it is true that there is a libertarian, Goldwater-like element in some groups of the Tea Party, most of its members embrace an ultra-conservative social agenda of government intrusiveness into people's lives, and that is already a source of contention and conflict within the movement.

Given its grassroots, decentralized approach, its platform is a hybrid of sometimes conflicting ideas, but at its core, it is an anti-federalist movement. It officially appeared in the political map on tax-filing day, April 15 of 2009, when "tea parties" were organized in several states to

protest against government spending. It grew as a bottom-up organization but, as it gathered strength, it was courted by the GOP as an instrument to revive the party and mobilize its supporters.

The Tea Party in its nature and its approach to politics is more reminiscent of the movement that coalesced around Ross Perot in the 1990s. He was against the expansion of the federal government, against free trade and open borders, against Washington “insiders” of both parties, and in favor of balanced budgets and lower taxes. The main difference is that the Tea Party is trying to transform the Republican Party from the inside, instead of running against it as a third party, as Perot did in 1992, thereby preventing the re-election of President Bush senior, and delivering a victory to the Democrats. The question is whether the Tea Party movement will succeed and, whether, by moving the party to the Right, it will have a “corrective” effect, or whether, due to its populist excesses, it will self destroy and bring the party down with it. The Perot movement dissolved because of its internal dissent and lack of leadership, and the Tea Party may encounter the same fate. What the Tea Party movement has in vigor and energy, it lacks in logic, organization and cohesiveness. They would most certainly not have been so successful if they had had to find their own moneys to fund their campaigns.

Unfortunately for the GOP, there are at least two Political Action Committees (PACs) that are giving financial support to these fringe-quality candidates: Sarah Palin’s own PAC, and the Tea Party Express run by old Republican political operative and entrepreneur Sal Russo, who identifies “promising” candidates that can attract contributions and bring treasure into his own formerly moribund PAC. A third PAC, FreedomWorks, run by former Representative Dick Armey, has been more selective in the Tea Party candidates it supports. It refused to fund Christine O’Donnell, who instead received substantial campaign funds from the other two.

Some serious conservative voices are being raised against the Tea Party, but it may be too late. Charles Krauthammer, one of the leading conservative intellectuals, called O’Donnell’s triumph a “stunning but pyrrhic victory” that will prevent the Republicans from regaining control of the Senate. While conceding that the Tea Party itself was “the most vigorous and salutary grass-roots movement of our time” and a “source of electoral energy”, he still cautioned Republicans that they had to be selective. He said that O’Donnell was problematic and most likely unelectable. Showing his frustration with the defeat of Mike Castle, he stated that the so-called “Buckley rule”-“Support the most conservative candidate *that is electable*” -had been violated. Also, Karl Rove from his new column in the Wall Street journal called her “unfit for office” and “not a credible” candidate. O’Donnell was the seventh Tea Party candidate to defeat an incumbent, so now the National Republican Committee will most likely have to fund their national campaigns. Not all are unelectable, but the question is, once in power, will they follow the party line or their own?

As the GOP moves to the extreme Right to please the Tea Party

supporters, it is the moderates that are left out of place. In Florida, the unstoppable Senate race of Tea Party candidate Marco Rubio has forced his opponent Charlie Crist, whom Rubio defeated in the primary, to leave the GOP and run as an Independent. Unlike O'Donnell, Rubio is a very credible candidate who may some day run for president, while Crist has been too much of a moderate for the present political climate, and as governor has supported several of Obama's initiatives. Tea Party Senate candidate Joe Miller, who beat incumbent Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski in the Alaska primary, is also a candidate with solid credentials (WestPoint graduate, then Yale Law), but he is still outside the mainstream on basic issues such as Social Security, which he considers "unconstitutional, because it is not in the Constitution".

This is what most worries the party moderates: that a huge part of the electorate, frustrated with the expansion of US government, debt and deficits, will feel so disgruntled as to elect a Republican Congress majority populated with extremist candidates that will ignore the party line, and will try to impose their simplistic, atavistic views of government, turning the clock back one or even two centuries. Unquestionably, not all is said and done in this election, and the Republican primary results are cautiously being watched by Democratic candidates who now see an opening to regain the moderate Independents' vote. But the generalized anger against incumbents in the electoral may very well lead many of them to vote for Tea party newcomers all the same, no matter how extreme and erratic they may seem.

Objectively, one can understand and respect philosophical differences and the traditions of this country's two-party politics. In order to survive in the post-Bush era, the Republican Party needed to undergo a correction towards smaller government and balanced budgets, which are the core principles of their ideology. During his eight years in power, Republican George Bush oversaw the biggest expansion of the federal government since the 1960s; he made the decision to fight two wars while at the same time lowering **taxes** across the board and **deregulating** private financial institutions. It should thus come as no surprise that his course of action brought about the biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression, and that a public backlash against government spending ensued. A year and a half of frantic efforts by the Obama White House and Congress, which obviously demanded more government spending for the short-term, have not delivered palpable results and, although the Recession has officially ended, unemployment is still at 10%.

The popular outcry against big government is to be expected. But some groups have used this opportunity to propose hare-brained schemes based on ignorance, nescience and prejudice. Whether they are railing against immigrants, taxes and social welfare programs, or in favor of armed insurrection against the federal government, quite often, to legitimize their demands, they refer their critics to the US Constitution of 1787. To the extent that the Constitution established the federal government and its relative power over the states, their claims have little

merit. Perhaps they confuse it with the Articles of Confederation that preceded it and vested power in the states. In any case, the infantile worship of a three centuries old document in an era of globalization, interdependence and a communications revolution speaks for itself: the Tea Party is reactionary, regressive, and irritating to mainstream Americans. But given the level of anger and disenchantment with Washington, they may linger in the political landscape longer than initially predicted.

Tea Party supporters tend to confuse their candidates' folksiness with authenticity, their simple-mindedness with sincerity and their populist slogans with serious policy proposals. The truth is that the United States, for all its failures, has governmental institutions that have endured, and is governed by the rule of law and not by mob rule. It is normal and healthy in a democracy to protest against an unresponsive government. It is quite a different thing to put opportunistic, unproven, inexperienced people at the helm in order to roll back institutions that took years to build and that the newcomers in their ignorance scorn upon. There is no telling that they would be less greedy or more competent than those they replace.

More likely, a Tea-Party-dominated Congress would be a complete disaster as they focus on their petty interests and ideological vendettas; they repeal existing social legislation and refuse to fund the federal government; they start handing out subpoenas to investigate made-up claims against the Executive, and they do not address any of the real problems facing the country. Their narrow-mindedness, their disdain for the realities of democracy and their disinterest in the welfare of others is quite alarming. It may come back to haunt the other Republicans in Congress, who will realize too late that they have to rely on Democrats in order to pass any spending bill and that anger cannot be turned into an agenda for governing.

Ironically, this week has been proclaimed Education Week in America, as the White House unveils its new plan to reform the public school system and to bring American students up to par with other advanced democracies. Although the new emphasis will be on science, math and a longer school year, one can only hope there is room in the curriculum for more civic education, a better understanding of American History and a greater appreciation for democracy and its institutions. Only when that happens will this kind of movement be forever confined to the fringes of society, where it belongs.

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