

# Right Now

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REVOLUTIONIZING CONSERVATISM

## Tea Party Passions

**T**HE TEA PARTY is a marvel of modern American politics. What began in February 2009 with a CNBC commentator's tirade against federal support for borrowers with underwater home loans quickly built into a movement that altered the 2010 congressional elections and is now shaping the 2012 Republican presidential field.

In a new book, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford University Press), Thomas professor of government and sociology Theda Skocpol and graduate student Vanessa Williamson offer one of the first comprehensive, empirical analyses of this phenomenon, which Skocpol calls "an innovative version" of "recurrent populist upsurges on the right." The authors draw on existing surveys of Tea Partiers and observation of their events, as well as on the in-depth interviews they conducted with dozens of Tea Party activists. Unlike surveys, which Skocpol says ask questions with "precooked" answers, these hour-long interviews allowed Tea Party members to speak for themselves. The researchers could note the words and phrases interviewees used repeatedly, such as "freeloaders" and "take our country back." She and Williamson could also "hear the emotion," she adds. "You hear what they're afraid of, what they're hopeful about."

Local, grass-roots Tea Party activists

are generally older than 45, mostly white, and "comfortably" middle class, Skocpol explains. "They're often in their sixties and seventies, so they've had a chance to own a house and accumulate some savings." National surveys indicate that men make up 55 percent of the Tea Party, but the authors observe that women tend to be more active in local groups, often leading them.

Many Tea Partiers own small businesses, or did before they retired, says Williamson; they frequently describe themselves as "proud capitalists" who have worked hard all their lives. And de-

spite their reputation for despising government programs, Skocpol reports that many grass-roots members "are not only collecting benefits from Social Security, Medicare, and veteran programs, but also think these are good programs that are legitimate. Grass-roots Tea Partiers make a real distinction between things that go to people like themselves, who have earned them, and the kinds of government spending...that [go] to low-income people or young people or immigrants," whom they see as undeserving freeloaders.

But the Tea Party is more than these grass-roots activists. Skocpol and Williamson include in the movement conservative media outlets, such as Fox News, and an elite group of big Republican donors and well-funded free-market advocacy organizations, such as Americans for Prosperity,



co-founded by billionaire David H. Koch. These parts “sometimes work at cross purposes and sometimes work together,” Skocpol explains. Thus grass-roots members may support Social Security, while the advocacy groups seek to radically restructure social programs. Skocpol says such groups associated themselves with the Tea Party to capitalize on the grass-roots enthusiasm, but promote their own agendas.

Many journalists and academics have speculated that the Tea Party emerged in response to the economic downturn, but Skocpol and Williamson conclude from their interviews that hatred of Barack Obama played a bigger role. “Hatred’ is a word they use,” Skocpol notes. “He symbolizes things that they’re very worried about: tax-and-spend liberal government, asking hard-working Americans to help pay for benefits for freeloaders, and immigration. We don’t think it’s the color of his skin so much as the fact that he’s a black liberal professor with a foreign father.”

She is skeptical of the parallels often drawn between the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street protests, in part because the Occupy protestors have yet to articulate clear goals. “A lot of Americans are pretty pissed off right now,” she says. “You could say that these two protests have that in common, but I don’t know that they have much else.” She also notes a “startling” generational difference: Occupy Wall Street is made up mostly of young adults, while the Tea Party consists overwhelmingly of older adults who tend to distrust young people, particularly those without jobs.

Skocpol and Williamson predict that the Tea Party will continue to influence elections through active participation and fundraising in Republican primaries, forcing candidates to take tough stands on immigration and against universal health-care. Although the book’s research shows that Tea Partiers often believe inaccurate information about public policy (such as specifics of the Affordable Care Act), the

authors consider the Tea Party politically sophisticated. “I think a lot of people on the liberal side have this image that grass-roots members are uneducated, irrational people,” Skocpol says. “That is not correct. Tea Partiers are quite effective organizers, and they’re quite pragmatic in their political choices.” Their candidate may lose the general election, as Senate hopeful Christine O’Donnell did in Delaware, but O’Donnell’s primary victory successfully warned moderate Republican politicians about possible challenges from the right, she points out. Tea Partiers “want to win.”

~ERIN O’DONNELL

*Editor’s note: Theda Skocpol is an incorporator of this magazine.*

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GETTING THE RED OUT

# A Diabetes Link to Meat



paired, either because of “insulin resistance” (when insulin fails to trigger effective glucose uptake by muscle or other tissues), or because production of insulin by beta cells in the pancreas declines.

The HSPH investigators, led by professor of epidemiology Frank Hu and research fellow An Pan, analyzed data from three longitudinal studies of male and female healthcare professionals who were followed for 14 to 28 years.

After adjusting for other risk factors, the researchers found that a daily serving of red meat no larger than a deck of cards increased the risk of adult-onset diabetes by 19 percent. Processed red meat proved much worse: a daily serving half that size—one hot dog, or two slices of bacon, for example—was associated with a 51 percent increase in risk. (The

average 10-year risk of getting diabetes for U.S. adults is around 10 percent.)

Why is red meat harmful? “Saturated fat, which can lead to cardiovascular disease, is really just the beginning of the story,” explains Hu. Even though it is “difficult to pinpoint one compound or ingredient” as mechanistically linked to diabetes risk, three components of red meat—sodium, nitrites, and iron—are probably involved. Sodium is well



**R**ED-MEAT CONSUMPTION is already linked to higher levels of colorectal cancer and cardiovascular disease (atherosclerosis, heart disease, and stroke). Now researchers from Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) have added an increased risk of type 2 (adult onset) diabetes to that list. The incurable illness occurs when the body’s ability to control blood glucose levels by means of insulin secretion becomes im-

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