

Amy Fried* and Douglas B. Harris

The Strategic Promotion of Distrust in Government in the Tea Party Age

DOI 10.1515/for-2015-0028

Abstract: This paper argues that distrust in government is not an inadvertent byproduct of economic change, scandals, and cultural and identity politics, but rather grows out of strategic efforts to promote and harness it for political purposes. Elites encouraging distrust interact with grassroots movements, which they can only loosely direct and control. Identifying four strategic benefits of distrust: organizational, electoral, institutional and policy, the paper discusses how Republicans and conservative movement organizations in the Tea Party age used distrust to develop groups and achieve coherence, try to influence primaries and win elections, argue for the constitutional powers of institutions they control, and seek to influence public policy. Paying special attention to health policy, we examine how, after distrust was successfully used to thwart President Bill Clinton's proposed reforms, it was employed to try to stop and then to exact a price for President Barack Obama's passage of the Affordable Care Act. While Tea Party rhetoric and current streams of distrust are often associated with racialized messages and anti-Obama sentiment, we contend they are likely to persist after Obama leaves office, particularly given the Tea Party's comfort with ungovernability and long-standing conservative use of government distrust.

Distrust in government does not just happen. As we previously argued in analyzing the 1994 Republican Revolution and the demise of the Clinton health reform bill, political elites sometimes work intentionally to promote distrust. Rather than an "accidental by-product" of political, economic and social developments, we found that "some leaders may have wished to increase political distrust" strategically to mobilize groups in the mass public already prone to mistrust of government and political institutions. Thus, there is an interplay between elites and mass publics: "Distrust clearly involves strategizing for concrete purposes but not Svengali-like powers of elites" (Fried and Harris 2001, p. 158). The politics of distrust, then, is an imprecise art wherein leaders seize on distrust but direct it only loosely and are apt to lose control of it altogether.

*Corresponding author: Amy Fried, Department of Political Science, University of Maine, 5754 North Stevens Hall, Orono, ME 04469, USA, e-mail: Amy_Fried@umit.maine.edu
Douglas B. Harris: Loyola University Maryland, 4501 N Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21210, USA

This article argues that distrust continues to be a powerful strategic tool. With the rise of the Tea Party in 2009, conservative distrust in government intensified. At one Tea Party march that year, protesters were animated “not only by their opposition to ‘Obamacare,’ but by anger over what they perceived to be excessive government spending and taxation, government interference with personal freedoms, such as gun ownership, and a belief that Obama is leading the country toward socialism” (Rosenthal and Trost 2012, pp. 11–12). By 2013, Pew Research found that but 3% of Republicans and Republican leaners who agreed with the Tea Party trusted the federal government all or most of the time, and these citizens were quite angry at the federal government (Pew 2013). Whether at the federal or state level, Tea Party supporters and elected officials embodied conservative Republican criticisms of domestic policy and regulation, which overlapped with and diverged from Tea Party efforts organized by deep pocket far-right groups (Gardner 2010; Lepore 2010; Melcher and Fried 2012; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

We examine how elites tried to use distrust to build organizations, win elections, shift institutionally based power, and secure policy victories. While scholarly attention to individual level dynamics provides important insights about today’s political dynamics, we focus on how and with what consequences conservatives’ attitudes were appealed to and used by Republican leaders. As numerous scholars have shown, candidates and politicians have monitored public opinion in increasingly sophisticated ways (Converse 1987; Igo 2007; Fried and Harris 2010; Fried 2012), and elites have ignored, roused, mobilized, and tried to shape opinions and political perceptions of public views (Fried 1997; Herbst 1998; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Jacobs and Burns 2004; Hacker and Pierson 2005; Harris 2005).¹

We interpret key elements of the Tea Party Movement and Republican opposition to President Obama not simply as a cultural movement that swelled up from the grassroots nor as merely an elite-driven “astroturf” affair that sought to look like a democratic wave. Instead, this paper explores the interplay between these two forces – one broad, mass-based, enduring, democratic and difficult to predict or control and the other, elite-driven, strategic, institutionally located and seeking to manipulate and advance the mass-based efforts toward its own ends.

¹ Our approach contrasts with research in this contentious political period that focuses on individual level phenomena such as negative partisanship, motivated reasoning and conservatives’ tendency to see politics ideologically rather than in terms of group benefits (McCright and Dunlap 2011; Abramowitz 2012; Abramowitz and Webster 2015; Grossmann and Hopkins 2015; Theiss-Morse, Barton, and Wagner 2015).

We also recognize the role of long standing ideological commitments, such as conservatives' distaste toward government regulatory and social welfare activities and acknowledge the persistent place of race in structuring policies and politics.² In 2009, the political conditions were ripe for the politics of distrust. At a time of grave economic difficulty, during which the first African-American president tried to enact an ambitious domestic agenda, distrust was strategically useful for conservatives in and outside of Congress, marshaling economic anxiety as well as cultural and identity politics to weaken the Obama Administration and its coalition.

Following the framework of our prior work on the subject, this "update" of the politics of distrust examines how Tea Party politics and the distrust many in that movement have for the government and for President Obama provided benefits – organizational, electoral, institutional, and policy benefits – to Republican elites and how they, in turn, used those benefits in their ultimately failed efforts to stop the passage of Obamacare. We conclude with some considerations about the ongoing nature of the anti-government sentiment in the US and prospects for the continued influence of the Tea Party movement.

The Benefits of Distrust in the Tea Party Age

While politicians always have the potential to stoke and to benefit from distrust, the roots of public distrust in government have deepened. Economic turmoil can feed the conditions that make elite efforts to promote distrust more successful. The financial collapse of 2008 not only fed an Obama victory but also stoked opposition to his presidency from conservative critics. Economic distress, a mistrust of a Washington more concerned with Wall Street than Main Street, and a slow recovery in which income gains disproportionately flowed to the top fed a scattered Occupy movement on the left and an anxious Tea Party movement on the right.³

Social and political changes also fed the counter-Obama movement. Although economic conservatives may prefer the cheaper labor markets offered by liberal

² See Davies and Derthick 1997; Disch 2012; Free and Cantril 1967; Katznelson 2013; Soss and Schram 2007; Tesler 2012; and Winter 2006.

³ As Skocpol and Jacobs point out (2011), the timing and conditions of the economic crash politically disadvantaged Obama compared to Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt came to power years after an economic crash, not as it was occurring, and the recovery Obama presided over did little to counter the skewed distribution of wealth and income.

immigration policies, the social conservative and nativist wings of the Republican coalition are concerned about “porous” borders and the economic and social impacts of immigration. Efforts by nationally-oriented Republicans to change the party’s stance could not quiet often restive anti-immigrant forces. At the same time, there has been a sharp transformation in public opinion and policy in regard to LGBT rights and marriage, which had to be bewildering to many opponents and further confirmation that the world they once knew and valued was under coordinated and sustained assault. Other policy changes included bailouts of the financial and auto industries, a massive economic stimulus program, reform of the financial sector, the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” and gender pay equity legislation. The election of America’s first African-American President stoked the anxiety of some who believed that the world was quickly changing around them. To cope, the most extreme opponents engaged in a myth-making project that questions the President’s birth origin, religion, and commitment to America’s success.

Obama’s policy accomplishments made him, arguably at least, the most liberal president since Franklin Roosevelt. But if liberals celebrated these policy changes, critics saw this activism as yet another liberal threat to America’s free market and its traditional values. Some even viewed this as evidence that the President intended to destroy America out of a post-colonial mindset or a secret Muslim plot. The most conservative elements of American society saw them as threats to Americanness itself. Nowhere was this truer than with the Affordable Care Act.

These changes during the Obama years occurred the same time as America’s trends toward political partisan polarization accelerated. In addition to the “sorting” of liberals and conservatives along geographical and cultural lines, changes in media communication, campaign finance law, and partisan strategies at the national level fed polarization and bred vehement opposition to the President. Increased efforts within parties to use primary election challenges as a way of exacerbating polarization took root on the left and especially the right, with Club for Growth and Tea Party challengers looking to oust many more establishment, albeit quite conservative, Republican officeholders.

These dynamics created conditions for the rise of anti-government sentiment which seemingly at least lingers in the background of American politics (on both the left and the right) and that, in the contemporary era, conservative Washington elites used strategically to provide organizational, electoral, institutional, and policy benefits. Tea Party politics, specifically the interplay of the Tea Party movement at the periphery and Republican and conservative elites at the center of American power, extended the conservative promotion of public anger we noted in our examination of 1990s Republicans (Fried and Harris 2001). As we argued, distrust of government is not simply an unfortunate consequence; it

is and remains a potent strategic resource for those who seek to keep and to gain power. It helps them build organizations, mobilize for elections, feed selective distrust of institutions, and impact the policy process.

Organizational Benefits. To some, the phrase “Tea Party organization” might seem an oxymoron. The movement is ostensibly geographically and organizationally diverse and purportedly primarily motivated by ideological commitments to liberty and individualism and has populist suspicions of well-heeled power. Still, the history of the movement’s founding is littered with examples of other views, some even contrary views, on government and policy as well as elite seeding and sponsorship, including top-down coordination and control. Most accounts of the Tea Party’s founding include the roles of CNBC, FoxNews, Glenn Beck, Dick Armey, and the Koch brothers and noted Washington organizations such as Americans for Prosperity and Freedom Works (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011; Perrin et al. 2014).

Recognizing both of these aspects of Tea Party origins and organizations, we argue that any dichotomy between seeing the Tea Party as a “grassroots” movement rather than an “astroturf” movement, a movement primarily organized and directed by elites, is false and misses the point of how elites use mistrust.⁴ Except in very narrow policy or issue campaigns, elites do not manufacture discontent (or any mass sentiment) out of whole cloth but instead seize on very real and socially grounded trends of distrust and dissatisfaction, stoke them and give them voice, and then attempt to mobilize, harness, and crystallize them into a political force. As we put it in 2001, leaders “can catalyze persons with ornery temperaments to react” in ways that might build political organizations (Fried and Harris 2001, p. 158).

Many of the ingredients of a Tea Party revolt existed well before the financial collapse and the Obama victory. Anti-government rhetoric has its origins in colonial America and was a key component of the American Revolution and the founding of the republic. Antifederalists, early Democrats, and populists resisted strong centralized government and were leery of the influence that might be wielded by economic elites, particularly those from the northeast. Suspicion of government “meddling” in the economy has a long lineage in American (at first, Democratic) thought and became especially Republican only after Progressive attempts to regulate the economic realm. Racism and nativism are also perennial American touchstones with origins as old and legacies as long as our commitments to democracy and republicanism (Smith 1993).

⁴ Indeed, all social movements must balance the tensions between feeding the movements popular strength but guarding its messaging and articulating its views to people in power.

Despite its ostensibly straightforward aims to return the US to an earlier era, the Tea Party consists of a complex, often internally contradictory mix of these ideologies.⁵ It is comprised not only of anti-government libertarian conservatives but also of a vehement streak of social conservatism much more to the extreme (even when compared to other Republicans) on abortion and gay marriage (Arceneaux and Nicholson 2012, p. 703) as well as “overwhelmingly oppos[ing] affirmative action” and being extremely conservative on immigration (Arceneaux and Nicholson 2012, p. 704). Scholars of Tea Party opinion are quick to avoid inaccurately labeling the group as racist or as motivated only by nativist sentiments, but most acknowledge that these more sinister aspects of American political thought are more pronounced in the Tea Party than among other conservatives, Republicans, or the overall population (Arceneaux and Nicholson 2012; Perrin et al. 2014; Tope et al. 2015). In regard to welfare-state benefits, Tea Party members are apt to support Social Security and Medicare – particularly relevant to them as the Tea Party demographics skew older than the rest of the population – but draw the line at policies that they deem benefit the “undeserving” (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011, p. 33). For social policy, the anti-government philosophy seems not to hold as Tea Party Republicans are more apt to posit a role for the state in social regulation and in seeking a greater government enforcement role in immigration policy.

Organizationally, the Tea Party is disparate, decentralized and loosely affiliated (Karpowitz et al. 2011; Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011; Bullock and Hood 2012; Perrin et al. 2014), making it difficult to identify who is actually in the Tea Party. If the “patchwork” nature of the movement presents an analytical problem for scholars, this pales in comparison to the practical problem facing those seeking to lead such individualistic members and supporters. Tea Party organizers have relatively meager means of providing coordinated action. In various scholarly accounts, the Tea Party is “united” merely by shared ideological commitments (Karpowitz et al. 2011, p. 303), cable news messages (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011), cyber connections (Perrin et al. 2014, p. 627), or the crucial dollars of well-funded Washington organizations like Americans for Prosperity or Freedom Works. Even with these benefactors and the anti-government messages of the conservative media (Calmes 2015), coordination of the rank-and-file is difficult. Many members know “little or nothing about Freedom Works or the other national free-market organizations promoting the Tea Party brand” (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011, p. 29).

⁵ Readers should note that this seemingly critical assessment of Tea Party opinion and ideology as complex, incoherent, and internally contradictory does not necessarily negatively distinguish the Tea Party from other social movements, membership coalitions or public opinion generally.

How, then, does an ideological movement achieve message coherence and political impact when its organizations are “far flung” and its followers are not centrally organized? Tea Party leaders seek to keep some aspects of their shared ideology under wraps while focusing group and public attention on more politically palatable issues – specifically, broad anti-government sentiment. Arguing that social movements use framing techniques to create “resonance” thus “motivating people to act in concert with the movement” (p. 303), Prior (2014) conducted an ethnographic analysis of how Tea Party organizers engaged in “quality control” of Tea Party messaging, “a deliberate technique of management and instruction” from the top down (p. 307). Tea Party organizers engaged in both preemptive efforts as well as message policing to keep the focus on economic issues and anti-government sentiment as opposed to “social issues” (including “immigration, poverty or homelessness”), “tin foil hat theories,” specifically anti-Obama signs or rants, and “to prevent framings that either were racist, could be construed as racist, or were otherwise inflammatory” (p. 309). Even where movement organizers shared some of these sentiments, they policed the rhetoric and symbolism of the organization to maintain focus on the “master frame” of anti-government views.

Notably, the leadership of the Tea Party seems to believe that maintaining focus on the anti-government aspects of the movement is the best way to achieve the twin imperatives of maintaining organizational coherence and expanding the movement’s political reach. Whereas racism, nativism, and strident anti-Obamaism are forces to be muted and social policies are viewed as impolitic distractions, the accentuation and promotion of public anger toward government has the cultural resonance and the political appeal capable of defining the movement. Proper assessment of the Tea Party should acknowledge the success with which its leaders have subdued these forces and focused attention on anti-government messages but note, too, the more sinister aspects of American thought from which they benefit. As an interplay of elite direction and mass-based movement, the Tea Party provides a prime example of elites using public dissatisfaction and distrust of government to mobilize public opinion.

The organizational benefits of government distrust are many for the Tea Party movement. First, among the many things that might unite Tea Party adherents, anti-government thought and rhetoric is the most politically palatable and socially acceptable. Second, as “far-flung” and disparate in organization as these groups might be, it really is the soft politics of ideology and identity that serves as the “glue” of cohesion. Not Arney and not even the Koch brothers could supply the resources that would provide the organizational structure necessary to tame such a multi-faceted group. None of this is to deny that race, nativism, and social conservatism are also key motivating forces for the Tea Party, but only that without anti-government rhetoric the Tea Party would lose a key pillar of internal

agreement and the fig leaf it might require when interacting with the American political universe to avoid being deemed racist or anti-immigrant.

Combining “grassroots” and “astroturf” elements, the Tea Party is best understood in light of our view that elites seize upon anti-government sentiment among the public, distill it, guide it, and, ultimately, make use of it for their own purposes. In 2001, we wrote, “Elites can seek to promote political alienation to help them build organizations focused on public anger or to modify organizations to focus on public anger” (p. 159). From Freedom Works and FoxNews to the local activities of the grassroots across the country, the Tea Party has been built on such anger and its more aggressive proponents have tried to “modify” the national Republican Party to focus even more on the anti-government aspects of conservative ideology and Republican policy.

Electoral Benefits. These attempted “modifications” of the Republican Party included efforts to run Tea Party Republicans for higher office, including by challenging some Republican incumbents in primaries. But the Tea Party thrust has been essentially Republican and, more or less, has served Republican Party electoral interests, particularly when viewed against the backdrop of more than a century of Whig-Republican ideology. If Whig-Republicans were primarily oriented toward the expansion of government and the coordination of its activities with business and other interests, the contemporary Republican Party has been ostensibly a small government party since the 1920s.⁶ Noting that Republican ideology shifted in the 1920s from a Burkean conservatism to a market-based, individualistic, social Darwinist philosophy, Gerring argued, “Whereas in the previous century the party had worked to contain the passions of the individual, largely through the actions of an interventionist state, now Republicans reversed this polarity: the individual was to be set free from the machinations of the state” (p. 15).

The Tea Party’s anti-statism and pro-market individualism parallels Republican Party ideological history since the emergence of “right-wing populism” in the 1920s. From essentially elitist (e.g. Whigs) to quintessentially populist, Republicans “attacked special privileges, special interests, and various other expressions of elite control” (Gerring 1998, p. 143) along with “a general reaction against experts and expertise” (p. 147) and a view of the job of citizen being “to flail government into obedience on a regular basis” (p. 145). But more than anti-government, this right-wing populism took a decidedly negative turn when it embraced the nativism that would also come to influence key elements of the Tea Party. Right-wing populists held “that all Americans were not equally deserving”

⁶ The authors are aware of the evidence to the contrary wherein Republicans favor big government in regard to the military, police powers, and social regulation and wherein the Republican Party is and has been a champion of government promotion of business.

(p. 143) and their political enemies were not sufficiently “American.” Gerring (1998) quotes Wilkie, for example, who to FDR and other New Dealers insisted, as Tea Party-ers might to Obama, “Give our country back to us” (p. 145). Other developments in the Republican party – first western prairie libertarianism starting with Goldwater and later incorporating southern Whites who fled the Democratic party after the civil rights movement – severely diminished moderate (and certainly liberal) Republicanism (Kabaservice 2012), leaving the anti-statist and nativist elements as potent, sometimes dominating, forces inside the GOP.

Tea Party complaints about Wall Street as well as Washington and the contemporary conservative antipathy toward scientific “experts” and especially findings on climate change have clear antecedents in Republican right-wing populism. These forces fueled the rhetorical furor Tea Party-ers level at Obama’s “crony capitalism” of corporate bailout policies, government contracts to Solyndra, and concerns that Obama’s IRS targeted right-wing groups. To them, Obama, Pelosi, Reid, and the national Democrats were using the state to fuel a political machine that rewards Democratic allies and punishes Republican opponents (Balz 2011).

Even those skeptical of the ideological and policy similarities between Republicans and the Tea Party movement sketched out above would be hard pressed to deny that the Tea Party is exercising increasing electoral influence within the Republican Party. Tea Party influence has demonstrated itself in funding campaigns, the power of endorsement, the influence of the (Tea Party dominated) Republican base in primary elections, and mobilization in general elections. Dick Lugar, Bob Bennett, or Eric Cantor, who would have been considered conservative leaders in earlier eras, were deemed unacceptable by Tea Party activists, in part because of their ties to Washington or to K Street, and were ousted in Tea Party-driven primary elections (Kamarck 2014). Tea Party influence has been felt at the presidential level too. Comparing rhetorical emphases of Republican Presidential candidates between 2008 and 2012, Medzihorsky, Littvay, and Jenne (2014) found that “the Republican Party has been radicalized in a direction consistent with the libertarian, small-government ideology” of the Tea Party (p. 807). Sociologists note the inverted nature of this movement’s relationship with the political world moving as it did from a “cultural-political identity to a partisan political identity” (Perrin et al. 2014, p. 648).

In addition to offering intra-party “discipline,” the Tea Party is a prime mobilizing force for Republicans. From the outset, the Tea Party was an activist element of the Republican Party, voting at much higher rates than non-Tea Party members in the 2010 elections (Maxwell and Parent 2012, p. 1390). This energy continued in 2012 when still “a majority of Tea Party Republicans said that [Obama] was probably or definitely born in another country, and almost as

many said that he was a Muslim” (Bradberry and Jacobson 2014, p. 3). Fueled also by antipathy to liberal immigration policies and nativist sentiments, “Tea Party sympathizers form the Republican coalition’s largest, most loyal, and most active component” (Bradberry and Jacobson 2014, p. 8). Despite his lackluster conservative credentials and his own “government run” health care plan, Mitt Romney had *more* support from Tea Party members than from other Republicans (Bradberry and Jacobson 2014, p. 4).

The close alliance of this ostensibly “grassroots” movement with the Republican Party is not surprising. In addition to all of the elite media and conservative-leaning groups that spurred its creation and, for all of its purported anti-Washington and insurgent motivations, the Tea Party has been in part coordinated by and, ultimately, incorporated in the national Republican Party. The GOP’s coordinated opposition of Obama started immediately with his inauguration as key national Republicans went far beyond the “permanent campaign” of jousting, issue framing and claims about and appeals to public opinion. At a 2009 steakhouse dinner on Inauguration Day convened by political strategist Frank Luntz, a group of Republicans decided to oppose everything the president proposed. Attendees included former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, Luntz, journalist Fred Barnes and about 15 Republican legislators, including Reps. Paul Ryan and Eric Cantor and Senators Jim DeMint and Jon Kyl. Ryan told attendees that “everyone’s got to stick together” and a strategy was born: “Show united and unyielding opposition to the president’s economic policies” (Draper 2012, p. xii). This would make it impossible for Obama to keep his campaign promises to go beyond political divides, possibly prompting distrust about his character. Moreover, centrist “Blue Dog” Democrats faced the unhappy prospect of pure party-line votes that would tie them to leaders that were unpopular in their constituencies, or separating themselves from and undermining the majority’s endeavors. Even if legislation passed, it could seem less legitimate without bipartisanship. The dinner attendees’ hope was that this strategy would win them back control of the House in 2010 and the presidency in 2012.

The Tea Party provided both a constituency for this strategy of polarization and an intra-party means of enforcing discipline around the strategy. Any Washington Republican who entertained compromise with the White House or publicly acknowledged Administration success (or who even just said something positive about the President personally) risked backlash from constituents such as protests in town halls and other district events or retribution at the ballot box in a primary election. Indeed, for all of the Tea Party efforts to mute anti-Obama rhetoric (and some of the more radical, even race-based language, that might accompany it), scholars have nevertheless shown that “the Tea Party movement is clearly characterized both as pro-fiscal conservatism and as an anti-Obama

movement” (Maxwell and Parent 2012, p. 1398).⁷ Thus, the Tea Party serves as an important component of the Republican Party’s base, propelling its mobilization and turnout and influencing, especially, its primaries. Its anti-government rhetoric is a prime source of Republican electoral politics and support (Parker and Barreto 2013).

Institutional Benefits. As a “partisan political identity,” much Tea Party rhetoric and belief about institutional power might be expected to fit the partisan situation rather than some timeless (or at least long-standing) constitutional principle. Another key argument of our previous work was that contemporary politicians are “situational constitutionalists” (Piper 1991; 1994) willing to shift their views of separation of powers and the roles and powers of Congress and the Presidency depending on whether or not they control those institutions. That is, when partisans mistrust government they are apt to mistrust the parts of government they do not control. When we wrote our first piece on this topic, the Republican Party had become a pro-executive, anti-congressional party, championing Ronald Reagan’s expansions of executive power and decrying the politics of the Democratically-controlled Congress.

Our initial piece, in fact, caught Republicans at an atypical time in their disposition toward institutions. As 20th century separation of powers issues emerged surrounding the Progressive and then New Deal expansions of presidential and executive power, conservative Republicans were “stand pat” believers in Congressional power (Harris 2015). But whereas Republicans resisted the 20th century’s growth of presidential power and championed congressional dominance, with Nixon’s Administration and especially by Reagan’s presidency, Republicans had switched views on presidential power just as Democrats worked to rein in their delegations to the presidency in regard to war power and budget. As Milkis and Rhodes (2007) put it, “Reagan’s presidency presupposed that an institutionalized presidency forged for liberal purposes could be redeployed for conservative ends” (p. 467).

Reagan era Republican efforts to bolster the presidency were multi-faceted. Besides expanding presidential power with unilateral military moves and early president-led legislative successes, the Reagan Administration advocated expansions of executive power. Articulated by Ed Meese’s Justice Department as a belief in a “unitary executive,” conservatives argued for greater presidential control of

⁷ This fact has implications for the longevity of the Tea Party movement because, if anti-government rhetoric is a perennial force in American political thought that various movements have tapped into, to the extent that the Tea Party is motivated and unified by anti-Obama sentiment, its cohesiveness and force is likely to “wane after President Obama leaves office” (Maxwell and Parent 2012, p. 1398).

departments and agencies. Strategically, this made sense given that the Democrats' control of Congress was so strong that not even Reagan's clear victory in 1980 (or 1984) could dislodge Democrats from control of the House; if conservatives were to govern on anything from environmental policy to Contra aid, they had to sidestep Congress. Yet there is a great deal of irony in Republican conservatives' newfound affinity for executive power. As Stephen Skowronek put it, "The theory of the unitary executive promotes exactly what the earlier generation of conservatives feared" (Skowronek 2009, p. 2075).

Part of the Reagan era's conservative promotion of presidential power was the denigration of congressional power, the very institution they had previously championed as a conservative bulwark against progressivism and the New Deal. If anti-congressionalism was a consistent element of conservative thought since the resignation of Nixon, it took on an added urgency when Democrats reclaimed majority control of the Senate in the 1986 elections, consolidating Democratic Party control of the legislative branch. At this time the conservative attack on Congress was in full bloom. Outside Congress, conservative scholars published books like *The Imperial Congress: Crisis in the Separation of Powers* (Jones and Marini 1988) and *The Ruling Class: Inside the Imperial Congress* (Felten 1993) which couched conservative critiques of Democratic Congresses in broad, seemingly timeless, separation of powers rhetoric.⁸

At the center of all of this was Dick Cheney, who had long believed that the presidency was imperiled. After Vietnam, the resignation of Richard Nixon and the failed and brief presidency of Gerald Ford (a failure for which Cheney, as Chief of Staff, had a front row seat), Cheney had become convinced that the presidency was losing power in the constitutional system and he worked, even while in Congress, to advance presidential power. He viewed the War Powers Act as unconstitutional. As a member of the Iran-Contra committee, Cheney was a principal author of a Minority Report that averred that the Affair was in part caused by Congress interfering with the president's foreign policy powers.

With Iran-Contra still stinging, separation of powers was in the partisan air. The 1988 and 1992 Republican Platforms represent the high-water mark of anti-congressionalism for the GOP. In 1988, Republicans dubbed Congress "the broken branch" controlled by "an arrogant oligarchy that has subverted the Constitution" through "excessive interference" in foreign policy, a characterization of what Republicans might simply call "responsible oversight" in a Democratic Administration (Republican Party Platform 1988). By the same token, the 1992

⁸ This is drawn from our 2001 piece on the subject; for a more comprehensive look at this anti-Congress Republican rhetoric, see Fried and Harris 2001, pp. 164–165.

Republican Platform featured a section called “Cleaning up the imperial Congress” and the observation (loaded with insinuation) that “Democrats have controlled the House of Representatives for ... longer than Castro has held Cuba” (Republican Party Platform 1992).⁹

This rhetoric would continue to be a touchstone for Republicans until they took control of the House and Senate in 1994 at which point they rediscovered suspicion of the executive branch and the Framers’ devotion to Congress. In a speech given at the Library of Congress months after becoming Speaker in 1995, Gingrich (who had authored a forward to Jones and Marini’s *The Imperial Congress*) seemingly rediscovered the elements of Federalist writings that approved of legislative power. He said, “as we leave the Cold War era, you’re going to see a reassertion of Congressional initiative not because of partisanship but because of the natural pattern that the *Federalist Papers* [sub]scribes to ... we have greater freedom because of the legislative branch than we would be putting our faith in an elected temporary kingship” (Gingrich 1998, p. 325). Arguing that this was the “correct model,” Gingrich concluded, “in peacetime ... the bias ought to be in favor of the legislative branch” (Gingrich 1998, p. 325).

The impulse toward situational constitutionalism was arrested by unified party control of government. The first six years of the Bush Administration left Republicans controlling not only the Presidency but at least one chamber of Congress, usually both chambers. Still, Republicans in the Bush era were pro-executive power and Bush “aggressively used executive orders and directives to achieve ambitious and controversial policy goals in both foreign and domestic affairs without congressional action” (Milkis and Rhodes 2007, p. 472). With Republicans discovering anew the merits of a strong presidency, the Democrats’ victories in the 2006 election and return to majority status in the House and Senate must have felt familiar to Republicans who cut their teeth in the Reagan era. Republican complaints about excessive oversight and meddling were rampant and the Bush Administration, particularly Vice President Dick Cheney, was back on the march to restore executive branch power and presidential autonomy, perhaps failing to anticipate a future Democratic President.

But to what extent was the return to executive power due to the 9/11 attacks and wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq or rather because the president was a Republican? The answer seems clear when one sees how quickly most of the conservative movement abandoned “timeless” beliefs about the separation of powers, its “elegant” theory of a unitary executive, and its hand-wringing over congressional meddling once Barack Obama was elected president. Republican

⁹ Quoted by Fried and Harris 2001, p. 165.

sensitivity to slights toward Congress's authority heightened, including complaints about "czars" in the Obama Administration. With Glenn Beck leading the charge on FoxNews, other conservative critics carried the argument forth as if it was long-standing separation of powers dogma to preserve legislative authority. In *Power Grab: Obama's Dangerous Plan for a One Party Nation*, Dick Morris and Eileen McGann (2014) worried about Obama's "disdain for the Constitution" just as Ken Blackwell and Ken Klukowski (2010) expressed concern about White House "czars," referring to them as a "shadow government" (pp. 26–27). Notably, the Blackwell and Klukowski book is called, *The Blueprint: Obama's Plan to Subvert the Constitution and Build an Imperial Presidency*.

Such objections became officially "Republican" with the inclusion of a passage in the 2012 GOP platform decrying Obama's "antipathy toward the Constitution" as exhibited by

appointing 'czars' to evade the confirmation process, making unlawful 'recess' appointments when the Senate is not in recess, using executive orders to bypass the separation of powers and its checks and balances, encouraging illegal actions by regulatory agencies from the NLRB to the EPA, openly and notoriously displaying contempt for Congress, the Judiciary, and the Constitutional prerogatives of the individual States, refusing to defend the nation's laws in federal courts or enforce them on the streets, ignoring the legal requirement for legislative enactment of an annual budget, gutting welfare reform by unilaterally removing its statutory work requirement, buying senatorial votes with special favors, and evading the legal requirement for congressional consultation regarding troop commitments overseas" (Republican Party Platform 2012).

Responding, the Obama White House observed that prominent Republican critics had not similarly objected to "czars" in the Bush Administration (or the Reagan and Bush Administrations before that) and had, in fact, made a number of errors in asserting the scope of Obama's reliance on "czars," including miscounting the number of these positions, informally labeled as "czars," that had lacked congressional oversight through Senate confirmation.¹⁰ The point is not so much that Obama's defense was dispositive or superior to the charges of his Republican critics, but only that it was partisanship more than a lasting, consistent belief in congressional oversight and power that underlay critics' claims.

The contested nature of institutional power in the separation of powers framework leaves ample room for politicians to strategically "adjust" their viewpoints to current partisan realities. Partisans shift their views of the appropriate balance of power depending on whether they control the presidency or Congress. In the politics of judicial appointments, 1990s Republicans, still stinging

¹⁰ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2009/09/16/truth-about-czars>.

from failing to confirm Robert Bork to the Supreme Court, complained, “‘Advise and consent’ has been replaced by ‘slash and burn’” (Republican Party Platform 1992). With the Senate in Republican hands in 2012, the GOP emphasized the legislature’s role to “advise and consent” differently, claiming, “That is both a presidential responsibility, in selecting judicial candidates, and a senatorial responsibility, in confirming them” (Republican Party Platform 2012). Similar shifts occurred in foreign policy. While in 2008 the Republican platform warned “The waging of war – and the achieving of peace – should never be micromanaged ... on the floor of the Senate and House of Representatives” and that “our next president must preserve all options” (Republican Party Platform 2008), by 2012, they reverted to a balanced view of separated power saying, “The United States of America is strongest when the President and Congress work closely together – in war and in peace – to advance our common interests and ideals” (Republican Party Platform 2012).

For all of their purported reverence for Ronald Reagan, contemporary conservatives stop short of adopting Reagan’s belief in a strong executive branch or at least applying it consistently. Indeed, whereas the Republicans’ 1994 “Contract with America” read, in part, as a critique of an imperial Congress, the 11th component of the Tea Party’s “Contract from America” was “Stop Unconstitutional Executive Branch Power. Develop a plan to sunset federal regulations and limit the Executive Branch’s power, which has grown substantially over the past decade.”¹¹

The 1980s Republicans’ antipathy toward Congress and celebration of executive power were aberrations for a party that opposed expanded presidential power in the Progressive Era and during the New Deal. Thus it is notable that Tea Party mistrust of Obama has translated into broader articulations of concern about the power of the presidency and executive branch. Any reading of separation of powers politics since the beginning of the 20th century would observe clear increases in executive branch power, discretion, and potential for unilateral policymaking. What has been far less consistent is how the parties (and their associated ideological movements) responded. Neither liberals nor conservatives have been consistently anti-government; each has instead been against aspects of government they do not control. Given their anti-Obama roots and its odd mix of both anti-government sentiment and strong authoritarianism (Arceneaux and Nicholson 2012, p. 702), it seems quite likely that, all their “timeless” constitutionalist rhetoric notwithstanding, Tea Party and other conservatives will reverse

¹¹ “Contract from America,” Contract from America Foundation, <http://contractfromamerica.org> (accessed 15 Aug. 2015).

course again and favor a strong presidency when America elects its next conservative president.¹² Meanwhile, claims about Obama's purported unconstitutional actions promote distrust in him, governmental actors who do not restrain the president and the federal government.

Policy Benefits and Beyond: Distrust and the Politics of the Affordable Care Act

The passage of the Affordable Care Act was a major domestic accomplishment of President Obama, as he achieved a long-term liberal policy objective. In the contentious politics of health care in 1994 and 2009, opponents of reform efforts by Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama used distrust in government to try to serve policy, electoral and organizational goals. Ultimately distrust of government was inadequate to defeat the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) as it had Clinton health care reform, but it helped Republicans win the 2010 midterm elections and build organizations motivated by opposition to health reform and, more broadly, a robust federal presence in domestic policy.

Understanding how the ACA succeeded while Clinton's reform effort failed is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that during debates about health reform in both battles, opponents used the politics of distrust in government. During the Clinton era, Republicans, urged on by strategist Bill Kristol to stand against any new policies that would expand coverage, invoked "big government," referred to "socialized" or "socialist" health care, and raised fears that "Washington bureaucrats" would control health care (Fried and Harris 2001, pp. 168–172). Though the strategic promotion of distrust remained, conditions had changed by the Obama era. In brief, factors enabling the law's passage included a reform process within Congress kicked off by a White paper issued by Senate Finance Committee Chair Max Baucus (D-Montana) shortly after the 2008 election; discussions and negotiations with health care stakeholders (including hospitals, pharmaceutical companies and insurance companies) that began after the 2006 Democratic congressional election successes; the election of large congressional Democratic majorities in 2008 which increased the likelihood of passage; proponents' choice of a policy approach that avoided upending existing health care;

¹² Indeed, given the advanced average age of the Tea Party membership and their consistent conservatism, it is to be expected that most of them, individually, have switched commitments on whether or not the Congress or the President should be dominant as partisan realities in Washington have changed over the last decades.

and Democratic leaders' persistence after the January 2010 election of Republican Sen. Scott Brown seemed to preface significant political fallout would ensue (Hacker 2010; Oberlander 2010; Starr 2011).

While attempts to stop the Affordable Care Act were not successful, distrust was again key to the Republican playbook. As health policy scholar Jonathan Oberlander noted, Obama's efforts faced "the perennial problem of building popular support for reform in a country where many citizens had little faith in government and where most insured Americans were satisfied with their own health care coverage" (Oberlander 2010, p. 1113). Moreover, trust in government has fallen a great deal since Medicare and Medicaid were passed a half century ago and even since the 1993–1994 Clinton effort. A whopping 69% agreed they "trusted the federal government to do what is right most of the time" when Medicare passed in 1965, but only 23% agreed in 1993 and 19% in early 2010 (Brodie et al. 2010, p. 1126). Thus it is no surprise that anti-government messages were key to Republican rhetorical strategies.

Republican strategist Frank Luntz supplied language, telling reform opponents they "simply MUST be vocally and passionately on the side of reform," (Luntz 2009) but that anti-government messages should play a large role.¹³ After asserting they wanted reform, speakers should say they wanted to prevent a "government takeover" of healthcare by "Washington bureaucrats," "while ratcheting up the rhetoric against insurance companies." Economic arguments focused around markets were not endorsed. As Luntz noted, "Nobody is asking for 'private healthcare' or 'free market health care.' There is no demand for 'more competition.'" Republicans should say they "are firmly committed to providing genuine access to affordable, quality healthcare for every American," they would also "oppose any politician-run system that denies you the treatments you need, when you need them."

Luntz also stressed that Republicans should say what they supported, albeit in rather general terms. Instead of adopting a "Washington takeover of health care," the nation should "say yes to personalized, patient-centered care." Republicans should bring up harms that would "jeopardize our quality of care and access to good doctors by putting politicians in charge of your healthcare." As Luntz noted, Americans care about being denied care. "It is essential," Luntz wrote, "that 'deny' and 'denial' enter the conservative lexicon immediately because it is at the core of what scares Americans the most about a government takeover

¹³ Allen (2009) noted that Luntz was "involved in creating much of the language Republican lawmakers used from 1994 through 2004, but was tossed out by the House leadership in 2005." One of his successes was popularizing the phrase "death tax" for "inheritance tax."

of healthcare. Then add to it the source of that denial and you have the perfect anti-government, anti-Washington and anti-Democratic message.” Putting “politicians in charge of your health care” was scarier than invoking a role for “bureaucrats;” “Washington” was worse than “government” and “Washington takeover” more frightening than “Washington control.” After all, “Takeovers are like coups. They lead to dictators and a loss of freedom,” Luntz advised.

Language invoking government control was used frequently in Congress. Tying the ACA to rationing and a decline in freedom, Rep. Ted Poe (R-TX) said, “In a government-run system, the government decides who gets treatment in medicine and who doesn’t. That means the government decides who lives, who dies... When government bureaucrat gatekeepers have control over who lives and who dies in America, freedom is the first casualty.”¹⁴ Rep. Steve Scalise (R-LA) held that a “new health care czar” would have “the ability and the power to interfere between the relationship of a patient and their doctor.”¹⁵ Rep. Sam Johnson (R-TX) asserted, “Congress needs to wake up and realize that Americans know more about their health care needs than the government bureaucrats. They know exactly what a Washington takeover of health care means, and they’re shouting from the rooftops: No, no, no.”¹⁶

Sarah Palin’s invocation of “death panels” embodied Luntz’s instruction that “What Americans fear most is that Washington politicians will dictate what kind of care they receive.” Asking, “[W]ho will suffer the most when they ration care?” Palin answered, “The sick, the elderly, and the disabled, of course. The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama’s ‘death panel’ so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgment of ‘level of productivity in society,’ whether they are worthy of health care” (Palin 2009). Similarly, Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-VA) said old people would be “put to death by their government.” Starr (2011, p. 212). GOP House leader John Boehner (R-OH) suggested paying for end-of-life counseling “may start us down a treacherous path toward government-encouraged euthanasia” Starr (2011, pp. 212–213). The rhetoric of distrust surely reached an awful apex in claiming that health care bureaucrats would execute the sick and infirm.

These emphases redeployed long-standing frames about government to apply to health reform. Given high levels of distrust in government during the Obama years, it was perhaps “no surprise” that health care opponents pointed to government having ‘too big a role in the health care system’ as the reason for their

¹⁴ U.S. House of Representatives. *Congressional Record*, 7 Jul. 2009.

¹⁵ U.S. House of Representatives. *Congressional Record*, 16 Jul. 2009.

¹⁶ U.S. House of Representatives. *Congressional Record*, 4 Mar. 2010.

opposition” (Brodie et al. 2010, p. 1126). One analysis found that for “mass-and elite-level opponents of the ACA, the legislation’s cost and the increased governmental role it authorized were central reasons behind their opposition” and these shared concerns did not shift appreciably through the reform effort (Hopkins 2013, p. 2013). Moreover, the absence of frames emphasizing economic fairness and equality left supporters without what could have been a potent alternate rhetorical approach (Druckman, Fein, and Leeper 2012).

While attempts to use distrust in government to stop the Affordable Care Act failed, they had policy consequences, including notably Palin’s “death panel” claims. The provision to pay doctors for end of life counseling was taken out of the health reform bill and later regulations regarding such advising were axed (Kessler 2012; Millman 2014). Moreover, as one scholar put it, “the lie has nimbly been used to mobilize opposition, not just against the ACA’s provision for advance care planning but also against other parts of the act,” including “the Independent Payment Advisory Board (IPAD) and evidence-based treatment recommendations” (Frankford 2015, pp. 1085–1086).

Second, distrust bred fear that existing government health benefits could be undermined. Seniors were targeted by ACA opponents with claims Medicare was threatened, though the law increased coverage by closing the prescription drug donut hole and covering preventive care without any copay. In saying Americans “should not have a government run plan to decide when to pull the plug on grandma” (Montopoli 2009) Senator Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) invoked that threat.

Third, individualistic notions of government were embedded in pre-ACA policy rhetoric and designs, making it harder to convince seniors receiving benefits that universalistic approaches would benefit everyone. As Campbell argued (2011, p. 966), older voters saw “social protections” they received as “individual entitlements for workers, or those attached to workers, not truly as social insurance.” But while “the individually earned entitlement proved an effective way to package social protection for individualistic, antigovernment Americans... [it] also greatly complicates health care reform. Public opinion polls showed repeatedly that seniors were more opposed to the Obama health care reform effort than were younger citizens.” These long-standing cultural perspectives, dovetailing with Tea Party rhetoric about the relative “deservingness” of some Americans, were linked to specific negative claims about the ACA.

Distrust in government was also used to try to achieve organizational and electoral goals. Large organized Tea Party groups may be libertarian-leaning and want government to do very little, but many people who associate themselves with the Tea Party are comfortable with some benefit programs. The individualism inherent in program designs Campbell identified translates to a sense among members of this group that the ACA is illegitimate (Skocpol and Williamson 2012,

p. 60). Seniors and veterans constitute the deserving, while young people and racial minorities are undeserving. Thus Tea Party supporters see government helping a group that they believe has not worked for benefits and therefore is illegitimately receiving them. How much racial attitudes affected views toward the Affordable Care Act is a matter of some scholarly disagreement, but it is quite clear that race has long been a factor in the design of and attitudes toward social programs (Davies and Derthick 1997; Winter 2006; Henderson and Hillygus 2011; Disch 2012; Tesler 2012; Katznelson 2013; Kriner and Reeves 2014).

Tea Party groups organized people to attend town halls during the summer of 2009. Often rowdy events, ACA opponents used anti-government themes and made claims consistent with Palin's contentions about "death panels." An event hosted by Rep. John Dingell (D-MI) started with Mike Sola pushing his son, in a wheelchair due to cerebral palsy, to the front. Sola proclaimed that, under the ACA, there would be "no care whatsoever" for his son, and told Dingell "You've ordered a death sentence to this young man" (Shanahan 2013). Another ACA opponent told a reform supporter nearby, "You may be dead in five years! They may euthanize you." John Rhen, 68, told a reporter, "They're going to take over everything. It's socialism," and "I don't want some bureaucrat making health decisions for me and my family" (Antsett and Gray 2009). After a supporter of the law, a woman with disabilities named Marcia Boehm, uninsured because of preexisting conditions, spoke about how the ACA would benefit her, "a very large man got down on his knees so he could be face to face with Marcia Boehm and said "They are using you. You're stupid. They're going to euthanize you" (Kirsch 2011, p. 199).

Similar explosive language was used all over the country.¹⁷ An unsuccessful Republican candidate for the Iowa House carried a sign saying "Obama Lies, Grandma Dies," at the town hall meeting of Rep. Dave Loebsack (Gitterman and Scott 2011, p. 555). In Virginia, Lydia Martin, a canvasser for a progressive group called the Virginia Organizing Project, reported a change in mood over the summer of 2009, with much more negativity toward the ACA emerging in August. Martin reported, "At the doors, people would say, 'I heard they were going to kill old people'" (Kirsch 2011, p. 201). As Duffy (2013) argues, this rhetoric combined hyperbole, vilification and a narrative of victimhood that obscured policy specifics. Polarizing the debate by portraying President Obama as someone who would kill others by withholding treatment used distrust of government, reinforced it, and took it to new extremes.

¹⁷ See Urbina (2009). The pro-ACA group Health Care for America Now, in coalition with other groups, organized supporters of the health reform law to attend town meetings as well; see Kirsch (2011).

While Tea Party energy and anti-government messages, which energized and developed conservative organizations, did not stop the ACA from passing, it affected electoral outcomes.¹⁸ Democrats lost 63 House seats and their majority, while losing Senate seats but retaining majority control. Jacobson contends the 2010 elections was a referendum on Obama; economy and health care were core issues, but the degree of anger from the president's detractors was atypical: "[N]ot a few Tea Partiers came to see [Obama] not merely as an objectionable liberal Democrat, but a tyrant (of the Nazi, fascist, communist, socialist, monarchist, or racist variety, depending on the critic) intent on subjecting Americans to, variously, socialism, communism, fascism, concentration camps; or control by the United Nations, Interpol, international bankers, the Council on Foreign Relations, or the Trilateral Commission" (Jacobson 2011, pp. 33–34). With a nationalized message that adopted some of the most extreme rhetoric imaginable in two-party politics, distrust had electoral impacts even in the face of policy defeat.

Conclusion

When we wrote "On Red Capes and Charging Bulls" (Fried and Harris 2001), we were interested in examining the politics of public opinion as an interplay between elites and masses, whereby elites seized upon, channeled, propelled, and benefited from distrust among the mass public. Noting how conservatives made use of public suspicion toward government to halt Clinton health care reform and to win majority control of Congress, we argued that much of the literature on public distrust in government missed the fact that distrust was a resource for elites. Like waving a red cape in front of a bull, some politicians purposefully antagonize citizens in ways that build organizations, influence elections, and shape public views of government institutions and policies. The efforts of the Tea Party to undermine trust in government, the executive branch, and the Obama presidency were not only predictable, but, in some ways, our prior analysis predicted them. Stoked by anti-government and anti-Obama rhetoric (and working hard to disguise the more extreme thought among much of its membership), the Tea Party's anti-government, anti-Obama efforts represent something of a "perfection" of the Gingrich revolution's efforts to tear down the government in order to take it over.

¹⁸ After surviving two Supreme Court cases, Republicans continued to support the law's full repeal (Hamel, Firth, and Brodie 2015).

While both sides have become more polarized and left-wing political actors are also sometimes suspicious of government, Republicans have driven polarization to a greater degree than Democrats. A conservative philosophy built on expectations of government ineffectiveness and failure feeds on itself when conservative efforts grind government to a halt and weaken public trust in governing institutions. Such impacts on policy, governance, and constitutionalism are summed up by the title of Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein's book on the contemporary Congress – *It's Even Worse than it Looks*. As Mann and Ornstein note (2012, p. 33), Gingrich's core strategy that culminated in the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress was "to so intensify hatred of Congress that voters would buy into the notion of the need for sweeping change and throw the majority bums out." Institutional arguments against congressional power were joined with a lack of cooperation with Democrats in committees and the body as a whole and employed to win elections. Those same Republican tendencies and strategies have only intensified. Tea Party Republicans pull the GOP further right with each passing electoral cycle, affecting governance and creating feedback effects on elections. In September 2015, a conservative congressman who supports a government shutdown over funding for Planned Parenthood proclaimed that the vote will show their base they "stood up," while independent and swing voters would not remember it by 2016 (Berman 2015).

In contrast and consistent with their ideological beliefs in the positive uses of government, Democratic politicians want government programs they support to work and fear that breakdowns in governance ultimately harm their electoral prospects. As Rep. Rob Andrews (D-NJ) said during the 2011 scuffle over raising the debt ceiling that resulted in the sequester, "It's the Republicans that are the party of antigovernment, while Democrats are the party of government. And if we fail here, if this bill goes down, it will reinforce the public's impression that the government doesn't work... 'The government doesn't work' is an attack on the Democratic party" (Draper 2012, p. 257). Indeed, the stark problems with the rollout of the healthcare.gov website in Fall 2013 reversed gains Democrats made in public opinion polls after Republicans forced a government shutdown to try to defund the Affordable Care Act.

Thus we join Mann and Ornstein's call to resist the false equivalencies that say that both sides are equally to blame for partisan polarization, dysfunction in governance, and political distrust. The Tea Party's extreme anti-government rhetoric is likely to have its intended consequences on civility, governance, and public trust in government. Having explored efforts to propel such partisanship and distrust for more than a decade and a half, here we add our observation that, compared to our negative assessment of similar efforts in the 1990s, it's even worse than we thought.

References

- Abramowitz, Alan I. 2012. "Grand Old Tea Party: Partisan Polarization and the Rise of the Tea Party Movement." In *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party*, edited by Lawrence Rosenthal and Christine Trost, 195–211. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Abramowitz, Alan, and Steven Webster. 2015. "All Politics is National: The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S. House and Senate Elections in the 21st Century." Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting. Chicago, IL.
- Allen, Mike. 2009. "Frank Luntz warns GOP: Health Reform is Popular." *Politico*, May 5. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0509/22155.html>.
- Antsett, Patricia, and Kathleen Gray. 2009. "Tempers Flare Over Health Care Plan." *Detroit Free Press*, August 7.
- Arceneaux, Kevin, and Stephen P. Nicholson. 2012. "Who Wants to Have a Tea Party? The Who, What, and Why of the Tea Party Movement." *P.S. Political Science and Politics* 45 (4): 700–710.
- Balz, Dan. 2011. "Sarah Palin, in Iowa, Attacks Obama and 'Crony Capitalism'." *The Washington Post*, September 3.
- Berman, Russell. 2015. "Republicans Swear this Shutdown will be Different." *The Atlantic*, September 9. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/conservatives-embark-on-another-futile-fight/404242/>.
- Blackwell, Ken, and Ken Klukowski. 2010. *The Blueprint: Obama's Plan to Subvert the Constitution and Build an Imperial Presidency*. Guilford, CT: Lyons Press.
- Bradberry, Leigh A., and Gary C. Jacobson. 2014. "The Tea Party and the 2012 Presidential Election." *Electoral Studies* 1–9. doi: 10.1016/j.electstud.2014.09.006.
- Brodie, Mollyann, Drew Altman, Claudia Deane, Sasha Buscho, and Elizabeth Hamel. 2010. "Liking the Pieces, not the Package: Contradictions in Public Opinion during Health Reform." *Health Affairs* 29 (6): 1125–1130.
- Bullock, Charles S. III, and M. V. Hood, III. 2012. "The Tea Party, Sarah Palin, and the 2010 Congressional Elections: The Aftermath of the Election of Barack Obama" *Social Science Quarterly* 93 (5): 1424–1435.
- Calmes, Jackie. 2015. "They Don't Give a Damn About Governing: Conservative Media's Influence on the Republican Party." Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy Discussion Paper Series, #D-96, July 2015. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy. <http://shorenstein-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Conservative-Media-Influence-Jackie-Calmes-July-2015.pdf>.
- Campbell, Andrea Louise. 2011. "Policy Feedbacks and the Impact of Policy Designs on Public Opinion." *Journal of Health Politics, Policy & Law* 36 (6): 961–973.
- Converse, Jean M. 1987. *Survey Research in the United States: Roots and Emergence 1890–1960*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Davies, Gareth, and Martha Derthick. 1997. "Race and Social Welfare Policy: The Social Security Act of 1935." *Political Science Quarterly* 112 (2): 217–235.
- Disch, Lisa. 2012. "The Tea Party: A 'White Citizenship Movement?'" In *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party*, edited by Lawrence Rosenthal and Christine Trost, 133–151. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Drapet, Robert. 2012. *When the Tea Party Came to Town*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

- Druckman, James N., Jordan Fein and Thomas J. Leeper. 2012. "A Source of Bias in Public Opinion Stability." *American Political Science Review* 106 (2): 430–454.
- Duffy, Caitlin. 2013. *Vilifying Obamacare: Conservative Tropes of Victimage in the 2009 Health Care Debates*. MA. Thesis: Wake Forest University.
- Felten, Eric. 1993. *The Ruling Class: Inside the Imperial Congress*. Special Abridged Edition. Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation.
- Frankford, David M. 2015. "The Remarkable Staying Power of 'Death Panels.'" *Journal of Health Politics, Policy & Law* 40 (3): 1083–1095.
- Free, Lloyd, and Hadley Cantril. 1967. *The Political Beliefs of Americans*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Fried, Amy. 1997. *Muffled Echoes: Oliver North and the Politics of Public Opinion*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Fried, Amy. 2012. *Pathways to Polling: Crisis, Cooperation and the Making of Public Opinion Professions*. New York: Routledge.
- Fried, Amy, and Douglas B. Harris. 2001. "On Red Capes and Charging Bulls: How and Why Conservative Politicians and Interest Groups Promoted Public Anger." In *What Is It About Government That Americans Dislike?*, edited by John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, 157–174. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fried, Amy, and Douglas B. Harris. 2010. "Governing with the Polls." *Historian* 72 (2): 321–353.
- Gardner, Amy. 2010. "Gauging the Scope of the Tea Party Movement in America." *Washington Post*, October 24. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/23/AR2010102304000.html?sid=ST2010102304023>.
- Gerring, John. 1998. *Party Ideologies in America, 1828–1996*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gingrich, Newt. 1998. "Remarks to the May 1995 Dirksen Congressional Center Conference on House Leadership." In *Masters of the House*, edited by Roger H. Davidson, Susan Webb Hammond, and Raymond W. Smock, 323–325. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Gitterman, Daniel. P., and John C. Scott. 2011. "Obama Lies, Grandma Dies: The Uncertain Politics of Medicare and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act." *Journal of Health Politics Policy and Law* 36 (3): 555–563.
- Grossmann, Matt, and David A. Hopkins. 2015. "Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats: The Asymmetry of American Party Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 13 (1): 119–138.
- Hacker, Jacob. 2010. "The Road to Somewhere: Why Health Reform Happened, or Why Political Scientists Who Write about Public Policy Shouldn't Assume They Know How to Shape It." *Perspectives on Politics* 8: 861–876.
- Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. 2005. *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hamel, Liz, Jamie Firth, and Mollyann Brodie. 2015. "Kaiser Health Tracking Poll: Late June 2015 – A Special Focus on the Supreme Court Decision." Kaiser Family Foundation. <http://kff.org/health-reform/poll-finding/kaiser-health-tracking-poll-late-june-2015-a-special-focus-on-the-supreme-court-decision/>.
- Harris, Douglas B. 2005. "House Majority Party Leaders' Uses of Public Opinion Information." *Congress & The Presidency* 32 (2): 133–155.
- Harris, Douglas B. 2015. "Joseph G. Cannon: Partisan Majorities and Responsible Democracy." In *Defense of the Founders Republic: Critics of Direct Democracy in the Progressive Era*, edited by Lonce H. Bailey and Jerome M. Mileur, 109–130. New York: Bloomsbury.

- Henderson, Michael, and D. Sunshine Hillygus. 2011. "The Dynamics of Health Care Opinion, 2008–2010: Partisanship, Self-Interest, and Racial Resentment." *Journal of Health Politics, Policy & Law* 36 (6): 945–960.
- Herbst, Susan. 1998. *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hopkins, Daniel J. 2013. "The Exaggerated Life of Death Panels: The Limits of Framing Effects in the 2009–2012 Health Care Debate." Available at SSRN 2163769. http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2163769.
- Igo, Sarah. 2007. *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Melanie Burns. 2004. "The Second Face of the Public Presidency: Presidential Polling and the Shift from Policy to Personality Polling." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34 (3): 536–556.
- Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 2000. *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2011. "The Republican Resurgence in 2010." *Political Science Quarterly*, 126 (1): 27–52.
- Jones, Gordon S., and John A. Marini. 1988. *The Imperial Congress: Crisis in the Separation of Powers*. New York: Pharos Books.
- Kabaservice, Geoffrey. 2012. *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderate and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kamarck, Elaine. 2014. "The Primaries Project: How the Tea Party is Winning While Losing" *Brookings*. Accessed August 15, 2015. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/fixgov/posts/2014/08/04-primaries-project-tea-party-tennessee-kansas-kamarck>.
- Karpowitz, Christopher F., J. Quin Monson, Kelly D. Patterson, and Jeremy C. Pope. 2011. "Tea Time in America? The Impact of the Tea Party Movement on the 2010 Midterm Elections." *P.S. Political Science and Politics* (April): 303–309.
- Katznelson, Ira. 2013. *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Kessler, Glenn. 2012. "Sarah Palin, 'Death Panels' and 'Obamacare.'" *Washington Post*, June 27.
- Kirsch, Richard. 2011. *Fighting for Our Health: The Epic Battle to Make Health Care a Right in the United States*. Albany, NY: The Rockefeller Institute Press.
- Kriner, Douglas L., and Andrew Reeves. 2014. "Responsive Partisanship: Public Support for the Clinton and Obama Health Care Plans." *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 39 (4): 717–749.
- Lepore, Jill. 2010. *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution And the Battle Over American History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Luntz, Frank. 2009. "The Language of Healthcare 2009." Politico. http://www.politico.com/pdf/PPM116_luntz.pdf.
- Mann, Thomas E., and Norman J. Ornstein. 2012. *It's Even Worse than it Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Maxwell, Angie, and T. Wayne Parent. 2012. "The Obama Trigger: Presidential Approval and Tea Party Membership." *Social Science Quarterly* 93 (5): 1384–1401.
- McCright, Aaron M., and Riley E. Dunlap. 2011. "The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in the American Public's Views of Global Warming, 2001–2010." *The Sociological Quarterly* 52: 155–194.

- Melcher, James P., and Amy Fried. 2012. "Tea Talk: The Rhetoric of Tea Party Governors." New England Political Science Association Annual Meeting. Portsmouth, New Hampshire.
- Medzihorsky, Juraj, Levente Littvay, and Erin K. Jenne. 2014. "Has the Tea Party Era Radicalized the Republican Party? Evidence from Text Analysis of the 2008 and 2012 Republican Primary Debates." *P.S. Political Science and Politics* 47 (4): 806–812.
- Milkis, Sidney M., and Jesse H. Rhodes. 2007. "George W. Bush, the Republican Party and the 'New' American Party System." *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (3): 461–488.
- Millman, Jason. 2014. "It's Time to Bury the 'Death Panel' Myth for Good. Is This the Way to do it?" *Washington Post (Wonkblog)*, September 17. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/09/17/its-time-to-bury-the-death-panel-myth-for-good-is-this-the-way-to-do-it>.
- Montopoli, Brian. 2009. "Grassley Warns of Government Pulling Plug 'On Grandma'" *CBS News*, August 12. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/grassley-warns-of-government-pulling-plug-on-grandma/>.
- Morris, Dick, and Eileen McGann. 2014. *Power Grab: Obama's Dangerous Plan for a One Party Nation*. West Palm Beach, Florida: Humanix Books.
- Oberlander, Jonathan. 2010. "Long Time Coming: Why Health Reform Finally Passed." *Health Affairs* 29 (6): 1112–1116.
- Palin, Sarah. 2009. "Statement on the Current Health Care Debate." *Facebook Post*, August 7. https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=113851103434.
- Parker, Christopher S., and Matt A. Barreto. 2013. *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Perrin, Andrew J., Steven J. Tepper, Neal Caren, and Sally Morris. 2014. "Political and Cultural Dimensions of Tea Party Support, 2009–2012." *The Sociological Quarterly* 55: 625–652.
- Pew Research Center. 2013. "Trust in Government Nears Record Low, But Most Federal Agencies Are Viewed Favorably." October 18, 2013. <http://www.people-press.org/2013/10/18/trust-in-government-nears-record-low-but-most-federal-agencies-are-viewed-favorably/>
- Piper, J. Richard. 1991. "Presidential-Congressional Power Prescriptions in Conservative Political Thought Since 1933." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 21: 35–54.
- Piper, J. Richard. 1994. "'Situational Constitutionalism' and Presidential Power: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal Model of Presidential Government." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 24: 577–594.
- Prior, Francis B. 2014. "Quality Controlled: An Ethnographic Account of Tea Party Messaging and Action" *Sociological Forum* 29 (2): 301–317.
- Rosenthal, Lawrence, and Christine Trost. 2012. *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Republican Party Platform. 1988. "Republican Party Platform of 1988," August 16. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. Accessed September 15, 2015. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25846>.
- Republican Party Platform. 1992. "Republican Party Platform of 1992," August 17. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. Accessed September 15, 2015. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25847>.
- Republican Party Platform. 2008. "2008 Republican Party Platform," September 1. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. Accessed September 15, 2015. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=78545>.
- Republican Party Platform. 2012. "2012 Republican Party Platform," August 27. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. Accessed September 15, 2015. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=101961>.

- Shanahan, Martha. 2013. "5 Memorable Moments When Town Hall Meetings Turned to Rage." *National Public Radio: It's All Politics*, August 7. <http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2013/08/07/209919206/5-memorable-moments-when-town-hall-meetings-turned-to-rage>.
- Skocpol, Theda, and Lawrence R. Jacobs. 2011. "Reaching for a New Deal: Ambitious Governance, Economic Meltdown, and Polarized Politics." In *Reaching for a New Deal: Ambitious Governance, Economic Meltdown, and Polarized Politics in Obama's First Two Years*, edited by Theda Skocpol and Lawrence R. Jacobs, 1–50. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Skocpol, Theda, and Vanessa Williamson. 2012. *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Skowronek, Stephen. 2009. "The Conservative Insurgency and Presidential Power: A Developmental Perspective on the Unitary Executive." *Harvard Law Review* 122 (8): 2070–2103.
- Smith, Rogers. 1993. "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America." *American Political Science Review* 83 (3): 549–566.
- Soss, Joe, and Sanford F. Schram. 2007. "A Public Transformed? Welfare Reform as Policy Feedback." *American Political Science Review* 101 (1): 111–127.
- Starr, Paul. 2011. *Remedy and Reaction: The Peculiar American Struggle Over Health Care Reform*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Tesler, Michael. 2012. "President Obama Polarized Public Opinion by Racial Attitudes and Race." *American Journal of Political Science* 56 (3): 690–704.
- Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth, Dona-Gene Barton, and Michael W. Wagner. 2015. "Political Trust in Polarized Times." In *Motivating Cooperation and Compliance with Authority: The Role of Institutional Trust*, edited by Brian H. Bornstein and Alan J. Tomkins, 167–190. Nebraska Symposium on Motivation. New York: Springer.
- Tope, Daniel, Justin T. Pickett, and Ted Chiricos. 2015. "Anti-Minority Attitudes and Tea Party Movement Membership." *Social Science Research* 51: 322–337.
- Urbina, Ian. 2009. "Beyond Beltway, Health Debate Turns Hostile." *New York Times*, August 7.
- Williamson, Vanessa, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin. 2011. "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism." *Perspectives on Politics* 9: 25–43.
- Winter, Nicholas J. G. 2006. "Beyond Welfare: Framing and the Racialization of White Opinion on Social Security." *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2): 400–420.

Amy Fried is Professor of Political Science at the University of Maine. In addition to numerous articles and book chapters on public opinion and political participation, she is the author of *Pathways to Polling: Crisis, Cooperation and the Making of Public Opinion Professions* (Routledge Press) and *Muffled Echoes: Oliver North and the Politics of Public Opinion* (Columbia University Press). Recently she has been conducting research on opinion research on racial tensions during World War II, as well as the roots of contemporary strategic uses of distrust.

Douglas B. Harris is Professor of Political Science at Loyola University Maryland. In addition to numerous articles and book chapters on Congress, political parties, and political development, he is co-author of *The Austin-Boston Connection: Five Decades of House Democratic Leadership, 1937–1989* (Texas A&M University Press) and co-editor of *Doing Archival Research in Political Science* (Cambria Press). His current project examines intra-party races for leadership posts in the House of Representatives.