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**THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT: A GREAT PARADOX? A SOCIAL
MOVEMENT STUDY ON THE EMERGENCE OF THE TEA PARTY**

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THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT: A GREAT PARADOX?

A SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDY ON THE EMERGENCE OF THE TEA PARTY

Thesis

Bachelor Project: Social movements and political violence

BSc Political Science: International Relations and Organisations



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1. Introduction

Mike Schaff lives in Louisiana, a state with bad public health and a lot of environmental disasters due to the petrochemical industry. The river close by is contaminated and the fish you catch is not eatable. Mike saw his community disappear due to environmental disasters caused by big chemical industries and diseases like cancer. Still, he would never want to leave his home. He loves it there. He is a supporter of the Tea Party, a movement in the United States that emerged in 2009 (Hochschild, 2016). They claim to be against the social policies of President Obama and want as little involvement of the federal government as possible. Furthermore, they are anti-taxing and anti-establishment (Arceneaux & Nicholson, 2012; Rouse, Hunt & Essel, 2021). With the primaries in 2010, the Tea Party grew proportionately. Most Republicans were openly supporters of the Tea Party (Zernike, 2010). The above example is from a book called *Strangers in their own land* by Hochschild (2016). She interviewed around 40 Tea Party supporters in Louisiana. Hochschild (2016), a sociologist, tries to find the reasons why people like Mike joined the Tea Party, as this is against their own economic and personal benefit. Furthermore, the state of Louisiana relies heavily on federal spending. Nevertheless, Tea Party supporters in Louisiana like Mike do not want any federal regulation for the petrochemical industry although it is a cause of environmental and humanitarian disasters. Hochschild calls it the Great Paradox (2016, pp. 8-9). She talks about wanting to climb over the empathy wall to understand people that are supporters of the Tea Party. Because “a healthy democracy depends on a collective capacity to hash things out” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 8). Democracy does not work if we cannot understand each other and see where each other’s demands come from. Especially in the United States where polarization has caused strong partisanship and distrust among the two parties. This eventually can lead to people not trusting the government and its institutions. As we have seen in the Capitol attacks of January 6th, 2020. Movements might emerge that do not believe in change through democratic institutions. Therefore, it is important to understand each other. Otherwise, it can have larger implications nationally.

Hochschild’s (2016) research is conducted with a sociological perspective and focuses primarily on the motivations and emotions of Tea Party supporters. It does not have a social movement perspective. Besides Hochschild’s sociological perspective, other literature focuses primarily on one aspect of the movement’s emergence. For example the economic situation at the time or the effect of the election of President Obama. There is no cohesive research on the

emergence of the Tea Party that applies social movement theory. Therefore, the question that is put in a more social movement framework is, *why did the Tea Party emerge?*

The following structure is used to answer this question. First, we look into the current debates on the emergence of social movements in general. Then we look at the emergence of conservative movements of which the Tea Party is part, and current theories on the emergence of the Tea Party are explored. This will show us the need for a social movement approach to sufficiently explain the emergence of the Tea Party. After this, the method for researching this question, why we chose the Tea Party as a case, and what data is used will be elaborated. Finally, we will analyze our findings and conclude.

2. Literature review

2.1 Emergence of social movements

Before looking into the Tea Party itself, it is important to look at why social movements emerged. Scholars who write on social movements emphasize different aspects of the emergence of social movements. Some have a more static view, and some take emotions and perceptions more into account. At first, grievances played a central role in the literature on the emergence of social movements. As Dill and Aminzade (2017) state, without a social condition that feels unjust or unacceptable, it makes no sense to move towards collective action as it is too costly and time-consuming (p. 169). Despite this, grievances do not directly result in collective action, they are socially constructed. Therefore, everyone perceives a grievance differently (p. 170). Besides grievances, scholars like Charles Tilly have stressed the importance of political opportunity (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018, p. 20). Tilly and McAdam argued that challengers were able to get political opportunities through changes in the institutional structures of political systems, changes in policy preferences, and alliances with elite polity members (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018, p. 20). In addition to this, an oppositional consciousness and the recognition of being an actor in institutional politics is also important (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018, p. 21). McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) mention that people need to organize of which social media is a recent example. In line with this, Lopes states how social media as a mobilizing structure can help demand change (2014, p. 8). It is a social network in which people convert political consciousness into action (Passy, 2003, pp. 23-24). However, this is not enough to cause collective action. People need “interpretive tools to make sense of their situation, identify the sources of their grievances, and formulate ways to address

them” (Drill & Aminzade, 2017, p.). This is called framing processes (Snow, Rochford, Worden & Benford, 1986).

These concepts that influence the emergence of social movements have gotten critique as well. One of the critiques of the political opportunity scheme is that early proponents of Tilly’s political opportunity scheme do not take the significance of perceived threats into account (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018, pp. 31-32). So the subjective view of someone on the situation and human agency is also important for the emergence of social movements. That is why, later on, emotion became more important in the research on the emergence of social movements. Scholars like Aminzade and McAdam even state that it has become “necessary...for any significant instance of collective action” (2001, p. 14).

2.2 Emergence of conservative movements

As we have seen above, certain factors influence the emergence of social movements. There are different forms of social movements. However, social movement theory has been tested primarily on progressive social movements in society. Therefore, social movement theory has been shown not to fit well for conservative movements (Blee & Creasap, 2010, p. 271). As mentioned above, alliances with elite polity members can be an important factor for the emergence of social movements. Tilly argues that this is important for political opportunity, but puts equal weight to perceived threats. He states that social movements can also emerge when these elites are perceived as a threat (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018). Scholars have often failed to recognize this factor. Van Dyke states that this factor is important for the mobilization of right-wing movements (2003, p. 228). Previously, scholars Lipset and Raab argued that conservative movements in the 70s emerged because of the decline of status (Lo, 1982, pp. 108-109). They believed it to be a reaction. However, scholars like Lo (1982) believed this not to be true. As Gross, Medvetz & Russel state “Contemporary American conservative movement might be thought of as a collection of issue-based countermovements under the broad umbrella of the Republican Party, arising in reaction to and with the aim of reversing recent progressive social and historical developments” (2011, p. 328). But the question remains whether every conservative movement can be seen through a countermovement lens. A “Countermovement is a movement that makes contrary claims simultaneously to those of the original movement” (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1631). Other scholars see conservative movements more through an economic lens. They claim that conservative movements are free market enthusiasts and that they want to establish a different economic system (Gross et al., 2011, p. 328).

These views on the emergence of conservative movements have a relatively narrow look. Other explanations broaden the scope more. An example of this is the scholars who emphasize economic causes and the role of culture in the emergence of conservative movements (Gross et al., 2011). Some say that changes in social structures create a mismatch with beliefs, values, and perceptions of people's view of the world (Gross et al., 2011, p. 337). Furthermore, economic changes like inflation in the 70s, a global economy, and de-industrialization, made people's support for the liberal welfare state that was created in the New Deal era decrease (Gross et al., 2011, p. 336). The stagnant economy led to a lot of inequality. These factors can explain the emergence of some conservative movements but not that of the Tea Party completely. It does not explain how the Tea Party emerged, as the Tea Party is not a reaction to the inequality that is a consequence of economic change. The Tea Party wants even less federal involvement. They believe that the policies against inequality by the Democratic party are going to the undeserving (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, 2011).

2.3 Social changes

If the emergence of conservative movements does not capture the emergence of the Tea Party completely, what theories have scholars used to explain the emergence of the Tea Party? Although controversial among scholars, racial resentment as a reaction to societal changes of the 1970s is one of the explanations. Williamson et al. state that Tea Partiers do not accept social policies created by President Obama because new social policies go to the 'undeserving'. The undeserving in their view are often young people and illegal immigrants. They state that this dichotomy of deserving and not deserving people has a racial undertone. Mainly because society has become more multicultural over the years (2011, p. 34). Lisa Disch (2010) confirms this. She states that Tea Partiers "take action to defend economic interest that liberal public policy since the 1930s has consistently amalgamated with whiteness." For example, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) mortgage loans in the twentieth century promoted segregation. Racial zoning by the FHA made it more likely for white people to get mortgages for areas with mostly white people (Rothstein, 2017, pp. 48-50).

2.4 Specific theories

Other theories state that third parties get more support when the economy is stagnant and when there is dissatisfaction with major party candidates (Rosenstone, Behr & Lazarus, 1984, pp. 134-139). Maxwell and Parent (2012) found that besides pro-fiscal conservatism, the

disapproval of President Obama and his stimulus pact for the economy influenced Tea Party identification. Besides the economic situation, anti-Obama sentiment and the racial resentment Tea Partiers have, Fried and Harris (2015) also add the distrust in government, that is prevalent in the Tea Party. This is likely to grow because it is a resource for elites to win elections, influence public policy, and influence constitutional institutions that they control.

All in all, these factors make clear what the Tea Party is and what factors contribute to its emergence. Nevertheless, it also shows that most scholars focus on one aspect of the emergence of the Tea Party. Fried and Harris (2015) focus only on the distrust in government, Maxwell and Parent (2012) only on anti-Obama sentiment, and Williamson et al. (2011) focus on cultural and social changes as a factor that contributed to the emergence. However, none of these scholars sufficiently seems to explain the emergence of the Tea Party from this one-sided focus. By looking from a more social movements perspective the dominant reasons for the emergence of the Tea Party will be explained. Therefore, the concepts of theories on the emergence of social movements are applied to the emergence of the Tea Party.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Social movement concepts

Political opportunity

The following concepts will form the independent variables in this research. Political opportunity structure, mobilizing structures, and framing processes have contributed to the emergence of social movements. These are concepts that are accepted by scholars from all theoretical traditions (McAdam et al., 1996). Political opportunities become present as social changes make the political order more vulnerable (ibid.). These opportunity opportunities in research on the emergence of social movements often entail discovering “changes in the institutional structure or informal power relations of a given national political system” (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 3). Tarrow identified four indicators that can measure this: increased access to the political system, elite divisions, elite alliances, and state capacity and tendency for repression (1998, p. 76). As stated before, the emergence of conservative movements can also be explained the when elites are perceived as a threat instead of elite alliances. This is not expected in the case of the Tea Party because of the close link between Republicans and Tea Party supporters later on in 2010 (Zernike, 2010).

Mobilization structures

But these changes in institutional structure and informal power relations alone do not create collective action. These concepts have a dynamic relationship with each other. How people make use of political opportunities relies on how much the group is organized (Dill & Aminzade, 2017, p. 165). This can be through formal and informal organization. Formal organization is often explained by the resource mobilization theory (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 3). This theory takes into account how a movement gets material resources, human resources, and moral resources. These resources can be acquired in various ways. For example self-production, co-optation, or appropriation (Edwards & Kane, 2016). In addition, informal organization and networks have shown to be important as well. A good example of this is the Civil Rights movement, where black churches played an important role in mobilization (Edwards & Oyakawa, 2022, p. 2). Grassroots settings like work and neighborhoods can also play a role in the organization of aggrieved groups (McAdam et al., 1996). As stated before, social media nowadays can also form an informal network through which groups organize (Lopes, 2014).

Framing processes

Framing processes by aggrieved persons also play a role in research on the emergence of social movements. This cognitive dimension removes the assumption that organization and opportunities directly result in collective action (Snow et al., 1986, p. 465). How people interpret grievances, attribute blame, define the aggrieved, and make demands, also attribute to the emergence of social movements (Dill & Aminzade, 2017, p. 162). Snow et al. (1986) have identified 4 types of frame alignment. Value amplification is a type of frame alignment that fits best to conservative movements (p. 476). This is a framing process in which people use certain values that have, for example, been taken for granted, and use them in relation to the issue. The social movement tries to “redefine their public image as a movement serving the best interest of their country, in part through revitalization of what they see as atrophied values such as the right to redress grievances and express dissent” (p. 469). All in all, besides the destabilizing events such as an economic crisis and social change, the social movement concepts identified in the literature, such as political opportunity, mobilizing structures, and framing processes might contribute to the emergence of the Tea Party. From these theories, we hypothesize several outcomes.

H₁: Political opportunities were present through which the Tea Party could emerge.

H₂: Mobilizing structures made the Tea Party organized through which the Tea Party could emerge.

H₃: Framing processes were essential for the interpretation of grievances and opportunities through which the Tea Party could emerge.

4. Methods

4.1 Research design

The emergence of the Tea Party is explained through a small-N qualitative study with a focus on congruence analysis. This is conducted by researching whether the hypothesis mentioned above will hold in the data we find. In this case, the independent variables are political opportunity, mobilizing structure, and framing process. The dependent variable is the emergence of the Tea Party. Congruence analysis applies well to this case because it allows us for a more context-specific operationalization of the variables (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 144). Plus, because congruence analysis uses different theories to test the observed data, it allows for reflection of the theories (p. 177). It uses different theories for one case. This will illustrate the relative strength of theories and how much they are generalizable.

4.2 Case selection

The Tea Party is chosen as the case because it is a movement that reflects a full range of themes that most conservative movements have. It is a movement that focuses on economic goals like anti-taxing, but supporters are also socially conservative (Arceneaux & Nicholson, 2012, p. 703). This shows that social issues might be as important as economic issues. The Tea Party movement consists of different Tea Party organizations. For this research, the focus will be put on the Tea Party as a whole, not one specific organization. As most organizations almost arose at the same time, this research will focus on the Tea Party in general (Burghart & Zeskind, 2010, p. 17). Another reason for choosing the Tea Party is that the Tea Party is often associated with the election of President Donald Trump (Rohlinger & Bunnage, 2017, p. 25). This illustrates that the Tea Party has similarities with the larger ideology of the Republican Party. The fact that these features all encompass the Tea Party, means that it is a case that makes generalization for other conservative movements more likely. Keep in mind, that this is not fully possible since it remains a context-specific study. The emergence of the Tea Party happens in a certain context that might be different from other conservative movements. This might imply that internal validity is over-implied in comparison to external validity. But it can give

more complete explanations and it can “challenge widely held assumptions even under favorable circumstances” (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 177). Primarily because established theories and concepts are tested to a most-likely case. All in all, the Tea Party is a conservative movement that might share features with other conservative movements, but the research done here is more specific for the Tea Party itself.

4.3 Data selection

The data that will be used for this research will primarily consist of secondary data. The secondary sources can range from newspapers to scientific articles. Because media outlets in the United States are very partisan, it is important to keep in mind that the information can be interpreted in a certain way. Besides this, quantitative data such as polls are used as well. Research has been conducted on Tea Party supporters' opinions on a variety of matters. For example, how they feel about President Obama or the Republican Party. Furthermore, Hochschild's (2016) book, which is also secondary data, contains detailed interviews with supporters. This book represents the puzzle of why the Tea Party emerged because it is set in Louisiana, one of the poorer states of the United States. Lastly, the period which is focused on in this research is 2008-2010. As 2008 is a year before the official emergence, it might show preexisting factors that contributed to the emergence. In 2010 most Republicans were Tea Party supporters which indicates the full emergence of the movement. Besides what data will be used, operationalization of the independent variables will make clear how we can recognize the independent variables in the data.

4.4 Operationalization

Access to political system

Political opportunity uses several indicators. One of them is increased access to the political system. This refers to the openness of a political system for new actors (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018). Social change can illustrate this openness as social change makes a political system more vulnerable (McAdam et al., 1996). Tarrow (1998, pp. 76-77) stated that elections create more access to the political system. New actors can participate. Plus, elections can create a policy shift. However, Tarrow does warn us to keep in mind that this variable has the most effect in authoritarian regimes because preexisting avenues for access are already open in democratic regimes (1998, pp.76-77). Furthermore, third parties get more support when the economy is stagnant and when there is discontent for the major politicians (Rosenstone et al., 1984, pp-

134-139). This is also a way in which access is created. All in all, access to the political system is found when we notice elections around 2009 and when this introduced policy shifts. These elections might create discontent for major politicians. This in combination with a stagnant economy makes access high. The more these factors are missing, the less access to the political system.

Elite divisions

The indicator elite divisions refer to new coalitions among political elites. When political alignments are stable, people have little opportunity to create change with collective action (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018). However, when new coalitions are formed, supporters can perceive this as uncertain, and therefore, elites might try and find support outside the political arena to find support their new coalition (Tarrow, 1998, p. 78). Therefore, in the data, we can find elite divisions by looking at ideological splits within the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, as these are the only two parties within the US political system.

Elite alliances

As stated above, new coalitions might make elites try to find support outside of the political arena. The elite alliances that are made between the movement supporters and the elites can be beneficial for the movement supporters because they can “act as guarantors against repression, or as acceptable negotiators on [the movement's] behalf” (Tarrow, 1998, p. 79). We can find this in the data by looking at connections between Tea Party supporters and elites.

State capacity and tendency for repression

Lastly, the capacity or tendency of the state to use repression is the final indicator that measures political opportunity. In this case, repression by the state can increase the cost of collective action (Tarrow, 1998, p. 80). Although this concept is often explained in association with authoritarian regimes, it can still be useful as an indicator for a case that has a democratic regime. Here, the more a state has the capacity or tendency to use repression, the less likely collective action will take place (ibid). Conversely, less state capacity or tendency to use repression, will more likely result in collective action. For our analysis, we have to keep in mind that the case studied here is in the US, a democratic country. Therefore, nuances might have to be made. State capacity can be measured through the number of police forces that can be put to use during protests. The tendency can be measured by looking at the past. Did these police forces act differently for progressive movements in comparison to right-wing movements? If

more repression is used for progressive movements, this might indicate that the tendency to use state repression is less likely for right-wing movements.

Formal and informal networks

The second independent variable is mobilizing structures. Scholars have stressed the importance of material resources, human resources, and moral resources for the emergence of social movements. When looking at the resources for organizing the Tea Party, we can look at how these resources were acquired. Edwards and Kane (2016, pp. 3-4) have stated that this can be through self-production, aggregation, and co-optation/appropriation. Informal networks are important as well. How did people get to know the movement? For the civil rights movement, churches have played a role in mobilizing people (Edwards & Oyakawa, 2022, p. 2). Moreover, for more recent social movements social media has played an increased role. These social ties can make people familiar with the movement. For the Tea Party, we can measure this by looking at how people found out about the Tea Party and how social ties have been formed.

Value amplification

The third and last independent variable is framing process. This can be measured through the indicator value amplification (Snow et al., 1986, pp. 469-472). As stated before, value amplification is used by a group in which one or more values are made important and used to frame an issue. This in turn can create a collective identity that can mobilize people. People who have a similar hierarchy of how salient a value is will likely join a movement that uses a salient value to frame an issue. The Tea Party is an American social movement whose name reflects the historic event of the 1773 Boston Tea Party. This was a historic event in the United States when it was still under the control of the British Empire. The Boston Tea Party was a reaction to the British Empire's restrictive laws. It was a movement against taxation and it is seen as the start of the American Revolution and its independence war. This reflects how the Tea Party movement today likes to perceive itself. They are also against taxation and federal involvement, just like the protest of the Boston Tea Party in 1773. Plus this is a grassroots movement that defies authorities from the bottom up. The historical reference to the Boston Tea Party by making use of its name is naturally attractive as it appeals to the concept of freedom. Americans' rights and freedoms are coded in the Constitution. Therefore, it is expected that the Tea Party might use constitutional rights to frame issues. The website of the Tea Party organizations might show where they stand for and how they frame the issues they find important to address.

5. Historical background

The Tea Party was established in 2009. The first Tea Party protests were held on February 27th, 2009 after “CNBC Business News editor Rick Santelli delivered a televised and rapidly popularized attack on the U.S. government’s plans to refinance mortgages and called for a ‘Chicago Tea Party’” (Madestam, Shoag, Veuger & Yanagizawa-Drott, 2013, p. 7). Soon after the largest protests of the Tea Party were held on the 15th of April 2009, called Tax Day, all over the United States. Around 50 to 15.000 protesters in every state attended meetings and protested (Silver, 2014). These numbers, however, are disputed. Furthermore, the Tea Party consists of several Tea Party organizations. For example, the Tea Party Patriots or the 1775 Tea Party. Some are more socially conservative in comparison to other Tea Party organizations, but all are fiscally conservative (Burghart & Zeskind, 2010). The organizations differ for example, in how openly they take a stance issues related to the Christian religion. Later on, the Tea Party got more influence in politics. The Tea Party caucus was established in Congress. This was a group of conservative Republicans who supported the Tea Party its goal (Amedee, 2013, p. 35). They adopted a tactic that was more based on confrontation instead of compromise (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012, p. 156). Some even say that the Tea Party embodies populism (Halloran, 2010).

6. Analysis

6.1 Political opportunity

Access to political system

As stated in the literature, political opportunities become present when there are changes in the institutional structure or informal power relations. These changes are measured with the indicator access to the political system. With this increased access, the political system gets more vulnerable. This vulnerability is created through elections, which might constitute a policy shift and can cause discontent for major politicians. This in combination with a stagnant economy creates support for third parties (Rosenstone et al., 1984, pp- 134-139). This increase in support for third parties shows an increase in access to the political system. Although the Tea Party has never had the intention to start a third party, they still could make use of the presence of political opportunities. In 2009 President Obama of the Democratic Party was elected. He was the first African American president of the United States. He succeeded President Bush, who was a Republican. Due to an economic crisis in 2008, Obama had to implement Economic Stimulus Act and other fiscal policies. One of the policies for example helped families through the recession by providing relief for their mortgages (Housing, 2023). Both President Bush and

Obama added 57% in budget deficits (Amadeo, 2021). Therefore there is not much of a change in federal spending. However, Maxwell and Parent (2012) have found that President Obama as a person itself is a cause for Tea Party membership. Although discontent with his sort of (Democratic) policies had also an effect on Tea Party membership, it was more Obama as a person that fueled mobilization. Williamson et al. (2011) have stressed this as well. “Racial resentment stokes Tea Party fears about generational societal change, and fuels the Tea Party’s strong opposition to President Obama” (p. 34). This societal change that is often meant here is the civil rights movement and how the United States has become more multicultural. So besides the more democratic policy shift that happened with the election of President Obama, racial resentment played a role as well. This discontent for President Obama, his policies, and the economic crisis, created more support for third parties. These third-party opportunities can be seen as political opportunities in general for the Tea Party.

Elite divisions

As stated above, political opportunities also become present when there are changes in informal power relations. Divisions among Republicans might create new coalitions in the party. Consequently, they might look outside the political realm for support from movements. Around the 1960s there was a split within the Democratic party. Political elites that were for the war against communism found more similarities with the Republican party as more leftist Democrats agreed with the anti-war protests, for example, the Vietnam War (Lipset, 1988, pp. 32-33). These neo-conservatives aligned themselves with the Republican party but still relatively believed in welfare policies (Noble, 2007). Some old traditional Republicans were more conservative and started to become more extreme in their ideology (Drolet & Williams, 2020, p. 31). Drolet and Williams (2020, p. 29-33) state that these paleoconservatives are not a continuation of the traditional Republicans but are relatively new in ideology and are often associated with the Tea Party and other conservative movements. Although this split within the Republican party happened from the 1980s onwards and cannot account for the emergence of the Tea Party fully, it does show a division between elites that is still happening today. There are always more moderate and more conservative elites in a party.

For the aggrieved to make use of the political opportunity they need to have noticed an elite division around 2009. President Bush was in office between January 2001 and January 2009. During his term, President Bush’s approval ratings were high right after the 9/11 attacks. However, at the end of his term, his approval ratings were low. According to Gallup.com (n.d.),

80 to 90% approved President Bush his handling of the job as president after the 9/11 attacks. At the end of his term, this approval rating dropped to 20/30% (Gallup.com, n.d.). Within the party, “approval among moderate and liberal Republicans saw one of the sharpest drops – from 82% to 50% (Pew Research Center, 2020). Conservative Republican approval dropped from 94% to 66%” (ibid.). When it came to finding a new candidate for the Republican Party against Obama, the GOP had a hard time (Nagourney & Thee, 2007). The Iraq war was still a central issue (Pew Research Center, 2020). Ideologically the Republican party was divided. About “39 percent of Republican voters said they wanted the next Republican presidential nominee to continue with Mr. Bush’s policies; 19 percent said they wanted the next president to become less conservative, and 39 percent more conservative” (Nagourney & Thee, 2007). Eventually, the Democrats were able to win Congress, the Senate, and later the presidency (Pew Research Center, 2020). What does this mean for the emergence of the Tea Party? As observed above, public opinion was polarized as well as within the Republican party. Tea Party supporters are critical of the Republican Party, but they do see this party as the only way to change Washington (Greenberg, Carville, Gerstein & Monninger, 2010, pp. 14-15). This shows that Tea Party supporters did use the opportunity of a divided Republican Party and political system to their advantage.

Elite alliances

Tea Party supporters were able to use a political opportunity of a divided Republican party and public opinion. But did they get help from political elites that could become negotiators on their behalf? Although Tea Partiers “vex establishment Republicans”, they did find alliances with Republican Congressional leaders and influential millionaires (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012, p. 156; Amedee, 2013, p. 35). “Sponsors as Freedom Works and Dick Armey, former Republican Congressman, with funding from the Koch brothers... and other notable political figures such as Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann also sponsored fundraisers designed to support the tea party organizations and candidate” (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012, p. 156). Furthermore, influential Tea Party supporters appointed themselves ‘watchdogs’ to make sure Republican political candidates concurred with the ultraconservative agenda of the Tea Party (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012, p. 156). These watchdogs would often have a newcomer status and were not considered establishment (ibid). During the 2010 primaries, around “138 Tea Party candidates, all Republicans, ran for nearly half the Democratic or open seats in the House and a third of those in the Senate” (Zernike, 2010). This shows us that the Tea Party did have alliances with influential conservatives within the Republican Party. However, these were often

not considered establishment. They were sponsored by advocacy groups that were funded by influential businessmen who have an interest in ultra-conservative policies. All together the Tea Party tapped into the political opportunity of a divided Republican Party and through support from influential businesses and Congressional conservative leaders, was able to get influence within politics.

State capacity and tendency for repression

As we have seen above political opportunity is present through changes in institutional structures and informal power relations. Nevertheless, this canceled out when a state uses repression. The capacity and tendency for state repression by the federal government might increase the cost of collective action which in turn makes it less likely for the movement to tap into the before mentioned political opportunities. We would expect to see little capacity or tendency for state repression around 2008 and 2010. When looking at the past, during the New Left protests like the civil rights movement and the protests of white hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan, there is no difference in the adaptation of counterintelligence programs (Cunningham, 2003, pp. 361-362). Although the FBI did oppose the civil rights movement at the time (ibid). Plus, after 1969, police violence and repression has become less severe (Soule & Davenport, 2009, p. 1). The amount of police violence and repression is based on whether protesters form a threat to the police. This is less based on changes within the police as an institution (p. 2). As the Tea Party rallies did not form a threat to police officers directly, the tendency would have been low to use police violence or repression. In comparison to civil rights protests which also contained a message of anti-police brutality.

The capacity nevertheless, was there. The United States has around 137.000 federal law enforcement officers (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022). When there is a protest, these officers are not on the streets. Police officers from the state are separate from federal police officers. The number of police officers within a state ranges from 658 to 290 per 100.000 civilians in 2023 (World Population Review, n.d.). Although this number does not reflect the period 2008-2010, World Population Review states that the numbers over the years do not change substantially (n.d.). So all in all, this shows that the capacity was there but that the tendency was relatively low as the rallies in 2009 did not pose a threat to police officers directly.

6.2 Mobilizing structures

Formal networks

For the Tea Party to tap into the political opportunities, it needed to be organized. Organization can take place through formal and or informal networks. Through formal networks, a movement can get resources from other organizations or through agreements with other third parties. Where does the Tea Party get its resources from around 2008-2010? Many say that the Koch brothers, who own one of the biggest private businesses in the United States, financed the start of the Tea Party through an advocacy group called Americans for Prosperity. Although the Koch brothers deny it, someone who works for the Koch brothers mentioned that they help to ‘educate’ Tea Party activists on policy details, and to give them ‘next-step training’ after their rallies, so that their political energy could be channeled ‘more effectively’. And she noted that Americans for Prosperity had provided Tea Party activists with lists of elected officials to target” (Mayer, 2010). Mayer (2010) also found out that the advocacy groups sponsored by the Koch brothers gave around 100 million dollars between 1998-2008 to right-wing groups. Dick Arme, a former Republican house representative, has also contributed to the Tea Party through an advocacy group called FreedomWorks (Meyer & Pullum, 2015, p. 211). “The libertarian Club for Growth and American Majority were all established before Obama’s election and...sought both to promote an ideological vision and to protect a financial interest” (p. 211). These are influential people who benefited from an ultraconservative government. Although strong evidence on the amounts of money donated cannot be given. Primarily because some advocacy groups have a 501 (c) 4 tax exempt status (Overby, 2010). This means that someone who donates to such an advocacy group does not have to disclose their name publicly (ibid). Nevertheless, the above-stated data does indicate that influential businessmen are connected to advocacy groups that donate to the Tea Party.

Informal networks

Nevertheless, the Tea Party movement started as a grassroots movement. Informal networks can be important for people to find each other and mobilize. As Nancy a Tea Party supporter stated, “The network kind of phenomena was very valuable and very instrumental in creating the Tea Party movement” (Rohlinger & Bunnage, 2017, p. 6). Social media made it possible for Tea Party supporters to find each other and to create a local political community as it “connected them with like-minded citizens and flattened information hierarchies, which allowed citizens to share information and engage in a conversation about it” (p. 8). This is in line with what Williamson et al. (2011, p. 26) state about how the first rallies in February 2009

started. They stated that social media, Twitter hashtags in particular, allowed people from different conservative networks to join forces (p. 39). Furthermore, most Tea Party supporters got their information on the Tea Party movement through television (47%) and the internet (24%) (NYTimes.com, 2010). This illustrates the role that television media has in the emergence of the party. Fox News creates a collective identity among Tea Partiers and helped the creation and mobilization of the Tea Party (Williamson et al., 2011, p. 27). It serves as an echo chamber through which the viewpoints of the Tea Party are articulated (ibid.). Nevertheless, besides social media and television, churches have not proven to be important for the mobilization of Tea Party supporters (Williamson et al., 2011, p. 27). Despite the fact that demographically most Tea Partiers are Christian (85%) (Diane D. Blair Center of Southern Politics & Society, n.d.). All in all, the Tea Party started as a grassroots movement that organized its rallies through social media and Fox News. Later on through formal networks, the Tea Party required more resources through advocacy groups sponsored by influential people like the Koch brothers. They gave the Tea Party more political influence.

6.3 Framing processes

Value amplification

The last variable in explaining social movements is framing processes. This is a process through which grievances are interpreted. This can result in a collective identity through which collective action can take place and therefore movement emergence. The indicator used is value amplification. What this means for the Tea Party is that when issues are framed through constitutional rights, someone who finds constitutional rights important as well will likely interpret its grievances the same way. Someone might join the movement and get mobilized. When looking at the website of the Tea Party.org also known as the 1776 Tea Party, they state that they “stand by the Constitution as inherently conservative [and] serve as a beacon to the masses who have lost their way, a light illuminating the path to the original intentions of our Founding Fathers” (Tea Party.org, n.d.). Wanting to go back to the original intentions of the Founding Fathers shows that the Tea Party puts a high value on constitutional rights. Moreover, they state that their “very own heritage held the key to unleashing the American Spirit” (Tea Party.org, n.d.). This illustrates how they believe that their issues can be solved by adhering to conservative constitutional rights. When looking at the website of the Tea Party Patriots, they explain what they stand for when it comes to, for example health care or immigration. In their arguments, they link constitutional rights as a justification for reform. For example, “real healthcare reform will be constitutional” (Tea Party Patriots, n.d.) As Schmidt (2011) states,

the Tea Party believes by limiting government, liberties are preserved (p. 534). He also states that although it is a broad-issued social movement, its visions on the constitution are relatively coherent (p. 533). Taking this together, framing issues through an interpretation of a conservative constitution, makes the movement identifiable through which people can easily identify. Hochschild (2016, p. 135-143) explains this effect well. She states that Tea Party supporters believe in the traditional American Dream. This means that by working hard, people will get it better than their parents. However, many people still struggle to make ends meet. They see people getting benefits for not working, which results in them getting a better life. They think 'undeserving' people skip the line while they still work hard. This also shows how much value Tea Party supporters put on the Constitution and the American dream in a traditional way. So no social benefits, but working hard will get you liberties. All in all, the framing of issues through the rights of the constitution, allows people who also find American traditional values important to interpret their grievances.

6.4 Discussion

Before the data was presented, there were certain outcomes we expected. The first hypothesis expected the presence of political opportunities through which the Tea Party could emerge. The data showed that due to increased access to the political system, third parties were more likely to get support. This increase in access was possible due to discontent with President Obama, which constituted a policy shift, plus there was an economic crisis. Moreover, elite divisions among the Republicans were present, elite alliances were made possible due to a divided Republican party and the political interest of influential businessmen. Lastly, there were sufficient state police officers to use repression, but little tendency for the state to use repression as there was no direct threat against the police officers in the message of the movement. Taking this all together we can generally accept the hypothesis. Political opportunities were present through which the Tea Party could emerge.

The second variable measured whether the presence of mobilizing structures affected the emergence of the Tea Party. The data showed that the Tea Party was organized through formal and informal networks. They were able to acquire resources through advocacy groups sponsored by influential businessmen and social networks. Social networks, for example, Twitter and FoxNews made it possible to organize rallies. Consequently, the hypothesis which states that mobilizing structures made the Tea Party organized which as a result had an effect on the emergence of the Tea Party can be generally accepted.

The last variable measures whether framing processes had an effect on the emergence of the Tea Party. The websites of Tea Party organizations showed that through the framing of issues in relation to constitutional rights and American tradition people, who put the same salience on certain values, could interpret their grievances. This made it possible for people who have the same values to create a collective identity through which they can mobilize. The data illustrated that the hypothesis which states that framing processes were essential for the interpretation of grievances through which the Tea Party could emerge can generally be accepted.

The above-mentioned variables are not sufficient on their own but necessary together for the emergence of the Tea Party as there is an interactive dynamic relationship among the variables. All in all, besides the current theories on social change and economic change, the concepts political opportunity, mobilizing structures, and framing processes had a dominant role in the emergence of the Tea Party.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary

Taking everything together, this research has investigated why the Tea Party emerged. The time frame used was 2008-2010. This is done through a congruence analysis in which the hypotheses are tested on the data. Social movement concepts that are accepted among scholars to explain the emergence of movements were applied to the case of the Tea Party. The data showed that all concepts played a role in the emergence of the Tea Party. All variables are necessary but not sufficient on their own. They have a dynamic and interactive relationship. Through organization, people can get mobilized and tap into political opportunities. These political opportunities were created through social and economic changes, such as a stagnant economy, a shift in policy, and racial resentment toward President Obama. For the Tea Party social media, such as Twitter and FoxNews, mobilized people to come to the rallies. In combination with the resources provided by influential people, for example by the Koch brothers, made it possible for them to tap into political opportunities. But at the same time, framing processes that framed issues through constitutional rights decided how grievances were interpreted and whether one joins a movement and gets mobilized. This all together explains the emergence of the Tea Party.

7.2 Limitations to research

Although this small-n research is very case specific, it did allow for a more context-specific operationalization of the variables. Nevertheless, there are some limitations to this research. First, political opportunity as a concept has been used extensively in research. This makes it difficult to not omit any indicators through which political opportunity can be measured. By choosing the most context-specific variables, this has been remedied a bit. As these are expected to be more applicable to the Tea Party as a case. Another limitation of this research is that supporters of right-wing groupings are often skeptical to provide information for scientific purposes. Therefore, a question can be raised on how reliable and generalizable answers to questionnaires are from supporters of right-wing groups. People who do answer might be more moderate in their views and do not represent the whole spectrum of ideas held by supporters of a right-wing group. As a result, the data that has been used in this research had to be approached with caution. Lastly, a limitation is that this research focuses only on the Tea Party as a whole. Although the Tea Party exists out of several organizations within different states. Every state has slightly different views on issues. Although this might not have changed the explanation for the emergence of the Tea Party, it would make the research more detailed.

7.3 Future research

Due to these limitations, future research with more data collected might give even more insight. As it can distinguish between the different chapters and whether there is a difference among these organizations on how they emerged. Furthermore, having more data might filter out the discrepancies in answers. Moreover, the data used here has already been interpreted. Therefore, using more primary data such as questionnaires or interviews conducted with Tea Party supporters might give more insight into the emergence of the Tea Party. Consequently, by using more data, research on the emergence will take into account the research already done on specific reasons for the emergence and it will therefore create a more coherent explanation for the emergence of the Tea Party. It will have an all-round focus on the emergence of the Tea Party.

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