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BREWING TEA PARTY TENSIONS

HOW THE GRASSROOTS CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT IS FLEXING ITS MUSCLES

BREWING TENSIONS BETWEEN THE TEA PARTY AND GOP

SPECIAL REPORT

- A year in, conservative movement is flexing its muscles
- Focus on Constitution, low taxes, small government
- Biggest challenge from fringe groups, religious right
- Don't steal our tea-bag, Tea Party told Republicans

BY NICK CAREY, ED STODDARD AND DAVID MORGAN

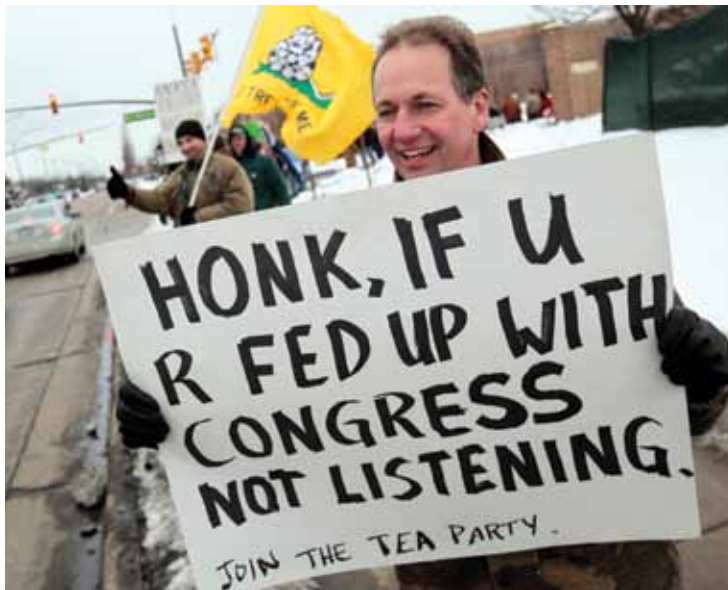
Some Tea Partiers say they can pinpoint the precise moment when they made it clear to the Republican Party they had no intention of being its lapdog.

On a bright, brisk afternoon in mid-February, with snow still thick on the ground from storms that had battered Washington the week before, Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele met with more than 50 members of the Tea Party, the Twitter Age conservative movement that is reshaping the U.S. political landscape.

Steele, RNC chairman since January 2009, had invited them to the plush Capitol Hill Club, built as a clubhouse for the party's top brass next door to RNC headquarters.

According to several accounts, not long into the meeting JoAnn Abbott, an activist from Virginia who calls herself the 'Tea Party Grandma,' raised her hand to ask a question.

She asked about a web page on the RNC site where visitors could send their member of Congress a postcard with a tea bag. On the tag at the end of the string were the letters 'RNC.'



“THE GOP NOW KNOWS WE’RE NOT ASLEEP ANYMORE....THE GIANT HAS BEEN AWAKENED.”

“Respectfully, sir, while we do not have a trademark on the tea bag, you are well aware that people associate it with the Tea Party movement,” Abbott, 50, recalls saying to Steele. “If you co-opt that image, you damage our brand and weaken our movement.”

Lest there was any confusion, she added: “It does not belong to you, it belongs to us as an independent movement.”

Abbott said within an hour of the end of the meeting the page (www.teaparty.gop.com) was gone – and the Grand Old Party was finally aware of conservative frustrations she and others felt with Republican leadership.

“The GOP now knows we’re not asleep anymore,” Abbott told Reuters. “The giant has been awakened.”

RNC officials said Steele, who according to Abbott and others agreed at the time to hold regional meetings with Tea Party groups around the country, was traveling and unable to comment for this story.

But on Fox News the day after the meeting, Steele described the meeting as part of a “healing process” with people disaffected with Republican leaders. Part of the process includes “acknowledging where we have gone wrong, where we have made the mistakes in spending, in growing the size of government, in stepping away from those very constitutional principles and values that have certainly defined this party,” he said.

CONSTITUTIONAL CONSERVATIVES

Accounts of that Feb. 16 meeting challenge a common perception that the Tea Party movement was founded, funded and dominated by the Republican Party. Most of them are current or former Republicans – up to 80 percent or more, with the rest split between

Tea Party member Mike Kopczyk holds a sign during a rally marking the one-year anniversary of the movement in Troy, Michigan February 27, 2010. **REUTERS/REBECCA COOK**



West Michigan Tea Party members Joyce (L) and Hank Wykretowicz leave with their signs after attending a Tea Party meeting in Ludington, Michigan February 11, 2010. REUTERS/REBECCA COOK

Democrats, independents and Libertarians. And the movement has received help from conservative groups like FreedomWorks, which has provided training and logistical support to Tea Party groups and hopes the movement will boost fiscal conservatives in congressional midterm elections.

But Tea Partiers insist that they are not beholden to the GOP and warn that Republican candidates counting on an endorsement from them in November may well be disappointed.

Interviews with Tea Partiers across the country paint a picture of a genuine, amorphous, conservative grassroots movement united by three core principles: constitutionally limited government, free market ideology and low taxes. The American Constitution is a rallying cry and many now dub themselves "constitutional conservatives."

They are angry not just at what they describe as the socialist policies of U.S. President Barack Obama. They also feel Republican politicians have betrayed the party's ideals. For many in the movement, purging the party of moderate Republicans is a major goal.

"I used to be a dyed-in-the-wool Republican. Now if we have a Republican lined up to come to our meetings, I don't even want to go," said Nate Friedl, 41, a member of the Rock River Patriots, a Tea Party group in southern Wisconsin.

Following a first year marked by protests, the movement is evolving. The political novices of a year ago are forming coalitions and learning how to change things from the ground up.

After rallying against government bailouts and Obama's healthcare reforms, as well as mobilizing the vote for key electoral races such as

"I USED TO BE A DYED-IN-THE-WOOL REPUBLICAN. NOW IF WE HAVE A REPUBLICAN LINED UP TO COME TO OUR MEETINGS, I DON'T EVEN WANT TO GO."

Republican Scott Brown's victory in Massachusetts in January, many Tea Partiers feel empowered.

"Tea Party people have realized that you cannot change the system by protesting on the outside," said Richard Viguerie, author of 'Conservatives Betrayed: How George W. Bush and Other Big Government Republicans Hijacked the Conservative Cause.'

The movement is also debating whether to remain independent – or stage a conservative takeover of the Republican Party. And some, a tiny minority, favor becoming a third party.

"The two-party system is too ingrained in America," said Rod Merrill, head of the Ludington Tea Party in western Michigan. "Every time someone has tried to form a third party, it has failed."

An Ipsos/Reuters poll shows that although a majority of Democrats and a plurality of independents voters would support Tea Party candidates, less than one third of Republicans would support them as a third party.

[FOR FULL POLL RESULTS, CLICK HERE.](#)

“EVERY TIME SOMEONE HAS TRIED TO FORM A THIRD PARTY, IT HAS FAILED.”

Regardless of the debate’s outcome, Tea Partiers are targeting not just prominent Democrats in the midterms but also key moderate Republicans like Charlie Crist in Florida and former presidential candidate John McCain in Arizona. United as never before by the internet and weekly conference calls, conservatives are eyeing a few “national” primary races.

“The Tea Party movement needs champions,” said Larry Sabato, a professor of politics at the University of Virginia. “They have to be able to say ‘We’re the reason they got elected.’ Otherwise the movement may dissipate.”

The Tea Party movement has resonated with many Americans, as demonstrated by a March 15 Rasmussen Reports poll putting Tea Party candidates in third place with 21 percent approval among voters behind the Republicans at 27 percent and the Democrats at 34 percent. A December poll had put the movement in second place ahead of the Republicans.



Tea Party member Scott Niemi holds a sign during a rally marking the one-year anniversary of the movement in Troy, Michigan February 27, 2010. REUTERS/REBECCA COOK

Some Republican politicians have actively courted Tea Partiers, whose fiscal conservative focus is close to the Republicans’ stated principles. Democrat politicians have largely shunned the movement.

“This year the momentum is away from the Democrats as they’re the party in power, so Republican candidates espousing Tea Party views in general have a better chance in the midterms,” Sabato said. “But movements like this have come and gone before, so it’s still too early to say if the movement will survive long term.”

In the near term, the mostly white movement faces a possible showdown with the religious right over divisive social issues. But its biggest challenge lies in tackling its extremist fringe, including those who equate Obama with Hitler and the “birther” movement that doubts Obama’s U.S. citizenship and the legitimacy of his presidency.

“The majority of Americans can agree with the core principles of the Tea Party movement,” said Ned Ryun, president of American Majority, a conservative group that has provided training programs for Tea Party groups. “But if it allows itself to be defined by its extremist fringe, then it’s lost.”

THIS REVOLUTION WILL BE TELEVISED

Around 11pm local time on Nov. 4, 2008, America’s first black president-elect strode out onto a stage in Grant Park in downtown Chicago and told a cheering crowd of about 250,000 that “change has come to America.”

Some 40 miles away in the suburb of Grayslake, local businesswoman Janelle Nagy sat up in bed watching Obama’s victory speech in horror, her bedcovers tucked tightly under her chin.

“I told my husband how afraid I was for America,” she said, her hands held close to her face as if still clutching a blanket like a scared child. “Obama said he wants to fundamentally change America. But I don’t want to fundamentally change this country.”

“I love America the way it is,” added Nagy, now a leader of the Northern Illinois Patriots.

Tea Partiers across the country recall a growing sense of anger well before presidential election night in 2008, as outgoing President George W. Bush helped prop up the teetering U.S. financial sector amid the worst downturn since the 1930s and issued emergency loans to struggling automakers General Motors and Chrysler. Under Obama, the government took stakes in both companies.

“I remember just screaming at the TV,” said Tanya Bachand, 35, a trial lawyer and Connecticut state coordinator for the Tea Party Patriots. “I was frustrated long before Obama came along because of how much the government grew under Bush. To me Obama was like Bush, only much worse.”

The moment that launched the Tea Party came a shortly after Obama took office. On cable business channel CNBC, on Feb. 19, host Rick Santelli launched into an impromptu tirade from his regular slot at the Chicago Board of Trade against plans to help



Phillip Smith of Bedford County, Tennessee, takes part in a rally at the Tennessee State Capitol at the Tax Day Tea Party in downtown Nashville, Tennessee, April 15, 2009. Protests were also held in Washington, Chicago and Boston, loosely inspired by the 1773 Boston Tea Party rebellion against British colonial taxes, which helped spark the American revolution. **REUTERS/HARRISON MCCLARY**

“IF WE DON’T STOP ALL THIS SPENDING, WE WON’T HAVE ANYTHING LEFT FOR OUR GRANDCHILDREN.”

“Social security is socialism,” said Jim Chase, 80, a retiree on social security, who is a member of the Ludington Tea Party. “If we don’t stop all this spending, we won’t have anything left for our grandchildren.”

Chase said he would rather have a system where Americans were able to invest their social security payments themselves, an idea not unlike President Bush’s proposal to privatize social security. So when Santelli let rip, fiscal conservatives were eager to answer the call.

“It wasn’t like all of a sudden we woke up and said we need a Tea Party,” said Amy Kremer, 49, one of the founders of the Atlanta Tea Party. “This came after years of rumblings through the conservative world. The fuel was already there and he (Santelli) just lit the fuse.”

struggling homeowners. Santelli proposed a tea party in Chicago in July to protest government bailouts.

This was a reference to the Boston Tea Party, an act of protest against the British government over taxation in 1773, a moment that has resonated throughout American history.

“The Rant,” as Santelli’s monologue has become known, struck a chord with conservatives.

[TO WATCH, CLICK HERE.](#)

“If we hadn’t had all of those bailouts the economy would be back on track by now,” said Tina Dupont, a founding member of the Tea Party of West Michigan. “The jobs would be back, companies would be coming back. If they’d let the banks and others collapse, we would have had a short, sharp downturn.”

The consensus among economists is that had the U.S. government and Federal Reserve not propped up the markets, a global depression would likely have ensued. Yet Dupont and others profess an unshakable belief in the power of the free market. To them, government intervention makes crises only worse. They argue runaway government spending threatens America’s future.

Tea Partiers say Santelli spoke to a deep-seated anger among conservatives who felt betrayed by the Republican politicians they had believed in. Many want big government spending programs like social security scrapped.

West Michigan Tea Party member Tina Dupont (2nd L) talks about the Tea Party movement while Jan Merrill (L), George and Mary Gasa and Joyce Wykretowicz (R) listen during a meeting of Tea Party members in a cafe in Ludington, Michigan in this picture taken February 11, 2010. “If we hadn’t all of those bailouts the economy would be back on track by now,” said Dupont. “The jobs would be back, companies would be coming back. If they’d let the banks and others collapse, we would have had a short, sharp downturn.” **REUTERS/REBECCA COOK**

A small group of conservatives on Twitter instantly took up the Tea Party theme and in a conference call on Feb. 20 they planned tea parties for the following week. On Friday Feb. 27, 2009, a total of 48 tea parties were held around the country and coordinators estimated turnout at 35,000 people.

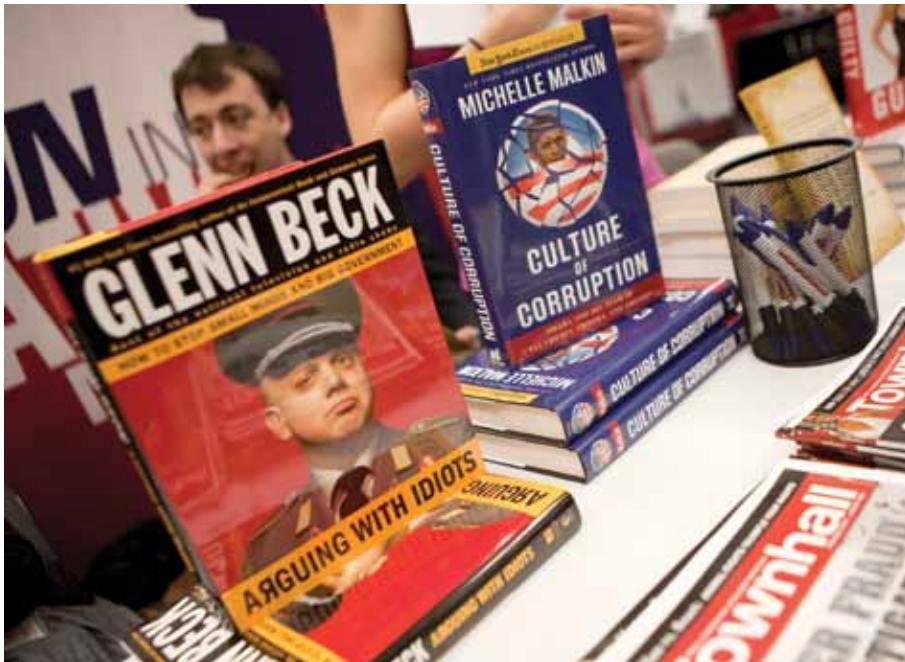
Mark Meckler, 48, a lawyer in Sacramento and independent who was a Republican until eight years ago, threw a party on Feb. 27 thinking he would have six attendees. Instead, 150 people showed up.

“That inspired me to keep going,” he said.

Jenny Beth Martin, a former Republican activist in Atlanta, was on the original conference call and said after the surprising success of Feb. 27, a second round was planned for April 15, the day American’s taxes are due. Activists used Facebook to spread the word.

“It went viral,” said Brendan Steinhauser, director of federal and





A book by conservative commentator Glenn Beck is displayed at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) during their annual meeting in Washington, February 19, 2010. REUTERS/JOSHUA ROBERTS

state campaigns at FreedomWorks. "It was a beautiful moment for us because it's not like you could create that if you wanted to."

FreedomWorks, which is in frequent contact with up to 2,000 local leaders, estimates 3 million to 5 million people have participated in Tea Party meetings or donated money.

Martin said according to local organizers, on April 15 some 1.2 million people attended 850 tea parties. Martin and Meckler are now national coordinators of the Tea Party Patriots, a grouping of more than 1,200 local Tea Party groups.

Following the early rallies, the Tea Party movement evolved quickly, cheered on avidly by right wing commentators, above all Glenn Beck on cable channel Fox News.

"The past year has been like drinking out of a fire hydrant," Martin said. "Everything has moved so fast."

Early on Tea Partiers found an enduring target in the Obama administration's attempts to reform the healthcare system.

Highly publicized and frequently angry confrontations with members of Congress at "town hall" meetings in the summer became a hallmark of the Tea Party's first year.

"I WAS NOT ALONE"

A common thread to tales of Tea Partiers is that in the early months they discovered others felt the same and, all of a sudden, they felt empowered.

Tanya Bachand traveled to New York for the Feb. 27 Tea Party event in New York and was surprised at how many conservatives there were in a liberal city. "I didn't even vote in the last midterm elections because I felt so disillusioned," she said. "But all of a sudden I felt I was not alone."

Bachand returned to Connecticut and started her own Tea Party group. She recalls an early meeting where a biker, a preacher and a businessman in a suit sat together on her living room couch.

"They had absolutely nothing in common, except they wanted to do what's right for this country," she said.

Bachand's group teamed up with others in the state – from gun rights to anti-abortion groups – to form the Connecticut Patriot Alliance. "Everybody in the alliance has their own particular bugaboo," she said. "But we all agree on the Constitution, so we work together on the big issues."

They focused on local Senator Chris Dodd, the Democrat chairman of the U.S. Senate Banking Committee. "Every time Chris Dodd set foot in the state, between us we had 50 to 100 people waiting to protest," Bachand said. "We made a real statement."

In Waco, Texas, the town's Tea Party group blocked a local bailout. According to local media reports, in October the Waco City council approved a \$700,000 loan to keep a local high-tech firm afloat

"EVERYBODY IN THE ALLIANCE HAS THEIR OWN PARTICULAR BUGABOO... BUT WE ALL AGREE ON THE CONSTITUTION!"

under new ownership. But when the Waco Tea Party got wind of the decision, they mobilized to prevent it.

"It made me mad," recalled leadership council member Lisa Dickson, a mild-mannered woman who looks incapable of anger.

Waco Tea Party head Toby Marie Walker said five or six members went to a county commissioner meeting, where the bailout was due to be approved. Walker said their presence alone led the commissioners to stop the bail out.

"We just had to show up and they knew why we were there," she said.

The healthcare debate is where conservative Tea Partiers feel they have had most impact. They are convinced they forced Republicans into opposing the reform and felt they were a crucial factor in getting Scott Brown elected to the Senate seat left vacant by the death of Ted Kennedy.

"On a conference call in December someone said maybe Brown could win and that we should get behind him," Meckler of the Tea Party Patriots said. "The idea gained momentum from there."

People like retirees Calvin and Linda Dykstra wanted to eliminate the Democrats' 60-seat, filibuster-proof majority that helped healthcare reform pass a vote in late December. They drove from western Michigan to Massachusetts in January and spent a week campaigning for Brown.

Speaking at a Tea Party meeting in Manistee, Michigan, the two beamed and blushed like newlyweds, despite being in their mid-60s. "Not everyone had the time or the money to do what we did, but we felt we had to stop the socialist government takeover of healthcare," said Calvin, a former physician.

GETTING ORGANIZED

As the movement has grown, coalitions have formed. In Michigan, Tea Party groups have formed the Michigan Tea Party Alliance with supporters of Glenn Beck's 9.12 Project – a conservative group that wants America to resume the spirit of unity of Sept. 12, 2001, the day after the Sept. 11 attacks.

"The movement is beginning to coalesce around a core set of principles – constitutionally limited government, free market ideology and low taxes," said Tony Raymond, who was laid off at consulting company Accenture in March 2009 and is now a leader of the Northern Illinois Patriots.

The Tea Party Patriots now have two paid national coordinators – Jenny Beth Martin and Mark Meckler – whose salaries come from member contributions. "I only started getting paid last month," Meckler said. "I went through my life savings to get to this point and my family has really suffered."

"I was working for the movement 100 hours a week and they either had to start paying me or I'd have to go back to work."

There is a mentoring program to teach novice local leaders how to organize, as more than 200 new groups have joined them since the beginning of 2010.

Staff at FreedomWorks believe the movement's expansion is largely behind it, but American Majority's Ryun said "the Tea Party is going to continue to grow until the country gets back on the right track."

Other volunteer groups have stepped in to aid conservatives in their quest for ideological purity. Utah-based Independence Caucus, for instance, vets conservative candidates using a questionnaire containing 80 questions based on the U.S. Constitution. Candidates who answer yes to at least 70 percent of those questions are interviewed by local conservatives.

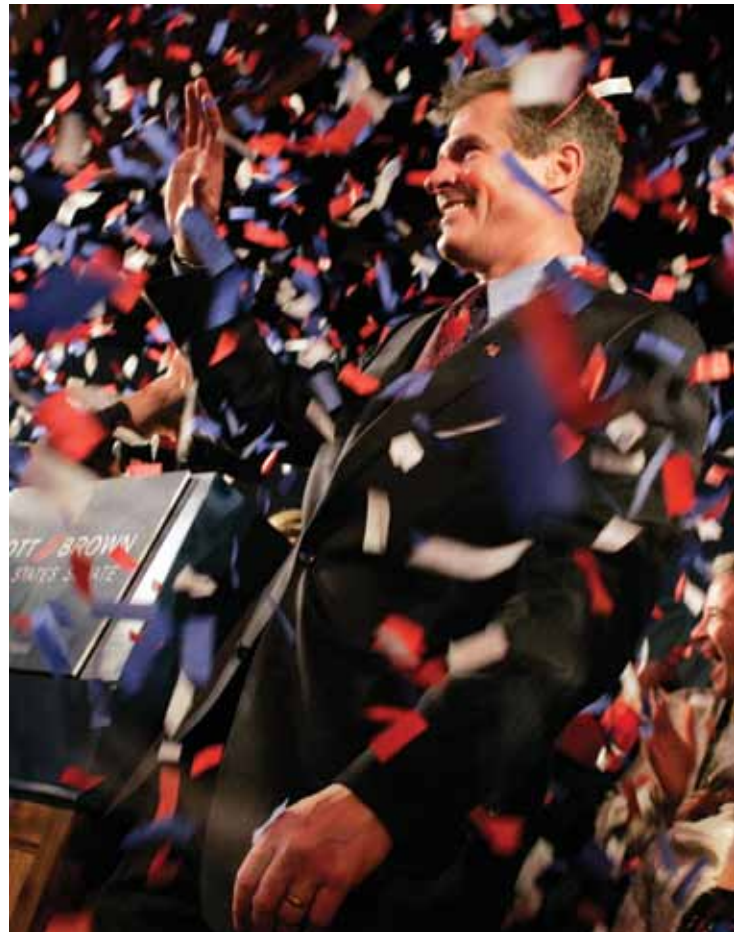
If they pass muster, Independence Caucus backs their candidacy. "But if we find someone is a chameleon and was lying, our policy is we'll work twice as hard to remove them from office as we did to get them elected," said Donald Jakel, the group's coordinator for Ohio and Michigan.

Independence Caucus has vetted at least one candidate in half the state and national seats up for grabs in Michigan.

CONSERVATIVE MACHINE

The efforts of Tea Party movement have also been backed by some well-funded conservative groups.

FreedomWorks, headed by former Republican House Majority leader Dick Armey, says it was involved from the outset. It helped political novices navigate the bureaucratic requirements of holding a protest, including insurance issues and permits.



Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate Scott Brown celebrates after winning the special election to fill the Senate seat of the late Edward Kennedy in Boston, Massachusetts January 19, 2010. **REUTERS/ADAM HUNGER**

The group has provided training for television interview, on meeting congressmen and public relations.

Spokesman Adam Brandon said FreedomWorks' budget in 2009 was \$7 million, up to 70 percent from individual donations, up to 25 percent from foundations and the rest from corporations. The group does not name donors but said the foundations were those that typically give to conservative libertarian causes.

In 2006 to 2007 FreedomWorks had zero online donations; in 2009 they had 19,000 individual online donors who contributed more than \$500,000 in total.

The group hopes to add up to 15 fiscal conservatives in the House of Representatives this year, plus four in the Senate.

Purcellville, Virginia-based group American Majority has also provided training. It was founded in 2008 with financial backing from the Chicago-based Sam Adams Alliance, which promotes free market principles. Individual conservatives have given as much as \$25,000 or as little as \$100 each.

The group's president Ryun said conservative donors are taking a fresh look at the RNC and wondering if their money would be better spent on grassroots conservative groups.



Sarah Palin speaks during the National Tea Party Convention at Gaylord Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee February 6, 2010. **REUTERS/JOSH ANDERSON**

"The Republican grassroots operation is pretty much defunct," he said. "Conservatives are looking for a better bang for their buck. There is going to be more competition for money that has traditionally gone to the RNC and I for one am going to go after that money, hard."

FreedomWorks and Our Country Deserves Better, a political action committee that has formed Tea Party Express, have been accused of being GOP operatives, including by other Tea Party groups. But both groups say their money comes from conservatives. Tea Party Express is staffed by people from Russo, Marsh & Associates, founded by Sal Russo, who began his political career as an assistant to Ronald Reagan when he was governor of California. A review of the Federal Election Commission filings from Our Country Deserves Better shows mostly small donations of a few hundred dollars, many of them from retirees.

Joe Wierzbicki of Russo, Marsh & Associates said the GOP was hostile to the Tea Party movement at first. "The response from the party establishment was that this was bad, that this would look like sour grapes and paint conservatives in a poor light," he said.

More recently, Wierzbicki said the Republican Party has belatedly tried to woo Tea Partiers.

Some Republicans have openly courted the movement, especially Sarah Palin, McCain's running mate in 2008. She gave the keynote

"CONSERVATIVES ARE LOOKING FOR A BETTER BANG FOR THEIR BUCK."

speech at the Tea Party Convention in Nashville in early February. Organized by Tea Party Nation, the event was derided by some other Tea Party groups as being a GOP front.

"We like Sarah Palin, she's one of us and she speaks to us," said Tina Dupont of the Tea Party of West Michigan. "But she does not speak for us." Her views were echoed by many.

Most Republicans are not so popular. "The Republican Party would like to take over the Tea Party and use it to gain power," Tanya Bachand said. "It's the other way around and they don't know what's coming."

"Their reckoning is coming."

The GOP and individual Republican candidates are actively seeking Tea Party endorsements and votes. "At every meeting we have, we see local and state representatives of the Republican Party counting heads and trying to drum up support from our members," said Nighta Davis, organizer of the North Georgia Patriots. "For six years the Republicans controlled Congress and the White House under Bush and they could have solved this country's problems. But they did nothing of the kind."

"Now they want to co-opt us," she added. "But they just don't get it."

Ray Franz, a local Republican politician in western Michigan for three decades, is running for state representative for the 101st district, which includes Manistee.

"The Republicans and the Tea Party movement are on the same page on most issues," he said at a local Tea Party meeting. "The party has lost its brand and these conservatives are right to want to hold our feet to the fire and make sure we represent them properly."

Adam Kinzinger won the Republican primary to run for Illinois' 11th district in the U.S. House of Representatives.

In a blog in early January Eric Odom, executive director of the American Liberty Alliance, described Kinzinger as a "strong" Tea Party candidate and recommended readers consider donating to his campaign.

Kinzinger said his campaign saw a major spike in small donations between \$10 and \$20 following that blog. "I'm a conservative Republican, and Tea Party people believe in the same things that we do," he said. "The movement has helped remind the party that it lost track of the Republican principles that I believe in."

ENDANGERED RINOS

The polarization of U.S. politics may explain why moderate Republicans are in trouble. According to the Pew Research Center, as recently as 2004, 30 percent of Americans were Republicans, but that fell to 23 percent in 2009. Conservatives made up 37 percent in 2004 and ended 2009 at the same level.

According to Gallup, conservatives went from 36 percent of the population in 1992 to 40 percent in 2009, while moderates slid from 43 percent to 36 percent.

Conservatives derisively call moderate Republicans RINOs – Republican In Name Only. They are angry at moderates over issues like immigration and the cap and trade climate bill.

Joe Walsh, a Tea Party Republican who won the Republican primary for 8th U.S. congressional district in Illinois, said conservatives in his district are furious. “The biggest applause I get from audiences comes when I whack the Republicans over the head for doing the same thing as the Democrats,” he said. “This year, party establishment support could be the kiss of death. What will matter this year is the support of the rank and file.”

Ted Schendel, 53, a semi-retired police officer and a Tea Party Republican, is running against “four millionaires” to be the Republican candidate for the 2nd district of Michigan.

“Just before Christmas I was watching Glenn Beck when I realized that Glenn alone cannot take our country back,” he said, speaking at the Manistee Tea party meeting. “So instead of just shouting at the TV, I decided to run for office.”

“I’m not stupid, I know I’ve got one almighty mountain to climb,” he said. “The only way I can do it is if I can get the common man behind me.”

Tea Party Democrats are a rarer breed. Tim Curtis, 53, is a former U.S. Marine who owns a UPS Store franchise and is a member of the Tampa 9.12 Project. He is running as a Democrat for U.S. Congress in Florida’s 11th district.

“There are those who believe in bigger, more costly and more intrusive government,” he said. “That’s not what this country was intended to be. The Tea Party movement cuts across party lines, as there’s more uniting us than separating us.”

According to the Ipsos/Reuters poll, while 49 percent of Republicans said they identify with the Tea Party movement only 11 percent of Democrats said the same.

While there appear to be Tea Party-inspired candidates running as Republicans across the country, there is not yet a clear picture of just how many are out there.

“We’ve heard from a lot of them from around the country, but I don’t think anyone has counted them yet,” said JB Williams, who runs conservative web site www.freedomforce.us. “But we’ll see more of them as the year goes on.”

“This is a movement that is determined to enact change peacefully,” he added. “But if someone tries to stop them, don’t be surprised if they resort to other means.”

Many others are getting involved in local politics to push fiscal conservatism, including at the precinct delegate level. Called a number of different things in different states, this is the lowest elected unit in both political parties. The average precinct represents 1,100 voters. They get out the vote and can influence candidate selection.

Selected in primaries, few people vote in these races.



Convention goers shop for tea bag merchandise during the National Tea Party Convention at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee, February 6, 2010. REUTERS/JOSH ANDERSON

“THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT CUTS ACROSS PARTY LINES, AS THERE’S MORE UNITING US THAN SEPARATING US.”

“In some counties up to 60 percent of these slots are vacant,” said Philip Glass, a commercial mortgage banker and national director of the National Precinct Alliance. This volunteer group is mapping the rules nationwide for becoming a precinct delegate to aid conservatives take these seats. “The tools for taking over both parties are just lying there waiting to be picked up,” he said.

In Connecticut both parties use a town committee system. As a registered Republican, Tanya Bachand went to her Republican town committee and asked how to run. She was told three of the committee’s 12 spots were vacant and was asked to take a seat.

“We have heard the same story many times from across the state,” she said. “This is the way to take over the Republican party from the ground up.”

Tea party conservatives are also paying attention to key races in other states. “Any race in the country can become a national race,” said Tea Party Patriots’ Meckler.

The movement has its sights set on a number of RINOs in this year’s Senate races. They are backing Marco Rubio against Charlie Crist in Florida, Rand Paul (the son of Republican Congressman Ron Paul) against Trey Grayson in Kentucky, Mike Lee in Utah against incumbent Robert Bennett, Chuck DeVore against former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina in California and, last but not least, J.D. Hayworth against McCain.

“Many people in Arizona feel that John McCain has leaned across the aisle,” said Kathy Boatman, a member of the East Valley Tea Party in the Phoenix suburb of Gilbert. “But the only problem is that



Elizabeth James poses for a portrait as she attends former U.S. Congressman J.D. Hayworth's (R-AZ) news conference as he announces his bid for U.S. Senator in Phoenix, Arizona, February 15, 2010. Hayworth will challenge current U.S. Senator John McCain (R-AZ) during the 2010 U.S. Senate election. REUTERS/ JOSHUA LOTT

"TEXAS IS ALREADY TEA PARTY COUNTRY!"

when he leans across the aisle ... they pull him down, and sometimes flat on his face."

At a Tea Party event in south Miami, everyone favored Rubio, who has a substantial lead over Crist in the polls.

"Charlie Crist is exactly what we don't want," said Nancy Meinhardt, a paralegal and a leading light in the Florida Tea Party movement. "He's a Republican in name only, he's not a conservative. It's all a facade."

While some Tea Party groups endorse candidates, others steadfastly do not. "We leave that to individual groups to decide on a local level whether to endorse someone," Tea Party Patriots' Meckler said.

Tea Party candidates did not fare well in the Texas primaries in early March, though James Henson, a politics professor at the University of Texas, said the state is a "low tax, low service, small government environment."

"Texas is already Tea Party country," he said. "You'd have to represent some fairly extreme views to push Republicans here further to the right."

"In the midterms I wouldn't be surprised to see Tea Party voters hold their noses and vote for the Republican candidates who won the primaries."

In the primaries in Illinois in early February, with the exception of Joe Walsh, Tea Party candidates fared badly. Tony Raymond of the Northern Illinois Patriots said Tea Partiers were kicking themselves for not getting involved sooner.

"We missed the boat and are now stuck with some candidates we'd rather not vote for," he said.

Chris Merrill, a conservative radio host in Kansas City, said even if candidates are not running specifically as Tea Party candidates many

are running on fiscal conservative platforms. "In some years the Tea Party message would not have resonated like it does this year," he said. "It's hard to say how many Tea Party candidates will get elected, but we will see more fiscal conservatives."

"We'll have to wait and see whether that will still be the case in 2012."

BATTLES AHEAD

Of the possible challenges ahead for the Tea Party movement the two main ones are not from the left, but from the right.

The first comes from social conservatives, or the religious right. The Tea Party movement is dominated by fiscal conservatives and leaders like Eric Odom of the American Liberty Alliance say social issues like abortion and gay marriage should be avoided.

When asked about abortion, for instance, Tina Dupont of the Tea Party of West Michigan says the group does not discuss it. "Most of us are probably pro-lifers," she said. "But we avoid the topic because it is so divisive."

This has been noted by some on the religious right. "At the national level you have people saying it is all about fiscal issues and not about social issues because they say they are divisive," said Tony Perkins, president of Christian lobby group the Family Research Council.

Chris Merrill said while Tea Partiers can avoid divisive issues at meetings, they cannot if they run for office. "Running a campaign is different," he said. "At some point they have to take a stand on social issues."

Some say a showdown between social and fiscal conservative groups may be inevitable. "Fiscal conservatives want to limit the size of government, social conservatives want to use government to further

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their agenda," Henson said. "That will likely cause problems."

The other problem is the extreme fringe of the Tea Party movement, which was evident at a demonstration outside the Detroit auto show on a snowy day in January. More than half of the 20 or so protesters held signs protesting government bailouts. The rest held placards with black and white pictures of President Obama's face, with a Hitler mustache added.

Within minutes, both groups had moved to opposite corners of their allotted patch of concrete. Andrew Moylan of the National Taxpayers Union said with evident discomfort he had tried unsuccessfully to get rid of the Obama-as-Hitler posters. "I oppose Obama's policies vehemently, I don't agree with what he is trying to do," he said. "But I believe that he is well-intentioned, even if he is dead wrong."

"Comparing him to Hitler is not only wrong on so many levels, it also reflects badly on us because all the pictures in the papers and on TV will be of them," he added. "Our message will get lost in that."

Those who argued here that Obama is like Hitler say that healthcare reform would grant doctors the power of life and death over patients, as under the Nazi regime.

The movement has also attracted members of the Council of Conservative Citizens, which supports some white supremacist causes, and from the John Birch Society and the LaRouchies. In a Feb. 19 column in the Wall Street Journal, former Bush adviser Karl Rove described both as "fringe groups."

"If tea party groups are to maximize their influence on policy, they must now begin the difficult task of disassociating themselves from cranks and conspiracy nuts," Rove wrote. "This includes 9/11 deniers, 'birthers' who insist Barack Obama was not born in the United States, and militia supporters espousing something vaguely close to armed rebellion."

Additional Reporting by Tim Gaynor, editing by Jim Impoco and Claudia Parsons

Email: nick.carey@thomsonreuters.com
 Call: +1 312 408 8756



People tape posters, featuring altered photos of U.S. President Barack Obama and Adolf Hitler, to a table at a town hall meeting on healthcare reform sponsored by U.S. Congressman Adam Schiff (D-CA) in Alhambra, California, August 11, 2009. **REUTERS/DANNY MOLOSHOK**

COVER PHOTO: Activists wearing Boston Tea Party-themed costumes gather to participate in a tax revolt rally in Santa Barbara, California, in this April 4, 2009 file photo. **REUTERS/REBECCA COOK**

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Jim Impoco, Enterprise Editor, Americas
 +1 646 223 8923
jim.impoco@thomsonreuters.com

Claudia Parsons, Deputy Enterprise Editor
 +1 646 223 6282
claudia.parsons@thomsonreuters.com