

IN FOCUS

RIGHT WING WATCH



The Tea Party and Religious Right Movements: Frenemies with Benefits

Peter Montgomery
Senior Fellow
People For the American Way
November 2010



Note: This paper was prepared for “Fractures, Alliances And Mobilizations In The Age Of Obama: Emerging Analyses Of The Tea Party Movement,” an October 22, 2010 conference convened by the Center for the Comparative Study of Right-Wing Movements at the University of California Berkeley. This report and other papers will be updated after the November 2010 elections.

Summary

Republicans in the U.S. Senate have already broken all records. The explosive growth, visibility and political impact of the Tea Party political movement in less than two years has inevitably led to tensions, jealousies, and jockeying for political position with the Religious Right movement, whose leaders have until now enjoyed being the self-declared voice of the Republican Party’s most active and engaged base. These institutional rivalries, and the ongoing debate about whether conservative candidates should highlight their positions on social issues important to Religious Right leaders as well as the small-government, low-tax message of the Tea Party movement, can mask the extensive overlapping and symbiotic relationships between the two movements at the leadership and activist levels. Despite some disagreements over priorities and political strategies, the two movements are pursuing shared political goals (defeating Democratic candidates and weakening the Obama administration) and policy objectives (most notably the repeal of health care reform legislation) as well as the long-term cultural goal of promoting an “American exceptionalism” that claims a divine mandate for limited government. Most of the federal candidates being backed by the Tea Party movement and being supported by vast sums of money from corporate coffers and anti-government billionaires are not in fact libertarians, but “complete conservatives” who share the Religious Right’s opposition to legal abortion and legal equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans.

Introduction and Context

The 2008 election of President Barack Obama and large Democratic majorities in both Houses of Congress sent shockwaves through the entire conservative political establishment. Religious Right leaders, who were largely unenthusiastic backers of GOP nominee John McCain until the selection of Sarah Palin as his running mate, announced well before Obama’s inauguration that they now viewed themselves, in the words of Concerned Women for America’s Wendy Wright, as part of a “resistance movement.”¹

Some conservative strategists began calling immediately for a grassroots movement that would challenge insufficiently conservative Republicans. Just weeks after the 2008 election, reports journalist Sarah Posner, the secretive Council for National Policy heard from Richard Viguerie that “there

needs to be a flowering of grass-roots conservative activism and local groups, local PACs.” She quotes an attendee recounting Viguerie’s strategy: “He’s basically saying you’ve got a Republican county commissioner in Buzzard’s Breath, Texas, and he’s not a conservative? Run a conservative against him.”²

At the same time, some conservative commentators challenged the prominent public role played by the Religious Right base of the Republican Party. Shortly after the election, pundit Kathleen Parker declared that “Armband religion is killing the Republican Party.” Parker declared that “The choir has become absurdly off-key, and many Republicans know it,” even as she acknowledged the GOP’s dilemma: “*But they need those votes!*” [emphasis in original].³

So the stage was set for a conservative backlash to the Obama administration and Democratic congressional leadership that was separate from the traditional Religious Right groups which had not proven themselves capable of delivering a sufficient electoral impact in 2008.

Some consider CNBC commentator Rick Santelli’s February 19, 2009 rant against the Obama administration’s planned intervention in the mortgage market⁴ to be a pivotal spark for the Tea Party movement. A week later, at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, Sen. Jim DeMint, the Religious Right’s point man in the U.S. Senate, declared that Americans were ready to “take to the streets to stop America’s slide into socialism.”⁵

Public anger at the extraordinary “bailout” of Wall Street and other interventions in the financial markets was quickly exploited by corporate-funded conservative groups such as FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity who helped mobilize anti-tax protests around the country on April 15, 2009.⁶ At this nascent moment of the Tea Party Movement, the Religious Right was there. The American Family Association, one of the oldest and largest Religious Right organizations, used its extensive online networks to encourage activists to participate in the Taxed Enough Already protests.⁷ Journalist Adele Stan concludes:

In truth, these two movements have been intertwined since the dawn of the Tea Party movement in 2009, when Republicans with a religious-right constituency saw a way to seize greater power within their party by

² http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_fundamentalist_111908

³ <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/kathleen-parker-invites-more-hate-mail>

⁴ <http://www.mofopolitics.com/2009/02/19/video-cnbc-santelli-slams-obama-mortgage-plan-21909/>

⁵ <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2009/02/27/senator-calls-obama-world%E2%80%99s-best-salesman-of-socialism/>

⁶ http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Americans_for_Prosperty

⁷ <http://blog.au.org/2010/02/18/having-a-party-religious-right-gets-an-invitation-to-tea/>

¹ <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/viva-la-resistance>

playing to the Tea Party crowd.⁸

By the summer of 2009, Religious Right leaders had enthusiastically joined GOP-led and Tea Party-fueled opposition to health care reform efforts. As People For the American Way Foundation noted⁹, Religious Right leaders moved well beyond their claims that reform would lead to taxpayer funding of abortions to fully embrace the Tea Party's anti-government talking points. For example, when Focus on the Family's James Dobson took part in a conference call for anti-choice activists, he denounced the legislation both as a "huge abortion industry bailout" and as a "health care power grab by the federal government." The anti-abortion Operation Rescue urged activists to "stop Obama's radical, socialistic abortion agenda."¹⁰

This rhetoric reflects conservative leaders' belief that the fight against health care reform was a way to reinvigorate the off-again, on-again coalition between social and economic conservatives that is essential to advancing right-wing political objectives. (DeMint famously said that defeating health care reform would be President Obama's "Waterloo.") The movement-straddling Heritage Foundation, the behemoth think tank and marketing firm for right-wing causes, has been pushing that agenda hard. It published *Indivisible*¹¹, a book of essays with a gimmick: people known primarily for "social issue" activism were asked to contribute essays on an economic topic and vice versa. So it includes an essay from anti-gay activist Harry Jackson on the moral evils of the minimum wage, while Club for Growth founder (and current Wall Street Journal editorialist) Steven Moore opined on the importance of the family. The publication's editor summarized its thesis saying "in the long run, economic prosperity and limited government depends on moral principles like respect for the property of others and social institutions such as marriage."¹² Heritage has been promoting that book at Religious Right gatherings, and hosted a panel discussion at this year's Values Voter Summit in September.

The same strategy is apparent in the creation of the Freedom Federation, a confederation of Religious Right groups launched in the summer of 2009. The Federation published a Declaration of American Values that declared groups' allegiance not only to the social agenda of the Religious Right but also to a system of taxes that "are not progressive in nature, and within a limited government framework, to encourage economic opportunity, free enterprise, and free market competition."¹³

8 <http://www.alternet.org/story/148246/>

9 <http://www.pfaw.org/rww-in-focus/to-hell-with-health-care-reform-religious-right-leaders-attack-obama-spout-gop-dogma-about-so>

10 <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/6571411022.html>

11 http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2010/pdf/Indivisible_RobackMorse.pdf

12 <http://blog.american.com/?p=10221>

13 <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/when-going-gets-tough-right-starts-new-grou>

The How to Take Back America conference in September 2009, convened by Phyllis Schlafly and Religious Right radio host Janet Porter, also demonstrated a merging of messaging and organizing strategies among the Religious Right and Tea Party right. For example, a session about health care reform focused less on the threat of publicly funded abortion than on the "fascist" government "takeover" of the economy as a "power grab" by the president.¹⁴

The overriding shared goals of economic and social conservatives in the wake of President Obama's election have been to diminish his administration's ability to advance its policy goals and to build toward the defeat of Democratic lawmakers in 2010. The importance of those electoral goals to both groups ultimately overwhelms the significance of the sometimes public squabbles over priorities or the question of the visibility or invisibility of the Religious Right's social agenda at Tea Party events and in Tea Party documents.

As Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, said in March, "I don't see the tea party movement as a threat at all – I see it as additional allies and fellow travelers."¹⁵ Or, as Mississippi Governor and former GOP chair Haley Barbour bluntly wrote in September in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Republican and tea party voters united means Mr. Obama defeated."¹⁶

Tensions & Rivalries

The convergence of the groups' political goals has not prevented public disputes and rivalries. A significant number of those have taken the form of Religious Right leaders complaining about Tea Party groups' inattention to abortion and gay rights issues and cautioning the GOP not to abandon social conservatives in the rush to embrace Tea Party Nation.

Some of the sparks are a result of the major role Dick Armey's FreedomWorks has played in fostering the Tea Party movement. Armey is a rare longtime Republican critic of the Religious Right movement, and he has continued to suggest that the Religious Right's social agenda runs counter to the Tea Party's small government, pro-individual liberty message:

When the social conservatives and the economic conservatives work well together is when they work with a common resistance to the growth of the power of the state. And what happened was there was a small cadre of very strongly assertive people on the social issues side that were saying "let's expand the power of the state" in order to impose our values on the community.... my point is very simple: you live a righteous

14 <http://www.pfaw.org/rww-in-focus/far-right-leaders-wov>

15 <http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=4FB3D910-18FE-70B2-A855734169AC4037>

16 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703989304575503921088554324.html>

life, you're an encouragement to other people; use the state to impose it and you're a tyrant.¹⁷

The victory of libertarian-leaning Ron Paul in the presidential straw poll at the 2010 Conservative Political Action Conference also dismayed some Religious Right leaders.¹⁸

"There's a libertarian streak in the tea party movement that concerns me as a cultural conservative," said Bryan Fischer, director of Issue Analysis for Government and Public Policy at the American Family Association, has complained. "The tea party movement needs to insist that candidates believe in the sanctity of life and the sanctity of marriage."¹⁹

A number of Tea Party leaders and Republican Party officials – including those with strong Religious Right credentials – have angered Religious Right leaders by making a case grounded in pure electoral politics that groups should stay focused on voters' economic concerns and shy away from social issues. Among them are Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels, and Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan. The anti-abortion LifeNews.com noted unhappily that Rep. Ryan told CNBC in September, "We will agree to disagree on those issues. But let's rally around the tallest pole in our tent: fiscal conservatism, economic liberty."²⁰

In response, the Family Research Council's Tony Perkins acknowledged that "economic issues are currently at the forefront of the minds of most voters," but said many socially conservative voters make abortion the top issue in deciding how to vote. Perkins says the libertarian leanings of Arney's FreedomWorks don't represent "true" tea partiers.²¹

In these disputes, the Tea Party has generally had the upper hand, one that has only gotten stronger as Tea Party-backed candidates – running mostly under the anti-tax, small-government banner – have defeated incumbent senators and other candidates backed by the Republican establishment. That show of intra-GOP electoral muscle is much more than the Religious Right has been able to muster in recent years, despite James Dobson's recurring threats to abandon the GOP if it did not do more to advance the Religious Right agenda.

That hard political fact is reflected in the comments by FreedomWorks' director of federal and state campaigns in response to Religious Right complaints that abortion and gay marriage were not in the Contract From America: "People didn't come out into the streets to protest gay marriage or abortion."²²

17 <http://www.alan.com/2010/09/14/on-tuesdays-radio-show-136/>

18 <http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=4FB3D910-18FE-70B2-A855734169AC4037>

19 <http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=4FB3D910-18FE-70B2-A855734169AC4037>

20 <http://www.lifenews.com/nat6701.html>

21 <http://www.lifenews.com/nat6701.html>

22 <http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=4FB3D910-18FE-70B2-A855734169AC4037>

That dynamic has frequently put Religious Right organizational leaders in the position of borderline-desperate suitor to the new popular kid in school. Religious Right leaders have worked hard to make the best of the situation by trying to ally with, or co-opt, the Tea Party movement, something that is potentially possible given the significant overlap between the two movements' activists and worldviews. Kyle Mantyla, who monitors the Religious Right movement for People For the American Way's Right Wing Watch blog, wrote in February:

At the moment, Tea Party activism is the face of the conservative movement and so it is no surprise that Religious Right groups are climbing aboard the bandwagon in an effort to try and utilize it to press their own agenda.

The Tea Party movement does not have a Religious Right agenda at its core, but rather as a component ... and that is only because Religious Right groups have set out aligning themselves with the movement in order to co-opt and exploit it.²³

National Leadership Connections

While the decentralized nature of the Tea Party movement and its relative lack of a formal leadership structure make it challenging to talk about connections between the movements at the leadership level, some connections are clear. Journalist Stephanie Mencimer reported that leaders of the Tea Party Patriots, a group that has maintained a focus on fiscal issues and eschewed public discussion of religion or social issues, met in early October with the members of the Council for National Policy to try to raise money for its election plans.²⁴ The CNP's national director Bob Reccord also moderated a tea party panel at the September meeting of Ralph Reed's Faith and Freedom coalition conference.²⁵

There are a number of high-profile individuals who provide leadership-level bridges between the movements. Here are brief profiles of a just a few of them.

Jim DeMint

Sen. Jim DeMint (R-SC) is in many ways the embodiment of this intersection between the two movements. DeMint has long been a folk hero to Religious Right activists; as a candidate in South Carolina he argued that gays and single mothers should not be allowed to teach in public schools. In Congress, he became the Religious Right's go-to guy in Congress, where he repeated the movement's false claims about hate crimes laws

23 <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/tea-party-activism-and-religious-right>

24 <http://motherjones.com/mojo/2010/10/tea-party-patriots-tim-lahaye-evangelicals>

25 <http://motherjones.com/mojo/2010/10/tea-party-patriots-tim-lahaye-evangelicals>

and sounded an inflammatory false alarm about the Obama administration's stimulus bill by claiming that it was designed to purge college campuses of religion and religious people.

DeMint is also at the far fringe of anti-government positions in the Senate, and has abused Senate rules to routinely obstruct Senate action on executive and judicial branch nominees as well as other legislation.²⁶ This year, DeMint and his Senate Conservatives Fund PAC have been the most prominent backers of insurgent candidates. His endorsement and financial backing have in many ways defined the crop of Tea Party candidates for the U.S. Senate.²⁷ He is well-positioned to be the center of a new far-right power base in the next session of Congress, and some believe he will challenge Sen. Mitch McConnell for the Republican leadership.

In April, the Christian Broadcasting Network's David Brody asked DeMint if he was worried about social issues taking a "back seat" to fiscal concerns, and DeMint responded:

No actually just the opposite because I really think a lot of the motivation behind these Tea Party crowds is a spiritual component...I think people are seeing this massive government growing and they're realizing that it's the government that's hurting us and I think they're turning back to God in effect is our salvation and government is not our salvation and in fact more and more people see government as the problem and so I think some have been drawn in over the years to a dependency relationship with government and as the Bible says you can't have two masters and I think as people pull back from that they look more to God. It's no coincidence that socialist Europe is post-Christian because the bigger the government gets the smaller God gets and vice-versa. The bigger God gets the smaller people want their government because they're yearning for freedom.²⁸

Newt Gingrich

Newt Gingrich, whose 1994 "Contract with America" helped engineer a Republican takeover of Congress with an agenda focused on fiscal and accountability issues, has in recent years been promoting books and DVDs under the rubric of "Rediscovering God in America." In March 2009, Gingrich launched an organization called "Renewing American Leadership" and hired Jim Garlow, a California pastor who mobilized church involvement in the Prop 8 campaign, to run it. Renewing American Leadership describes its mission statement this way: "to preserve America's Judeo-Christian heritage by defending and promoting the three pillars of American civilization: freedom, faith and free markets."

26 <http://blog.pfaw.org/content/demint%E2%80%99s-democracy>

27 <http://www.pfaw.org/rww-in-focus/the-rogues-gallery-right-wing-candidates-have-dangerous-agenda-for-america-and-could-tu>

28 <http://blogs.cbn.com/thebrodyfile/archive/2010/04/21/senator-demint-to-brody-file-tea-party-movement-will-bring.aspx>

David Barton, another bridge between the two movements, serves on RAL's board, reports journalist Dan Gilgoff, who noted that RAL had joined forces with the American Family Association to promote the Taxed Enough Already rallies on April 15, 2009:

The antitax rallies illustrate the new group's quest to unite religious and fiscal conservatives, two flanks of the Republican base that have squabbled with one another since Election Day. "There's too much finger-pointing between economic conservatives who say we're losing ground because of social conservatives and social conservatives who say the opposite," says Barton, who sits on Renewing American Leadership's board. "Instead of having a circular firing squad, we need to start identifying real allies and the real opponents."²⁹

Sarah Palin

Sarah Palin's choice as John McCain's running mate energized Religious Right leaders and activists who until then were generally reluctant supporters of McCain's candidacy. Palin's membership in a Pentecostal church and her routine references to the "prayer warriors" who support her made her popular among religious conservatives. In Palin's post-gubernatorial role as part pop culture figure, part conservative political icon, she has achieved folk-hero status among her followers while earning relatively low approval ratings among the public at large. A recent poll by the Public Religion Research Institute found that Palin was the most popular likely 2012 presidential candidate among voters who consider themselves part of the Tea Party. Her favorable rating among white evangelical voters is 61 percent; among voters who identify with the Tea Party, a remarkable 84 percent have a favorable view of Palin, more than double the figure for the public at large.³⁰

Politico recently noted that Palin's political operation is further hitching its wagon to the tea party movement with a video that praises the Tea Party as the "future of politics." In a note promoting the video, she tells supporters to "support commonsense conservative candidates who will work with you, and for you, to provide solutions to America's challenges. Constitutionalists who are running for the right reasons will put our country back on course — for opportunity and freedom for all."³¹

David Barton

David Barton is a longtime Religious Right activist and Republican political operative. Through his Wallbuilders ministry, he has built a small Religious Right empire as a self-declared historian who specializes in documenting the religious roots of the nation's founding. He is a former chair

29 http://politics.usnews.com/news/religion/articles/2009/03/20/newt-gingrich-steps-up-efforts-to-mobilize-religious-conservatives_print.html

30 <http://www.publicreligion.org/objects/uploads/fck/file/AVS%202010%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>

31 <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0910/42488.html>

of the Texas GOP who campaigned for George W. Bush in evangelical churches and has produced a “documentary” aimed at convincing Black Christians that they should abandon the Democratic Party because it was responsible for slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow.³²

Barton, well-known in Religious Right circles for years, has been given a vastly expanded audience by Glenn Beck, who has made Barton a sidekick of sorts in his efforts to “teach” Americans about our history and government. Barton shared the stage with Beck at the “America’s Divine Destiny” event on the eve of the “Restoring Honor” rally at the Lincoln Memorial in August.

Barton and Beck are promoting the kind of messages designed to unite the Religious Right and Tea Party movements around a two-fold notion of American exceptionalism: America is exceptional because it is grounded in the idea that inalienable individual rights are granted by a creator God, and because the founders wrote the Constitution to elevate individual liberty and restrict the power of government.

Glenn Beck

Glenn Beck, the Fox News Channel anchor and political pop-culture phenomenon, has played an extraordinarily powerful supporting role for the Tea Party movement, along with his Fox colleagues, who have promoted Tea Party events and validated the movement’s most extreme anti-government, anti-Obama elements. He has urged Americans to abandon churches that were committed to “social justice” and told his viewers that “Your church is either for socialist government, or the living of the gospel.”³³ Beck has partnered with Barton to promote the idea that America’s founding documents were cribbed from colonial preachers’ sermons, and that a dramatically limited role for government is inseparable from America’s divinely inspired founding.

This year, Beck has taken his effort to unite his political and religious visions with an increasingly messianic view of his role in bringing America back to God – and a particular vision of God. At “America’s Divine Destiny,” an event held on the eve of his “Restoring Honor” event at the Lincoln Memorial in August, he proclaimed his fathering as “the beginning of the end of darkness. We have been in darkness a long time.” He said Saturday’s rally would be a “defibrillator to the spiritual heart of America” and said participants would be “fundamentally transforming the United States of America.”³⁴ He repeatedly insisted that his “Restoring Honor” event at the Lincoln Memorial in August was not political, but he filled it with predictably conservative political speakers and messages.³⁵

32 <http://www.pfaw.org/media-center/publications/david-barton-propaganda-masquerading-history>

33 <http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/201005180056>

34 <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/glenn-beck-and-god-are-ready-rock>

35 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-b-keegan/glenn-becks-political->

Ralph Reed

Ralph Reed, who built the Christian Coalition into a political force in the 1990s and had a spectacular flame-out when his unsavory dealings with disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff were exposed and he lost his bid for the lieutenant governorship in Georgia, is making his political comeback with a new organization, the Faith and Freedom Coalition, which journalist Adele Stan calls “the Tea Party movement’s get-out-the-vote operation.”³⁶

At its Washington, D.C. conference in September, Reed bragged about its growing network of state level affiliates and its huge database of faith-based conservative voters. Reed says that below-the-radar voter identification and turnout work by conservative activists tapping into his database would turn November’s elections into a historic victory for conservatives including races not considered at play.

Mike Pence

In 2006, Rep. Mike Pence, former chair of the conservative Republican Study Committee, ran against John Boehner to lead the House Republicans. Pence framed his unsuccessful campaign as a challenge to Republicans’ own betrayal of the values of the 1994 Contract with America. He holds the title of Republican Conference Chairman, the third highest-ranking position in Republican leadership.

Pence has appeared at recent events sponsored by FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity. In addition, he was the dark-horse winner of the presidential straw poll at the September 2010 Values Voter Summit, which is sponsored by the Family Research Council and a number of other Religious Right organizations:

At the Values Voter Summit, Pence offered the following rationale for the melding of the two movements. “We must not remain silent when great moral battles are being waged,” he said. “Those who would have us ignore the battle being fought over life, marriage, religious liberty have forgotten the lessons of history. As in the days of a house divided, America’s darkest moments have come when economic arguments trumped moral principles. Men and women, we must demand, here and now, that the leaders of the Republican Party stand for life, traditional marriage and religious liberty without apology.”³⁷

Michele Bachmann

Minnesota Republican Rep. Michele Bachmann is another elected official with folk-hero status among both the Religious

[hyp_b_699686.html](http://blogs.alternet.org/speakeasy/2010/09/15/del-tea-party-senate-candidate-odonnell-opposes-women-in-military-n-h-candidate-lamontagne-endorses-creationism/)

36 <http://blogs.alternet.org/speakeasy/2010/09/15/del-tea-party-senate-candidate-odonnell-opposes-women-in-military-n-h-candidate-lamontagne-endorses-creationism/>

37 <http://www.alternet.org/story/148246/>

Right and Tea Party movements, even though some Missouri Tea Party activists were livid when she endorsed incumbent Roy Blunt.

An interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network's David Brody shows why, as she moves effortlessly from Tea Party rhetoric about big government "oppressing the American people with too much spending, too much taxes, too much regulatory burden" to standard Religious Right charges that federal hate crimes legislation is about "restricting free speech and free expression of American citizens" to a conversation about how her faith guides her life and work.³⁸

Local Activist-Level Connections

While much of the national media has focused on tensions between the Tea Party and Religious Right movements at the national level, local Tea Party organizations routinely engage with local Christian conservatives, which is not surprising given that Christian conservatives make up a significant portion of Tea Party membership.

In May, for example, the South Atlanta Tea Party sponsored a pastors breakfast that featured speakers from two national Religious Right groups, Ken Fletcher of the Alliance Defense Fund and Gary DeMar of American Vision. According to a news report, topics included "the threats to religious freedom and the persecution of the church" and "restoring the church to its Biblical foundations and America's Christian heritage."³⁹

This spring, Right Wing Watch reported an array of national Religious Right leaders appearing at Tea Party events:

For instance, WallBuilders' Rick Green is speaking at a rally in Texas, and the Eagle Forum's Phyllis Schlafly is addressing an event in Michigan, while Ralph Reed is joining Bob Barr and Virginia Thomas, wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, for a Tea Party rally in Atlanta.

On top of that, the AFA's Bryan Fischer is speaking at an event in Mississippi and Alan Keyes was at one in Ohio, while Vision America's Rick Scarborough is speaking at an event in Oklahoma where he will share the microphone with Oklahoma state Senator Randy Brogdon, who is trying to create Tea Party militia to defend the state's sovereignty from federal encroachment.⁴⁰

At the 2010 Values Voters Summit in September, a panel of three Tea Party activists discussed their efforts. While the representative of the Tea Party Patriots kept her focus on fiscal issues, the other two activists talked about feeling that they

were being instructed by God, just like Glenn Beck. One of those organizers, Katy Abram, told journalist Sarah Posner that the 350 members of her Lebanon, Pennsylvania, group are getting training on the Constitution from the Institute on the Constitution, which offers a 12-part course on the biblical basis of the Constitution.⁴¹ Another, Billie Tucker, described a disagreement among organizers of her local tea party group: When one argued against adding moral issues to the mission, Tucker responded that "God did not wake me up for four months at four in the morning to say, 'Billie, we've got a tax issue.' He woke me up because he said 'my country doesn't love me like it used to love me.'"⁴²

Polling conducted in September by the Public Religion Research Institute confirms extensive overlap between the two movements and their ideologies. The survey report found that 47 percent of those who consider themselves part of the Tea Party movement, and 57 percent of Tea Partiers who identify as Christians, say they are also part of the Christian conservative or Religious Right movement. The survey also shows that those who call themselves part of the Tea Party movement are much more socially conservative than they are libertarian. Nearly two-thirds (63%) say abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, and only 18 support allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry, which puts them far to the right of American voters and nearly as far to the right as those who identify as Christian conservatives. And on the question of whether America is a Christian nation, those who call themselves part of the Tea Party movement are actually more likely to say America is now a Christian nation (55 percent) than those who call themselves part of the Christian conservative movement (43 percent).⁴³

Earlier polls also identified affinities between the two movements. In June, the Seattle Times reported that a poll by the University of Washington found that "52 percent of strong tea party supporters agreed with the statement that 'compared to the size of their group, lesbians and gays have too much political power,' compared to 25 percent of all voters surveyed." University of Washington political science professor Matt Baretto concluded that "The tea party movement is not just about small government or frustration. It's (also) about a very specific frustration with government resources being used on minorities and gays and lesbians and people who are more diverse."⁴⁴

Ideology

It is not new, difficult, or an ideological stretch for Religious Right leaders to adopt the Tea Party movement's anti-government, anti-tax rhetoric nor its narrow vision of the

38 http://www.cbn.com/media/player/index.aspx?s=vod/MMA169v2_WS

39 <http://www.thecitizen.com/articles/05-18-2010/tea-party-group-holds-pastors-breakfast>

40 <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/tea-party-activism-and-religious-rights-unrequited-love>

41 <http://www.thenation.com/article/154944/tea-party-values>

42 <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/values-voters-angry-afternoon-tea>

43 <http://www.publicreligion.org/research/?id=386>

44 http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/politicsnorthwest/2012005031_new_poll_looks_at_tea_party_vi.html

federal government's role under the Constitution. When Ralph Reed was building the Christian Coalition into a prominent political force in the 1990s, he and other Religious Right leaders expanded the notion of the movement's agenda beyond its anti-gay and anti-abortion staples, and threw their support behind Newt Gingrich's Contract with America by arguing that opposition to taxation was a "pro-family" value. Since then, Religious Right leaders have generally backed conservative Republican candidates' support for restrictions on taxes and spending.

In some ways, right-wing funders have been working to advance that anti-government ideology for decades, investing in think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute, right-wing funded academic centers at universities, and an array of political organizations and media outlets. There's evidence that some strategists are continuing to think in the long term. According to journalist Stephanie Mencimer, at the early October meeting between Tea Party Patriot leaders and the Council on National Policy, "TPP leaders handed out a 'secret' strategy memo...that lays out an ambitious goal: to 'renew the commitment to limited government and free markets in the hearts and minds of at least 60 percent of the American people over the next 40 years.'"⁴⁵

That memo also implicitly points to a role for religion, quoting John Adams:

The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations. This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution.⁴⁶

This notion, that America's Revolution was won by its preachers, is central to the version of American history that Glenn Beck is helping David Barton popularize. Barton goes further, claiming that the nation's founding documents were essentially cribbed from colonial preachers' sermons, and that the individual liberties enshrined in the Constitution were a direct outgrowth of the colonial Christian leaders' theology of individual salvation.

If it weren't for that theology, Barton says, America's Constitution wouldn't have been so focused on protecting individual liberty, and America today would be more collectivist, like France.⁴⁷

45 <http://motherjones.com/mojo/2010/10/tea-party-patriots-tim-lahaye-evangelical>

46 <http://www.marktalk.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/TPP-2.pdf>

47 http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/3266/glenn-beck%E2%80%99s_salvation_army/

Others also invoke the divine hand in America's origins. Rep. Steve King, one of the most far-right members of the House of Representatives, asserted at the September 2009 "How to Take Back America" conference that American exceptionalism was not an accident but was "directed by providence" and asserted that the Declaration of Independence and Constitution were written with "divine guidance."

This take on the concept of American exceptionalism -- that a Constitution restricting the powers of government was divinely inspired and that other interpretations that allow for a more expanded role for government are therefore not only un-American but ungodly and unchristian -- packs a punch. It's also being promoted by Newt Gingrich. In his latest book *To Save America: Stopping Obama's Secular Socialist Machine*, he writes:

Most of us know who we are. We know that America is an exceptional country with unique genius for combining freedom and order, strength and compassion, religious faith and religious tolerance. But today we have given power in Washington and in state capitols nationwide to a radical left-wing elite that does not believe in American exceptionalism.⁴⁸

Gingrich's approach is paraphrased by journalist Sarah Posner:

His thesis on American exceptionalism is by now familiar to anyone watching how the self-anointed constitutional purists of the tea parties are finding common ground with proponents of America as a 'Christian nation.' The rights enumerated in the Bill of Rights have a divine source, coming not from human hands but God's as documented in the Declaration of Independence. That defines what Gingrich calls 'American exceptionalism,' something he confidently asserts the 'secularist socialists in the Obama government' simply do not understand."⁴⁹

In February, Damon Linker, writing for *The New Republic*, noted that claims by right-wing pundits that President Obama is an enemy of "American Exceptionalism" is a belief "so widely held and so frequently asserted on the right, in fact, that it can almost be described as conservative conventional wisdom."⁵⁰

In fact, Glenn Beck portrays President Obama, congressional Democrats, and liberals in general as not only pro-big government and anti-religion, but as anti-religion as a means to getting big government.

48 <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2010/6/14/185248/897>

49 http://www.religiondispatches.org/dispatches/sarahposner/3328/gingrich_on_obama%E2%80%99s_%E2%80%99Ckenyan_anti-colonial_behavior%E2%80%9D_and_%E2%80%99CAmerican_exceptionalism%E2%80%9D/

50 <http://www.tnr.com/blog/damon-linker/taking-exception>

Glenn Beck describes the “progressive dream” as requiring first the destruction of the religious and moral roots of the people: “That was the number one thing they had to destroy. They had to get God out of our schools.” And secondly, “they had to take apart our understanding of the Constitution.”⁵¹

In a televised conversation with David Barton, Beck says with notable hubris, “I guess what I’m introducing here to America...is the fact that we’re a nation of religious people, of morals, of God. This is his land, his right.” Barton responds, “And that’s what was so unique about America, is we had this concept of individual. Now we’re getting collective. That is socialistic Marxism.”

American exceptionalism has become one of the buzzwords on the campaign trail, where Tea Party-backed candidates wave it as a banner and wield it as a weapon against President Obama and Democrats. Florida Senate candidate Marco Rubio, one of the Tea Party’s biggest success stories to date and one of their brightest hopes for the future, has made American exceptionalism a theme of his campaign, which pushes the notion that disagreements about spending and the role of government are not just about policy disagreements but about the very identity and character of America.⁵² David Barton has affirmed that message while campaigning for Rubio.⁵³

This binding of a belief in America’s divine origins to the Tea Party movement’s belief in dramatically limited government can be seen as part of an ideological campaign being waged by Religious Right leaders and their allies against the more libertarian strains of the Tea Party movement. The campaign against the very idea that one can legitimately be a fiscal conservative without also being a social conservative was very much on display at the September 2010 Values Voter Summit, at which Sen. Jim DeMint declared “you can’t be a true fiscal conservative if you do not understand the value of a culture that is based on values.”⁵⁴

There is widespread reception to this notion among members of the Tea Party movement, who are more likely than other Americans to attend church often and believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible.⁵⁵ “Many tea partiers, like religious right activists, find the roots of their thinking on government in the Bible,” writes Sarah Posner for *The Nation*.⁵⁶

Among them is Sharron Angle, the Tea Party candidate who won the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate from Nevada. Angle views much government spending as not only unconstitutional but as a form of idolatry that violates the first of the Ten Commandments:

51 <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,591785,00.html>

52 <http://www.postonpolitics.com/2010/10/rubio-casts-senate-race-as-referendum-on-american-exceptionalism/>

53 http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/news_politics/2010/09/david-barton-marco-rubio-and-american-exceptionalism.html

54 <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/value-voter-recap-were-all-tea-partiers-now-including-god>

55 <http://www.publicreligion.org/objects/uploads/fck/file/AVS%202010%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>

56 <http://www.thenation.com/article/154944/tea-party-values>

“And these programs that you mentioned — that Obama has going with Reid and Pelosi pushing them forward — are all entitlement programs built to make government our God,” she told the TruNews interviewer. “And that’s really what’s happening in this country, is a violation of the First Commandment. We have become a country entrenched in idolatry, and that idolatry is the dependency upon our government. We’re supposed to depend upon God for our protection and our provision and for our daily bread, not for our government.”⁵⁷

Senator Jim DeMint told the Christian Broadcast Network’s David Brody in April, “It’s no coincidence that socialist Europe is post-Christian because the bigger the government gets the smaller God gets and vice-versa. The bigger God gets the smaller people want their government because they’re yearning for freedom.”⁵⁸

Journalist Adele Stan locates the political underpinnings for this ideological campaign in the Constitution Party. “If the Tea Party could be said to have a founding father,” she writes, “I’d name him as Constitution Party founder Howard Phillips.” Stan notes that Phillips was not only a founder of the Religious Right but also founded a political party (first organized as the U.S. Taxpayers Party) that has provided a political home for a range of far-right figures, from Operation Rescue founder Randall Terry to neo-militia leader Matthew Trewella. She also quotes from the preamble to the Constitution Party’s platform:

The Constitution Party gratefully acknowledges the blessing of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as Creator, Preserver and Ruler of the Universe and of these United States.[...] The goal of the Constitution Party is to restore American jurisprudence to its Biblical foundations and to limit the federal government to its Constitutional boundaries.⁵⁹

Those two goals – restoring America to its Biblical foundations and limiting the federal government to a pre-20th Century view of the Constitution – mirror the way that Beck and Barton are talking about American exceptionalism.

Candidates and Electoral Strategies

For all the sniping about whether or not social conservative voters are being given enough respect and attention by Tea Party and Republican leaders, the fact is that Religious Right leaders and activists have nothing to complain about when it comes to Tea Party –backed candidates.⁶⁰

57 <http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2010/aug/06/angles-view-rooted-biblical-law/>

58 <http://blogs.cbn.com/thebrodyfile/archive/2010/04/21/senator-demint-to-brody-file-tea-party-movement-will-bring.aspx>

59 <http://blogs.alternet.org/speakeasy/2010/06/15/what-rand-paul-and-sharron-angle-have-in-common-a-far-right-biblical-law-political-party/>

60 <http://www.pfaw.org/rww-in-focus/the-rogues-gallery-right-wing-candidates-have-dangerous-agenda-for-america-and-could-tu>

Tea Party candidates who beat establishment Republicans to win their primaries are not only committed to radical views of the role of government when it comes to spending, but they are generally even more conservative on social issues than current House Republicans. For example, at least six Republican Senate candidates want to criminalize all abortion, even in the case of rape or incest. (And on the House side, Huffington's Amanda Terkel reports, anti-abortion activists count 63 candidates who share this "pro-life without discrimination" position.)⁶¹

One thing that both Tea Party and Religious Right leaders undoubtedly agree on is the oft-repeated claim that this year's election is the most important of our lifetimes, because it is the last chance to stop the Obama administration and its congressional allies from destroying American exceptionalism and self reliance and replacing them with a form of European socialism. At September's Values Voter Summit, Amy Kremer of the Tea Party Express urged activists to focus on the fall elections. "The time has come to put down the protest signs and pick up the campaign signs and engage," she said. "If we're going to truly effect change it's going to be at the ballot box."⁶²

There's no doubt that Tea Party voters are engaged. Their ability to defeat some high-level Republican incumbents and bigger-name candidates – and throw a scare into others – makes that clear. And it also seems clear that some Tea Party activists, like those who are seeking support from the Council for National Policy or those who are tapping into Ralph Reed's voter turnout campaign, understand that the decentralized movement can benefit from tapping the Religious Right's political expertise and infrastructure:

... the uprising energy of the tea party movement is beginning to coalesce with the organizing savvy of the religious right -- and putting the force of religious zeal behind the tea party's anti-government fanaticism. Reed is focused on get-out-the-vote drives in key districts where, he told activists at his conference, just a few votes could make a difference. In a session on how to organize a state chapter, Colorado Faith and Freedom chair John Ramstead told activists that the "most receptive" people attending training sessions are coming from tea parties.⁶³

And Reed's efforts are just part of a much larger universe of advertising and organizing efforts made possible by tens of millions of dollars being poured through right-wing groups⁶⁴ in the wake of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United*

decision.⁶⁵

Religious Right leaders are working hard to ensure that their own activists are as energetically engaged. There are more than half a dozen programs promoting prayer and fasting as well as electoral activism by conservative religious voters.⁶⁶ It seems that the prospect of victory over congressional Democrats is a force more powerful than the Religious Right's desire to have its issues front and center.

FreedomWorks' Dick Armev told a group of reporters that he sees it as a question of priorities: "If we lose this nation, if it falls into insolvency, then all of these issues pretty well fall by the wayside too, don't they. So i think there is a setting of priorities." Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, made the same point regarding the more libertarian-leaning elements of the Tea Party movement, telling Altnet, "They can either hold their nose vis-a-vis social issues and get economic policies that they like, or they can vote for the social issues they like with the liberals, and have their pocketbooks raided by confiscatory liberal economic policies. I have no doubt which one they will choose, given the choice."⁶⁷

Religious Right voters in fact have a powerful precedent to consider. Ralph Reed's Faith and Freedom Coalition Iowa leader points to Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell "as a perfect example" of a "social conservative who talked about economic issues." After McDonnell's election, Mark Silk noted, "The newly elected governor of Virginia has impeccable Christian Right credentials--a degree from Regent University Law School and a perfect record of pushing social conservatism while representing Virginia Beach in the House of Delegates from 1993 to 2006. But in 2009, he ran for governor as a fiscal, not a social, conservative."⁶⁸ Since his election, McDonnell and his Attorney General Bob Cuccinelli have pursued policies to warm the hearts of Religious Right activists (restricting gay rights and defunding Planned Parenthood) as well as Tea Party activists (filing a legal challenge to federal health care reform legislation). McDonnell spoke at this spring's Faith and Freedom Federation-sponsored conference at Liberty University, and both he and Cuccinelli took part in Tea Party gathering in Richmond the weekend of October 8-9, along with other Tea Party – Religious Right bridgers Rep. Steve King and former Sen. Rick Santorum.⁶⁹

There's evidence that Religious Right groups are willing to follow the same strategy this year. The Family Research Council Action PAC announced on October 6 that it is spending \$125,000 targeting five Democratic members of

61 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/09/22/palin-abortion-rape-incest_n_731385.html

62 <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/values-voters-angry-afternoon-tea>

63 <http://www.thenation.com/article/154944/tea-party-values?page=0,0,1>

64 http://www.altnet.org/news/148152/conservative_and_tea_party_rallies_and_trainings_dominate_the_capital_are_progressives_and_liberal_democrats_about_to_be_out-organized/

65 <http://www.pfaw.org/press-releases/2010/09/report-outlines-pro-corporate-players-post-citizens-united-politics>

66 <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/lucky-number-seven-liberty-council-launches-election-prayer-effort>

67 <http://www.altnet.org/story/148246/>

68 http://caribou.cc.trincoll.edu/depts_csprl/RIN1203/End%20of%20Christian%20Right%20Ed%20Colm.htm

69 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/09/AR2010100903894.html?hpid=moreheadlines>

Congress with ads that feature a Tea Party message without mentioning abortion or homosexuality. The ad features a working-class American with a man in a suit hanging on his back, representing “big government.” The American says:

“I woke up one morning and it was there: big government on my back. It’s a huge problem. It’s affecting everyone. They’re taking over our health care, using our money to bail out big business.”

“Even our kids are in trouble,” the ad continues, since the government is leaving trillions of dollars in debt for them to pay off.

It concludes: “Congress supported big health care, big bailouts, big debt. Get Washington off our backs – stop big government on Election Day.”⁷⁰

It’s worth noting that another shared characteristic of the two movements that should encourage ongoing cooperation is resentment bordering on contempt for the “establishment” of the Republican Party in which both movements have made their home.

Tea Party leaders revile Republicans for having bought into earmarks and federal spending on federal programs that Tea Partiers believe are unconstitutional. In June, Richard Viguier put out a press release expressing “delight” that Tea Party-backed candidates had beaten establishment GOP picks in run-off primaries. “This is alarming news for GOP establishment politicians such as John Boehner, Mitch McConnell, and all closely associated with them. The Tea Party steamroller is rolling big government Republicans right out of town.”⁷¹

Dobson and other Religious Right leaders have frequently criticized GOP elected officials for not doing enough to push the agenda of Religious Right voters. Dobson has repeatedly threatened to punish the party by keeping his voters home, but has always backed down in the face of the alternative. The Tea Party’s aggressive and remarkably successful backing for insurgent challengers to the establishment has accomplished in short order more than Dobson was ever able to do.

So Dobson has been happy to join the Tea Party. When he endorsed Tea Party candidate Rand Paul in his successful senate primary bid, Dobson reversed an earlier endorsement he had made of Mitch McConnell’s favored candidate Trey Grayson. Dobson blasted “senior members of the GOP” who he said had given him flawed information about Paul’s anti-abortion credentials.⁷² Mark Silk commented on Paul’s primary win, saying:

70 <http://www.sunherald.com/2010/10/06/2534324/frc-action-pac-launches-125-k.html>

71 <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/2821514203.html>

72 http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-now/2010/05/james_dobson_endorses_rand_pau.html

Not only is Rand Paul’s victory a wake-up call for the national GOP establishment but it should also be one for those who imagine that the Tea Party movement is somehow unfriendly territory for the religious right. Other than Paul himself, the big winner was Dr. James Dobson, who weighed in with a video endorsement that seems to have driven the last nail into the coffin of Paul’s Mitch McConnell-anointed opponent. Therein, Dobson slams “senior members of the GOP” for lying to him about Paul’s positions and chalks it up to Paul’s credit that he “identifies with the Tea Party movement.”⁷³

Conclusion

Despite the rivalries between established Religious Right groups and the much younger and highly energized Tea Party, the two movements share many core values and activists, and have a powerful incentive to work together.

Make no mistake: The big Tea Party astroturf groups, FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity, and their media sponsor, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, are coming together with the Family Research Council and Ralph Reed’s Faith and Freedom Coalition to meet a common goal -- the crippling of the Obama administration and the movement of the Republican Party even further to the right.⁷⁴

Chip Berlet, a longtime scholar of right-wing movements in America, suggests that even with the overlap in the movements, the Tea Party has energized a number of people who have not previously been involved in politics. He says “If those newbies are even another five percent of the population, the Democrats aren’t going to know what hit them.”⁷⁵

As for longer-term predictions about the working relationships between the groups, it is likely that they will continue to find common ground on advancing a small-government ideology and will continue to experience tensions over the priority given to Religious Right desires to reverse the advance of LGBT equality and criminalize abortion.

Beyond that, making predictions is a particularly dicey business. Back in February, David Waters, editor of the Washington Post’s “On Faith” blog, asked, “Will the Christian Right join the Tea Party? Will the Tea Partying fiscal conservatives make room for social conservatives? Should they? I doubt it.”⁷⁶ I think Waters has been proven wrong.

73 <http://b27.cc.trincoll.edu/mt/mt-search.cgi?search=rand+paul+dobson&includeBlogs=13&limit=20>

74 <http://www.alternet.org/story/148246/>

75 <http://www.thenation.com/article/154944/tea-party-values?page=0,0,1>

76 http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/undergod/2010/02/will_christian_right_join_the_tea_party.html

But he shouldn't feel too bad. He's not the only one who made some faulty predictions. Religious broadcaster Pat Robertson reports annually on his year-end one-on-one conversations with God. In the wake of the 2008 election, Robertson reported that God had declared, "The people will welcome socialism in order to relieve their pain. Nothing will stand in the way of a plan by Obama to restructure the economy in the same fashion as the New Deal in the '30s."⁷⁷

In other words, even God didn't see the Tea Party coming.



⁷⁷ <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/it%E2%80%99s-time-year>



People For the American Way is dedicated to making the promise of America real for every American: Equality. Freedom of speech. Freedom of religion. The right to seek justice in a court of law. The right to cast a vote that counts. The American Way.

© Copyright 2010 People For the American Way.
All rights reserved.

People For the American Way
2000 M Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036
202-467-4999 or 800-326-7329

WWW.PFAW.ORG