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The Rise, Fall, and Influence of the Tea Party Insurgency. By Patrick Rafail and John D. McCarthy. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 250p. $105.00 cloth, $34.99 paper.
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In the November 2008 U.S. elections, the Democratic Party achieved a "trifecta," taking the White House and both chambers of Congress at the same time. Hard and explosive pushbacks from the Republican Party and surrounding right groups started at once. Koch network billionaires and Congressional GOP leaders plotted to block as many of President Barack Obama's initiatives as possible and set the stage for GOP bounce-backs in the 2010 midterms. Powerful right-wing media outlets launched a steady stream of racially charged scare stories. And within weeks, widespread, colorful "Tea Party" protestors took to the streets, culminating in recurrent nationwide rallies, branding efforts by national advocates and funders, and volunteer grassroots organizing of two to three thousand local groups nationwide.

Scholars sprang into action to make sense of it all—among them John McCarthy, a distinguished sociologist and student of social movements, and his then-graduate student Patrick Rafail, who has since become a professor and well-known movement analyst in his own right. They first planned an article-length probe of the April 2009 protests but ended up doing years of data collection, especially coding over-time data on events and rhetoric from the internet. Years later, their 2024 book, *The Rise, Fall, and Influence of the Tea Party Insurgency*, lays out empirically grounded arguments about the nature, emergence, and effects of the Tea Party, some of which reinforce while others challenge key findings published by others in the interim. In this necessarily brief review, I assess their main contributions compared to research groups led by political scientists Rachel Blum (working with Mike Cowburn); Christopher Parker (working with Matt Barreto); and myself (working with Vanessa Williamson, Caroline Tervo, and Kirsten Walters).

Fundamentally, Rafail and McCarthy agree with previous scholarship that the Tea Party consisted of loosely intersecting sets of top-down and bottom-up networked activists and groups, not one unified organization. Long-active right-wing fiscal advocates provided encouragement, offered early networking facilities, and helped amplify some versions of "Tea Party" rhetoric, but such groups did not directly command, control, or fully coordinate the protests; nor did they fully anticipate or prove able to herd the thousands of grassroots Tea Party groups that took shape in 2009 into 2011.

But when it comes to *explaining the origins, underlying causes, and trajectory of the Tea Party*, Rafail and McCarthy depart sharply from the other major research groups—because they see the Great Recession of 2008–2009 as the main prod for their insurgent activities and believe that as national economic conditions improved, the insurgency lost effectiveness.

All researchers agree that grassroots Tea Partiers were disproportionately older, white, and already GOP-leaning people. But why? Rafail and McCarthy see such folks as unusually especially hard hit by the Recession's effects on housing values and retirement savings. Their stoked racial anxieties mattered too, they argue, but the basic impetus for the Tea Party was suddenly heightened "economic precarity." This contrasts with political science researchers who see Barack Obama's election and the Democratic "trifecta" as spurring activism by stoking social fears and ethno-racial resentments. Although the Tea Party's nationally visible advocates claimed it was all about "fiscal conservatism" and the Constitution, Parker's attitudinal research, Blum's research on activists, and studies I led (which included field observations and interviews) found much more support for ethnoculturally charged conservative fears and animus against Obama, the Democrats, and Republicans deemed unwilling to fight hard enough for such priorities.

Rafail and McCarthy provide no direct evidence that older white economic worries were the main spur to the Tea Party. In Chapter 3, they offer a statistical model showing that higher counts of the earliest formed local Tea Parties visible online occurred in counties with high rates of unemployment and mortgage foreclosures. One can quibble with the timeframe and data editing methods, but the chief issue is that Rafail and McCarthy apparently did not control for wide population variations across counties (while many other scholars use Congressional Districts to get roughly comparable local population units). Consequently (and unsurprisingly), Rafail and McCarthy portray relatively dense areas such as in southern California as early Tea Party hotbeds, directly contradicting other studies that show less densely populated outer suburban and small city areas as more prone per capita to Tea Party activities and groups. Perhaps Rafail and McCarthy could have best bolstered their case for "economic precarity" with individual-level survey findings, but they do little of this—and they do not seem to have spoken to actual grassroots participants or activists. Other scholars who have used surveys or talked with Tea Partiers find little causal evidence for economic motivations as opposed to racial resentments, worry about immigrants, and support for Christian-right family rules.

On the trajectory and impact of the Tea Party elite and grassroots efforts, Rafail and McCarthy again both agree and disagree with other researchers. They use their rich, over-time counts of Tea Party events to demonstrate that

Tea Party activities peaked around 2010–2011 and tailed off after that, and they stress that general U.S. public opinion turned negative on "the Tea Party" as visible activism receded. Other scholars agree, but place much more emphasis on the diffusion of early Tea Party activism into the rightward movement in the attitudes of very conservative and/or GOP-leaning voters and activists.

Dynamic effects in and through the GOP are what matter, after all. Aligned with other scholars, Rafail and McCarthy argue that the Tea Party initially boosted the GOP and pulled it further right, using fresh data and operationalizations in one of their strongest chapters to show that Tea Party actions and local organizations spurred overall House GOP wins, tilted the party right, and propelled more uncompromising, rhetorically aggressive behavior (Chapter 8). Researchers who have looked only at formally labeled House caucuses have not found much, because Republicans have shifted right across the board. But by now many research groups have identified specific routes—including grassroots pressures and nomination challenges—through which District-level Tea Party processes fueled the GOP lunge to the right from 2009 on.

Beyond 2010–2012 is where Rafail and McCarthy differ from others about Tea Party influences. Because they see the Tea Party as *ineffectively decentralized and uncoordinated*, and because they posit that this "insurgent movement" was primarily about fiscal conservatism, they see Tea Party influences as falling off sharply after 2010. Unlike Rachel Blum, they do not see the Tea Party as a faction that has deliberately, and relatively successfully, shifted GOP nominations and the stances of elected legislators toward the uncompromising right on both ethnocultural and fiscal issues. What is more, in contrast to Rafail and McCarthy's suggestions that Tea Party influences ended, my collaborators and I see grassroots ethnonationalist radicalism, always a prime force in the Tea Party, as increasingly important over time, compared to elite fiscal conservatism.

At base, these disagreements are not so much empirical as conceptual. Sociologists Rafail and McCarthy adhere to a definition of "social movement success" that depends either on continuing grassroots protests or on transformation into a professional social movement organization, whereas other scholars, especially political scientists, stress the potency of the Tea Party's networked, loosely coupled structure. This sort of structure may look "weak" from a bureaucratic perspective, but it has clout in federated U.S. politics because it facilitates diffuse, indirect radical influences on the most attentive voters and creates new inducements for officeholders and candidates to cater to hard right, ethnonationalist passions.

Because Rafail and McCarthy see waning protests and uncoordinated pressures as evidence of movement weakness, they have nothing to say about the surprise 2014 GOP primary defeat of Virginia House leader Eric Cantor at the hands of obscure Tea Party upstart David Brat, or about the collapse of bipartisan Congressional immigration reform that followed right afterwards. But scholars in other research groups highlight these Congressional pivot points and link them to Tea Party pressures and rhetoric, noting that self-described Tea Party participants or sympathizers have always been disproportionately hostile to immigrants and immigration. From 2015, Tea Party supporters or sympathizers in surveys have taken stronger ethnonationalist stands and given more approval to Donald Trump than other conservatives and Republican leaners. The more Tea Partified right-wingers have also been in the vanguard in criticizing GOP elites as ineffective on anti-immigrant measures.

In the final analysis, Rafail and McCarthy assign almost sole power for defining the overarching Tea Party goals to professionals like Matt Kibbe at Freedom Works or to Tea Party Patriots. This is ironic because they agree that such national organizations never had much control of grassroots activities. By allowing those elites to define Tea Party goals, they presume the entire movement was always primarily about spending cuts and fiscal conservatism. But that was never true for most in the Tea Party grassroots. Over time, grassroots groups, activists, and sympathetic GOP voters took the initiative and expanded their clout, first by voting to replace or realign GOPers in the House of Representatives—and then, from 2015, by moving toward fanatic enthusiasm for the ethnonationalist-in-chief, Donald Trump.

From 2015 until now, candidate/President Trump and his allies have championed the grassroots Tea Party's ethnocultural priorities and amped up attacks on liberals and "soft" GOP elites. Trumpists have nationalized the earlier shifts seen in Congress and state legislatures. As the GOP and its surrounds changed, Tea Party protests faded and many local groups stopped meeting (although my fieldwork showed that some continued into 2016–2020 in right-leaning areas). By their own lights, grassroots Tea Party members, activists, and sympathizers do not need to take such extraordinary steps anymore, because former Tea Party activists or pandering politicians control many GOP organs and Trump loyalists have refocused the national GOP agenda in ethnonationalist directions.

Rafail and McCarthy may see this trajectory as Tea Party fizzle and failure. Others who see insurgencies as possible pathways to party transformation see the MAGA-fied GOP as a grassroots Tea Party triumph.