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Zachary Morris

Kent State University, zmorris5@kent.edu

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How the Tea Party Captured the GOP: Insurgent Factions in American Politics

Zachary Morris

Kent State University, zmorris5@kent.edu

How the Tea Party Captured the GOP: Insurgent Factions in American Politics by Rachel M. Blum (2020). The University of Chicago Press. 176 pp. (\$25.00 paper). (\$90.00 cloth).

How the Tea Party Captured the GOP: Insurgent Factions in American Politics opens with Blum recapping her conservative upbringing, which makes her uniquely qualified to study the impacts of the Tea Party's reshaping of the Republican Party. Blum argues against the conventional wisdom that the GOP and the Tea Party shared the same policy preferences and ideological ideals but disagreed on electoral strategies. Through her analysis, Blum finds considerable ideological differences between the Tea Party and the GOP, which explains why the Tea Party implemented insurgent tactics to renegotiate the political identity of the Republican Party to embrace reactionary conservatism. Blum contends that this forced ideological transformation of the Republican Party due to the Tea Party's aggressive strategy paved the way for the rise of former President Donald Trump.

Blum argues that although the Tea Party gained national attention from scholars and commentators alike, not everyone took the Tea Party seriously. The author argues that many commentators and pundits pegged the Tea Party as another dark money-funded outgrowth of the Koch Brothers. The author notes that some believed the Tea Party was another social movement that would quickly dissipate. However, Blum finds that researchers failed to notice how the Tea Party became an insurgent faction that exerted significant political influence on its host party and changed its ideological makeup. Blum's work provides a theoretical framework for how a subversive set of conservatives born and shaped by the 2008 financial crisis fundamentally changed the GOP. Through her research, she asserts and shows that the Tea Party's strategy was to destroy and replace the establishment with Tea Party-aligned members.

According to Blum, the Tea Party's rise in American politics left a profound and lasting effect on the Republican Party. Blum claims that the Tea Party, through insurgent tactics and aggressive strategies against establishment Republicans, forced a renegotiation of the Republican Party's political identity. Blum's research utilizes Parker and Barreto's (2013) work on Tea Party supporters' ideological predispositions. Blum agrees with this framework developed by Parker and Barreto (2013), who found that the Tea Party members should be considered reactionary conservatives. The author finds that the Tea Party successfully redefined acceptable rhetoric within the Republican Party to distrust political elites and to treat groups who were not white Christian Americans as threats to their existence. Subsequently, this infusion of reactionary conservatism led to the rise and success of a candidate like former President Trump. The author uses a multimethod approach outlined throughout the book to describe the systematic capture of the GOP by the Tea Party.

The central theme of the historical and theoretical underpinnings of insurgent factions introduced in Chapter 2 provides a foundation for why the Tea Party pursued an infiltration strategy in Virginia and, overall, a confrontational approach toward the moderate establishment. Blum continues describing the history of insurgent factions in American politics. Blum asserts that factions within a two-party system are "miniature parties within party coalitions, through which groups of policy demanders can attempt to increase their influence in the party" (Blum, 2020, p.14). Blum argues that the Tea Party's desire for intraparty warfare, even at the expense of winning elections, is due to the Tea Party being an insurgent faction. Blum defines an insurgent faction as "their willingness to destabilize their host parties in order to seize control of them" (Blum, 2020, p. 6).

Beginning with the Dixiecrats and the New Right, Blum argues that these insurgent factions destabilized their host party in hopes of negotiating a more conservative identity for the Republican and Democratic Parties. Blum finds that compared to the Dixiecrats, who failed to utilize the political apparatus of the Democratic Party to reshape its political identity, the New Right successfully used activist networks to attack establishment GOP candidates during the 1964 Republican presidential nomination process to help elect the reactionary Barry Goldwater.

The author notes that unlike the Christian Right, which was aligned with the establishment of the GOP in hopes of moving the GOP to focus on social issues, the Tea Party had an inherent distrust for the Republican Party to advance its reactionary policy goals. Blum declares that the New Right of the 1960s provided the foundation for how conservative activists could overtake the moderate wing of the Republican Party and reshape the GOP's ideological positions. The author notes that the insurgent faction of the Tea Party mirrored the infiltration strategy of the New Right by conducting an intense fight to elect Tea Party candidates in Virginia. The framework of factions outlined by Blum provides us with historical context as to why the Virginia case study of the Tea Party's insurgent strategy in Virginia was so fierce.

According to Blum, this infiltration strategy that began in Virginia was the foundation for how future Tea Party activists would usurp moderate-elected Republicans. The author found that the Tea Party members and activists did not trust the elected establishment Republicans to support legislation that protected the traditional white American Christian culture at the state and federal levels. This ideological schism led to Tea Party activists being eager to replace moderate Republican officeholders.

Blum begins by examining why the Tea Party espoused so much vitriol, anger, and distrust toward establishment Republicans. To answer this perplexing phenomenon, Blum uses a multimethod approach that examines qualitative interview data from thirty-five respondents and survey data following a Virginia Republican Convention. This approach provides a much-needed understanding of why the Tea Party activists began distrusting establishment Republicans. Tea Party activists and establishment Republicans shared similar policy preferences, but the Tea Party did not believe the GOP protected "conservative principles" (Blum, 2020, p.27).

Blum posits that people originally joined the Tea Party for two main reasons; they were repulsed by the government's response to the 2008 financial crisis, and many had a general disdain for the Obama Presidency. Tea Party members were concerned that the country was irreversibly changing for the worse. One interviewee named Sandy proclaimed, "I want the country back the way it was, and I don't think Obama wants the same thing" (Blum, 2020, p. 29). The author argues that this visceral reaction to the economic downturn and sweeping victories for Democrats mobilized Tea Partiers to become more aggressive toward establishment Republicans. Blum uncovers that the Tea Party distrusted the GOP due to what they perceived as the party's lack of accountability for upholding traditional American values, which were tenets of their campaign promises.

From the survey, Blum found that the Tea Party members intensely distrusted political elites on both sides and believed their host party was primarily concerned with winning elections rather than adhering to conservative principles. The Tea Party's distrust, which was not studied before, led Blum to distinguish two reasons why the Tea Party did not trust the Republican Party. Blum describes how Tea Party members believed that the Republican Party strayed from the "founding" principles of the American Republic, which Mary, a Tea Party member, proclaimed were "fiscal responsibility and liberty" (Blum, 2020, p. 32). Blum finds that due to this perceived betrayal by their party, Tea Party members organized to infiltrate the Republican Party to hold

them accountable for not adhering to conservative principles. The author argues that Tea Party members believed establishment Republicans were not adhering to these principles, emboldening Tea Partiers to challenge elected Republicans at the ballot box. Therefore, the author finds that Tea Partiers intentionally decided to attend local GOP meetings to hijack party election machinery to help elect Tea Party-supported candidates to Republican-held seats. Consequently, the Tea Party's infiltration hurt the GOP's chances in general elections, but it gave Tea Partiers the ability to hold the host party accountable.

Blum asserts that the Tea Party believed the GOP failed to protect conservative principles, which was the second primary reason the Tea Party distrusted the GOP. Blum proclaims that disgruntled conservatives perceived the GOP as inept and unable to fight for traditional values important to countless Americans, causing many to join the Tea Party. Blum uses VPS survey questions to elaborate on the divergence between the Tea Party's conception and the GOP's ideas of conservatism.

Blum found in Chapter 3 that Tea Party respondents believed they were more conservative than establishment Republicans at the state and federal levels. Blum also found that conservative Virginia Tea Party respondents thought they were more conservative than their Republican state party. Additionally, Blum found that Tea Party members did not have significantly different policy preferences from their mainstream Republican counterparts. However, Blum discovers the critical difference between these two groups came down to how important the key issues were to them. The author argues that compared to establishment Republicans, Tea Party respondents were more likely to feel intensely about policy issues.

The Tea Party, with limited funding and no defined leader, still reshaped Republican politics by successfully ousting Eric Cantor. Blum delves into the Tea Party's network and, in Chapter 4, asks two questions, "With whom were Tea Party groups connected, and where did they mobilize?" (Blum, 2020, p.45). Chapter 4 answers these questions by explaining how the decentralized Tea Party mobilized its support and organizational apparatus to achieve the impossible—upsetting Virginia Republican Eric Cantor in the House race. Blum utilizes a data set of local Tea Party websites and blogs to begin her study of the Tea Party insurgency network. Additionally, Blum analyzes these blogs using social network analysis to uncover where Tea Partiers gathered and which elites they listened to. Blum's analysis of the blogs is crucial because it reveals how insurgent factions generate and sustain online networks to topple establishment Republican candidates. This Tea Party activist network was vital for the upset victory of David Brat over Eric Cantor.

Blum's use of social network analysis also found that the critical voices within the Tea Party network were well-known organizations to conservatives, such as Glenn Beck's 9/12 Project, FreedomWorks, and the Tea Party Patriots. Blum describes that the most popular and influential Tea Party websites included links to alternative conservative groups, mainstream conservative organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, and connections with civic resources.

Blum details how the Tea Party structured its network like the GOP. Blum states that the two-hundred and seventy communities in the network were structured into three levels national, state, and local organizations. Blum claims this federated network structure was likely utilized to infiltrate heavily Republican congressional districts. This finding matches Blum's original hypothesis that Tea Party networks will mobilize in heavily Republican congressional districts to challenge establishment GOP candidates. However, Blum also found that Tea Party networks will likely rally in electorally competitive districts. The author argues that this mobilization

signals that Tea Party groups are willing to pressure local establishment Republicans to nominate Tea Party candidates or risk losing support from the Tea Party base, which would guarantee a general election defeat. Tea Party networks actively and successfully leveraged an active activist network to apply political pressure on establishment Republicans to nominate Tea Party candidates across the country.

Chapter 5 details how the Tea Party reshaped the Republican Party through forced negotiations of the party's ideological identity. Blum claims that if the GOP wanted the Tea Party's support at the polls, they had to show their commitment to upholding traditional, white-middle-class Christian culture in America. Blum finds through her mixed method approach that Tea Party members use fiscal conservatism to promote reactionary conservative priorities. Blum argues that the Tea Party members who embraced the Constitution and believed in self-reliance used these tenants of fiscal conservatism as proxies to justify their xenophobic fears of nonnationals. Blum finds that Tea Party members are gravely concerned about threats from outsiders and anyone who challenges the traditional American ways of life. Paradoxically, Blum uncovers that while Tea Party supporters felt welfare policies were terrible, most Tea Partiers held positive views of Social Security and Medicare. Therefore, the author asserts that the Tea Party's attachment to traditional fiscal conservatism was merely a strategy to advance reactionary conservatism into mainstream Republican rhetoric.

Blum's analysis describes how the Tea Party rebranded traditional Republican conservatism to become reactionary and used interviews with the Tea Party activists to support her argument further. In one of Blum's interviews, Linda R. perfectly synthesizes why the Tea Party pursued a strategy of insurgent tactics to renegotiate the GOP's political identity by saying, "The Tea Party is just people fighting for a way of life that's lost. It started with taxes, but now it's blossomed" (Blum, 2020, p.59). This quote shows how the Tea Party used fiscal conservatism to promote reactionary conservatism.

Blum describes next how the process of how an insurgent faction can renegotiate a party's identity. Blum notes that the political party's fluid ideology allows certain factions to advance their ideology within the party. Blum acknowledges that with the recent electoral defeat by the GOP in the 2008 presidential election, the Tea Party seized the opportunity to demand a transformation of the establishment of the GOP's conservatism. Blum uses activists' interviews, mission statements, and blog posts to describe the Tea Party's ideological demands to change the rhetoric of conservatism to reactionary conservatism.

In the book's final two chapters, Blum analyzes how the Tea Party seized control over the Republican-led Congress and how the Tea Party led to the rise of Donald Trump. The final two chapters connect the successes of the Tea Party's infiltration strategy at the state level to their capture of the GOP-led Congress. The Tea Party came to Congress with a clear agenda to disrupt the establishment Republican members of Congress and to shift the Republican Party's goals to protect what they believed to be the traditional white Christian American culture. Also, Blum analyzes how the Tea Party-aligned House Freedom Caucus came to dominate the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

Blum utilizes roll call votes, multiple analyses, and data from 2011-2015 to display how progressively, over time, the Tea Party became the dominant faction with the GOP-controlled Congress. Blum found that as the House Freedom Caucus became more active in Congress, the ideological distance between the Tea Party and establishment Republicans grew more polarized. Also, Blum finds that Tea Party Caucus covoting communities increased significantly as their power grew within Congress. According to Blum's analysis, the establishment Republicans

began aligning with their Tea Party voting communities on final passage, procedural, and amendment votes. The author also found that Tea Partiers were more active in co-sponsoring bills to brand their policy positions than their establishment counterparts. Blum finds that Tea Party-affiliated members of Congress assumed policy positions that protected traditional ways of American life. Blum declares that Tea Party members of Congress were more likely in their press releases to discuss preventing threats to conventional marriage, stopping illegal immigration, and their distrust of federal agencies. The author also notes that the Tea Party's members of Congress press releases also displayed disdain for other Republican members and a willingness to challenge their party.

The penultimate chapter describes how the Tea Party's insurgent takeover of the GOP reshaped Republican politics and led to the rise of Donald Trump. Blum claims that due to the Tea Party's successful renegotiation of the Republican Party's ideological positions, Donald Trump, a political outsider, could ascend quickly. Blum emphasizes that the new Republican Party accepted and promoted rhetoric that otherized immigrants, liberals, and those who did not align with Judeo-Christian values as the enemy of the traditional American way of life. The author finds that the Tea Party primed the Republican base to accept reactionary conservatism in hopes of saving America and protecting conservative white working-class culture by fundamentally altering the GOP.

Blum provides an excellent foundation to understand how an insurgent faction such as the Tea Party can alter the ideological composition of its host party. This work describes the tensions between the more moderate establishment Republicans and the reactionary Tea Party as spilling over due to the Tea Party's belief that the establishment GOP was not conservative enough. However, my first criticism is that Blum fails to acknowledge that this intraparty tension between the moderate wing and the reactionary wing of the party has always been present. The struggle between the moderates of the GOP and the reactionary faction of the Republican Party to define the policy positions of the GOP has been going on for a significant amount of time. Therefore, I cannot entirely agree with Blum's argument that the Tea Party originated because they lacked confidence in their co-partisan's ability to uphold conservative values in the face of the Obama administration's passage of Obamacare and the Dodd-Frank Financial Reforms. The Tea Party also arose due to the constant competition between the party's moderate wing and the reactionary wing competing to determine the ideological predispositions of the Republican Party. This struggle between the different strains of the Republican Party predated 2008 and the Obama Presidency.

In "*The Right The Hundred Year War For American Conservatism*," Matthew Continetti describes the enduring competition between the different strains of conservatism within the Republican Party. The globalist market-oriented neoconservatives have battled reactionary paleoconservatives for the ideological soul of the Republican Party. This author's book helps analyze Blum's work because it provides the historical background of the Republican Party's constant battle between different ideological factions within the Republican Party. The rise of the Tea Party insurgent faction is unsurprising because this was a vehicle for reactionary conservatives to retake the party from the moderate establishment Republicans. The underpinnings of this conflict were always present within the GOP, and Blum's work does not fully capture this important theme which weakens her argument about the rise of the Tea Party.

Blum describes the successfulness of the Tea Party's insurgent tactics in reshaping the GOP but fails to include how the establishment Republicans responded to maintain their control of the party. Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts who passed Romneycare,

which Obamacare was modeled after, became the 2012 Republican presidential nominee. The Tea Party successfully infiltrated the local and state-level party operations but not at the national level. The establishment wing of the Republican Party successfully blocked a Tea Party favorite politician from becoming a presidential nominee during a time when the Tea Party was becoming a dominant faction in the Republican Party.

I concur with Blum that the rhetoric of the Tea Party and the fallout of the 2008 financial crash provided Donald Trump with a receptive base to capture the GOP presidential nomination. However, Blum fails to provide literature that discusses how unrestrained neoliberalism during the 1980s and 1990s created an environment conducive to the growth of reactionary conservatism. I concur with the author that the 2008 financial collapse helped generate the rise of the Tea Party. Still, trade deals such as NAFTA and the reduction in spending for social safety nets made populism appealing to some voters in the United States.

Areas such as Luzerne County in Pennsylvania, which saw decreases in manufacturing jobs over the past few decades went for Trump in 2016 (Monnat & Brown, 2017). Donald Trump provided these voters in the rustbelt who were negatively affected by the loss of manufacturing jobs with a voice. In 2016, voters' attitudes toward globalization were critical determinants of whether they voted for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton (Rodrik, 2021). Those voters who voted for Obama in 2012 and switched to Trump in 2016 had negative attitudes associated with globalization and feared for their economic security (Rodrik, 2021).

Therefore, the Tea Party did assist Donald Trump in capturing the 2016 nomination. Still, the damaging aftershocks of globalization and fears of economic insecurity led to voters being more receptive to reactionary messaging from the Republican Party (Rodrik, 2021). This rage of being left behind impacted not only the Tea Partiers but everyday voters who were not associated with the Tea Party.

Blum's work is exceptional, and this book explains to readers how researchers failed to account for the Tea Party's profound, lasting impact on the GOP; they fundamentally altered the Republican Party by renegotiating the policy positions. Although Blum, through extensive research, provides reasoning why the Tea Party pursued an infiltration strategy by purifying the Republican Party of establishment leaders, Blum does not fully capture the long-standing intraparty competition. Establishment moderates and Tea Party activists were just a continuation of two facets of the party fighting to determine policy positions. Blum provides a one-sided analysis that only provides evidence of the insurgent strategy used by the Tea Party to seize control of the messaging of ideological positions for the Republican Party. Blum's work should be the catalyst for further research to review how existing intraparty competition among factions with ideological differences reshape the political parties.

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