

Why Liberals Don't Get the Tea Party Movement

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By

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Highly educated people say the darndest things, these days particularly about the tea party movement. Vast numbers of other highly educated people read and hear these dubious pronouncements, smile knowingly, and nod their heads in agreement. University educations and advanced degrees notwithstanding, they lack a basic understanding of the contours of American constitutional government.

New York Times columnist Paul Krugman got the ball rolling in April 2009, just ahead of the first major tea party rallies on April 15, by falsely asserting that "the tea parties don't represent a spontaneous outpouring of public sentiment. They're AstroTurf (fake grass-roots) events."

Having learned next to nothing in the intervening 16 months about one of the most spectacular grass-roots political movements in American history, fellow Times columnist Frank Rich denied in August of this year that the tea party movement is "spontaneous and leaderless," insisting instead that it is the instrument of billionaire brothers David and Charles Koch.

Washington Post columnist E. J. Dionne criticized the tea party as unrepresentative in two ways. It "constitutes a sliver of opinion on the extreme end of politics receiving attention out of all proportion with its numbers," he asserted last month. This was a step back from his rash prediction five months before that since it "represents a relatively small minority of Americans on the right end of politics," the tea party movement "will not determine the outcome of the 2010 elections."



Washington Post Columnist E.J. Dionne ILLUSTRATION: Getty Images

In February, Mr. Dionne argued that the tea party was also unrepresentative because it reflected a political principle that lost out at America's founding and deserves to be permanently retired: "Anti-statism, a profound mistrust of power in Washington goes all the way back to the Anti-Federalists who opposed the Constitution itself because they saw it concentrating too much authority in the central government."

Mr. Dionne follows in the footsteps of progressive historian Richard Hofstadter, whose influential 1964 book "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" argued that Barry Goldwater and his supporters displayed a "style of mind" characterized by "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy." Similarly, the "suspicion of government" that the tea party movement shares with the Anti-Federalists, Mr. Dionne maintained, "is not amenable to 'facts'" because "opposing government is a matter of principle."

To be sure, the tea party sports its share of clowns, kooks and creeps. And some of its favored candidates and loudest voices have made embarrassing statements and embraced reckless policies. This, however, does not distinguish the tea party movement from the competition.

Born in response to President Obama's self-declared desire to fundamentally change America, the tea party movement has made its central goals abundantly clear. Activists and the sizeable swath of voters who sympathize with them want to reduce the massively

ballooning national debt, cut runaway federal spending, keep taxes in check, reinvigorate the economy, and block the expansion of the state into citizens' lives.

In other words, the tea party movement is inspired above all by a commitment to limited government. And that does distinguish it from the competition.

But far from reflecting a recurring pathology in our politics or the losing side in the debate over the Constitution, the devotion to limited government lies at the heart of the American experiment in liberal democracy. The Federalists who won ratification of the Constitution—most notably Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay—shared with their Anti-Federalist opponents the view that centralized power presented a formidable and abiding threat to the individual liberty that it was government's primary task to secure. They differed over how to deal with the threat.

The Anti-Federalists—including Patrick Henry, Samuel Bryan and Robert Yates—adopted the traditional view that liberty depended on state power exercised in close proximity to the people. The Federalists replied in Federalist 9 that the "science of politics," which had "received great improvement," showed that in an extended and properly structured republic liberty could be achieved and with greater security and stability.

This improved science of politics was based not on abstract theory or complex calculations but on what is referred to in Federalist 51 as "inventions of prudence" grounded in the reading of classic and modern authors, broad experience of self-government in the colonies, and acute observations about the imperfections and finer points of human nature. It taught that constitutionally enumerated powers; a separation, balance, and blending of these powers among branches of the federal government; and a distribution of powers between the federal and state governments would operate to leave substantial authority to the states while both preventing abuses by the federal government and providing it with the energy needed to defend liberty.

Whether members have read much or little of *The Federalist*, the tea party movement's focus on keeping government within bounds and answerable to the people reflects the devotion to limited government embodied in the Constitution. One reason this is poorly understood among our best educated citizens is that American politics is poorly taught at the universities that credentialed them. Indeed, even as the tea party calls for the return to constitutional basics, our universities neglect *The Federalist* and its classic exposition of constitutional principles.

For the better part of two generations, the best political science departments have concentrated on equipping students with skills for performing empirical research and teaching mathematical models that purport to describe political affairs. Meanwhile, leading history departments have emphasized social history and issues of race, class and gender at the expense of constitutional history, diplomatic history and military history.

Neither professors of political science nor of history have made a priority of instructing students in the founding principles of American constitutional government. Nor have they taught about the contest between the progressive vision and the conservative vision that has characterized American politics since Woodrow Wilson (then a political scientist at Princeton) helped launch the progressive movement in the late 19th century by arguing that the Constitution had become obsolete and hindered democratic reform.

Then there are the proliferating classes in practical ethics and moral reasoning. These expose students to hypothetical conundrums involving individuals in surreal circumstances suddenly facing life and death decisions, or present contentious public policy questions and explore the range of respectable progressive opinions for resolving them. Such exercises may sharpen students' ability to argue. They do little to teach about self-government.

They certainly do not teach about the virtues, or qualities of mind and character, that enable citizens to shoulder their political responsibilities and prosper amidst the opportunities and uncertainties that freedom brings. Nor do they teach the beliefs, practices and associations that foster such virtues and those that endanger them.

Those who doubt that the failings of higher education in America have political consequences need only reflect on the quality of progressive commentary on the tea party movement. Our universities have produced two generations of highly educated people who seem unable to recognize the spirited defense of fundamental American principles, even when it takes place for more than a year and a half right in front of their noses.

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