

E. J. Dionne Misunderstands the Tea Party

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On Oct. 22, *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne, among our most knowledgeable progressive political commentators, published a courteous rebuttal, [“Debating the Tea Party: A Reply to Peter Berkowitz,”](#) to my recent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, [“Why Liberals don’t get the Tea Party Movement.”](#) The rebuttal, or rather attempted rebuttal, is instructive for several reasons.

Dionne continues to insist, contrary to the evidence, that the Tea Party is a small and inconsequential movement. He leaves unchallenged my main claim that many highly educated Americans misunderstand the Tea Party’s central commitment to limited government because the political science and history departments at the distinguished colleges and universities that credential them are failing to teach the principles of American constitutional government (I do not dispute Dionne’s assurance that he was well trained by his college teachers). And while insisting on the importance of a thoughtful conservatism, he seems to be unaware of its existence.

Concerning the facts, Dionne stands by his September 2010 [contention](#) that the Tea Party “constitutes a sliver of opinion on the extreme end of politics receiving attention out of all proportion with its numbers.” As evidence, he cites a [study](#) released earlier this month by the Public Religion Research Institute (which he notes he played a hand in designing) that found [“11 percent of Americans consider themselves part of the Tea Party movement.”](#)

Set aside the oddity of referring to 11 percent of the electorate—or 11 percent of anything—as a “sliver.” What Dionne does not tell readers is that the study he both contributed to and relies upon is significantly out of step with leading polls. A Gallup [poll](#) released in July, based on surveys conducted in March, May, and June, reported that “Thirty percent of Americans, on average, identify as Tea Party supporters—a percentage remarkably consistent across the three surveys.” According to a Sept. 2010 [CBS News/New York Times poll](#), 20 percent of Americans support the Tea Party movement. And a [Rasmussen poll](#) of likely U.S. voters released early this month found that “17% describe themselves as members of the Tea Party.”

Dionne also sees no reason to revise his April 2010 [assertion](#) that the Tea Party movement “will not determine the outcome of the 2010 elections.” One would have thought that Tea Party backing of upset Senate seat winner Scott Brown in Massachusetts, Senate candidate and rising national star Marco Rubio in Florida, and Senate candidate Sharon Angle in Nevada (running as I write slightly ahead of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid in the latest [Real Clear Politics average](#)), along with Tea Party supported primary victories over Republican Party stalwarts in Alaska, Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, New York, South Carolina, and Utah would have demonstrated the considerable impact that the movement has already had on the 2010 elections.

According to Dionne, however, “Unemployment and economic discontent are still far more important.” That’s like saying that in the 2008 election, Iraq and the collapsing economy were decisive, while Barack Obama and his historic run for the White House were of little significance.

Having unsuccessfully defended the view that the Tea Party is small and inconsequential, Dionne proceeds to misstate the disagreement between left and right in America. He declares that, “Liberals do differ with the right-wing in believing that the federal government has the authority under the general welfare and commerce clauses of the Constitution to support programs for social security, health care, environmental and food safety regulation, and the protection of the rights of labor.” Although some right wing voices, and some of them loud, call for repeal of the New Deal, most conservatives do not quarrel with the authority of the federal government to enact social welfare programs and regulate our complex post-industrial economy. Rather, they challenge progressive views about where the lines should be drawn. And Tea Party supporters and almost all conservatives believe that the Obama administration has drawn the lines in the wrong places, in the process unleashing uncontrolled spending, unaccountable bureaucracy, ballooning deficits, and nearly double-digit unemployment.

In conclusion, Dionne urges me, and conservatives more generally, “to apply the example of their distinguished forebears, notably William F. Buckley Jr., by challenging the sometimes exotic extremism that is now taking hold on parts of the right, including parts of the Tea Party.” Apparently, Dionne hasn’t done his homework. In essays since January 2009 in the

Wall Street Journal, *The Weekly Standard*, and elsewhere—for example, [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)—I have argued that conservatives must cultivate moderation, recover the spirit of reform, and undertake the nuts and bolts work involved in crafting viable reforms including of health care. And publications such as *[City Journal](#)*, *[The Claremont Review of Books](#)*, *[National Affairs](#)*, and *[Policy Review](#)* brim with thoughtful efforts to translate conservative principles into responsible public policy.

Dionne is right to want a reasonable conservatism. He is wrong to promulgate the myth that it does not exist.

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