What Progressives Can Learn From the Tea Partiers

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As a political phenomenon, the Tea Partiers are more colorful than mysterious. They are not really a new or post-party phenomenon, but are the latest incarnation of the populist conservative wing of the Republican Party, the political descendants of Richard Nixon's Silent Majority or the angry white men who catapulted Newt Gingrich and the Republican Party into control of the Congress in 1994. Tea Partiers will vote overwhelmingly for the Republican Party in November, or they will stay home. Very few will vote Democratic; and third party rumblings that have not yet died away, will do so in the next months.

The most interesting, and probably important, impact the Tea Partiers will have will be in the Republican primaries. As the more radical wing of the party demands more radical and ideologically rigid nominees, the party will have to either accede to these demands and risk nominating less electable candidates, or risk losing the energy and enthusiasm of the Tea Partiers. While the power of the ideological base of both parties can be overstated, parties also overlook these voters at their own peril.

What makes the Tea Party movement distinct from any radical elements within the Democratic Party base is that the Tea Partiers are very clear in their intention to fight for the future not just of the country, but of the Republican Party. For Tea Partiers, Republicans who are merely conservative such as Charlie Crist, are as much the enemy as liberal Democrats like Harry Reid or Nancy Pelosi. In this regard, they are not dissimilar to the right wing Republicans who viewed the liberal, Rockefeller Republican wing of their party as the enemy almost fifty years ago. That generation of radical Republicans foisted Barry Goldwater on their party. Goldwater was, of course, trounced, by Lyndon Johnson in 1964, but if ever there was a movement which lost the battle but won the war it was those right wingers who after seeing Goldwater lose badly, reaped what they had sewn a few short years later with Richard Nixon's victory in 1968, and more importantly, the Reagan Revolution in the 1980s.

Interestingly, although the Democratic Party is often portrayed as disorganized and beholden to its radical base, while the Republican Party is viewed as the more orderly and disciplined party, the reality is not so clear. The far-right Republican base has been willing to challenge incumbent Republicans in primaries. Contemporary examples include Marco Rubio's campaign against Charlie Crist in Florida, and J.D. Hayworth's challenge to John McCain in Arizona. There are Democratic examples as well, such as Ned Lamont's campaign against Joe Lieberman in Connecticut in 2006, and Bill Halter's current campaign against Blanche Lincoln in Arkansas, but in recent years it seems as if Republican challenges of this kind have been more frequent.

More striking is the willingness of conservative leaders and organizations to take on mainstream Republicans. Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, Sarah Palin and other leaders of the far right, for example, do not just attack Democrats, but go after moderate Republicans as well. It is different on the Democratic side where voices of the left tend to either fall into line much more quickly
behind often conservative leaning Democrats, or else sublimate their own voices to those of the party. A good example of this is the recently shut down Air America radio network, which sought to bring progressive voices to the public, but was too closely tied to the mainstream of the Democratic Party to have a real impact.

The far right understands that they cannot have a conservative country without having a conservative party, while the equivalent lesson has still not sunk in with the progressive wing of the Democratic Party who too frequently conflate Democratic victory with progressive victory. Winning control of the senate in 2006, for example, was a Democratic victory, but as has become unmistakably clear, it was not a progressive victory.

Making this distinction does not mean that progressive Democrats should always demand ideological purity from their candidates or refuse to support moderate Democrats. When all is said and done, even the Tea Partiers will back away from some of that kind of rhetoric. However, it means that progressive Democrats will never have a progressive country until they are willing to fight for a progressive party. That will entail demanding more from elected Democrats, approaching elections strategically and not giving in to the electability argument from centrist Democrats quite so frequently.

The strength of the Tea Partiers is that they are not afraid to challenge their own party. This may make them seem extreme, or even dangerous, but the mainstream of the Republican Party cannot ignore their energy or numbers. Until there is a progressive force willing to play a similar role in the Democratic Party, a progressive party, and country will remain elusive.