

# Tea Party Influence: A Story of Activists and Elites\*

Michael A. Bailey  
Dept. of Gov't  
& Public Policy Institute  
Georgetown University  
baileyma@georgetown.edu

Jonathan Mummolo  
Dept. of Gov't  
Georgetown University

Hans Noel  
Dept. of Gov't  
Georgetown University

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## Abstract

Understanding how the Tea Party has affected congressional elections and roll call voting helps us understand not only an important political movement, but how movements affect politics more generally. We investigate four different ways in which the movement might influence political outcomes: activists, constituent opinion, group endorsement activity and elite-level self-identification. Our ability to distinguish the effects of these interrelated areas of strength is enhanced by the surprisingly low correlation of measures for each. We find consistent evidence that activists mattered both electorally and for roll call voting on issues of importance to the movement. Constituent opinion had virtually no impact on either political outcome. Group endorsement activity had possible effects on elections, but mostly no effect on congressional voting. Self-identification among elites did not enhance – or harm – Republican electoral fortunes, but did affect congressional votes important to the movement. These divergent results illustrate how movement politics can influence outcomes through multiple channels and call into question the usefulness of the “Tea Party” moniker without important qualifiers.

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The influence of any movement, the Tea Party included, might be felt in multiple ways. Movement activists may bring energy to campaigns and exert pressure on elected officials. Sympathetic constituents may be more inclined to vote for movement-associated candidates and reward representatives who vote with the movement. Movement interest groups offering endorsements may bring publicity and other resources to bear in both campaigns and lobbying efforts. Politicians may take explicit steps – such as joining the congressional Tea Party Caucus – to associate themselves with the movement in ways that could affect both their electoral performance and their voting in Congress.

In this paper we use the important example of the Tea Party to assess which elements of a movement most influence elections and congressional voting. Two factors give us analytical leverage. First, while one might assume that any measures of the various elements of the movement would be highly correlated – thereby making analysis difficult – the reality is that the measures are remarkably weakly correlated. Second, the Tea Party had a relatively clear starting point early in Obama’s term. This means that we can do before and after comparisons, placebo tests and other analyses that would be more difficult if the movement had evolved more gradually.

We find several clear patterns. The most consistent is that Tea Party activism matters. The more Tea Party activists in a district, the better Republican candidates did and the more likely Republican representatives were to vote with the Tea Party on issues salient to the movement. In contrast, diffuse popular support for the movement was largely irrelevant for election returns and roll call votes. Interest group endorsements appeared to affect elections (although we are somewhat cautious about this conclusion for reasons we explain below),

but mostly did not affect congressional voting. Elite self-identification with the movement did the opposite: members of Congress who joined the Tea Party Caucus did no better or worse than before, but they did vote differently on roll calls important to the movement.

The implication is that the movement's influence is multifaceted. It makes little sense to generalize about the Tea Party based on elected officials who had been endorsed by the Tea Party groups; nor does it make sense to generalize about the Tea Party based on members of Congress in the Tea Party Caucus. Each of these capture real aspects of the Tea Party movement, but none are the full expression of it.

This paper proceeds as follows. In part one, we discuss ways in which a movement may be able to affect elections and voting in Congress. In part two, we assess how these strengths influenced the 2010 congressional elections. In part three, we assess how these facets of movement strength influenced roll call voting in the 112th Congress. We conclude in part four.

## **1 Facets of Tea Party Strength**

The Tea Party is an organized interest or movement associated with the Republican Party, but not the same as the Republican Party. This is consistent with the conception of political parties as coalitions of interests. Parties respond to the demands of activists and other groups of policy demanders who want things from government. The Tea Party is one of these groups. At the same time, elected officials may have incentives to resist the demands of affiliated groups, especially if they conflict with the demands of other affiliated groups, or are so extreme as to alienate unaffiliated voters (Aldrich 1983, 1995; Bawn et al. 2006;

Cohen, Karol, Noel and Zaller 2008; Karol 2009; Masket 2009; Masket and Noel 2012). In this way, the movement is similar to other social movements that have strong alliances or ties to one party and not the other (Heaney and Rojas 2007; Schwartz 2010; Green 1995).

The Tea Party's goals are generally consistent with Republican orthodoxy. Recent scholarship has shown that Tea Party activists are similar to other conservative Republican activists, on both economic and social issues (Perrin, Tepper, Caren and Morris 2011; Campbell and Putnam 2011; Abramowitz 2011; Jacobson 2011). The movement's central stated focus is on economic issues, including reducing government spending and lowering taxes.<sup>1</sup> Movement activists also tend to oppose environmental restrictions on emissions, favor repealing the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and adopt a strict constructionist view of the Constitution. Large majorities of self-identified Tea Party supporters support restrictions on immigration, and Tea Party groups have organized rallies supporting tougher immigration enforcement. Large majorities also oppose gay marriage and support racial profiling in airport screenings (Barreto and Parker 2010). To the extent that the Tea Party distinguishes itself from the GOP it may be its opposition to compromise.

We focus on four elements of the Tea Party movement, elements that will to varying degrees be present in any major political movement. These elements represent distinct ways in which an analyst might measure the strength of a movement, as well as different pathways for how the movement might influence political outcomes.

First, at the core of any movement are activists. These are the people most energized by the movement's agenda. Activists are not just voters who are sympathetic to the movement,

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<sup>1</sup>However, Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin (2011) show that many grassroots activists hold favorable views toward large government programs like Social Security and Medicare, from which they personally benefit.

nor are they necessarily the leaders of the movement. They are the ones willing to take some action for the cause. As a movement with a strong grassroots component (Gardner 2010; Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin 2011; Zernike 2010), the Tea Party could influence elections and representation by having a lot of supporters in a district. These activists form the labor pool for campaign activities. Many of these enthusiastic supporters campaigned against candidates they viewed as Washington insiders and organized get-out-the vote efforts for favored candidates (Gardner 2010). Members of Congress who know that their districts had many Tea Party supporters may not need any formal endorsement from movement leaders to feel increased pressure to cast votes sympathetic to the movement's concerns.

We measure district-level Tea Party activism based on the registration numbers of six national Tea Party organizations, provided in a study by Burghart and Zeskind (2010). The groups are: Tea Party Nation, Tea Party Patriots, 1776 Tea Party (also known as TeaParty.org), FreedomWorks, ResistNet and Tea Party Express (Burghart and Zeskind 2010). These membership figures represent district residents who indicated their support for the movement by signing up with a Tea Party-affiliated web site, or, in the case of the Tea Party Express, by donating to its PAC. These residents are ground-level activists, distinct from the elite politicians and organizations that endorsed candidates in 2010. The Burghart and Zeskind data set provided the number of group registrants in thousands of U.S. cities. We summed these six group membership totals within each city, and then matched these sums with congressional districts. We also took care to account for cities that cross district boundaries. The mean number of activists in a congressional district was about 402, and the variable ranged from about 41 to 1,148 activists.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Burghart and Zeskind used computer software to extract and aggregate individual registration data from the online

Second, at a movement's periphery are sympathetic voters. They may not be as informed about the movement or particularly political, but it is from this more numerous group that movement affiliated politicians may actually reap large numbers of votes. Activists alone cannot swing elections. Members of Congress presumably work hard to have a good idea of how widely supported Tea Party ideas are in their district, and then orient their behavior to satisfy those preferences (Fenno 1977; Kingdon 1977; Arnold 1990; Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan 2002).

At the same time, popular support for the movement ought to be the least important area of strength. Voters who are sympathetic with the Tea Party but not activists with it are likely to be less familiar with the details of the movement. They may find some policy positions attractive, but not others. They may need help deciding which politicians really are standard-bearers for the movement and which are not. When it comes time to vote, their Tea Party sympathy may play some role, but the other things that matter, including their party identification, the state of the economy and the personal characteristics of the candidates may overshadow their movement sympathy. Activists or interest group leaders or the candidates themselves might be able to make the Tea Party more salient to the campaign,

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directories of national Tea Party group web sites in early May 2010, and the details of their methodology can be found at <http://www.irehr.org/the-report/tea-party-faction-data-collection-methodology>. Their downloadable data set provided a list of cities and the numbers of individuals in each city that had registered with each group. The Tea Party Express numbers were based on individuals who donated to the Our Country Deserves Better-Tea Party Express PAC during that period. Figures for the other 5 groups came from registration data. This data was coded into congressional districts based on the cities listed. For 263 cities that cross district boundaries as identified in Koszczuk and Stern (2005), we apportioned membership totals according to what fractions of city populations were in each congressional district. For example, 53.8% of Detroit's population is in the 13th congressional district and 46.2% is in the 14th congressional district; we allocate Detroit Tea Party supporters in the Burghart and Zeskind data across these two districts in these proportions. It is due to such apportionment that some districts have non-integer values of Tea Party activists. We also estimated models in which measures of congressional-district level supporters of individual Tea Party organizations were used as independent variables. We found no different patterns when we broke the data down by group (unlike for the endorsement data) and therefore report only the results based on aggregate figures in order to avoid cluttered results.

but absent these other aspects of the movement, voter sympathy may not mean much.

We measure district-level Tea Party constituent support with a question from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study in 2010. The survey asks respondents, “What is your view of the Tea Party movement – would you say it is very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, or very negative, or don’t you know enough about the Tea Party movement to say?” Responses were coded on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 being “very negative” and 5 being “very positive.” We then took the mean response for each congressional district, excluding “don’t know enough to say” and “no opinion” responses. We have an average of 127 observations for each district and the mean response across districts is 3.03.

Third, movements are affiliated with one or more interest groups that handle organization and mobilization. An interest group offers a Member of Congress the carrot of support, financial or otherwise, in future primaries and general elections, or the stick of intervention on behalf of a challenger instead (e.g. Masket 2009). Smart candidates anticipate this and vote accordingly, perhaps even without any explicit instructions. As effective as this can be, however, it is hard to influence a legislator who has no sympathy for your agenda. So it might be easier to elect members who already agree with what you want (e.g. Bawn et al. 2006, Cohen et al. 2008; Dominguez 2011).

Some of the major groups associated with the Tea Party include FreedomWorks, Tea Party Express (“TPX”) and Americans for Prosperity. The movement also includes many local groups that are not officially related to these umbrella groups (Gardner 2010).<sup>3</sup> In this way, the Tea Party is like a diffuse social movement, perhaps like the environmental or

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<sup>3</sup>See Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin (2011) for details on differences between national groups and grassroots Tea Party supporters.

antiwar movements, which were also managed by a variety of organized leaders but were still informal. These Tea Party groups are particularly active in both electoral and legislative politics. National Tea Party organizations and websites endorsed candidates in the 2010 Republican primaries and mobilized voters on their behalf. The organizations also closely monitor events in Washington, especially votes in Congress, urging movement members via e-mail blasts to write to their Congressmen and present the movement's position.

We measure the attempts of interest groups to influence outcomes via endorsement data. Of course, interest groups may have other pathways of influence, but this is one of the most visible forms of their activity and one that features prominently in many academic and media discussions of the Tea Party movement. In the general election cycle, 201 GOP candidates were endorsed by one or more of FreedomWorks, Tea Party Express and Sarah Palin, a figure commonly associated with the Tea Party. Most of these candidates (149) were not incumbents.<sup>4</sup> These national group endorsements vary considerably. Table 1 shows a cross-tabulation of endorsements by FreedomWorks and Tea Party Express. Of the 113 candidates endorsed by FreedomWorks, and the 138 endorsed by Tea Party Express, only 55 were endorsed by both groups. FreedomWorks generally did not endorse incumbents, (a couple of candidates who were elected in special elections before the 2010 election were endorsed), and Tea Party Express did. Of the 87 non-incumbents endorsed by the Tea Party Express, 33 were not endorsed by FreedomWorks.

Fourth, a movement can influence outcomes when elected officials choose to affiliate with

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<sup>4</sup>Data on endorsements by FreedomWorks were obtained directly from a representative of the organization. Tea Party Express's midterm endorsements were listed on the organization's web site: <http://www.teapartyexpress.org/endorse-2010/>. Data on endorsements by Sarah Palin were obtained from *The Washington Post's* "Palin Endorsement Tracker," found at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/palin\\_tracker/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/palin_tracker/).



Table 1: TEA PARTY ENDORSEMENTS

	All candidates		Challengers only		Open seats	
	Not TPX endorsed	TPX endorsed	Not TPX endorsed	TPX endorsed	Not TPX endorsed	TPX endorsed
Not FreedomWorks endorsed	239	83	135	33	10	1
FreedomWorks endorsed	58	55	57	54	18	14

it. For the Tea Party, many members of Congress self-identified with the movement by joining the Tea Party Caucus organized by Rep. Michelle Bachmann (R, MN) in July 2010. Unlike the other external forms of movement expression, this is the manifestation of the movement *inside* the institution of Congress.<sup>5</sup>

Members of Congress might join the caucus for various reasons. Congressional caucuses provide an opportunity for like-minded members – in this case, members sympathetic to the Tea Party movement – to coordinate legislative strategy, decide priorities and otherwise communicate with one another about movement goals (Victor and Ringe 2009, Victor, Ringe and Gross 2008). Caucus membership also sends a signal to voters, to activists and to interest group leaders that the member identifies with the movement. And of course, membership may simply be sincere expression, as legislators who believe in the Tea Party cause stand up to be counted.

The incumbent members who joined the Tea Party Caucus were *responding* to the Tea Party; they were not spawned by it. Many may have already held policy positions consistent with the movement, but some may have merely been trying to capitalize on the attention

<sup>5</sup> Data on members of the House Tea Party Caucuses in the 111th and 112th Congresses were obtained from Bachmann’s web site: <http://bachmann.house.gov/News/DocumentSingle.aspx?DocumentID=199440> and <http://bachmann.house.gov/News/DocumentSingle.aspx?DocumentID=226594>.

the Tea Party was receiving throughout the election cycle by joining the Caucus.

These four facets of the Tea Party are plausibly related to one another. Members who come from districts with large groups of Tea Party activists might be expected to join the Tea Party Caucus, and so forth. But in fact, the relationship among the variables is not strong. In some cases, the relationship is actually negative.

The correlation matrix across various affiliation types displayed in Table 2 makes it clear one cannot simply take one or another association and assume it completely embodies the nature of the Tea Party movement. The national groups and Palin correlate weakly with one another (no pair tops  $r = .27$ ). Their endorsements correlate even less with local levels of Tea Party activists and membership in the Tea Party Caucus in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress (the Congress before the 2010 election). And the group endorsements meant little for subsequent membership in the Tea Party Caucus: of the 72 GOP freshman in 2010 who had been endorsed by FreedomWorks, only 13 joined the Tea Party Caucus in the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress. The single exception is a moderately high correlation between the number of activists in a district and the opinion of the Tea Party in that district ( $r = .52$ ). While many low correlations can be easily explained (e.g. FreedomWorks avoided endorsing incumbents while Tea Party Caucus membership in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress was open only to incumbents), this does not change the simple fact that the measures diverge, often dramatically.

These various faces of the Tea Party reflect efforts to influence the political process by electing like-minded individuals to Congress and by influencing the votes of members of Congress. Tea Party activism in an election might send movement politicians to Washington, or its threat might keep those politicians loyal in anticipation of later elections. Joining the

Table 2: CORRELATION OF MEASURES OF TEA PARTY ASSOCIATION - 2010 REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES

	FreedomWorks	Tea Party Express	Palin	Tea Party Activists	Tea Party Caucus	Tea Party Favorability
FreedomWorks	1	0.22	0.27	0.12	-0.19	0.15
Tea Party Express		1	0.02	0.07	-0.05	0.10
Palin			1	0.08	-0.07	0.07
Tea Party Activists				1	0.26	0.52
Tea Party Caucus					1	0.29
Tea Party Favorability						1

Tea Party Caucus might be a signal to voters that proves electorally useful, or it might be a way for legislators to coordinate on legislative strategy. Or some of these aspects might only matter in one arena and not the other. The next two sections take up these two possible arenas in which to exert influence, beginning with elections.

## 2 Influence and the 2010 Election

One strategy the Tea Party might use to influence policy is simply to increase the numbers of its supporters in Congress. We therefore assess in this section if and how any of the four aspects of the movement were associated with higher vote percentages for GOP candidates in the 2010 congressional elections. We build from the approach of Karpowitz, Monson, Patterson and Pope (2011) who found that “Tea Party endorsements generally had little statistically discernible effect on Republican vote share in the general election,” (2011, 305).

The single exception was endorsement by FreedomWorks, which was associated with an additional two percentage points in general election vote share. Ansolobehere and Snyder (2011), Bond et al. (2011), Jacobson (2010), and Sides (2010) also found little or no influence of Tea Party endorsements and affiliation on general election results. Karpowitz, Monson, Patterson and Pope (2011) did find that Tea Party endorsements were most associated with better outcomes in Republican primaries.

We begin with a standard OLS model in which the dependent variable is the percent of the two-party vote received by the Republican candidate for the House of Representatives in the 2010 general election. We focus on the four modes of Tea Party movement strength described above via four variables: levels of activists in a district (“Tea Party Activists”), constituent opinion (“Tea Party Favorability”), group endorsements (“FreedomWorks”) and elite-level self-identification (“Tea Party Caucus”). We control for standard influences on congressional elections, including: incumbency status, candidate quality, district-level support for the GOP (measured by George Bush’s share of the presidential vote in 2004), district-level support for the 2008 GOP House candidate, district-level demographics from U.S. Census data, campaign spending (measured in millions) and indicator variables for regions.<sup>6</sup> We do not include uncontested races.<sup>7</sup>

Column (a) of Table 3 shows the results of this specification for 2010, while Figure 1

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<sup>6</sup>Following Jacobson (1989), a “quality” candidate is one who has held prior elective office. District-level median household income data is from <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/research/data/congressionaldistricts110th.pdf>. It is measured in \$100,000s.

<sup>7</sup> Descriptive statistics are available in the appendix. As with any set of specifications there are alternative reasonable approaches. The appendix provides results for a number of these; none appreciably changes the results. In order to assess whether the election dynamics were different for challengers, we ran the specifications above on races with no Republican incumbents. In order to address concerns that the district normal vote is not adequately captured by controlling for the Bush vote in 2004, we also estimated models in which we replaced Bush’s percent of the district presidential vote with McCain’s from 2008. Some scholars caution against including too many control variables (Achen 2002, Clarke 2009); we therefore also report specifications with the Tea Party variables and only the most obvious controls.

graphically presents the coefficients for the Tea Party variables. In the 2010 model, all four Tea Party variables show statistically significant relationships with GOP performance, though their substantive impact varies. Tea Party Activists has a large coefficient, with an increase of 1,000 activists in a district corresponding to an 8-point boost in the two-party vote for a GOP candidate. A two standard deviation change (of about 360 activists) is associated with a 2.9 point increase in GOP percentage. To get a further sense of the substantive effect of the activist variable, we compared the fitted values for the GOP Vote in 2010 at actual levels of the activist variable to fitted values where the Tea Party Activism variable was set to zero and all other variables remained at their true values. For 38 districts, the fitted value fell below the 50 percent threshold when Tea Party Activism disappeared, providing a rough sense of the political import implied by these results.

Hailing from a district where constituents had a more favorable view of the Tea Party (“Tea Party Favorability”) also showed a positive and significant effect. A one-point increase on the five-point favorability scale (equivalent to a roughly 2 standard deviation change) corresponded to about a 2.7-point boost in vote share. Unlike the activist results, however, this finding is not robust as we shall see in Table 4.

Being endorsed by FreedomWorks was associated with running about 2.4 percentage points ahead of where an otherwise similarly situated candidate would run—a very similar finding to the results in Karpowitz, Monson, Patterson and Pope (2011). We also ran similar models in which the FreedomWorks endorsement variable was replaced by endorsements by Tea Party Express and Sarah Palin. Like Karpowitz, Monson, Patterson and Pope (2011), we found no statistically discernible relationship between these alternate measures

and election outcomes. If we include all of these endorsement variables in a single regression, (an acceptable specification given the demonstrated low correlation across these measures), the results are the same: only the FreedomWorks endorsement variable is positive and statistically significant. Finally, membership in the Tea Party Caucus in the 111th Congress correlated with about a 1.7 percentage point *decrease* in GOP performance.

The controls operate as would be expected: Republicans do substantially better when they are incumbents, or are running in districts where Bush ran well in 2004. Republicans also do better when the incumbent is a Republican or their candidate ran well in the previous election; they do worse when the incumbent is a Democrat, the district has large numbers of African Americans or is in the West.

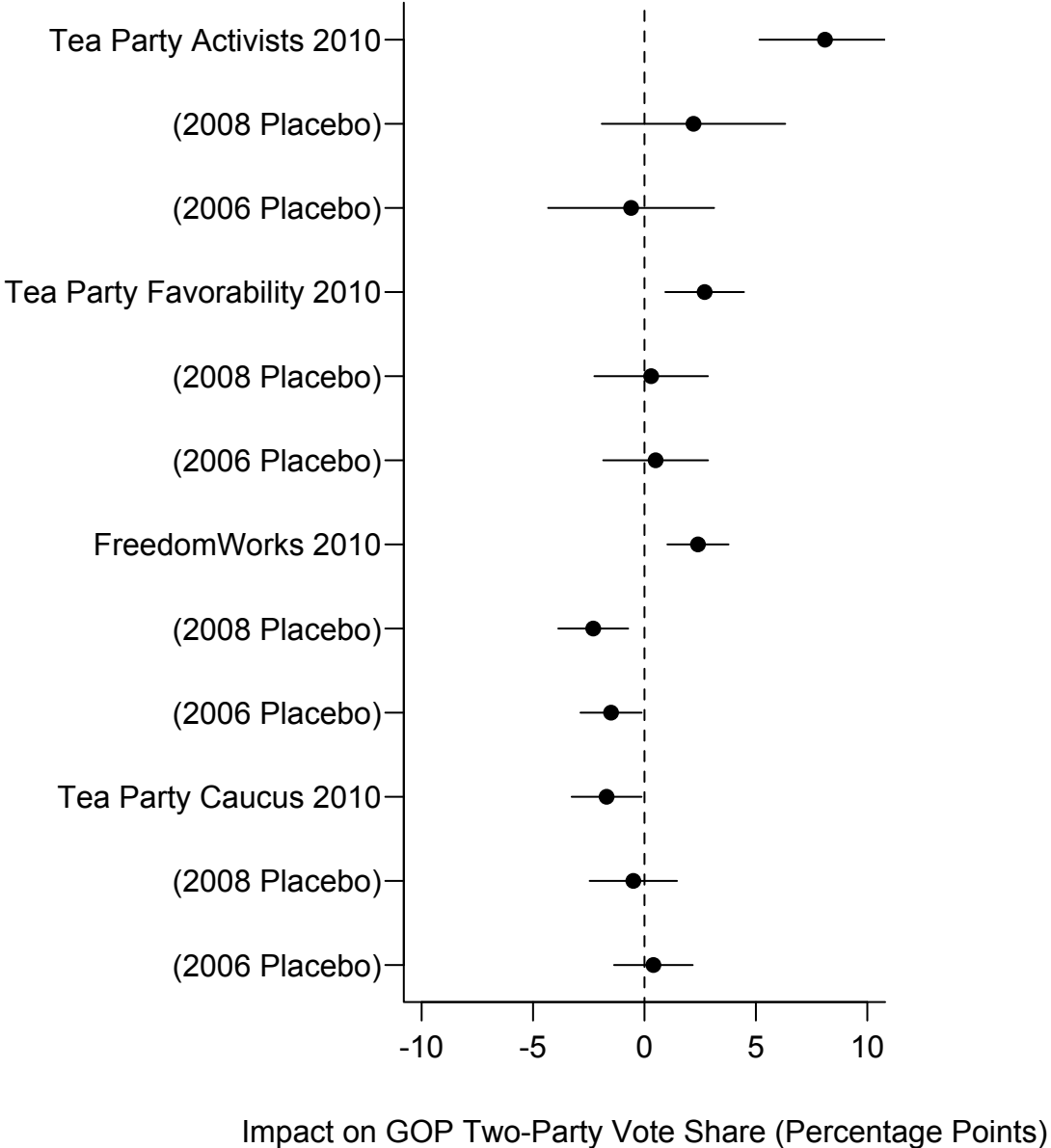
Simply looking at a cross section of voting in 2010 is not sufficient to give us confidence that these effects are real. It is possible that the Tea Party variables could somehow be tapping pre-existing predispositions that are not captured by the other variables. For example, while it could be that affiliating with the Tea Party Caucus *causes* vote shares to decline, relatively few voters probably even knew about the affiliation, and it is equally plausible that members of Congress who joined the Tea Party Caucus did worse electorally because they were ideologically more extreme. Likewise, Tea Party activism could simply manifest pre-existing conservatism among a district's voters that was not well captured in other variables. Therefore we also run placebo tests on elections that occurred before the Tea Party movement existed. The Tea Party variables could not have exerted any causal influence on these prior elections, and to the extent we find the Tea Party variables significantly explain previous elections, we must conclude that the variables are tapping some pre-existing charac-

Table 3: CONGRESSIONAL GOP VOTE

	2010	2008	2006
	(a)	(b)	(c)
Tea Party Activists (1,000s)	0.081 *** (0.015)	0.022 (0.021)	-0.006 (0.019)
Tea Party Favorability	0.027 ** (0.009)	0.003 (0.013)	0.005 (0.012)
FreedomWorks	0.024 *** (0.007)	-0.023 ** (0.008)	-0.015 * (0.007)
Tea Party Caucus (111th)	-0.017 * (0.008)	-0.005 (0.010)	0.004 (0.009)
Lagged GOP House Vote	0.097 *** (0.017)	0.157 *** (0.025)	0.146 *** (0.023)
Bush Vote in District, 2004	0.545 *** (0.041)	0.477 *** (0.056)	0.452 *** (0.052)
Rep. Incumbent	0.076 *** (0.010)	0.067 *** (0.014)	0.087 *** (0.014)
Dem. Incumbent	-0.057 *** (0.009)	-0.084 *** (0.015)	-0.079 *** (0.013)
Rep. Spending	-0.000 (0.002)	0.006 (0.004)	0.006 † (0.004)
Dem. Spending	0.001 (0.003)	-0.009 * (0.004)	-0.018 *** (0.005)
Quality Rep. Challenger	0.006 (0.007)	0.030 ** (0.010)	0.043 *** (0.011)
Quality Dem. Challenger	-0.014 † (0.008)	-0.028 * (0.011)	-0.027 ** (0.009)
Percent Black	-0.118 *** (0.020)	-0.061 * (0.030)	0.037 (0.028)
District Median Household Income	-0.002 (0.018)	0.012 (0.025)	0.058 * (0.023)
South	0.006 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.010)	0.017 † (0.010)
Midwest	0.013 † (0.007)	-0.000 (0.009)	0.020 * (0.008)
West	-0.037 *** (0.006)	-0.028 ** (0.009)	0.024 ** (0.008)
(Intercept)	0.103 *** (0.026)	0.146 *** (0.038)	0.089 * (0.035)
<i>N</i>	406	380	374
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.944	0.900	0.918

Dependent variable is Republican share of two-party vote. Standard in parentheses. Excludes uncontested races. † significant at  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Figure 1: COEFFICIENTS FROM MODELS OF GOP VOTE IN RECENT CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS



*Dots are point estimates for coefficients. Lines are 95 percent confidence intervals.*



teristics among constituencies or representatives and are not in any way causally associated with the movement itself.

Column (b) of Table 3 reports the results for the 2008 placebo test. The coefficient on the activist measure is 0.022, but is not significant, indicating that the results for the 2010 election reflect a real pattern of areas with lots of activism becoming more pro-Republican only in that year, controlling for all the other factors. The Tea Party Favorability variable was insignificant as well, while the FreedomWorks variable is statistically significant and *negative*. This means that not only is it not the case that the FreedomWorks endorsees came from districts that were more Republican friendly even in 2008, but that they actually came from districts where, all else equal, Republican candidates had done *worse* in 2008. This implies the findings from the 2010 election may understate the relationship. Tea Party Caucus membership was not a significant predictor of 2008 election results.

By many accounts, the Tea Party movement as we now conceive of it did not exist until—at the very earliest—the “Santelli rant” of February 19, 2009 (Bedard 2010).<sup>8</sup> But in no small part it reflects a political reaction to President Obama. It is therefore possible that the 2008 elections were seeing some nascent-Tea Party effects, even before such activity had been branded with the Tea Party moniker. Such effects could not have reflected the organizational and mobilizing activities associated with the movement, of course, but they could reflect societal reactions to Obama that are part of the energy behind the broader Tea Party movement. Therefore column (c) of Table 3 also reports results for a placebo test

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<sup>8</sup>The “Santelli rant, as it is now known, occurred when CNBC reporter Rick Santelli gave a harsh extended critique on live television of an Obama administration mortgage assistance proposal. In the segment, Santelli suggests having a “tea party” at Lake Michigan to protest the proposal. Though small tea party protests had occurred earlier, the “rant” quickly went viral online, and is often cited as a key early moment in the Tea Party story (Zernike 2010).

using 2006 House election results as the dependent variable.

In this placebo specification, the Tea Party Activists variable is actually slightly negative, though far from statistically significant, which again bolsters the idea that the variable's effect was a real phenomenon in 2010. As in Model (b), the Tea Party Favorability variable is not significant. FreedomWorks is again significant, but still in the negative direction. Tea Party Caucus membership was not significant. This specification continues to support the inference that the Tea Party effects observed in the 2010 election were actually caused by the various facets of the movement and not a spurious relationship between the movement variables and some pre-existing tendency in some districts.

Figure 1 highlights the overall trend: *only 2010 vote share* is explained by Tea Party variables. All other models yield either statistically insignificant coefficients or theoretically invalid expected directions. With the exception of FreedomWorks, which is negative and significant, coefficients from the placebo models all have confidence intervals which overlap zero.

We conduct one final specification check, one that allows us to make statistical inferences about the net effect of the Tea Party variables and to control for district level fixed effects. Following the logic of placebo testing, the net effect of the Tea Party is the effect on the 2010 election minus the placebo effect. Therefore in Table 4 we report specifications that allow us to isolate the net effect of the Tea Party variables. The dependent variable in the models is the change in vote for GOP candidates. This approach automatically estimates standard errors on the net difference in a variable's effect and also allows us to net out so-called district-level fixed effects that are the set of all otherwise unmeasured district-level factors

which are unchanged from one election to another. Factors covered by district-level fixed effects include district-level idiosyncrasies in party organization, political attitudes, or, for districts represented by the same person in both elections, representative-level idiosyncrasies.

The model is generated simply by subtracting the model from the early placebo results from the model for the 2010 results. For example, if we wish to compare 2010 to 2008 we begin with basic models of the election outcomes:

$$\begin{aligned}
 GOP2010_i &= \alpha_i + \beta_0 + \beta_1 TP_i + \beta_2 districtvar. + \beta_3 cand.var.^{2010} + \epsilon^{2010} \\
 GOP2008_i &= \alpha_i + \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 TP_i + \gamma_2 districtvar. + \gamma_3 cand.var.^{2008} + \epsilon^{2008}
 \end{aligned}$$

where  $GOP2010$  is the percent of the two-party vote received by the GOP candidate in district  $i$  in 2010,  $\alpha_i$  is a district-level fixed effect,  $district\ var.$  is a set of district variables that do not change across elections and  $cand.\ var.$  is a set of candidate variables that do change from one election to another. Subtracting the 2008 equation from the 2010 equation cancels out the  $\alpha_i$  parameters and yields

$$\begin{aligned}
 \Delta GOP_i &= (\beta_0 - \gamma_0) + (\beta_1 - \gamma_1) TP_i + (\beta_2 - \gamma_2) districtvar._i + \beta_3 cand.var._i^{2010} \\
 &\quad - \gamma_3 cand.var._i^{2008} + \epsilon_i^{2010} - \epsilon_i^{2008} \\
 &= \pi_0 + \pi_1 TP_i + \pi_2 districtvar._i + \beta_3 cand.var._i^{2010} - \gamma_3 cand.var._i^{2008} + \eta_i
 \end{aligned}$$

The results for the change model from 2008 to 2010 are reported in column (a) of Table 4. The Tea Party Activist variable is significant and about half the size it was in the cross sectional model. The Tea Party Favorability, FreedomWorks and Tea Party Caucus variables

Table 4: MODELS OF CHANGE IN GOP VOTE PERCENT IN CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

	2010-2008	2010-2006
	(a)	(b)
Tea Party Activists (1,000s)	0.040 *	0.088 ***
	(0.019)	(0.021)
Tea Party Favorability	0.010	0.022
	(0.012)	(0.014)
FreedomWorks	0.014	0.020 *
	(0.008)	(0.010)
Tea Party Caucus (111th)	-0.006	-0.009
	(0.010)	(0.012)
(Intercept)	-0.070 *	-0.032
	(0.036)	(0.041)
<i>N</i>	359	354
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.425	0.575

Dependent variable is the change in the Republican share of the two-party vote. Standard errors in parentheses. Includes only contested races. Results for control variables included appendix. † significant at  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

are all insignificant. The implication is that only the activist variable exerted influence such that the net difference from 2008 to 2010 is statistically significant. The FreedomWorks variable is approaching statistical significance ( $p=.102$ ), but the constituency opinion and Tea Party Caucus variables are far from significant. This implies that any effects observed for the 2010 specification for these variables were actually due to pre-existing factors: the Tea Party Caucus members didn't do worse in 2010 per se, they always ran a bit worse (and since we have controlled for fixed effects in this model we are doing more than simply comparing coefficients across the columns of Table 3). Candidates in 2010 from districts with more favorable constituency opinion toward the Tea Party did better in 2010, but this should not be attributed to the Tea Party because candidates from these districts were running ahead in 2006 and 2008 as well.

We can also estimate a change model from 2006 to 2010. While the 2008 to 2010 results capture changes that occurred after Obama – and thereby capture all the organizational and rhetorical Tea Party activity that has occurred since Obama has been president – the 2006 to 2010 results capture the changes that occurred since before Obama was even the Democratic nominee. They therefore encapsulate not only the organizational activities of Tea Party groups since the Santelli Rant, but also the more generalized political movement that began with the start of the 2008 election campaign, which can be considered part of the Tea Party movement broadly construed. Column (b) of Table 4 reports these results.<sup>9</sup>

In this model, we see the Tea Party Activists variable is significant again, and its coefficient returns to a size comparable to our original 2010 election model in Table 3. The only other significant variable is FreedomWorks, which also shows a coefficient similar to that in the 2010 model. The Tea Party Favorability and Tea Party Caucus variables are again statistically insignificant. Though they achieved significance in the earlier models, those results appear to be artifacts of unmeasured district-level factors which for which the change model accounts.

While we find the results for Tea Party activism compelling, it is difficult to parse whether the endorsements caused vote shares to go up or were associated with FreedomWorks focusing, “its attention on ‘winnable’ contests rather than using other more ideological criteria,” (Karpowitz, Monson, Patterson and Pope 2011, 309). This interpretation is consistent with claims of FreedomWorks’ Vice President of Communications, Adam Brandon, who said in an interview (April 5, 2011) with us that the organization initially used a two-pronged test for whether to endorse candidates. First, the candidate had to be aligned with the conservative

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<sup>9</sup>For full results see appendix.

fiscal policy stances of FreedomWorks; second, the candidate had to have a viable chance of being elected. However, Brandon also noted that as the election season went on, grassroots activists supporting candidates who stood little chance of winning demanded that FreedomWorks endorse these candidates as well, so the endorsement list is not wholly constituted by candidates deemed more likely to win by the group. We can, however, rule out that FreedomWorks simply picked candidates from *districts* that were more winnable by looking at the change models and noting that the results are positive and statistically significant, or nearly so.

### **3 The Tea Party and Voting in Congress**

As discussed above, a movement can also influence political outcomes by directly influencing roll call votes. This might be through threats to intervene in primary and general elections if their interests are not supported by their representatives. It might be that members, aware of broad support for the agenda in their districts, adjust accordingly. Or it may be that the movement has successfully persuaded members of the importance of its goals. And so, as before, activist, constituent, interest group and elite elements of the Tea Party may exhibit substantially different patterns of influence, and we find that they do.

#### **3.1 Overall ideology**

We first consider general voting patterns. Does Tea Party affiliation push members to the right? The most general way to assess this is to model some measure of ideological voting as a function of Tea Party variables. We use Poole and Rosenthal's NOMINATE procedure,

which generates ideal points based on all votes in the 112th Congress.<sup>10</sup>

Table 5 shows results for the models in which the dependent variable is the Poole Rosenthal NOMINATE score for a Republican member from the 112th Congress (2011-12) based on 741 votes taken as of September 23, 2011. We report specifications in which we control for many of the standard variables in voting models, including seniority, district-level presidential vote results, black percent, median household income and region. We also control for whether a representative was newly elected in the 112th Congress.

The results indicate that there are no robust relationships between Tea Party activity or group variables and ideology in Congress. District-level Tea Party activism and Tea Party Caucus membership are statistically significant in specification (a), but these relationships completely disappear in specification (b) when pre-Tea Party ideology is controlled for by including the NOMINATE scores from the 110th Congress (2007-2008) for those members who served then as well. The cost of including this measure is that we do not have it for members who did not serve in both Congresses, reducing the sample size considerably; the benefit is that it allows us to ascertain if the members from active Tea Party districts have been moving to the right, or whether the members from those districts have simply always been more conservative than their districts would otherwise suggest. The Tea Party Favorability and FreedomWorks variables are insignificant in both specifications, (and the results are the same if we use any of the other group endorsement variables).

The NOMINATE scaling procedure effectively summarizes voting in one dimension, but may nonetheless mask important changes in representation that the Tea Party could have

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<sup>10</sup>The computer code used here is from Poole, Lewis, Lo and Carroll (2007) and the data is from Lewis and Poole (2011).

Table 5: MODELS OF NOMINATE SCORES FOR REPUBLICAN MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

	(a)	(b)
Tea Party Activists (1,000s)	0.151 *	0.038
	(0.064)	(0.045)
Tea Party Favorability	0.035	-0.011
	(0.043)	(0.032)
FreedomWorks	0.018	0.035
	(0.039)	(0.080)
Tea Party Caucus (112th)	0.069 **	0.008
	(0.022)	(0.016)
Poole Rosenthal (110th)		0.814 ***
		(0.044)
Seniority	-0.006 *	-0.001
	(0.003)	(0.002)
Bush Vote in District, 2004	0.977 ***	-0.007
	(0.176)	(0.149)
Percent Black	0.141	-0.130
	(0.143)	(0.118)
District Median Household Income	0.155 †	-0.052
	(0.086)	(0.061)
GOP Freshman	0.041	
	(0.041)	
South	0.089 *	-0.021
	(0.037)	(0.029)
Midwest	0.141 ***	-0.033
	(0.033)	(0.028)
West	0.129 ***	-0.028
	(0.036)	(0.028)
(Intercept)	-0.291 †	0.392 **
	(0.164)	(0.124)
<i>N</i>	241	133
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.374	0.834

Dependent variable is the NOMINATE score for Republican members of Congress. Standard errors in parentheses. Results for control variables excluded from table. † significant at  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$



induced. First, the procedure is not rooted in policy space such that a movement of the *whole* Republican Party to the right (or left) would not necessarily register any change. Bailey (2007) shows how the NOMINATE scores of many actors did not move at all during the civil rights movement even as the policy space moved decisively. At the beginning of the sixties, Jim Crow laws and segregation were widespread; by the end of the sixties, the debate had moved to debates over mandatory busing for desegregation. Poole and Rosenthal scores would indicate no change and, if used naively, could lead one to believe that the civil rights movement had no policy effects. Second, since the NOMINATE scores place members along a single dimension that best predicts voting, it is possible that the mapping of policies into that dimension—what Converse (1964) calls “what goes with what”—could change over time, and that the Tea Party could have something to do with this. We therefore turn in the next section to a consideration of individual votes in order to assess whether the various associations with the Tea Party are connected to distinctive voting patterns in specific issue areas.

### **3.2 Individual votes**

While Tea Party affiliation does not appear to exert a strong influence on the relative preferences of Republicans as measured by Poole and Rosenthal scores, it is possible that the movement has affected some associated members of Congress on particular issues of interest to the movement. We therefore explore in this section the association of Tea Party variables with votes central to the movement’s agenda. We look only at Republicans, which means that we cannot analyze a number of important votes for which there was no variation among

Republicans, such as the unified Republican vote to repeal Obama’s Affordable Care Act of 2010. (Votes such as these echo the finding in the previous section, since on these votes, Tea Party-associated members are no different than other Republicans.)

We focus on four votes that exemplify various strands of the policy interests of many Tea Party supporters. First and most obviously are budget votes. The idea that the federal budget and federal debt are too large is clearly one of the dominant themes of the movement. We therefore look at a continuing resolution that was passed on March 15, 2011 in order to avoid a government shutdown while negotiations between the two parties continued. It included \$6 billion in cuts and passed the House, but was opposed by 54 House Republicans. Many in the media attributed this opposition to Tea Party-affiliated members, who said the measure “kicked the can down the road,” (Associated Press 2011; Collender 2011). We therefore code a vote against the resolution as a vote for the Tea Party’s position.<sup>11</sup>

We also look at a roll call vote tied to what was perhaps the most intense legislative battle of the Obama Presidency to date: the effort to raise the national debt ceiling. After months of negotiations over how to raise the nation’s debt limit to avoid default—an outcome many in the Tea Party movement advocated as an alternative to borrowing more money—the House passed a compromise measure on August 1, 2011 that split the Republican caucus 174-66. The measure, “would cut more than \$2.1 trillion in government spending over 10 years while extending the borrowing authority of the Treasury Department,” *The New York Times* reported at the time (Hulse 2011). Because of the movement’s intense opposition to growing the national debt, we code a vote against the compromise measure as a vote for the

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<sup>11</sup> Analysis of a similar budget resolution in April 2011 that included \$38 billion in spending cuts but was opposed by 59 Republicans (Thomas and Dann 2011) provides a similar story, although with the Tea Party Caucus coefficient insignificant.

Tea Party position.

Table 6 provides the results from probit analyses of these votes. In each case, the dependent variable is whether a member voted for the Tea Party's preference, so we should expect to see positive coefficients on our variables of interest. We include, as before, the Tea Party Activists, Tea Party Favorability, FreedomWorks endorsement and Tea Party Caucus variables in addition to standard controls. A challenge in all roll call studies is how to control for ideology. On the one hand, we would like to isolate the effects of our variables over and above the general pattern of liberal or conservative voting for each member; on the other hand, the ideological variables are themselves based on votes, so they may soak up important variation that we are trying to explain. Therefore we report three specifications for each roll call: specification (a) which does not include any vote-based ideology measure; specification (b) which includes the NOMINATE ideology measure based on the 112th Congress (up until September 23, 2011); and specification (c) which includes the NOMINATE ideology measure from the 110th Congress. Specification (a) is the easiest test for our Tea Party variables, specification (b) is a standard approach and specification (c) attempts to control for pre-Tea Party ideology at the cost of losing observations for members who did not serve in the 110th, (which in turn means that variables that only vary for new members, such as those indicating FreedomWorks endorsement and being newly elected in 2010, must be dropped).

Fortunately results are generally consistent across specifications, easing interpretation. The results demonstrate the multifaceted nature of Tea Party influence. Levels of Tea Party activism are significantly associated with opposition to both the March continuing resolution and the debt ceiling vote in all six specifications. District-level opinion of the Tea Party

showed no significant effects. Representatives who had been endorsed by FreedomWorks were also not at all distinctive. The Tea Party group's endorsement may have helped elect more Republicans, but they were not necessarily distinctive Republicans.<sup>12</sup> Tea Party Caucus membership, however, was significant in several specifications, but the effect of Caucus membership is not robust to the inclusion of an ideology control in Model (b) for the debt ceiling vote. This is more consistent with the idea that individuals who were particularly conservative have identified with the movement, rather than the idea that joining the Tea Party Caucus has pushed members to be *more* opposed to spending.

In order to interpret the probit coefficients substantively, we simulate first differences in predicted values using Imai, King and Lau's (2007; 2008) Zelig software. These first differences are presented in Figure 2. The Tea Party Activists variable is associated with rather large effects. The coefficients for the March continuing resolution models imply that moving from one standard deviation below the mean level of Tea Party activists to one standard above the mean, (and holding all other variables at their means), is associated with increases in the likelihood of a member voting the Tea Party's position on the March continuing resolution of 21, 17 and 27 percentage points across the specifications (a), (b) and (c), respectively. Increasing the levels of Tea Party activism in the same way in the debt ceiling models yields increases in the probability of voting with the Tea Party of 16, 12 and 16 percentage points across the three specifications. As Figure 2 shows, these estimates are remarkably uniform across the six models. Of the six first differences for these two votes, all but one—model (b) of the Debt Ceiling vote, is statistically at the 95 percent level,

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<sup>12</sup>The results are similar using the other national Tea Party group endorsement variables as well.

Table 6: TEA PARTY AFFILIATION AND FISCAL POLICY VOTES

	March CR			Debt Ceiling		
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(a)	(b)	(c)
Tea Party Activists (1,000s)	2.760 *** (0.766)	2.375 ** (0.765)	4.201 *** (1.104)	1.614 * (0.688)	1.276 † (0.701)	1.930 * (0.971)
Tea Party Favorability	0.306 (0.482)	0.391 (0.503)	0.217 (0.711)	0.624 (0.453)	0.691 (0.471)	0.012 (0.649)
FreedomWorks	0.109 (0.424)	-0.022 (0.437)		-0.029 (0.385)	-0.137 (0.399)	
Tea Party Caucus (112th)	0.803 *** (0.229)	0.639 ** (0.234)	0.837 * (0.334)	0.487 * (0.215)	0.313 (0.222)	0.715 * (0.300)
Poole Rosenthal (112th)		2.813 *** (0.804)		2.815 *** (0.780)		
Poole Rosenthal (110th)			1.376 (0.944)			1.599 † (0.943)
Seniority	0.021 (0.032)	0.046 (0.033)	0.001 (0.037)	-0.052 (0.033)	-0.032 (0.034)	-0.060 (0.040)
Bush Vote in District, 2004	4.450 * (1.960)	1.463 (2.156)	0.131 (3.318)	4.210 * (1.806)	1.421 (2.005)	0.687 (3.149)
Percent Black	5.099 ** (1.675)	4.781 ** (1.728)	2.016 (2.771)	4.203 ** (1.456)	3.983 ** (1.498)	3.885 † (2.320)
District Median Household Income	0.764 (0.980)	0.034 (1.049)	-0.842 (1.321)	0.260 (0.961)	-0.613 (1.040)	-2.201 (1.406)
GOP Freshman	0.353 (0.448)	0.294 (0.460)		0.346 (0.414)	0.233 (0.427)	
South	-1.354 ** (0.469)	-1.695 *** (0.500)	-2.148 ** (0.668)	-0.367 (0.447)	-0.641 (0.481)	-0.694 (0.693)
Midwest	0.291 (0.366)	-0.159 (0.403)	-0.367 (0.530)	0.502 (0.391)	0.150 (0.431)	0.284 (0.646)
West	-0.461 (0.413)	-0.906 * (0.446)	-1.534 ** (0.591)	0.457 (0.417)	0.137 (0.449)	-0.116 (0.667)
(Intercept)	-6.617 *** (1.985)	-6.134 ** (2.053)	-2.947 (2.842)	-6.611 *** (1.862)	-6.187 ** (1.925)	-1.562 (2.712)
<i>N</i>	240	240	133	240	239	133

Dependent variable is whether the member voted for the Tea Party's position. Standard errors in parentheses. † significant at  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

though that first difference is right on the borderline of significance (the lower bound of the confidence interval is -.01).

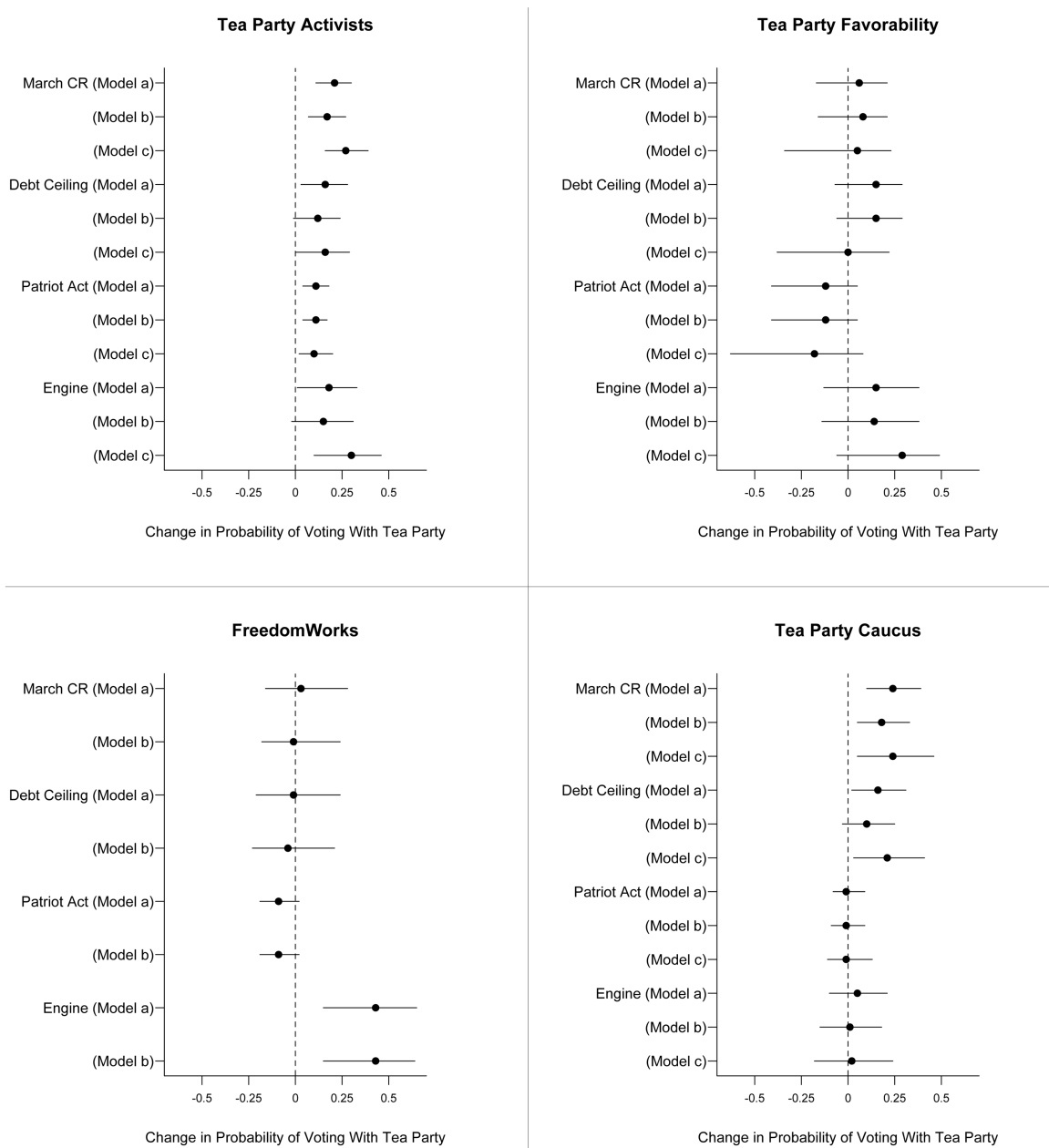
Tea Party Favorability and FreedomWorks endorsements yielded no statistically significant first differences in any specifications for the March resolution or debt ceiling votes. But the substantive effects of the Tea Party Caucus variables are noteworthy. For the March resolution models, caucus membership increased the probability of voting with the Tea Party by 24, 18 and 24 percentage points across the three models. The variable is associated with 16, 10 and 21-point increases in the debt ceiling models, though the first difference in model (b) is not statistically significant at the 95 percent level.

The Tea Party is also associated with a more general opposition to government, and with a more libertarian orientation. This preference is not universally held within the movement, as many Tea Party supporters are very hawkish on national security and quite comfortable with a large or even expanded national security apparatus. Nonetheless, at least part of the movement has a libertarian and anti-statist element that makes some of them skeptical of the federal government even with regard to police and national security. We therefore examine a vote to extend provisions in the Patriot Act—a law that granted expanded policing powers to the federal government to combat terrorism, which has been opposed by small government libertarians. On February 8, 2011 an initial vote to extend provisions of the Patriot Act was voted down in the House, and journalists attributed this opposition to the Tea Party's influence (Kane and Sonmez 2011). Again, we code a vote against the extension as a vote for the Tea Party position.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>There was a subsequent Patriot Act vote as well; the statistical results using that vote are similar for that vote as to what we report below.

Figure 2: First Differences for Probit Models of Legislative Votes



The plots above show estimated first differences generated from the probit models in Tables 6 and 7. The black dots represent the estimated change in probability of voting the Tea Party position on an issue salient to the movement as the different Tea Party variables increase in value. For continuous variables (*Tea Party Activists* and *Tea Party Favorability*), the black dots show the estimated change in probability as the Tea Party variables move from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean. For dichotomous variables, (*FreedomWorks* endorsements and *Tea Party Caucus* membership), the dots show the change in probability as the variables move from 0 to 1. The lines extending from the black dots are 95 percent confidence intervals.

Table 7: TEA PARTY AFFILIATION AND SMALL GOVERNMENT VOTES

	Patriot Act			Engine		
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(a)	(b)	(c)
Tea Party Activists (1,000s)	2.356 ** (0.833)	2.318 ** (0.842)	2.402 * (1.063)	1.281 * (0.608)	1.079 † (0.618)	2.464 ** (0.855)
Tea Party Favorability	-0.689 (0.558)	-0.688 (0.559)	-0.930 (0.792)	0.434 (0.404)	0.404 (0.409)	1.037 † (0.613)
FreedomWorks	-0.736 † (0.439)	-0.745 † (0.440)		1.147 ** (0.388)	1.135 ** (0.390)	
Tea Party Caucus (112th)	-0.090 (0.282)	-0.101 (0.285)	-0.094 (0.373)	0.137 (0.206)	0.033 (0.211)	0.065 (0.290)
Poole Rosenthal (112th)		0.187 (0.877)		1.395 * (0.649)		
Poole Rosenthal (110th)			0.341 (1.059)			1.284 (0.812)
Seniority	0.006 (0.034)	0.008 (0.035)	0.015 (0.040)	-0.017 (0.026)	-0.010 (0.026)	0.024 (0.031)
Bush Vote in District, 2004	3.555 (2.178)	3.347 (2.370)	4.143 (3.637)	-1.372 (1.654)	-2.807 (1.795)	-5.617 † (2.874)
Percent Black	0.480 (2.153)	0.444 (2.158)	3.316 (2.969)	-2.401 † (1.347)	-2.651 † (1.364)	-3.529 (2.171)
District Median Household Income	0.157 (1.070)	0.116 (1.084)	-0.526 (1.422)	0.472 (0.794)	0.247 (0.805)	-0.593 (1.087)
GOP Freshman	0.632 (0.456)	0.629 (0.456)		-0.627 (0.404)	-0.712 † (0.408)	
South	-0.545 (0.499)	-0.569 (0.508)	-0.540 (0.747)	0.398 (0.346)	0.252 (0.355)	0.233 (0.524)
Midwest	-0.251 (0.430)	-0.285 (0.452)	-0.336 (0.755)	-0.091 (0.305)	-0.323 (0.325)	-0.348 (0.500)
West	0.032 (0.432)	0.000 (0.450)	0.347 (0.679)	-0.087 (0.333)	-0.303 (0.349)	-0.758 (0.512)
(Intercept)	-2.193 (2.083)	-2.131 (2.110)	-1.925 (2.964)	-1.604 (1.542)	-1.166 (1.567)	-1.578 (2.252)
<i>N</i>	236	236	131	240	240	133

Dependent variable is whether the member voted the Tea Party's position. Standard errors in parentheses. † significant at  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$



The first three columns of Table 7 provides results on the Patriot Act vote. There is again a statistically significant association in all three specifications between levels of Tea Party activists in a home district and supporting the Tea Party position on the issue. This indicates that districts with lots of grassroots activity *do* produce members whose skepticism of the government extends even to the national security apparatus. The simulated effect of increasing Tea Party Activists from one standard deviation below the mean level to one standard deviation above is 11, 10 and 10 percentage across models (a) (b) and (c), respectively. Again, Tea Party Favorability was never a meaningful predictor of voting behavior. Interest group endorsements were, if anything, associated with support for the Patriot Act (note the negative and statistically significant coefficients in models (a) and (b)). This is consistent with much of the narrative around the Tea Party as a culturally conservative movement; it does, however, contradict the view that group endorsements went to libertarian candidates. Tea Party Caucus membership shows no statistically significant effect in the Patriot Act models.

Tea Party opposition to the federal government also has a strong anti-Washington and even anti-establishment flavor. Sometimes Tea Party anger is as much against Republicans who “go native” in Washington as it is against big-spending liberals, as evidenced by the ousting of several high-profile GOP incumbents in the 2010 primaries by Tea Party-backed challengers (Balz and Cilizza 2010). A vote to cut funding for a controversial fighter jet engine on February 16, 2011 highlighted this tension. The engine was derided by budget hawks as political pork, but was supported by Speaker John Boehner, of Ohio, where the engine, “provided more than 1,000 jobs,” (Drew 2011). Again, journalists attributed much

of the opposition to the engine to the Tea Party wing of the GOP, and we coded a vote to cut the engine as a vote for the Tea Party position.

The final three columns of Table 7 provide results on the engine vote. Again, we see a statistically significant positive association between levels of Tea Party activists in a district and a willingness to cut funding for the engine, indicating that members from districts with more Tea Party activists are more likely to buck the Washington establishment. The simulated effect of increasing local Tea Party activist levels from one standard deviation below the mean level to one standard deviation above is sizable, ranging from 18 to 30 percentage points across the three specifications, although the first difference barely misses statistical significance at the 95 percent level in specification (b). Alone among the votes, the engine vote had Tea Party Favorability approaching statistical significance ( $p < .1$ ) in model (c), but none of the first differences were significant at the 95 percent level. The Tea Party Caucus membership showed no statistically significant effects, implying a divided caucus on this measure.

Unlike any of the other votes, the FreedomWorks endorsement variable was significant and very substantial. The group lobbied on the engine vote, including sending letters to members of Congress urging them to vote for the amendment cutting funding and threatening negative consequences for a failure to vote with them:

We will count your vote on [the amendment] as a KEY VOTE when calculating the FreedomWorks Economic Freedom Scorecard for 2011. The Economic Freedom Scorecard is used to determine eligibility for the Jefferson Award, which recognizes members of Congress with voting records that support economic freedom (Kibbe

2011a).

The lobbying appears to have paid off as those candidates who were endorsed responded with an estimated increase in probability of voting against the jet engine of over 40 percentage points, (recall that the FreedomWorks variable is not included in specification (c) as FreedomWorks only endorsed GOP challengers in 2010). This is in contrast to the budget votes where FreedomWorks also supported Tea Party positions (see, e.g., Kibbe 2011b), but there was no observable effect on members of Congress. It appears interest group positions are swamped by larger political concerns on highly salient budget bills, but can be more powerful on less salient budget votes such as the jet engine vote.

## 4 Conclusion

The Tea Party is an important political movement. It is also a complex movement. There are activists, sympathetic citizens, interest groups and affiliated politicians, all operating in a highly decentralized environment. Which, if any, of these facets is most likely to translate into changing policy?

Our analysis points to activism as the most important way in which the movement might have influence. Republican candidates in districts with more Tea Party activists performed better in the 2010 general election relative to other Republicans, evidence that stood up in a series of placebo and other statistical tests. This ground-level enthusiasm also was associated with legislative changes. On specific votes of interest to the Tea Party, members from districts with high levels of Tea Party activism repeatedly took stands consistent with the movement. The broader implications are clear: organization matters and non-median

influences on Congress are alive and well (Crespin, Gold and David Rohde 2006).

The next most important area of movement strength was elite self-identification with the movement. These individuals did not reap electoral gains by associating with the movement, but on some Tea Party priorities they voted in ways markedly different than otherwise similarly situated Republicans. While this behavior may enhance votes in some indirect way or other forum (such as seeking higher office or publicity), it is also consistent with the idea that these members are sincerely committed to the agenda of the movement and willing to use slack in the representative-voter relationship to advance the goals of the movement.

Interest group influence is less clear. Endorsement by one – and only one – group was associated with better electoral outcomes, but there are signs that this group specifically sought out the most attractive candidates making it hard to be confident that the group’s endorsements were increasing vote shares rather than reflecting underlying and otherwise unmeasured vote-getting advantages of individual candidates. But the group was not simply endorsing candidates in pro-Republican districts, so it remains possible that endorsement by FreedomWorks did causally increase Republican vote totals. We can be more certain that these interest group endorsements generally did not affect congressional voting. The exception was on a lower profile budget vote that FreedomWorks lobbied: on this, the effect was massive. This means that the common practice in news coverage of identifying Tea Party supporters in Congress based on whether they were endorsed by a Tea Party group is generally unwise. For very particular votes on which the groups lobby, however, endorsements may reflect a deeper relationship that influences how members vote. On the high-profile votes and unlobbied votes, however, it appears that GOP candidates endorsed

by Tea Party groups were remarkably conventional Republicans.

Sympathy toward the Tea Party among ordinary citizens showed no influence on electoral outcomes and virtually no sign of influencing congressional votes. This may be due in part to survey respondents not really understanding the Tea Party or due to their lack of mobilization. The contrast of the consistent evidence that activists matter is striking.

These results speak to the strength the movement has gained in a short period of time. Clearly, the Tea Party arises from a long-standing conservative movement in America. However, its political accomplishments are nonetheless real. The fact that some modes of Tea Party affiliation show significant effects even after controlling for the ideology of representatives and the underlying conservatism of their districts suggests that at least some elements of the Tea Party movement are distinct from traditional Republican politics.

More generally, these findings highlight the need in future studies of political movements for careful delineation between these various facets of movement strength, and argue for a heightened focus on non-elite supporters. The actions of well-funded national political organizations affiliated with movements are often easier to measure, and, to be sure, are important. The success of both grassroots and elite components are certainly intertwined. Elites help inform and mobilize voters, supply resources, and advertise ways for grassroots activists to show support (Wald and Fridy 2005). But, as this analysis reinforces, mere *signals* from elites in the form of endorsements are not sufficient, by and large, to impact elections and policy. It is the presence of rank-and-file enthusiasm—boots on the ground—that appears to drive representatives to alter their behavior.

This, in turn, suggests a novel interpretation of the Tea Party. It is not, as some have

concluded, ultimately inconsequential in the 2010 election, nor in policymaking after the election. Even accounting for what we might have expected to happen in 2010 due to the economy, the movement appears to have had an impact. But the movement is also not a simple reflection of the will of the people, or even the will of some people. Its impact appears to have required mobilization among activists. Members of Congress are not responding to changes in the preferences of constituents so much as they are responding to an organized interest, and one that put electoral and legislative politics at the top of its agenda.

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## APPENDIX

Appendix Table 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS (EXCLUDES UNCONTESTED RACES IN 2010)

	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
Tea Party Activists (1,000s)	0.402	0.179	0.041	1.148
Tea Party Favorability	3.021	0.437	1.611	4.016
FreedomWorks	0.276	0.447	0.000	1.000
Tea Party Caucus (112th)	0.118	0.323	0.000	1.000
Tea Party Caucus (111th)	0.084	0.277	0.000	1.000
Tea Party Express Endorsement	0.330	0.471	0.000	1.000
Palin Endorsement	0.079	0.270	0.000	1.000
GOP Two-Party Vote, 2010	0.506	0.170	0.043	0.849
GOP Two-Party Vote, 2008	0.408	0.223	0.000	1.000
GOP Two-Party Vote, 2006	0.420	0.228	0.000	1.000
Change GOP 2008-2010	0.097	0.123	-0.353	0.695
Change GOP 2006-2010	0.085	0.137	-0.461	0.694
Bush Vote in District 2004	0.499	0.138	0.091	0.794
McCain Vote Share in District 2008	0.443	0.141	0.050	0.760
Poole Rosenthal (112th)	0.057	0.701	-1.000	1.000
Poole Rosenthal (110th)	-0.326	0.655	-1.000	0.978
Rep. Incumbent 2010	0.328	0.470	0.000	1.000
Dem. Incumbent 2010	0.571	0.495	0.000	1.000
Rep. Incumbent 2008	0.363	0.481	0.000	1.000
Dem. Incumbent 2008	0.552	0.498	0.000	1.000
Rep. Incumbent 2006	0.463	0.499	0.000	1.000
Dem. Incumbent 2006	0.458	0.499	0.000	1.000
Rep. Spending 2010 (million \$)	1.039	1.199	0.000	12.000
Dem. Spending 2010 (million \$)	1.215	1.138	0.000	5.600
Rep. Spending 2008 (million \$)	0.823	1.043	0.000	7.000
Dem. Spending 2008 (million \$)	1.040	0.968	0.000	7.300
Rep. Spending 2006 (million \$)	0.939	1.184	0.000	8.100
Dem. Spending 2006 (million \$)	0.866	0.844	0.000	4.600
Quality Rep. Challenger 2010	0.190	0.393	0.000	1.000
Quality Dem. Challenger 2010	0.101	0.302	0.000	1.000
Quality Rep. Challenger 2008	0.133	0.340	0.000	1.000
Quality Dem. Challenger 2008	0.111	0.314	0.000	1.000
Quality Rep. Challenger 2006	0.108	0.311	0.000	1.000
Quality Dem. Challenger 2006	0.133	0.340	0.000	1.000
Percent Black	0.118	0.149	0.003	0.652
District Median Household Income (\$100,000s)	0.525	0.139	0.233	1.037
South	0.303	0.460	0.000	1.000
Midwest	0.244	0.430	0.000	1.000
West	0.234	0.424	0.000	1.000

Appendix Table 2: BASIC MODELS OF GOP VOTE IN RECENT CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

	2010	2008	2006
	(a)	(Placebo)	(Placebo)
	(a)	(b)	(c)
Tea Party Activists (1,000s)	0.049 ** (0.016)	0.012 (0.022)	0.001 (0.020)
Tea Party Favorability	0.022 * (0.010)	-0.000 (0.014)	0.008 (0.013)
FreedomWorks	0.022 ** (0.007)	-0.026 ** (0.008)	-0.023 ** (0.007)
Tea Party Caucus (111th)	-0.029 ** (0.010)	-0.005 (0.011)	0.004 (0.011)
Bush Vote in District, 2004	0.771 *** (0.039)	0.682 *** (0.053)	0.613 *** (0.050)
Rep. Incumbent	0.081 *** (0.011)	0.077 *** (0.012)	0.099 *** (0.012)
Dem. Incumbent	-0.059 *** (0.009)	-0.102 *** (0.012)	-0.096 *** (0.012)
(Intercept)	0.040 † (0.021)	0.119 *** (0.031)	0.114 *** (0.028)
<i>N</i>	406	380	378
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.924	0.875	0.887

Dependent variable is Republican share of two-party vote. Standard errors in parentheses. Includes only contested races. † significant at  $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Appendix Table 3: CHANGE IN GOP VOTE, FULL RESULTS

	2010-2008	2010-2006
	(a)	(b)
Tea Party Activists (1,000s)	0.040 *	0.088 ***
	(0.019)	(0.021)
Tea Party Favorability	0.010	0.022
	(0.012)	(0.014)
FreedomWorks	0.014	0.020 *
	(0.008)	(0.010)
Tea Party Caucus (111th)	-0.006	-0.009
	(0.010)	(0.012)
Bush Vote in District, 2004	0.157 **	0.093
	(0.050)	(0.057)
Rep. Incumbent 2010	0.055 ***	0.065 ***
	(0.013)	(0.015)
Dem. Incumbent 2010	0.022	-0.042 **
	(0.014)	(0.014)
Rep. Incumbent in prior year	-0.060 ***	-0.080 ***
	(0.013)	(0.015)
Dem. Incumbent in prior year	0.040 **	0.091 ***
	(0.014)	(0.014)
Rep. Spending 2010	-0.002	-0.002
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Dem. Spending 2010	-0.001	-0.002
	(0.004)	(0.004)
Rep. Spending in prior year	-0.009 *	-0.006
	(0.004)	(0.004)
Dem. Spending in prior year	0.010 *	0.022 ***
	(0.004)	(0.006)
Quality Rep. Challenger 2010	0.016 †	0.014
	(0.009)	(0.010)
Quality Dem. Challenger 2010	0.007	-0.006
	(0.011)	(0.011)
Quality Rep. Challenger in prior year	-0.027 **	-0.041 ***
	(0.009)	(0.012)
Quality Dem. Challenger in prior year	0.007	0.036 ***
	(0.011)	(0.010)
Percent Black	-0.070 **	-0.145 ***
	(0.027)	(0.031)
District Median Household Income	-0.014	-0.070 **
	(0.022)	(0.026)

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	2010-2008	2010-2006
	(a)	(b)
South	0.006 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.011)
Midwest	0.011 (0.008)	-0.001 (0.009)
West	-0.012 (0.008)	-0.059 *** (0.009)
(Intercept)	-0.070 * (0.036)	-0.032 (0.041)
<i>N</i>	359	354
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.425	0.575

Dependent variable is the change in the Republican share of two-party vote from 2006 or 2008 to 2010. Thus the expected signs for variables measured in the prior year are negative for Republican measures and positive for Democratic measures. Standard errors in parentheses. Includes only contested races. † significant at  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Appendix Table 4: CONGRESSIONAL GOP VOTE, CHALLENGERS ONLY

	2010	2008	2006
	(a)	(Placebo)	(Placebo)
	(a)	(b)	(c)
Tea Party Activists (1,000s)	0.083 *** (0.018)	0.025 (0.029)	0.001 (0.025)
Tea Party Favorability	0.034 ** (0.011)	0.004 (0.017)	0.004 (0.017)
FreedomWorks	0.013 † (0.007)	-0.013 (0.010)	0.001 (0.010)
Tea Party Caucus (111th)		0.006 (0.025)	0.011 (0.025)
Lagged GOP House Vote	0.069 *** (0.019)	0.106 *** (0.031)	0.150 *** (0.034)
Bush Vote in District, 2004	0.551 *** (0.050)	0.434 *** (0.071)	0.398 *** (0.074)
Dem. Incumbent	-0.066 *** (0.011)	-0.123 *** (0.021)	-0.065 *** (0.017)
Rep. Spending	0.008 * (0.003)	0.010 † (0.005)	0.019 ** (0.006)
Dem. Spending	0.005 (0.003)	0.007 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.007)
Quality Rep. Challenger	0.007 (0.007)	0.034 ** (0.010)	0.034 ** (0.010)
Quality Dem. Challenger	-0.018 (0.014)	-0.081 *** (0.022)	-0.025 (0.019)
Percent Black	-0.082 *** (0.022)	-0.035 (0.034)	0.033 (0.031)
District Median Household Income	0.022 (0.022)	0.073 * (0.031)	0.079 * (0.032)
South	0.009 (0.009)	0.029 * (0.013)	0.015 (0.013)
Midwest	0.019 * (0.008)	0.005 (0.011)	0.022 † (0.011)
West	-0.023 ** (0.007)	-0.013 (0.011)	0.033 ** (0.011)
(Intercept)	0.060 † (0.031)	0.137 ** (0.049)	0.063 (0.046)
<i>N</i>	273	224	177
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.920	0.810	0.845

Dependent variable is Republican share of two-party vote. Standard errors in parentheses. Includes only contested races. † significant at  $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$



Appendix Table 5: MODELS OF GOP VOTE USING MCCAIN VOTE CONTROL

	2010	2008	2006
	(a)	(Placebo)	(Placebo)
	(a)	(b)	(c)
Tea Party Activists (1,000s)	0.072 *** (0.014)	0.011 (0.020)	-0.009 (0.020)
Tea Party Favorability	0.023 * (0.009)	-0.008 (0.013)	0.015 (0.012)
FreedomWorks	0.026 *** (0.006)	-0.021 ** (0.007)	-0.013 † (0.007)
Tea Party Caucus (111th)	-0.014 † (0.008)	-0.006 (0.010)	0.010 (0.010)
Lagged GOP House Vote	0.111 *** (0.016)	0.155 *** (0.024)	0.165 *** (0.023)
McCain Vote in District, 2008	0.557 *** (0.039)	0.536 *** (0.052)	0.366 *** (0.051)
Rep. Incumbent	0.081 *** (0.010)	0.071 *** (0.013)	0.089 *** (0.014)
Dem. Incumbent	-0.048 *** (0.009)	-0.081 *** (0.014)	-0.082 *** (0.013)
Rep. Spending	-0.002 (0.002)	0.007 † (0.004)	0.006 (0.004)
Dem. Spending	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.010 ** (0.004)	-0.018 *** (0.005)
Quality Rep. Challenger	0.011 † (0.007)	0.032 ** (0.010)	0.044 *** (0.011)
Quality Dem. Challenger	-0.009 (0.008)	-0.029 ** (0.011)	-0.024 * (0.009)
Percent Black	-0.097 *** (0.020)	-0.038 (0.029)	0.030 (0.029)
District Median Household Income	0.026 (0.017)	0.036 (0.024)	0.074 ** (0.024)
South	0.007 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.010)	0.021 * (0.010)
Midwest	0.027 *** (0.006)	0.011 (0.009)	0.031 *** (0.009)
West	-0.018 ** (0.006)	-0.011 (0.009)	0.038 *** (0.009)
(Intercept)	0.106 *** (0.025)	0.159 *** (0.037)	0.100 ** (0.036)
	<i>N</i>	406	380
	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.948	0.907
		0.907	0.913

Dependent variable is Republican share of two-party vote. Standard errors in parentheses. Includes only contested races. † significant at  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$