INSTITUTIONALIZATION WITHOUT DERADICALIZATION: POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT

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University of Pittsburgh, 2018

This dissertation explores the political culture of activists and sympathizers in the Tea Party network in Virginia, with particular attention to its impact on the movement's organizing model and relationships to other political organizations and actors. I ask: How has the Tea Party become so integrated into the Republican Party, while maintaining organizational independence and radical ideology? What does this process tell us about conservative political culture and movement organizing in the Trump era?

Based on ethnographic fieldwork among Tea Party activists and sympathizers, I show that the relationship between the GOP and the Tea Party – at the grassroots level – is partially explained by the political culture dominant among Tea Party conservatives. Tea Party political culture emphasizes an individualist approach to politics, typically through institutional means. This view has two distinct results. First, by encouraging activists to engage in politics primarily as individual agents, the movement allows the majority of its members to become involved in established political institutions – such as the Republican Party – while maintaining allegiance to the Tea Party. Second, the individualist orientation of the movement creates a very diffuse and decentralized organizational structure that extends the movement's reach broadly into the conservative community. At the same time, this open structure creates few barriers to the

introduction and circulation of radical content, but without encouraging a narrow group identity that would isolate activists and alienate the movement. By maintaining this highly diffuse, independent movement structure, the Tea Party underwent partial institutionalization, while avoiding the process of deradicalization that frequently accompanies such a transition. The Tea Party movement is an example of regular people creating political space outside of partisan politics, but through institutional means. It is also an illustrative narrative of how the GOP became dominated by radical politics and actors.

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PREFACE

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I would like first to thank the many Tea Party activists and sympathizers who kindly and patiently tried to help me understand the world through their eyes. You gave me an incredible amount of your time and energy, whether it was between speeches at an event, or while my car sat in a mud pit waiting for a tow. I hope in reading this you will agree that I was truly listening, and have done my best to accurately portray your movement.

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Thank you to my mom, who always taught me to think beyond immediate assumptions. You've always been good at convincing me I was interesting, so I'll let you read my dissertation now. Thanks also to my many siblings, parent/guardians, and friends from coast to coast, you guys are my world and as a certified sociologist, I can now say with authority that you made me who I am.

Finally, thank you to Bruce, who has been by my side throughout this process, providing encouragement, meals, levity, and love. I'm sorry about those library fines. You're the best.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As Laura stood up to get the meeting started, she apologized for her relatively quiet voice; someone else usually ran meetings for this local Tea Party, she explained, but he wasn't there and she was standing in. As per usual, the meeting began with a prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance, before general announcements, followed by the evening's speaker. As it happened, Laura herself had a couple of announcements. Turning away from the crowd, Laura reached down to the table behind her, grabbed a large red button with her name printed across it, and pinned it to her chest. As she explained, she was running for delegate to the Republican National Convention, and she wanted to make a quick pitch to Tea Party members gathered there to vote for her at the GOP district convention that month. Having concluded her appeal, she announced she was switching "hats" and making another announcement. With one finger in the air demonstrating a pause, Laura again turned again to the table behind her, picked up another red button – this one printed with the name "Dave Brat" – and quickly switched pins. Now, she explained, patting her new button, she was speaking on behalf of the Dave Brat campaign for re-election, and she wanted to encourage Tea Party membership to attend the upcoming GOP district convention to support "Dave," as he would be facing some genuine opposition in the next election. Having concluded that appeal, she turned around, removed the pin, and returned to her Tea Party facilitator role, introducing meeting guests and speakers and welcoming them to the group.

Through ethnographic research studying the grassroots Tea Party movement, I found that Laura exemplifies the political ethos of the 2016 Tea Party: Diving headfirst into the GOP, she has integrated herself into the apparatus via multiple roles. Yet at the same time, she has maintained a leadership role in her local Tea Party group and – as I would later observe – would guard her independence from the Party when GOP leadership attempted to assert their authority, committed to an agenda that pushed the Republican Party farther right.

This dissertation explores these dynamics among activists and sympathizers throughout the Tea Party network in Virginia. I ask: How has the Tea Party become so integrated into the Republican Party, while maintaining their organizational independence and radical ideology? What does this process tell us about conservative movement organizing in the Trump era?

I argue that the relationship between the GOP and the Tea Party – at the grassroots level – is partially explained by the political culture dominant among Tea Party activists and sympathizers. In defining "political culture," I use Ruth Braunstein's (2017) model of a "democratic imaginary," which captures how people conceive of an ideal political system and their roles within this system. Rather than focusing exclusively on activists – as Braunstein and many other social movement scholars do – I study the political culture as it is manifest in the broader movement network, integrating analysis of non-activist movement supporters, as well as social and cultural leaders from activists' communities. Activists and sympathizers of the Tea Party see themselves as individual citizens with a responsibility to fulfill their civic obligations to support the democratic republic (Braunstein 2017).

The Tea Party's vision of individualist civic responsibility has two distinct results. First, by encouraging activists to engage in politics primarily as individual agents, the movement allows the majority of its members to become involved in established political institutions – such

as the Republican Party – while maintaining an independent commitment to the Tea Party. Rather than becoming absorbed into the Republican Party, the Tea Party thus maintained itself as an autonomous movement. Second, the individualist orientation of the movement creates a very diffuse and decentralized organizational structure that extends the movement's reach broadly into the conservative community. At the same time, this open structure creates few barriers to the introduction and circulation of radical content. When social movements engage with mainstream political institutions, they often deradicalize their agenda by compromising to conform to dominant ideologies among mainstream political actors and entities (Tarrow 1989, 2011). In contrast, the organizing structure of the movement enabled the Tea Party to avoid such a transformation.

By drawing on the dominant conservative political culture, the Tea Party has effectively institutionalized itself as an independent movement that is simultaneously highly influential in the Republican Party, well-integrated into non-activist communities, and radical in ideology and agenda. It is an example of how regular people can create political space outside of partisan politics, but through institutional means. It is also an illustrative narrative of how the GOP became dominated by radical politics and actors.

The rest of this section provides background on my case study, including the movement nationally, as well as the Tea Party in Virginia. I then discuss the bodies of literature from which my study draws, followed by an outline of the rest of my dissertation.

1.1 CASE STUDY

1.1.1 The Tea Party Movement

The Tea Party first mobilized in February 2009 after a CNBC business news editor in Chicago launched into an online rant about the Obama Administration's mortgage assistance plan, describing potential beneficiaries as "losers" who couldn't "carry the water." He went on to complain that Cuba had ruined their economy by turning from "the individual to the collective," implicitly comparing Obama's proposal to a Communist agenda. His call for a "Chicago Tea Party on the banks of Lake Michigan" quickly went viral (Todd Sullivan 2009). Established conservative organizers took advantage of this publicity by organizing protests against taxes and federal government spending around the country (Lo 2012; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). As local groups formed in cities, towns, and suburbs throughout the nation, they began to host speakers on political issues and protests became less frequent (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Many Tea Party activists became involved in voter registration or legislative tracking. They have also joined local Republican Party bodies, and many activists have become deeply involved in local and national elections and legislative campaigns (Almeida and Van Dyke 2014; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). As my research shows, meetings are now simultaneously networking sites for candidates to reach conservative audiences, for campaigns to find volunteers, for government officials to reach constituents, for activists to learn about the political process, and for professional conservative organizers to speak on political issues.

Tea Party principles usually describe a commitment to limited government and fiscal responsibility. Despite this ostensibly narrow focus, I found that groups and individuals in the movement often address social issues in terms of opposition to activity by the federal

government. For example, most of the activists I studied felt that the federal government is over-stepping its bounds by requiring public schools to acknowledge transgender students' rights in order to receive public funds. I also observed that refugee resettlement became an animating issue for the Tea Party in 2016, drawing large crowds to public meetings on the topic, and emerging as a recurring theme among activists. Although the Tea Party addressed this issue from a number of angles, movement leaders emphasized the financial costs of the resettlement program, applying a "fiscal responsibility" frame to an issue that – activists openly admitted – has obvious cultural/social dimensions. Thus, although national organizers in the early years of the Tea Party attempted to steer the movement away from social issues, in practice, such distinctions were less neat (Zernike 2010).

1.1.2 The Tea Party in Virginia

Virginia has a particularly active Tea Party grassroots presence, although it is difficult to make comparisons as the Tea Party is extremely decentralized and hard to document nationally. Approximately 20 local groups are now active, concentrated in Central Virginia, (the Richmond area), the Shenandoah Valley, Virginia Beach, and Northern Virginia. They are frequently organized by county, and most have joined a statewide federation, the Virginia Tea Party Patriots Federation. Groups meet as often as twice a month to every few months. Some meet in-person less frequently, but stay in touch online or in informal networks, as members volunteer directly in campaigns or for events, and so forth. Groups have anywhere from seven to fifty regular attendees, with bigger events drawing crowds of over a hundred. All groups operate independently of one another, although the statewide federation involves representatives from every member group and does coordinate some activity. For example, they host quarterly, state-

wide conventions, featuring speakers that local groups might be interested in bringing to their home counties. Most importantly, they circulate emails suggesting action on legislative developments in the Virginia General Assembly. In national and state races, the Federation sometimes endorses political candidates.

1.2 LITERATURE

1.2.1 Political Cultures in the Social Movement Society

Scholars describe a "social movement society" in which social movement tactics are increasingly integrated into society, as activists have professionalized and moved movement politics into mainstream political institutions, including parties, interest groups, lobbying firms, and campaigns (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). Further, they argue that movement activism has lost its earlier stigma, as a wider and more diverse range of actors have embraced activism and movement tactics have become less disruptive and more formalized. At the individual level, scholars find that many people move in and out of movement activism over the course of their lives (Corrigall-Brown 2011). Further, the advent of "lifestyle politics," "cultural movements," and "prefigurative politics" has blurred the distinction between activist and non-activist (Haenfler, Johnson and Jones 2012; Yates 2015).

At the same time, political sociologists have emphasized the relevance of different political cultures in different contexts, showing how distinct understandings of "politics" and citizens' roles in politics result in very different types of movement organizations (Binder and Wood 2013; Blee 2012; Braunstein 2017; Eliasoph 1990; Lichterman 1996; Staggenborg 2015;

Taylor 2015). For example, Ruth Braunstein (2017: 119) compares a conservative Tea Party group with a progressive Interfaith group, showing that both believe they have a strong responsibility to "hold government accountable," but they advance these goals very differently based on different visions of the relationships between citizens and politicians. The Tea Party saw themselves as a collection of individuals who gained the power to confront representatives based on their rights as individual citizens. In contrast, the Interfaith group saw themselves as members of various communities and worked with representatives to try to incorporate representatives into their symbolic communities to collaboratively reach shared solutions.

While Braunstein (2017) observed Tea Party activists in the northeast discuss and collectively create this approach to politics in the early days of their movement, between 2010 and 2012, my research shows that, several years later, Tea Party groups in another part of the country had arrived at very similar conclusions about themselves. By looking at a single network and incorporating actors from different levels of commitment, interest and experience, my research shows that political culture can serve as the foundation of a diffuse movement, and not just as the modus operandi for a single, contained group. For example, nearly all activists and non-activists in my study approved of the massive, wooden yellow signs along rural highways that Tea Party groups used to advertise meetings and political messages, as activists and sympathizers agreed with the signs' content and style. Among conservatives with shared ideas about what form political expression should take, these massive yellow signs provided a link between activists and sympathetic non-activists in the area.

Social movement cultures, societies, and communities are evolving differently in different places (Ramos and Rodgers 2015; Staggenborg 2015; Taylor 2015). My study contributes to scholarly understanding of these distinct dynamics by directly assessing the role of

movement tactics and strategies in a conservative movement. I find that the political culture of the Tea Party network encouraged an anti-partisan ethos that rejected political parties as the basis of popular organizing, while simultaneously rejecting protest tactics. Ultimately, Tea Party activists created an independent movement that uses institutional politics, but organized outside of the Republican Party.

1.2.2 Political Polarization, Radicalization, and Social Movements

A central goal of social movements is to spread ideologies and beliefs more broadly in society. Indeed, recent literature ties growing political polarization across society to the radicalizing effects of social movement mobilization. Social movements typically advance a political agenda that is not represented by dominant political actors (Tarrow 2011), their demands are therefore "radical" compared to those of "mainstream" forces. In this analysis, I use these words to refer to ideological comparisons in two ways: between dominant political entities and challenger movements, and within a single movement (or individual activists within the movement) at different stages over time. In this view, the radicalization of political representatives and grassroots political activists on both sides of the aisle has coincided with the successful integration of movement ideologies, activists, and identities into political parties, universities, churches, and many other social institutions (Abramowitz 2012; Bell 2014; McAdam and Kloos 2014; Rojas 2007; Staggenborg and Taylor 2005; Zald 2000). This phenomenon represents a transformation in typical patterns of movement evolution, as research also shows that, when movements institutionalize through mainstream politics, they often deradicalize their ideologies and agendas (Koopmans 1993; Tarrow 1989, 2011).

At the same time, extensive research at the individual level shows that social movements can radicalize participants by introducing them to extremist ideology and content with which they were previously unfamiliar (or at least not convinced by) (Blee 2002; Munson 2010). In radical movements, this process can alienate activists from their friends and family, forcing them to form new social networks while losing others (Blee 2002; Downton and Wehr 1997; Simi and Futrell 2009). Some observers have described the narrowing effects of this process as creating "activist ghettos," where radicalized actors operate in isolation from the rest of society (Chatterton 2010).

My dissertation integrates these bodies of literature by analyzing how social movements contribute to the process of political polarization by drawing on shared political culture to normalize radical content. My research shows that nearly all of the activists experienced some form of radicalization through participation in the Tea Party. Yet, no one described becoming isolated from their existing family or friends. Instead, as the Tea Party acts as a civic group, drawing heavily on shared cultural ideas regarding local politics, community engagement, and patriotism, the movement was able to maintain itself as a welcoming destination for new and regular activists alike to come learn about local politics, while being exposed to radical political content. Furthermore, it did not encourage a new collective identity that excluded other people within this existing cultural group, but instead, encouraged people to see themselves as more "informed" (see also Braunstein 2017; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Finally, by maintaining an independent movement, the Tea Party was able to maintain movement ideology, even after institutionalizing through the Republican Party. Political culture was thus a vehicle for the Tea Party to advance radical movement ideology.

1.3 OUTLINE OF DISSERTATION

Chapter Two reviews the methods I employed while collecting and analyzing data. In attempting to capture the political culture of a diverse network, I deployed a range of outreach methods, interviewing individuals and observing a variety of political and social events. As a result, I successfully traced manifestations of shared cultural norms regarding politics, from an evangelical prayer rally to political strategizing at the Republican National Convention.

Chapter Three begins by reviewing existing literature on social movement evolution, emphasizing the processes of mass movement decline, institutionalization, and radicalization/deradicalization. I follow with a brief discussion of studies of these dynamics within the Tea Party. I then show that the highly diffuse nature of the Tea Party has endured, forming a central filter into a right-wing network, through which dozens of local and national political organizations and campaigns reach a broad array of dedicated activists and sympathizers, who in turn, reach out more broadly to sympathizers and potential sympathizers. At the same time, the movement has also been institutionalized through its strong relationship with the local Republican Party. By maintaining this highly diffuse, independent movement structure, the Tea Party underwent institutionalization without deradicalization.

Chapter Four first reviews the literature on how cultural norms, expectations and values shape social movement organizing. I then develop a modified version of Ruth Braunstein's model of political culture that focuses on the distillation of shared political understandings in a broader conservative culture. I follow this by showing how the Tea Party organizing model appeals to activists' cultural preferences. By relying on this shared understanding of political organizing, the Tea Party maintained a fluid and highly diffuse organizing model that united a broad network of sympathizers and activists.

Finally, Chapter Five illustrates these dynamics in detail by using the Tea Party's relationship with Congressman Dave Brat as an example. I first review the details of Brat's campaign and victory. I then show how Brat continues to evoke particular aspects of conservative political culture to maintain his favored status by the Tea Party that helped get him elected. Specifically, he appears to form a relationship with Tea Party activists whereby he acts as "their guy" in Washington, feeding them "insider" information and then taking their demands to Congress. By allowing Tea Party activists to enact their idealized vision of politics, Dave Brat maintains his status as a Tea Party "movement politician." I conclude with suggestions for future research.

1.4 CONCLUSION

The Tea Party is an excellent case through which to understand the shifting relationships among social movements, political parties, and other social institutions in a polarized political climate. Although social movement mobilizations and tactics have become increasingly common and visible (Fox Piven 2014; Meyer and Tarrow 1998), recent research suggests that political constituencies embrace movement activism as a tactic differently depending on the views of the political system and citizens' roles in politics (Braunstein 2017; Corrigall-Brown 2011; Taylor 2015). By analyzing the Tea Party's relationship with the Republican Party in the context of their organizing structure, I show the relevance of the Tea Party's political culture for their ability to maintain an enduring, independent movement.

2.0 DATA AND METHODS

This study began as research for my Master's thesis looking at women's activism in a few local Tea Party groups and morphed into this dissertation which examines a broad network of activists and sympathizers as they organized across a state and eventually into national politics. To capture the many components and dynamics of this network, I drew on several types of qualitative data: in-depth interviews with Tea Party and associated activists, in-depth interviews with non-activist sympathizers, (meaning sympathetic actors who had attended fewer than four Tea Party events), observations at Tea Party and other political events, observations at social and cultural functions involving Tea Party activists, Tea Party advertisements and outreach paraphernalia, and online blogs recounting and editorializing about local political events with Tea Party actors. In this chapter, I describe the evolution of my research goals, my methods of data collection, the basic descriptive findings, methods of analysis, and ethical considerations.

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND THEORETICAL APPROACH

I began my dissertation with the goal of understanding the social base of the Tea Party movement. In my Master's research, I found that most Tea Party activists were surrounded by friends, family, and acquaintances who they believed had similar political views, but were not active in the Tea Party. In fact, they saw few ideological or political distinctions between

themselves and most “conservatives” they knew; and they interchangeably cited examples of conservative cultural behaviors and political ideas (2014). They regarded all conservatives, including Tea Party activists, as sharing a commitment to a set of principles that are largely apolitical, such as individual personal responsibility and patriotism. However, since they believe that both major political parties in the U.S. have abandoned the fundamental principles of American democracy, Tea Party conservatives think that a state of political crisis compels them to enter politics to correct the political system and ultimately, to protect their way of life. Thus, grassroots Tea Party groups rally behind the idea of “conservatism” in the service of an explicitly political agenda, even as they see themselves as representative of a “conservative” population defined in fundamentally apolitical terms. My goal was to understand the different manifestations of conservatism that circulate and evolve among Tea Party activists, sympathizers, and people who identify as “conservative” more generally – and how these different populations interact with the movement.

My research aims were two: First, I wanted to understand the meaning of “conservatism” to Tea Party activists and sympathizers. What are the manifestations of conservatism among activists and non-activists and how are they defined, communicated, and enacted? Specifically, when do they understand conservatism as political, apolitical, or both? In what contexts are these different meanings invoked? How do conservatives interpret conservatism in their lives and in their communities? What interpretations are most influential in determining their political activity? Second, I wanted to understand how their understanding of conservatism is operationalized in conservative organizing. How do different understandings and expressions of Tea Party “conservatism” influence the strategies, tactics, and organizational patterns of Tea Party mobilizations? How do activists’ interpretations of conservatism impact the goals and

campaigns of the Tea Party? What different manifestations of conservatism influence different kinds of Tea Party projects? How are ideas of conservatism deployed in the Tea Party?

This analysis draws on a "critical realist" approach (Maxwell 2013), which seeks to uncover the meaning that informants attach to their actions and to the world around them (Kurzman 2008). In this approach, subjective data such as beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and values are "real" phenomena that tell researchers how informants perceive and "make sense" of events and their own actions (Maxwell 2013: 80-1). Thus, by understanding how Tea Party activists and sympathizers themselves understood "conservatism," I sought to gain insight into how the Tea Party movement mobilized.

Pursuing a form of grounded theory, I narrowed and adjusted my original research questions as part of the research process, analyzing my data as I collected it and re-specifying my research goals and methods as I went (Corbin and Strauss 1990). For example, when I realized that activists repeatedly responded to a general question about their "political responsibilities" in terms of how they would ideally interact with elected representatives, I focused on understanding how Tea Party activists and sympathizers envision an ideal relationship between political leaders and citizens and adjusted my interview schedule to include that topic.

At the same time, my research evolved according to types of data I was able to access; that is, who I was able to interview and what types of events I had opportunities to observe. Thus, I focused increasingly on how the political culture of the Tea Party impacted the movement's relationship with the Republican Party as I gained access and opportunities to explore this issue. For example, as the 2016 elections were underway, the local Republican Party hosted a series of meetings in which Tea Party activists were active that were open to press and researchers. After observing these events, I was invited by a Tea Party activist to attend the

Republican National Convention. To take advantage of this unique opportunity, I obtained a new IRB certification to explicitly examine interactions between Tea Party conservatives and the Trump campaign at the RNC, in the context of my overall focus on Tea Party conservatism.

In the end, my main focus was how the political culture of Tea Party conservatism impacted the movement, specifically in terms of its relationship to external groups and the greater community of sympathizers. The following subsections discuss data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations in this research process.

2.2 DATA COLLECTION

I chose Richmond, Virginia, as a site for practical and substantive reasons. I had extended family in the area with whom I could stay while in the field, and early data on the Tea Party suggested that the state had a number of active groups. I entered and exited the field three times, in summer 2013, summer 2014 (both for pre-dissertation research), and from December 2015 through all of 2016 (for my dissertation). During all three periods, I used a combination of interviews, event observations, and surveys to collect data. I also pursued a range of outreach efforts, relying primarily on in-person recruitment at events, referrals from previous informants, flyering, and referrals from several family members. In the following subsection, I outline these methods, starting with a brief discussion of how I presented myself in these efforts and then describing my outreach strategies. I conclude with a discussion of the resulting sample.

2.2.1 Reflexivity and Self-Presentation

The first time I walked into a Tea Party event, in the summer of 2013, I felt like everyone turned to look at me. That was probably partly a false perception on my part, produced by an over-active imagination driven by my first fieldwork jitters. And yet, it wouldn't have been surprising if audience members had noticed me, as the event was focused on attracting "young people" to the conservative movement, and I was one of a minority of people in attendance without gray hair. Thus began my years'-long foray into fieldwork with the Tea Party.

In many ways, a great social distance existed between my informants and me. I was much younger, less religious, more liberal, and from a different region of the country than nearly everyone I encountered. While these differences created potential barriers for me in terms of data collection and analysis, I drew on scholarship in "reflexivity" to recognize these challenges, and develop strategies to handle them in my data collection and analysis (Babbie 2005; Taylor 1998).

Initially, my immediate concern was access. Conservatives are often hostile towards academics and those on the other side of the political spectrum (Pew 2016, 2017), and I worried that my status in both these categories would be a barrier to meeting and recruiting informants. However, while I did face regular hostility, I was almost always able to overcome concerns by emphasizing my status as a researcher with a genuine interest in understanding the Tea Party conservative movement.

I began by introducing myself as a "graduate student researcher." For my Master's work, I explained that I was studying the role of women in the Tea Party. Later, after broadening my research, I explained that I was studying "conservatism - how people see conservatism in their lives and in the world around them." I often went on to explain that I was studying "the conservative movement." At the Republican National Convention, I added that as part of this

project, I was studying the relationship between conservatives, the conservative movement, and the Trump campaign. At this point, many activists were happy to talk, while others were more hesitant. Some, given the reputation of the so-called "liberal media" – a category to which they often tried to assign me – expressed concern that I would be dishonest and untruthful. I explained that I was genuinely trying to understand the movement, that I could not promise that they would approve of or agree with everything I wrote, but that I would "take the movement seriously" and be fair and honest. At that point, (or soon thereafter), most informants asked me if I was "a conservative," to which I replied honestly in the negative.

I built rapport by sharing experiences and views on several levels. First, as do other scholars studying movements they do not sympathizer with, I spoke about my personal life, telling anecdotes especially about common experiences with family, pets, traffic, and so forth (Blee 2002). I followed previous scholars' methodology in adopting a non-confrontational mode in which I typically did not openly express any disagreement. This approach is necessary to avoid making informants defensive, and thus distracted or unwilling to freely express themselves (Blee 2002; Klatch 1988). Although there were moments in which I found this very difficult, in general, it was actually much easier than I had imagined.

My ability to interview people with whom I disagreed so consistently rested on two factors. First, I genuinely was trying to understand the perceptions, internal logics, and narratives of my informants. My intellectual curiosity was a driving force in this research and I was honestly less interested in engaging in debate than listening to and understanding their views and how they had arrived at them. I tried to identify the assumptions, emotional responses, and the evidence on which they relied. Second, although I disagreed with nearly all the policy solutions that Tea Party conservatives advocated, was dismayed by prejudices they sometimes expressed,

and knew some of the statements they made were grossly inaccurate, I agreed with much of what they said. Nearly all expressed anger and frustration at an unresponsive government, an economy with fewer opportunities for future generations, and a society increasingly divided. I disagreed with how they viewed the causes and solutions to these problems, but shared some of these concerns and agreed with some of their sentiments. For example, Tea Party conservatives frequently complained that politics had been damaged by the enormous amount of money circulating in the system. I agreed, once sharing that I had seen a video claiming that politicians spent more than half of their time fundraising (see LastWeekTonight 2016). These moments of shared frustration, and sometimes levity, built rapport.

2.2.2 Informant Recruitment

In May of 2013, I looked at online calendars to see when the first upcoming Tea Party event in Virginia was scheduled, and emailed the listed contact. When I didn't hear a response, I showed up at the meeting – a fairly large event in the sanctuary of a large church. I introduced myself to the women staffing the information table as I entered, explaining that I was a graduate student researching the Tea Party. At that event and at others that followed – including rallies and meetings of other Tea Party groups – I followed a similar pattern of introducing myself, explaining that I was doing research and was wondering if anyone would be willing to be interviewed for my project. After completing interviews, I asked for referrals to other activists and/or sympathizers, and successfully interviewed 11 activists that summer.

When I returned to the field the following summer, I followed up with my previous informants, explaining that I needed a larger data set, and asking for referrals to more activists. I shared with them some preliminary findings based on my Master's research. One informant

provided me with several new activist contacts. At the same time, I reached out to the leader of another group I had read about online. He gave me referrals to another handful of activists.

When I returned to the field for my dissertation research two years later, I had much bigger ambitions: I wanted to capture the political culture of an entire movement network, including Tea Party activists, activists in related organizations, and non-activist sympathizers. Using ethnographic methods, I began to see many of the same activists at various political events at which I followed up with them on interview questions, or asked for responses to recent events, and so forth. Occasionally, I got rides with informants, met their families, or went to their churches, facilitating more opportunities for informal interaction.

I also wanted to understand how prominent and visible this political culture was in the communities in which Tea Party groups were active. In this effort, I attended multiple political, social, and cultural events to find signs of conservative political culture throughout the community. My research primarily centered on the Tea Party network in the Richmond area, where I focused on attending events and locating informants. I also included interviews with several Tea Party conservatives from other parts of the state, typically because they were leaders integral to the movement, or, in a couple of instances, because I met them at national rallies in the early period of my research.

Given the size of the movement network I had set out to study, and because I didn't know what was possible, I started my dissertation research by simultaneously pursuing a number of outreach strategies, initially interviewing anyone who was willing to participate. Eventually, as my study was narrowed by practical limitations as well as intellectual evolutions, I used theoretical sampling to focus on gathering a more specific sample. As demonstrated in Table 1,

this process resulted in a total of 101 interviews, drawing heavily on referrals and contacts at events.

Table 1. Informant Recruitment Methods

Category	Recruitment Method	No. of Interviews Conducted
Tea Party Activists	At Tea Party Events	28
	Activist Referrals	15
	At non-Tea Party events	7
	Non-Activist Referrals	4
	Cold call via online contact information	2
	Referral from family	1
	Total	57
Tea Party-Associated Activists	At political events	12
	Activist referral	5
	Non-Activist Referrals	3
	Total	20
Non-Activist Tea Party Sympathizers	Flyering cars with Tea Party associated-paraphernalia	1
	Flyering local businesses	1
	Family referrals	5
	Approached/surveyed at political events	5
	Activist Referrals	5
	Non-Activist Referrals	7
	Total	24
Total		101

2.2.2.1 Recruiting Non-Activists I considered informants "non-activists" when they described the Tea Party positively (in some aspects or at least at some point in time), and/or supported Tea Party-associated candidates, and/or occasionally attended Tea Party events (no more than three). I used this liberal definition to capture people who were a part of the broader political culture. When I first entered the field in 2013, I attempted to follow Ziad Munson's (2010) methodological approach for comparing activists and non-activists, asking activists for referrals to non-activists. In contrast to Munson's experience, only one of the 11 people I interviewed that summer provided me such a contact for a non-activist. I guessed it was because non-activists were not receptive to these requests by activists. So, for my dissertation I attempted to access non-activists directly, without the mediation of activists.

I pursued a range of outreach strategies, with less than satisfying results. First, I tried a variety of "cold call" recruitment tactics, nearly all of which failed. For example, I made up one-page flyers asking, "Are you a conservative?" while introducing my research and asking for volunteers. I placed approximately 50 flyers on cars in parking lots near Tea Party meeting locations, targeting only cars with the Tea Party-associated "Don't Tread on Me" license plates or other bumper stickers or flags associated with conservative politics such as Confederate flags or stickers for Republican candidates. It took me days to distribute these flyers in suburban and rural parking lots, but it resulted in only one interview. I also placed flyers in mailboxes along a few rural roads in one of the most heavily-Republican areas in the metro region. Despite the fact that I wrote handwritten notes on each one introducing myself and explaining that I was staying with my cousin nearby, this approach yielded no volunteers. Additionally, I placed flyers with tear-off tabs on bulletin boards in coffee shops, restaurants, and local grocery stores all over the

area, with only one successful interview. Finally, I stopped in at a local gun shop, asked for volunteers and left flyers, but found no takers.

These results reflect the sampling problem that Guro Kristenen and Molin Ravn (2015) describe as "the voices heard and the voices silenced." They argue that the most difficult informants to recruit are those who think they have nothing of value to contribute to the research topic. I suspect that this might have been at play in my difficulty in recruiting non-activists, who may not have been interested in being interviewed about their politics, either because they did not enjoy talking about politics or because they thought they had nothing to say.

In an attempt to overcome informants' hesitancy, I attempted a variety of other outreach strategies. First, I asked my family members in the area if they knew any "conservatives" who supported the Tea Party. This resulted in eight referrals and five interviews. Interestingly, although everyone professed not to know anyone in the Tea Party, I found that all of my family members who made referrals were – at most – two degrees away from an activist in the Tea Party network. Yet, these contacts produced few referrals.

Eventually, I came across willing non-activists at political events. Here, I had two ways of recruiting. First, I simply approached people and asked if they were willing to be interviewed. Second, at Tea Party meetings, I distributed brief surveys that asked for interview volunteers to provide contact information. I had initially not considered this approach likely to reach non-activists, as I assumed that most people who attended such events would be politically involved. To my surprise, I repeatedly encountered people who had only attended a couple of political events in their entire lives, and either had come to that event for a very particular reason, or with an activist friend. For example, one woman I met at a rally for the Convention of the States (an organization dedicated to holding a convention to reassess the U.S. Constitution) was relatively

uninvolved in politics – and uninterested in becoming more involved – but had come as an educational field trip for her homeschooled adolescent children. In total, I interviewed six non-activists that I met at political events.

Throughout my time in the field, I continued to ask informants for referrals to non-activists. The vast majority responded that they would consider it but never produced referrals. In total, this method resulted in six interviews with non-activists, half of whom were from the same activist. Non-activists were only slightly better at recruiting other non-activists, producing seven successful referrals. In total, I interviewed 24 non-activist Tea Party sympathizers.

2.2.2.2 Recruiting Activists Initially, I planned to interview 50 activists and 50 non-activists, sampling for demographic variation among both groups. However, when my struggle to recruit non-activists quickly revealed that this would be impossible, and as my outreach attempts continuously led me towards more politically engaged Tea Party conservatives, I shifted my goals to include capturing as many different components of the activist network as possible.

I used multiple strategies to find people in the activist network around the Tea Party. As snowball sampling is effective at collecting data on a single social network (Small 2009), I began with this method to create an overall sample of the network. I knew from pre-dissertation research that the Tea Party network in Richmond included approximately ten Tea Party groups, with cores of dedicated activists in each group, and leaders from each group who interacted with one another. In essence, each group was comprised of a network, which – through a few leaders – was connected to the overall regional movement network. I began by reaching out to several local groups, following my previous approach of sending emails, showing up at meetings and introducing myself. At the same time, I found that the non-activists I was interviewing were leading me to activists and local Tea Party leaders.

At this early phase in my research, Tea Party group leaders played a critical role as gatekeepers to their groups. Gurchathen S. Sanghera and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert (2008) argue that gatekeepers not only affect researchers' access to potential informants and research sites, but also provide potential informants with information about the researcher(s) and research project that may impact access. Gatekeepers can thus provide access but also create bias in sampling. These effects are dependent on the structure of the network. For example, the role of gatekeepers is different in formal, hierarchical organizations in which gatekeepers have explicit authority than in informal ones in which gatekeepers must exert power through "the strength of their personality and character" (Reeves 2010: 325).

The complex nature of the Tea Party movement meant that gatekeepers were more and less powerful in different contexts. For example, the movement overall is decentralized, as local groups are independent and autonomous, with little decision-making at the movement level. Each group also has elements of hierarchy and decentralization, as a core of leaders within each group are responsible for most decision-making but have little control over members.

Tea Party leaders impacted my sample both by facilitating access to informants, but also by encouraging me to pursue particular types of informants. At first, they welcomed me to – or at least did not eject me from – meetings. This was crucial, because had I been asked to leave, it would have been very difficult to reach informants. Five leaders allowed me to introduce myself and request interviews from members. I was able to interview at least one leader from nearly all of the independent groups. These leaders introduced me to other Tea Party leaders, as well as to leaders in related groups and campaigns. Over time, I built relationships with a number of Tea Party leaders and influential activists whom I saw regularly at political events where we would speak informally. I imagine that such public displays of my relationships with leaders facilitated

my ability to recruit informants at other levels of the network. Ultimately, I met 28 activist informants at Tea Party events, while 15 were referrals from other Tea Party activists (see Table 1).

The rest of the Tea Party activists I interviewed I met through cold calls based on online contact information, at non-Tea Party events, and a family referral. Interestingly, the non-activists I interviewed also referred me to activists in the Tea Party, four of whom I interviewed. Seven activists I met at non-Tea Party events, including those hosted by the local Republican Party. Two informants I "cold-called" after I found their contact information on Tea Party websites, and one was referred to me by my family.

Tea Party gatekeepers were especially critical in facilitating my entrée into the broader Tea Party network, including activists who were sympathetic but not directly associated with any Tea Party group. In this category I include people associated with special interest advocacy groups, professional lobbyists, or campaigns, all of which had staff and/or volunteers who were sympathetic to the Tea Party, but organized distinct groups independently. In some ways, these interviews were more difficult to obtain, as few of the non-Tea Party organizations in the network were as diffuse and decentralized as were Tea Party groups. Generally, such groups were smaller and more hierarchical. They often had professional staffs and were more wary of sociologist researchers. They were also less likely to have public meetings. In these cases, support from other activists was critical to my access. For example, my invitation to the Republican National Convention allowed me to observe not only the official proceedings, but also the various events, meals, and informal gatherings of delegates and their guests. This was access that could only be provided by a powerful gatekeeper. This invitation gave me access to

members of the Virginia delegation and their guests, including several activists in the greater Tea Party network whom I was able to interview.

In total, I interviewed 20 non-Tea Party activists. Six were associated with advocacy groups, four were either politicians or paid campaign staffers, one was primarily associated with the local GOP, and one was a media figure. The final eight were independent activists who expressed some approval of the Tea Party, attended a variety of political events, or volunteered for campaigns, but were not regular attendees of a Tea Party group, nor associated with another organization. Among this group, 12 were recruited at political events (including those I met at the RNC), five were referred by other activists, and three by non-activists (see Table 1).

Tea Party gatekeepers expanded my access within the movement, but they also may have biased my sample. For example, they typically ushered me towards leaders and other highly engaged activists. This may have compounded my existing problem trying to recruit less active and dedicated informants. Furthermore, gatekeepers likely introduced me to activists who they thought would provide a positive image of the movement. I attempted to counter this directly: at the four Tea Party meetings where I formally introduced myself and asked for volunteers (at a fifth meeting I was introduced but wasn't able to speak myself) I explained that I was trying to get a wide range of conservatives, and explicitly said that if this was their first meeting or their fiftieth, I would love to interview them. This diversified my sample in terms of the level of experience and commitment among Tea Party activists, and helped me reach activists the leaders might not have recommended.

2.2.2.3 Informant Sampling Methodology Initially, I pursued multiple outreach strategies and interviewed anyone who was willing. At this point, I was basically pursuing a number of snowball samples simultaneously. However, as I began to gather data and analyze my results, I

developed causal theories that required more specific samples, following a grounded theory methodology (Corbin and Strauss 1990). For example, as I developed theories about views towards protest, I went out of my way to interview activists that I heard were non-normative in their continuing embrace of protest activity, as examples of “negative cases” (Snow and Trom 2002). I also attempted to interview activists who were involved in either Libertarian-oriented groups or explicitly Christian groups. I also intended to interview representatives from as many network organizations as I could, actively seeking out leaders from the non-Tea Party groups that were most closely associated with the movement. In this effort, I identified groups with the most frequent presence at Tea Party events, or with whom I found the most overlapping membership with Tea Party activists. Some of these interviews were “key informant” interviews, as I considered these activists “experts” in the history and strategy of particular groups, and thus asked them extensive questions about their groups in particular (Blee and Taylor 2002). In nearly all cases, participation overlap between these groups and the Tea Party meant that I interviewed rank and file activists from these groups through the Tea Party. Ultimately, I reached saturation when I had obtained interviews with representatives from as many different network organizations as possible and new interviews yielded little new information (Small 2009).

2.2.3 Implementing Tea Party Meeting Surveys

To gain a quantitative measure of who attended Tea Party meetings, I implemented brief, two-page surveys at five Tea Party meetings of different groups (see Appendix A). The groups surveyed were those where I had developed the most rapport with leadership. (I requested to distribute surveys at two other groups, but received no response.) Surveys quickly generated

many informants. I followed-up with every respondent who volunteered in the first four surveys, but by the fifth, had become close to saturation and did not follow up.

Surveys included multiple-choice questions asking respondents how many Tea Party events they had attended, how often they attended Tea Party events, how they heard about their first Tea Party event, if they had had previous political experience and what kind, and if they had since had political experience outside of the Tea Party, and if so, what kind (see Appendix A). In each case, I got permission ahead of time, was introduced by a Tea Party organizer, and distributed the surveys. In four of the cases, I was able to introduce myself and answer questions. In each of these four cases, the leader either introduced me as a "liberal" or a "Democrat," or someone in the audience asked, meaning that my status as a non-conservative was established immediately. Together, surveys had a 66 percent response rate across five Tea Party meetings (N=145).

2.2.4 Conducting Interviews

Interviews were one of the two primary means of data collection for this research. Using a modified "oral history/life history" approach (Blee and Taylor 2002), I conducted semi-structured interviews with an established interview protocol addressing major themes, but varied my questions based on each informants' responses. This type of in-depth interview is a highly effective tool for understanding how individuals perceive themselves, their actions, and events around them. This is particularly important for social movement scholars, because it encourages informants to move beyond practiced rhetoric and speak to their views and beliefs as part of their life experiences. It also can provide longitudinal data about informants' trajectories in activism (Blee and Taylor 2002).

However, the flexibility of a semi-structured interview makes comparisons across informants more difficult, as the data collected in each interview varies somewhat (Blee and Taylor 2002). Because I was combining in-depth interviews with observations and other ethnographic methods, I was able to mitigate this problem to some extent – at least with the Tea Party activists – because I saw them repeatedly and asked follow-up questions. The other major difficulty with this approach – particularly when attempting to document informants' activist histories – is that activists often depict their personal activist trajectories to be consistent with the narratives that they have learned through political participation (Blee 2002; Blee and Taylor 2002). For example, a number of informants told me that September 11th was a major turning point for them in terms of becoming "a conservative." However, in nearly every case, no one who said this actually began participating in politics until several years later. To counter this inclination, I asked specific questions not only about what ideas and incidents inspired mobilization, but also about when and how they had participated in events.

Interviews lasted between an hour and three hours, although a few, mostly those conducted by necessity at busy events, were closer to a half hour. In each interview, I asked informants what "conservatism means to you" and what conservatives they admired. I also asked about their political trajectories, attempting to track ideological as well as participatory changes, as, for example, when they started seeing the Republican Party as a threat or when they first attended a Tea Party meeting. I asked what political and social responsibilities they felt they had as conservatives. I also asked about their activities and social networks and to what extent they knew whether their friends and family members were also "conservatives." I asked them about the 2016 presidential election, and requested that they complete a brief demographic

questionnaire on their age, race, marital status, religion, income, and employment (see Appendix B).

I digitally recorded nearly all of my interviews. In a couple instances, informants rejected my request for taping, and in two more, technical errors on my part prevented me from accessing the recordings. In a few more cases, I did not tape brief interviews with relatively well-known activists because I was only asking a few questions and did not want to discourage them from taking a few minutes to talk to me. In all of these cases, I relied on notes which I took while interviewing.

2.2.5 Event Observations

I regularly attended Tea Party and associated political and social events for several reasons. First, I hoped people would be comfortable in these environments and freer to express themselves than during formal interviews (Klatch 1988). Second, I wanted to understand how – and to what extent –Tea Party conservatives enacted the definitions and understandings of "conservatism" that they articulated privately. As culture is an interactive phenomenon (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), I wanted to understand how Tea Party conservatives collectively produced a "group style" (Binder and Wood 2013; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

Initially, I attended all Tea Party meetings I could but later, as I reached theoretical saturation, I targeted at least one meeting of each group in the greater Richmond area. In total, I attended 13 meetings of seven different Tea Party groups and a statewide Tea Party convention. In pre-dissertation research, I attended three additional meetings and two national rallies in Washington, D.C. I always tried to make contact with leaders in advance the first time I attended

a group's meeting. Usually, the organizers did not respond, but seemed to remember me when I showed up (see Table 3).

Among the nine active Tea Party groups in the area in 2016, I was able to visit all but one. I reached out to the ninth's leadership, but they were hesitant to allow me to visit, and the contact eventually fell through. Soon after, the group's website was disabled and I could find no further information about them. My sense is that, although this group publicly identified as "Tea Party," they pursued different politics. This group is not a member of the statewide Tea Party Federation and a couple of leaders from other groups told me they were not "like them." One described forcibly excluding this group's leader from a statewide convention when he tried to distribute offensive material. He did not elaborate, but the group's website included blatantly anti-Semitic content that I did not encounter elsewhere in the Tea Party. They do not appear to be currently active.

I tried to attend events hosted by non-Tea Party groups in which Tea Party conservatives were involved. This included several events by politically-oriented evangelical Christian groups and Republican Party events in which the Tea Party was predicted to be competing for power with an "establishment" faction. I also attended several church services, Bible studies, and informal social activities with Tea Party activists and their friends.

My goals in these observations varied. At Tea Party meetings, I always noted the numbers and demographic make-up of attendees, including presumed race and gender. As I gained fieldwork experience, I learned to track some specific characteristics associated with age and class, such as people with gray or white hair or with apparently expensive clothes. I typically took copious notes while attending meetings, jotting down demographic counts, as well as the substance of as many speakers, conversations, and questions as I could. I observed how the

meetings operated, who spoke, who led, and how people interacted. I noted the presence of representatives of different groups and campaigns. At Republican Party functions, I paid special attention to how Tea Party-associated actors interacted with their establishment-associated counterparts. I also tried to see how obvious distinctions between the two camps were, and in what contexts. At more informal events, I tried to understand whether activists and non-activists integrated political discussion into conversation and activities. I also observed interaction patterns among activists in and out of Tea Party meeting spaces. Finally, I tracked how frequently I encountered the same people, or people I knew were associated with various groups or organizations, to get a sense of the density of the Tea Party network. Typically within 24 hours, I typed up my field notes and added additional observations as well as some analysis.

2.2.6 Collecting Artifacts

When possible, I gathered the publications available to Tea Party activists at meetings and events I attended. I regularly took photos of personalized license plates, bumper stickers, and yard signs which people advertised in and outside of their homes, throughout the area. I also systematically collected photos of official Tea Party highway signs posted by Tea Party organizers throughout the area. One organizer gave me copies of dozens of photos of signs, and I added to them on my own. I used these materials as evidence of how Tea Party activists attempted to present their movement to the outside world.

While the previous data collection was primarily a tool for me to examine how the Tea Party movement presented itself outwardly, I also attempted to capture what these attempts might look like from the outside. That is, I tried to document the ways that the movement was explicitly and implicitly made visible throughout the community. Sociologist Bernadette Barton

(2012) undertook such an effort while studying the experience of gay and lesbian people in the "Bible Belt," documenting every symbol of Christianity that she came across throughout her daily life over a period of six months.

I implemented a scaled-down version of Barton's (2012) methodology by attempting to capture what Tea Party and affiliated advertisements a person in the area might see on a typical day. I recruited two friends and drove along common routes near where Tea Party activists met and lived, marking and counting the numbers of "Don't Tread on Me" license plates, political signs, bumper stickers, flags, and other obvious representations. I used this data to illustrate what most of my informants perceive to be normal expressions of political conservatism in their daily lives.

Throughout several years of research, I thus pursued a multi-pronged outreach strategy and attempted to capture the many components of the Tea Party movement. Were I to go back in time and redesign this study, the major transformation I would make would be to use online social network data as other research has found online interactions critical to Tea Party mobilization (see Rohlinger and Bunnage 2017). I did ask informants about their social media use, but concluded that this network was not primarily organized through Facebook pages or other sites. However, there were several incidents in which disputes between activists occurred over Facebook, and it would have been valuable to have access to such data.

2.3 MY SAMPLE

In this section, I describe my sample and evaluate validity concerns.

2.3.1 Integrating Data Sets

This research draws on data collected for my Master's degree, as well as post-Master's preliminary research, and finally, dissertation research. These projects built on one another, similarly seeking to understand who participates in the Tea Party and why and how the movement is organized, so I was able to use the same interview protocol, with modifications, across these research projects. However, the projects differed in some methods and goals. For example, in my Master's research, I asked informants to completely map out their social networks, whereas for my dissertation, I asked much more limited questions about networks. Moreover, questions of individualism vs. collectivism are central to my dissertation, but not in my earlier studies. Thus, rather than combining the datasets of these research projects, I integrated the findings. However, to demonstrate the depth and range of the total research I collected, I combined counts for the raw numbers, in terms of how many activists I interviewed and events I attended.

2.3.2 Interviews

Table 2. Types and Counts of Interviews Conducted

Category	Definition	No. of Interviews Conducted
Tea Party Activists	People who regularly attend (or used to regularly attend) local Tea Party meetings.	57
Tea Party-Associated Activists	People who are (or were) regular participants in campaigns or political organizations associated with the Tea Party, such as conservative and politically active religious groups, the Dave Brat campaign, etc.	20
Non-Activist Tea Party Sympathizers	People who describe the Tea Party positively, and/or have occasionally attended Tea Party events or supported Tea Party-associated candidates.	24
Total		**101**

2.3.2.1 Activist Interviews In total, I interviewed 77 activists, including 57 Tea Party activists, and 20 associated activists. My sample among Tea Party activists included 27 men and 30 women, with a median age of 61. All but two were white. Among those who provided educational data, four had completed only high school, 16 had completed some college and/or Associates' or Technical degrees, 20 were college graduates, and 14 had post-graduate experience. Among those who reported household income, ten earned between $25 and $50K, twelve earned between $50k and $75K, ten earned between $75K and $100K, five between $100 and $150K, and 11 over $150K. Over 92 percent identified as "Christian." This sample is generally consistent with data from polls of Tea Party supporters, although it skews slightly

younger, wealthier, and more Christian (American National Election Survey, 2010 in Abramowitz 2012). Furthermore, more men than women report Tea Party support. Since my observations at meetings suggest this is consistent with activists at the eight groups I visited, my total interview sample over-represents women.

Although my sample of Tea Party activists is not necessarily demographically representative, after observing the Tea Party network at over a dozen events, I am confident that it includes a range of relevant kinds of activists: activists affiliated with local Tea Party groups, those affiliated with non-Tea Party political groups, those who had pre-Tea Party political experience and those who did not, and activists with varying relationships to the local GOP. It includes activists in some kind of leadership position (formal or informal) from all but two Richmond area Tea Party groups that were active in 2016, as well as a few leaders from Northern Virginia and Shenandoah Valley area groups.

Due to my interest in interviewing representatives of each Tea Party group (requiring access from the groups' leaders), and those with known tactical preferences, my data overrepresents the more dedicated among Tea Party activists. However, as described above, I did take steps to limit this effect, and included many low-intensity volunteers, who do little more than attend meetings and occasionally volunteer for campaigns or other extra-Tea Party activities.

The non-Tea Party activists I interviewed are not a demographically representative sample of a larger body, but rather, include representatives of the other major components of the greater Tea Party network. For example, they include members of local politicians' campaign staff, leadership at several evangelical Christian organizations, several special interest lobby groups, and leaders in the "conservative" arm of the local GOP.

Some research suggests that my sample may be biased towards the less radical, less hostile population of activists since more radical conservatives, who are generally hostile to academics (Pew 2016, 2017) may be disinclined to participate in academic research, especially by academics who are not clearly themselves conservative (Pew 2016, 2017). Indeed, I frequently encountered suspicion and mistrust from potential informants, such as one who came up to me after a meeting and asked me "what horrible things" I planned to write about them "all." Several times, leaders complained to me that they had previously been unfairly and inaccurately represented in the media, and they did not want me to do the same. While I was usually able to overcome this hostility, activists with especially conspiratorial beliefs would be unlikely to be interviewed by a young academic. In one instance, I followed-up on a referral with an activist whose tactics were known for being confrontational. He refused to be interviewed without seeing my social media profiles and, when I declined to share, he did not respond. And, as reported above, I was unable to access a group that had posted anti-Semitic material online although this group was largely excluded from the Tea Party network on which I was focused. Ultimately, given that the majority of activists whom I approached directly were willing to be interviewed – and I made these requests without knowing their political attitudes – I believe that my informants are fairly representative of Tea Party activists.

I evaluated the validity of activist informant responses in several ways. Since I was interested in accurately capturing informants' perceptions, I compared the emotional and intellectual reactions they described with the actions they took. I also asked for concrete examples to illustrate their claims. For example, if they said they were Republican Party members only out of "necessity," I asked specific questions about their process of joining the GOP to see if they had considered other options and what forces had influenced them to make

that decision. To confirm information about Tea Party groups and the movement in general, I compared accounts from many individuals, especially in cases where internal divisions existed. I also compared informant reports to my own event observations. Furthermore, when possible, I consulted local political blogs that covered political events to confirm narratives ("conservative" and "establishment" blogs existed), although I did not systematically consult these.

2.3.2.2 Non-Activist Interviews As I had difficulty recruiting from this population, my 24 non-activist sympathizers are not necessarily representative of a broader population of sympathizers, nor similar to the sample of activists.

I use the non-activist sample in several ways. First, it provides insight into the views and characteristics of a larger population of sympathizers. Also, a few of these respondents are church leaders, making them influential in conservative communities largely populated by Tea Party sympathizers. Their interviews helped me understand how the greater, sympathetic public sees and interacts with the movement. However, because of the limited sample, my conclusions cannot be definitive.

Also, I relied on non-activists to gauge how people perceive the Tea Party outside of the movement. For example, what do they think the Tea Party does? Or, had they noticed the signs and, if so did they remember their messages? I also attempted to discern why such sympathetic constituents do not participate, asking if they had ever been invited to participate in politics, if they'd had ever thought about it, and felt their responsibilities to society were.

The validity concerns associated with this population are similar to those associated with activists, and I took similar actions. For example, if an informant said they believed that a "good conservative" should be involved in their community, I asked to what extent to what extent they were involved in theirs, and their reasons why or why not. I also asked if they thought certain

“good conservatives” they knew were meeting their obligations to their communities, to see how they applied these perceptions in concrete cases. In this way, I tried to build context and detail into the perceptions informants related, to best understand the genuine meaning and implications of such perceptions.

2.3.2.3 Event Observations The events I observed capture the state of the movement in 2016. I attended meetings hosted by eight of the nine local Tea Party groups in the Richmond area, and was in-person for all but one of the major showdowns between the Tea Party conservative and establishment factions of the GOP. I also attended two Trump/Pence rallies, a Dave Brat town hall, and a GOP women’s meeting. The non-Tea Party/non-GOP events I attended supplemented these observations by showing how activists contribute to and participate in other groups. I attended enough Tea Party meetings to identify a shared political culture. Core activists frequently remarked to me that I was “everywhere” – a pattern I took as a sign that I was covering what they considered relevant political events.

Like my sample of non-activist interviews, my sample of event observations for non-political events is not representative, but more supplemental, allowing me to confirm, for example, that some of the non-political institutions frequented by members of the community incorporated elements of the Tea Party conservative political culture. For instance, one of the four churches I attended featured numerous symbols of conservative political culture, including images of the Founding Fathers and numerous American flags. Although I was not able to attend church services with every activist, my experience in a few different institutions, (each one had multiple confirmed Tea Party sympathizers as members), helped illustrate the cultural and social bases of the network.

Table 3. Types and Counts of Events Attended

Category	Definition	No. of Events Attended
Formal Tea Party Meeting or Events	Event officially hosted by a local Tea Party group	16
Republican Party Event	Event officially hosted by the Republican Party	8
Political Event (Non-Tea Party and Non-GOP)	Politically-oriented event hosted by an individual or organization officially outside of the GOP or the Tea Party, such as an informal screening of a conservative movie, a political talk by an evangelical leader, etc.	14
Social or Cultural Event	Non-Political event involving activists, such as church services, or non-political meetings.	5
Total		**43**

2.4 ANALYZING THE DATA

I completed partial transcriptions of all of the interviews that were taped. In partial transcriptions, I summarized main points and transcribed extensive quotes. I also kept spreadsheets with the profiles of all informants, including their demographic data, as well as some information for which I needed counts, such as early or late Trump supporters, new or experienced activists, and so forth. I entered the attendance survey data by hand into Excel.

I used inductive and deductive coding to generate themes as well as concepts, using Nvivo to code all transcripts and field notes. I first created thematic codes based on content type (Corbin and Strauss 2008). For example, I put expressions of ideology into one category, while responsibilities to society was in another. As I continued to interview and transcribe, I created conceptual memos, as well as handwritten transcription journals, which I consulted while coding. I eventually developed conceptual subcodes based on more specific elements of each category, as well as dimensional subcodes reflecting patterns and variations within each element (Corbin and Strauss 2008). I completed second rounds of coding by hand, printing thematic codes in single documents and using colored pens to mark subcodes. Throughout this process, I used a "constant comparative method," identifying a pattern in one case and then going back through other cases to see how frequently it occurred, and then comparing different instances among different informants (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 105). For example, I created a thematic code collecting references to politician Dave Brat. I then created subcodes that reflected informants' real and/or imagined relationships to Brat. By hand, I marked instances where informants described Brat as a "source of insider knowledge" and where other informants portrayed Brat as their "public servant."

2.5 ETHICS

I underwent several rounds of Institutional Review Board review to secure approval for my dissertation research. I obtained informed consent from informants in writing (during dissertation fieldwork), providing them with a copy of a letter explaining the terms and providing my contact information. We discussed the meaning of "confidentiality" in this context, and I explained that

there was always a risk that they might be identified based on the context in writing. At that point, I asked them to let me know – at any point during the interview – if there was anything they disclosed that they wanted excluded. I took extra pains to ensure confidentiality by avoiding specific organizational names or individual titles (with a few exceptions), using little personal context around quotes, and not including information that – I believe – could only have been revealed by a single source. All names used here are pseudonyms, and some informant characteristics are scrambled to preserve confidentiality.

At public events, I observed quietly. However, if I spoke to anyone (beyond pleasantries), I introduced myself as a graduate student researcher. I did the same in the few instances I observed private meetings. Raw data is maintained offline and only I have access to it.

3.0 SOCIAL MOVEMENT EVOLUTION AND THE TEA PARTY

In the summer of 2013, I set out to begin fieldwork on the Tea Party with a plan to study the phenomenon of "social movement demobilization." That is, how and why do movements lose adherents, cease activity, and ultimately disintegrate? Scholars were reporting a dramatic decrease in the number of active Tea Party groups (Skocpol and Williamson 2012), with much analysis focused on the growing relationship between the movement and the GOP (see Cohen 2012), and numerous polls showed a consistent waning in the movement's popularity among voters (see Friedersdorf 2013). The Tea Party seemed like it would be a great case study for the decline of a mass protest movement. Through a brief online search, I found a few active groups in Virginia, and headed down to investigate.

However, where I had expected to find a declining and enervated group hanging onto the movement's early glory, I found instead a thriving and motivated network of activists and sympathizers who were continuing to build and transform the Tea Party into a powerful political force. Yes, the movement had changed and, in some ways, shrunk significantly since it first captured public attention in 2009 and 2010: nationally, rallies no longer drew hundreds or thousands, and the number of local groups statewide had dropped by almost two-thirds. Furthermore, activists were directly focused on influencing the Republican Party. However, among the approximately 20 remaining groups were legions of now well-seasoned activists who were extremely knowledgeable about the political system and had significant electoral and

legislative victories under their belts. The contrast between my expectations and my findings reflects some of the challenges that the evolution of the Tea Party presents for the field of social movement literature.

Social movement research shows that mass movements – those with widespread mobilization among large segments of the population – do not last forever. At the individual level, many activists eventually cease movement participation, either because they are satisfied with early movement gains, disappointed by movement failures, compelled to pursue other approaches to social change, feeling burnt out, or simply occupied with life outside of movement politics (see literature discussion below). With such attrition, the movement is transformed. At the organizational level, movements often evolve by institutionalizing, building the infrastructure to participate in mainstream political institutions, or by moving towards radicalization, embracing more extreme ideologies and pursuing extra-institutional tactics (Karstedt-Henke 1980 in Koopmans 1993 ; Koopmans 1993; Tarrow 1989, 2011). However, a growing literature suggests that the processes of institutionalization and radicalization are not necessarily mutually exclusive and, further, that they are impacted by a range of internal and external factors. For example, several scholars suggest that existing relationships between movement activists and political parties will facilitate partisan institutionalization (Almeida 2010). Doowon Suh (2011) argues that movements can avoid deradicalization during institutionalization by maintaining organizational autonomy.

Most scholarship on the Tea Party relies on fieldwork completed before 2014, at which point the processes of decline and institutionalization were well underway. The number of protests and meetings decreased substantially (Heaney and Rojas 2015), support plummeted to include less than ten percent of the public (Cooper, Cox, Lienesch and Jones 2015), and activists

became increasingly integrated into the Republican Party (Blum 2016; Brown 2015; Rohlinger and Bunnage 2017). Pointing to the centrality of partisan dynamics, scholars argued that demobilization was a result of Republican gains in Congress in 2010 (Almeida 2010; Almeida and Van Dyke 2014; Heaney and Rojas 2015).

However, my research shows that in recent years the evolution of the Tea Party in Virginia in terms of institutionalization and deradicalization has been inconsistent with movement literature predictions. In Virginia approximately twenty independent Tea Party groups remain active – maintaining a significant presence in all of the major population centers of the commonwealth. Furthermore, while the individuals and groups have become increasingly connected to the Republican Party, the movement has retained organizational independence, a finding that challenges some depictions of the relationship between the GOP and the Tea Party (see Schlozman 2015). Furthermore, while the individuals within these groups have radicalized ideologically, the groups continue to maintain a diffuse organizing structure that – at the movement level – is decentralized, with local groups continuing to be outward-looking, emphasizing community outreach.

Drawing primarily on fieldwork conducted in 2016, I show that, rather than evolving into merely a faction of the Republican Party, the Tea Party in Virginia maintains an ideologically radical and autonomous network. Furthermore, I suggest that the movement's decentralized and diffuse organizing structure is a causal dynamic in the Tea Party's ability to enter mainstream politics without deradicalizing.

The following subsection reviews the social movement literature outlining the typical evolution of mass movements, with an emphasis on demobilization and on the dual processes of institutionalization and radicalization/deradicalization. I follow with a brief discussion of

research on the Tea Party before describing my findings, emphasizing the diffuse nature of the movement, its relationship to the GOP, and ideological effects that result from these dynamics.

3.1 MOVEMENT EVOLUTION

Social movement theorists have established several common patterns through which movements transform. The following subsection reviews social movement literature, addressing key dynamics within this process: movement decline, institutionalization, and radicalization/deradicalization.

3.1.1 Movement Decline

In the highest moments of mobilization, movements are typically the most ideologically, culturally, and politically diverse. Individuals may be linked to the movement through rhetoric and symbols that are broad and undefined with wide appeal (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011; Perrin, Tepper, Caren and Morris 2014). In other instances, movements quickly gain wide appeal by harnessing broadly shared views that are either unrecognized by political authorities or are under threat (Alexander 2006). Finally, movements may gain broad appeal by drawing on widespread reactions to disruptive events (McAdam 1982).

A movement's broad appeal and mobilization does not last forever. Several factors can undermine movement momentum. Early movement successes and failures can be major points of transition. For example, the women's movement fractured and dissipated after the suffrage movement secured for women a Constitutional right to vote, as some activists saw suffrage as an

end in itself while others saw it as a means to advance broader goals (Taylor 1989). Activists also leave due to "burn out," or the need to prioritize other facets of life (Corrigall-Brown 2011). And in some cases, the energy of the movement turns inward, as activists attempt to realize the ideas of the movement in their personal and professional lives, and in society directly (Bell 2014; Staggenborg and Taylor 2005; Yates 2015; Zald 2000).

At the organizational level, processes of attrition may quicken after the first phase wraps up and the movement re-orients towards next steps, which can reveal divisions that previously went unknown or unaddressed (Perrin et al. 2014; Taylor 1989). Andrew Perrin and colleagues (2014) argue that cultural symbols drawn largely from traditional American historical narratives around the Founding Fathers and the American Revolution initially mobilized broad feelings of disaffection under the banner of the Tea Party. However, once the movement started to take specific actions, ideological distinctions emerged between the highly conservative, elite leadership and grassroots Tea Party activists on the one hand and sympathizers on the other hand, resulting in a rapid narrowing of its membership.

After an initial drop in participation, activists who remain often go in one of two directions: towards mainstream, traditional politics – institutionalization – or towards more radical, alternative politics – radicalization (Koopmans 1993; Tarrow 1989, 2011). However, extensive literature shows that these processes are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as movements may institutionalize without deradicalizing, and that myriad internal and external factors influence outcomes.

3.1.2 Movement Institutionalization

Movements move towards mainstream political institutions by focusing on "insider" tactics such as lobbying and electioneering. This transformation often requires organizations to establish or expand professionalized staff, a move which triggers efforts to prioritize organizational maintenance, emphasizing fundraising and low-risk action (Meyer 1993; Staggenborg 1988). Individuals within these organizations may or may not retain (or develop) radical demands, but the need to succeed in mainstream politics tempers the extremity of the aspirations that the organization adopts, as they seek to build political coalitions via compromise. Such organizations develop normalized relationships with political elites, losing the aggressive and confrontational tone previously used to inspire mass participation. They also raise the profile of elites, such as scientists, policy experts, and politicians, in contrast to the regular actors that social movements tend to celebrate (Meyer 1993).

The process of institutionalization is appealing to many movements, especially to those with preexisting partisan relationships, identities, or loyalties. For example, movement leaders with established institutional ties are likely to propel the movement towards those institutions. This is especially true if the movement has been initiated or is supported by institutional elites who pursued movement tactics only when they were temporarily excluded from institutional power (Almeida 2010; Almeida and Van Dyke 2014; Meyer and Pullum 2014). Some research shows that movements on the right are more likely to see the mainstream electoral and legislative systems as a preferred vehicle for social change than those on the left, because of cultural or ideological influences (Heaney and Rojas 2015; Hutter and Kriesi 2013).

3.1.3 Movement Radicalization/Deradicalization

Early theories positioned radicalization as complementary to institutionalization/de-radicalization (Koopmans 1993): some activists and/or organizations embrace institutional politics and deradicalize their political agenda; others reject mainstream politics and remain radical either because they are competing for attention with institutionalizing organizations (Tarrow 1989, 2011), or because they are isolated and face state repression (Bosi 2016; Koopmans 1993).

Of course, “radical” and “mainstream” are relative terms. In this analysis, I use these words to refer to ideological comparisons in two ways: between dominant political entities and challenger movements, and within a single movement (or individual activists within the movement) at different stages over time. Social movements typically advance a political agenda that is not represented by dominant political actors (Tarrow 2011) their demands are therefore “radical” compared to those of “mainstream” forces. In terms of movement evolution, questions of radicalization and deradicalization focus on the extent to which movement agendas evolve over time, relative to their initial demands.

At the individual level, some research shows that activists can radicalize over the course of their participation (Blee 2002; Munson 2010) which can impact the structure and strategies of the movement. If members feel distant from society, the group may turn inward, isolating themselves and becoming even more radical, as they operate free from the ideological, financial, and cultural constraints that come from broader and more diverse membership (Rupp and Taylor 1987; Simi and Futrell 2009, 2017; Staggenborg 1998; Tarrow 2011; Taylor 1989). Verta Taylor (1989) shows that, after the passage of the 19th Amendment, the women’s movement lost its broad-based support and became a much smaller, more radical, and more centralized group that

maintained the movement while the external environment was unfavorable to their goals. When political activities become more centralized and radical, outreach to the broader community may occur through social and cultural activities rather than explicitly political efforts (Staggenborg 1998; Yates 2015). For example, Luke Yates (2015) shows that anti-capitalist organizers in Spain organized radical political campaigns, but also pursued social change via cultural transformations outside of the political system, reaching out to community members with social projects based in radical political theorizing such as community gardening and public meals.

Activists who pursue more radical politics may also transform their social and cultural lives. For example, activists in anti-hegemonic movements who feel isolated from the mainstream create communities to provide emotional and cognitive support (Downton and Wehr 1997). In his study of environmental activists, Paul Lichterman (1996) found that more radical environmental activists experienced an identity shift that impacted their social networks and relationship as they made use of movement organizations to build supportive networks.

Typically, as activists enter mainstream politics, they deradicalize their ideological agenda, conforming to meet goals that are closer to the mainstream ideologies dominant in existing political institutions. This is often because institutional politics typically require compromise to push ideological change (Tarrow 2011). For example, powerful environmental organizations like Greenpeace have frequently entered agreements with international corporations whereby the companies agree to certain environmentally-friendly concessions in turn for organizational approval. By publicly supporting corporations that continue to pollute the environment, these movement organizations make compromises in favor of incremental changes that advance their agenda through mainstream channels (Trumpy 2008). David Meyer and Amanda Pullum (2014) suggest a similar process occurs with individual politicians, as

"movement candidates" fail to satisfy initial supporters who eschew the compromises necessary to work within mainstream politics.

But deradicalization does not always accompany institutionalization, as activists may maintain radical goals while pursuing institutional politics. Activists sometimes make deliberate, strategic decisions to enter mainstream politics to advance movement goals and ideology, without shifting agendas (Bell 2014; Katzenstein 1990; Santoro and Fitzpatrick 2015; Santoro and McGuire 1997; Suh 2011). For example, in the later phases of the Civil Rights Movement, disappointment in the movement's lack of progress toward racial equality led some activists to pursue mainstream electoral politics, which they saw as a more effective alternative to traditional movement tactics (Santoro and Fitzpatrick 2015). As Suzanne Staggenborg (1988, 1991) points out, if the movement is successful in mainstreaming movement ideology, what were once considered "radical" ideas become integrated into existing institutions (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005). For example, she argues that the National Organization for Women shifted from protest to institutional tactics (such as lobbying, political campaigning, and public education) after access to abortion became a central plank of the mainstream women's movement, an agenda they continued to advance.

Certain internal movement characteristics facilitate the process of institutionalization without deradicalization. Doowon Suh (2011) argues that the South Korean women's movement was able to maintain movement goals through a process of institutionalization partly because movement groups maintained organizational autonomy from the state. Daniel Schlozman (2015) argues that movements successfully penetrate parties largely through coalitions, relying on non-movement brokers to mediate movement-party relationships, until movement constituents are effectively incorporated into the partisan fold, no longer requiring mediation through movement

leadership. Institutionalization and deradicalization, while not inevitable processes, are common patterns of social movement evolution, particularly in movements already tied to mainstream institutions.

3.1.4 The Tea Party: Radical Politics, Demobilization, and Institutionalization

Most research on the Tea Party draws on data from a period between 2010 and 2012, when activists were animated by a radical politics to the right of the agenda advanced by Republican Party actors in mainstream political institutions. Towards the end of that period, the movement lost some popular support as it institutionalized through the Republican Party. This subsection reviews scholarship on the Tea Party in terms of demobilization, radicalization/deradicalization, and institutionalization.

Research on the early Tea Party showed that activists were extremely conservative and advanced a radical politics through mainstream conservative frames and ideologies that are broadly held among self-identified Republicans and "conservatives" outside of the Tea Party (Berlet 2012; Burke 2015; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Surveys consistently showed that Tea Party supporters were more radical than other self-identified "conservatives" and "Republicans" across political issues. For example, higher percentages of Tea Party supporters opposed the 2009 economic stimulus package, healthcare reform (2010 American National Election Study Evaluations of Government and Society Survey in Abramowitz 2012), and same-sex marriage (Parker and Barreto 2013). They were also more likely to think that President Obama was born in another country, and that "immigrants increase crime" (Parker and Barreto 2013: 173). Furthermore, Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto (2013: 48) found that 33 percent of Tea Party website content was "conspiratorial," compared to just five percent in the *National Review* – the

historical mainstay of mainstream conservatism. While Skocpol and Williamson (2012: 26-27) found Tea Party activists to be "very conservative," "right-wingers of the GOP orbit," they argue that movement rhetoric reflected Nixon and Reagan-era narratives attacking recipients of government assistance and civil rights protestors. Megan Burke (2015) draws on Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's concept of "color-blind racism" (2006) to argue that the far-right politics of the Tea Party are framed through racial narratives dominant among White Americans that dismiss enduring racial inequities in the United States as the result of cultural faults or natural market forces, denying the enduring salience of structural and institutional racism in society today. While Tea Party ideology drew heavily on the normative principles and frames from the Republican Party, it clearly established a more radical agenda.

By 2012, the Tea Party movement had declined considerably. An analysis of Tea Party events listed on meetup.com showed over 800 events in April 2009, over 600 in April 2010, and over 200 in April 2011, with fewer than 100 events a month through 2012 (Heaney and Rojas 2015). The percent of Americans identifying as a "supporter" of the Tea Party declined from a high of 32 percent in 2010, to 21 percent in late 2011, and remaining in the low 20s through 2014 (Norman 2015).

At the same time, the Tea Party moved into institutional politics, especially into the Republican Party. Its activists became focused on impacting candidates and legislation, volunteering on campaigns, serving as "watchdogs" to monitor government activity, and joining local GOP committees and precincts (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). One study showed that the activists who remained involved between 2011 and 2013 were more comfortable integrating into the Republican Party (and more satisfied with online connections) (Rohlinger and Bunnage 2017). At the same time, research showed little evidence of deradicalization during this

transition, as most observers agreed the Tea Party had effectively moved the Republican Party to the right (Dionne 2017; Medzihorsky, Littvay and Jenne 2014; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

The Tea Party's transition to institutional tactics through the Republican Party follows social movement literature suggesting that movements with preexisting institutional ties will facilitate such a shift. From the Tea Party's first days, organizations and individuals from the conservative wing of the Republican Party provided the Tea Party with substantial resources in of the form of leaders, trainings, funds, and expertise (Almeida and Van Dyke 2014; Fetner and Brayden 2014; Lo 2012; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). At the individual level, Tea Party sympathizers and activists alike often identify as Republicans and participate in the Republican Party (Abramowitz 2012; Heaney and Rojas 2015). Indeed, scholars argue that the Tea Party's decline immediately after Republican Congressional gains in 2010 suggest that a partisan backlash was a primary force animating the mobilization (Almeida and Van Dyke 2014; Heaney and Rojas 2015; Meyer and Pullum 2014).

The strong connections between the Tea Party and the GOP have led some researchers to consider the Tea Party exclusively in terms of this relationship. For example, Daniel Schlozman (2015) argues that the Tea Party acts more like "an aggressive party faction" than "a movement grappling with the limits of electoral politics." Rachel Blum (2016) argues that the Tea Party is more independent than a typical party faction, but emphasizes its party-like features, describing the Tea Party as a "party within a party." She argues that the Tea Party has the same general goals as a political party: to win elections, create and pass legislation, and control government. However, she also finds that Tea Party activists reject the GOP as an instrument for achieving specific policy goals, so use the Republican Party as a "host," obviating the need to build their own party infrastructure.

Studies of the role of the Republican Party in the Tea Party provide insight into how the movement has institutionalized and evolved, but their narrow emphasis on the movement's partisan dimensions obscures the myriad ways that the Tea Party has retained the qualities that distinguished it from the Republican Party in the early years. In contrast to a political party or party faction, the Tea Party remains highly diffuse, decentralized, and individualized, with little hierarchy, shared goals, or defined membership. This structure has a critical impact on how the Tea Party operates and affects politics, especially its ability to maintain a radical politics while institutionalizing into the GOP.

In the following subsection, I discuss the organizing model of the Tea Party, focusing on how it combines elements of centralization and decentralization, and how this results in a highly diffuse structure that ties the movement to a range of activists, non-activists, and organized groups. I explain the trajectory of the Tea Party over time, noting what has endured and what has not. I then argue that the Tea Party has evolved through a partial institutionalization that maintains some distance from the GOP while avoiding deradicalization.

3.2 AN ENDURING MOVEMENT

Scholarship shows that the Tea Party has developed extensive ties with the Republican Party, both at the individual and group level. These ties represent a substantial institutionalization, but the movement has largely avoided the professionalization, centralization, and deradicalization that often accompany such a transformation. Instead, it has retained a diffuse and largely decentralized organizing structure that keeps it both autonomous and closely connected to the grassroots. The result is that the Tea Party now functions as a two-way filter, providing regular

citizens with access to local and national political institutions, while generating new leaders and constituencies. In this section, I show how this structure allows elite actors and organizations to penetrate the Tea Party and filter content to the grassroots, while leaders simultaneously move up through the movement into the ranks of political elites.

In the first subsection below, I describe the evolution of the Tea Party first by explaining its diffuse nature in Virginia today and then by showing how this diffuse nature facilitates its simultaneous embrace and rejection of the Republican Party, as well as the maintenance of its radical ideology.

3.2.1 "A Source of Volunteers": Decentralization and Diffusion in the Tea Party Network

In Virginia, each Tea Party group is unique and independent, yet most share basic organizing principles and thus operate very similarly. Further, most participate in a statewide federation that provides some coordination. Thus the movement has remained diffuse and largely decentralized overall, while individual groups have elements of centralization and decentralization.

Other studies have found that Tea Party groups have elected leaders who are responsible for the majority of the administrative and programmatic organizing (see also Skocpol and Williamson 2012). I found that these leadership cadres have between one and ten people. Often, leaders are those willing to take on the work of administrative organizing, although some seem to be those with the most dominant personalities in the group. Typically, these leaders are revered by participants for their commitment to the cause – evidenced by their sacrifices of time and money – as well as for their knowledge of relevant political issues.

The central function of Tea Party groups is two-fold. First, these groups educate the public about political issues and current events (Braunstein 2017; Skocpol and Williamson

2012). As is consistent with earlier accounts, I found that nearly every regular meeting is organized around an invited speaker who gives an hour-long presentation. Oftentimes, speakers are right-wing pundits like conservative radio hosts or authors. But local Tea Party activists also give presentations on topic they have researched, such as the local education budget. In some cases, political organizers will also give lectures on the procedures of the Republican Party or some facet of the legislative process (Braunstein 2017; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

In the Virginia Tea Party, local elected officials and political candidates or their representatives appeared at nearly every meeting I attended, usually taking a few minutes at the beginning to speak and answer questions. In the dozen meetings I attended, I saw sitting congressmen, candidates for state attorney general, county supervisors, and a member of the board of elections, along with campaign volunteers for these and other candidates. (All of the candidates and politicians I observed were Republicans, but I heard of incidents when Libertarians, Independents, and at least one Democrat showed up.)

The second function of Tea Party groups is to connect sympathizers with opportunities to get involved in local electoral, legislative, and administrative politics. People are always welcomed to speak on behalf of campaigns, pitch their candidacies, or request calls and letters to representatives about specific legislation. At bigger meetings and during election season, as many as six or seven such requests might be made. Encouraging people to "get engaged" – find a candidate you like and volunteer, contact your representatives, or even get to know your local representatives – was a central refrain in the Tea Party, frequently urged by group leadership and guests alike.

This movement structure, organized around speakers and campaign opportunities, reflects the highly individualized nature of the Tea Party, in which activists rarely see themselves as

representative of Tea Party groups, but as individual "constituents" or "citizens" (Braunstein 2017). As Toby, a group leader explained to me:

> I consider the Tea Party a source of volunteers. We're not dictators – I'm not gonna dictate to you who you're going vote for, or you support…..I don't care who you support, I just hope you come and get educated, and your education directs you to who you need to…. work for….Then it's up to you to vote. You know, vote your conscience.

Tea Party groups rarely do anything collectively (Braunstein 2017). They typically established collective mission statements years ago, but these are very general, typically to advance the principles of the U.S. Constitution and empower citizens; the most specific statements usually reference principles such as "limited government" or "free markets." In my fieldwork, I never heard anyone refer to such official group mission statements, either to interpret them in a specific way or to amend them.

Furthermore, individual groups in Virginia generally do not agree on a specific agenda or take public positions on candidates or issues. (Braunstein (2017) found that although the group she studied did not make endorsements, a nearby group did.) About half of the groups in the Richmond area made signs or flyers for wider distribution, but these typically had very broad, general messages reflecting general ideological principles, such as "limited government" or "gun rights," and almost never mention specific legislation. However, there were exceptions. Several groups and/or individual activists posted signs specifically attacking then-House Republican Majority Leader Eric Cantor, and two made signs attacking Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton.

Other than deciding on the wording of signs, Tea Party group decisions are typically limited to which speakers to invite and what to include in mass emails, nearly all of which are made by the small cadre of leaders over email or sometimes in small meetings. Thus, regular meetings are not typically a place for debate or compromise, but are gatherings of individual

citizens (see also Braunstein 2017 and Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Several leaders described collective efforts to me as a way to delegate tasks and work, rather than to generate shared ideas or approaches. As Bill, a group leader, said:

> We're going in and trying to affect the government….meaning county, state, and federal – we're trying to do it all. I can't do it all, but we try to get everybody so they do their part and we kinda cover it all, as a group. A large group, like our local Tea Party, but [also] as a statewide effort….We try to cover all of these areas, because this person's passionate about this with the federal government, whereas I have no interest in that, so that's their thing, but I'm passionate about this at the local level, and they can't do that, cuz they live three hours away….so, but we kinda tend to cover everything, because we're all doing our own thing, together.

Collective action does occur at the state level, via the Virginia Tea Party Patriots Federation (VTPPF), of which nearly all local Tea Party groups are members. VTPPF includes a representative of each group and has elected leaders. Initially its member groups were required to meet quarterly and have a certain number of regular attendees, although it is unclear if those standards are currently enforced. VTPPF has several functions. First, it runs a state legislative watch and circulates email "alerts" about upcoming legislation. Typically, one person coordinates the alert system, with others assigned to follow specific issues. These emails seem likely to be influential as they generate substantial responses. Second, VTPPF sometimes endorses candidates for office, but infrequently, and usually only at the general election level. For example, they endorsed Republican Gubernatorial candidate Ed Gillespie against his Democratic opponent in 2017. Finally, VTPPF hosts quarterly Tea Party conventions around the state that are open to the public and to which most groups send leaders and/or a few representatives. These conventions typically involve a day-long agenda of speakers, similar to regular Tea Party meetings, followed by a closed-door session for VTPPF leaders. Partly as a result of the VTPPF, local Tea Party groups often share the same speakers even though they operate independently.

At the national level, there is no official Tea Party body that governs local Tea Party groups. Many scholarly and journalistic reports on the Tea Party draw on national lists of affiliates of professionalized groups such as the Tea Party Patriots, the Tea Party Express, Freedom Works, or 1776 (see Blum 2016; Brown 2015). However, I found that these official affiliations did not reflect any actual material, organizational, or ideological relationship with local Tea Party groups. Local leaders reported that these groups had provided funds for bus trips in the early years of protest, and had since occasionally provided training, especially from the Heritage Foundation and Americans for Prosperity. However, in terms of their actions, policies, and funds, local Tea Party groups in Virginia were independent actors. Where direct coordination existed, it was at the state level, through the VTPPF.

Even if local groups are autonomous actors, they are not independent of external influence. On the contrary, the diffuse structure of Virginia's Tea Party groups meant that it was relatively easy for outside groups to build relationships with them and access their supporters. This is in contrast to a federated party-structure in which formal national leadership centralizes funds, organizing resources, and policy coordination. Rachel Blum (2016) uses Tea Party group website data to argue that the Tea Party nationally mirrors the structure of a political party since links on the "blog roll" or "further reading" pages of local Tea Party websites show that a majority of Tea Parties are connected to one or more national, elite actors, such as the Tea Party Patriots or for former Fox News host Glenn Beck. While this points to the prominence of many shared ideological authorities, links on websites (some of which probably have not been updated in years) are not clear evidence of relationships similar to political party affiliations.

At the group level, a quasi-hierarchical structure facilitates broad inclusion. Although a small number of leaders centralize group decision-making, they also make groups highly

accessible to outsiders, thus diffusing organizational participation and content broadly. As Braunstein (2017) argues, the Tea Party establishes a low barrier to entry by making meetings open to the public and welcoming new members. In Virginia, this approach facilitated the inclusion of sympathizers and activists at different levels of commitment, experience, and knowledge. Meeting rituals are typically limited to the Pledge of Allegiance and Christian invocations, traditions which may limit participation in the population generally, but are widely accepted among a large segment of the local community. Furthermore, in the events I observed, leaders almost always began meetings with an explanation of what the group is and the agenda for the evening. No one was required or pressured to speak or to share and, in fact, most attendees said nothing.

The Tea Party's open door policy allowed it to continue to draw new and occasional participants. Over the course of 2016, I surveyed participants at five Tea Party meetings hosted by five different groups. Four were regular monthly (or quarterly) meetings. Among the 61 respondents (66 percent response rate), more than half described themselves as "regular" participants, a third reported irregularly attending, and four were first-time Tea Party goers (see Figure 1). At a big event with a nationally-known speaker with over 150 people in attendance, 84 responded to my survey. More than half were attending a Tea Party event for the first time, less than a quarter were regular Tea Party participants, and the rest had attended a few Tea Party events previously. According to my observations and from reports from group leaders, hosting a national speaker typically drew crowds of over 100, but sometimes local speakers drew crowds also; for example, one group reported that their biggest event recently featured a local activist speaking about refugee resettlement in the area. As demonstrated by Figure 1, special events

draw a mix of new and regular participants, while regular meetings tend to draw participants with a range of commitment levels.

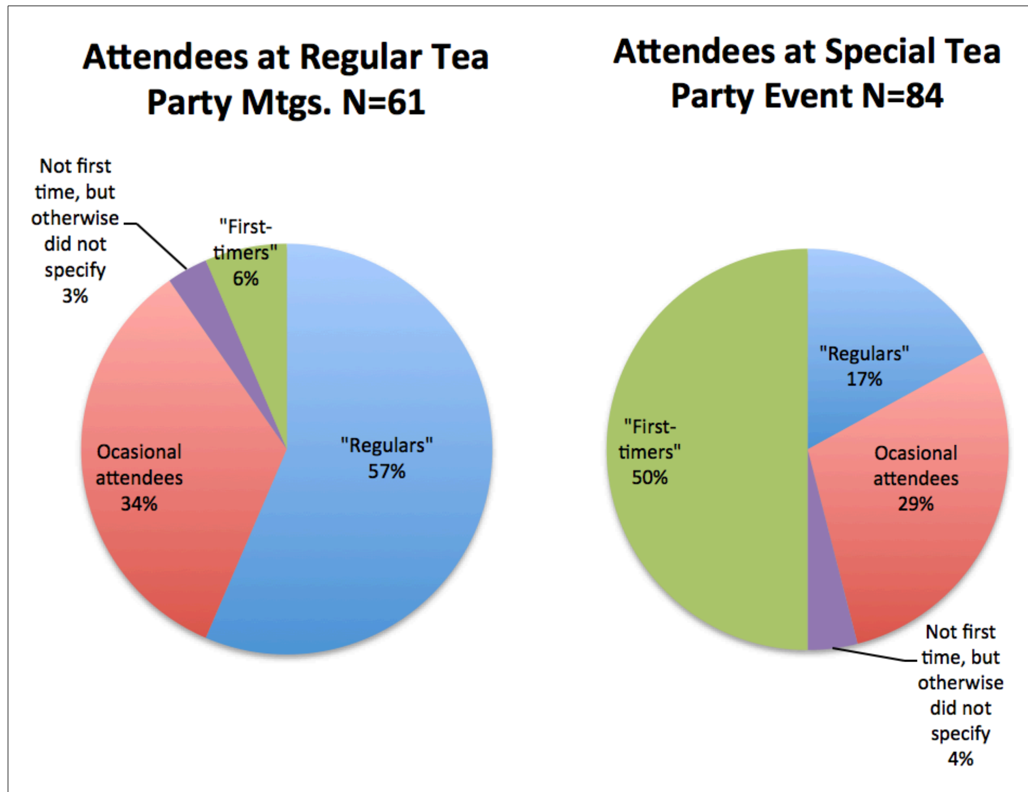

Figure 1. Attendance at Tea Party Events

Tea Party groups reach the public in ways other than meetings. In Virginia, all have extensive email lists, with anywhere from several hundred to over 6,000 members. In rural areas, several groups have become locally famous for advertising their meetings and sending messages with massive yellow signs along the highway. In my collection of 108 different signs, the vast majority were geared towards the general public rather than Tea Party activists or potential activists. They used general rhetoric to attract attention, make a political point, and sometimes to

advertise Tea Party meetings, as, for example, one that read "'THE FURTHER A SOCIETY DRIFTS FROM THE TRUTH…..THE MORE IT WILL HATE THOSE WHO SPEAK IT' – GEORGE ORWELL" with a local group's website below it. Rather than retreating internally, as some movements do after institutionalization, the Tea Party in Virginia has remained focused on political outreach and mobilization.

Collectively, local Tea Party groups form a decentralized network through which they are also connected to other political organizations. In the Richmond area, I captured the dimensions and dynamics of this network in three ways. First, I asked each informant to list and describe their involvement in all organizations, including those in which they were members and groups whose meetings they had attended. Second, I tracked the organizations I observed or learned were working with local Tea Party groups in Richmond throughout 2016. Finally, I attempted to interview representatives from the most closely connected groups to understand how they interact with the Tea Party. In total, I identified 14 non-Tea Party political organizations that had substantial connections to the Tea Party network in Richmond, excluding political parties, campaigns, and government representatives (see Table 4). This includes only organizations with which at least three Tea Party informants were involved, or only one activist informant was involved but the organization had also sent a representative to a Tea Party event in 2016.

Table 4. 2016 Richmond Tea Party Network

		# of Groups that Share with the Tea Party:		
Types of Groups	**Total # in Network**	**Leadership**	**Members/ Participants**	**Speakers**
Local Tea Party Groups*	**9**			
National Affiliates	**9**	3	9	6
Independent Local Groups	**5**	2	5	4
**Included in this number is the statewide Tea Party Federation*				

The majority of organizations within the Tea Party network were local affiliates of national organizations, meaning that powerful national organizations had direct reach into local Tea Party groups. However, I also found that the local, independent groups were closely connected to the Tea Party; all five either had members or frequent participants that were Tea Party leaders, or leaders that were Tea Party regulars, including two with overlapping leadership. Material resources were rarely shared between Tea Party groups and other organizations. In 2016, to my knowledge, only two non-party/campaign entities share substantial material resources with the Tea Party (other than literature or paraphernalia), and these consisted of computer software and office space.[1]

The relationships between Tea Party groups and other groups are evident in two examples. Americans for Prosperity (AFP) is a national advocacy group with operations in over 30 states, funded in part by the Koch brothers (Gold 2014). Their intent is to organize volunteers and paid citizens to canvas and phone bank in support of ultra-conservative economic policies. In Virginia, they also employ lobbyists to target the General Assembly directly. AFP was an early

[1] I do not include the distribution of organizational literature and/or paraphernalia in this analysis because I was unable to collect and document the literature available at every event, even those I attended. However, many of these groups made literature available at Tea Party events.

Tea Party organizer, distributing "talking points," setting up websites, and funding bus trips to transport protestors to Tea Party rallies across the country (Mayer 2010; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Observers often use its relationship with the Tea Party as evidence that the Tea Party is "astroturf" – meaning elite-manufactured, as opposed to genuine "grassroots" (see Demelle 2013; Jacobs 2009).

In Richmond, AFP had a presence in the Tea Party network, but a relatively limited one. AFP professionals sometimes spoke at Tea Party meetings, and AFP literature and paraphernalia (such as yard signs that say "SOCIALISM ISN'T COOL") were sometimes handed out at Tea Party events. AFP had eight chapters in Virginia, and claimed to have advocates in the field everyday across the commonwealth. However, only a few of the people I interviewed had ever attended an AFP event (other than at the Tea Party), worked for them, volunteered through them, or even mentioned knowledge of AFP having a grassroots presence. I attended one AFP event that I heard about through a local Tea Party group. Out of the twelve non-AFP and non-speakers in the audience, two – to my knowledge – had participated in the Tea Party. While AFP plays a role in the Tea Party network, it is certainly not a driver, but rather, is better understood as one among over a dozen grassroots organizations around the Tea Party.[2]

Some conservative organizations interacted frequently with the Tea Party in Virginia. One was an independent local group called the Virginia Citizens' Defense League (VCDL). The VCDL is a gun rights group focused on policy in Virginia. It is a genuinely grassroots organization with dues paying members that holds quarterly events in the state, organizing citizens to lobby the Virginia Assembly, and regularly circulating email legislative bulletins that

[2] If Americans for Prosperity is not a dominant player in the grassroots Tea Party network in Virginia, it may be a major force in state politics. Indeed, the fact that the organization maintains so many offices in the state and employs a paid staff indicates that it has the funds and infrastructure to organize independently.

urge members to call or visit their state representatives. They also use paid advertising to build membership, including electronic billboards in 2016 such as one which read "McAuliff and Herring" – then-Democratic Virginia Governor and Attorney General – "Want to Disarm us! Join VCDL.org" along a picture of a pistol tied in a knot (Virginia Citizens' Defense League 2016).

Although – to my knowledge – none of the VCDL leadership were directly associated with the Tea Party movement, they did sometimes attend Tea Party events as speakers. Furthermore, many Tea Party activists – including nearly all the leaders I interviewed – were members of the VCDL. Some had attended VCDL events or volunteered to represent the VCDL at gun shows or other events. In addition, the VCDL was associated with the Tea Party because of the prominent orange stickers that they passed out at every major political event I attended, from a rural fish fry to a county GOP convention and the Republican National Convention. At these events, nearly all Tea Party-associated attendees sported large VCDL orange and black stickers that read "GUNS SAVE LIVES." This visual separated people from the "establishment" side of the GOP from the Tea Party-associated people.

AFP and VCDL are only two examples of the 14 politically-oriented, non-party/campaign/government groups that have substantial relationships to the grassroots Tea Party in central Virginia. Together with the many arms of the Republican Party (including county GOP committees, district committees, and state central committees), the many Republican campaigns and representatives' offices (including congressional representatives, state elected offices, and county offices), a few Libertarian candidates, government entities (such as school boards, county development commissions, etc.), these non-party/campaign/government entities form a dynamic network through which information, actors, and resources are easily shared with Tea Party

groups. In the next two subsections, I show how this network has impacted the Tea Party's evolution through processes of institutionalization and radicalization.

3.2.2 Establishing the Anti-Establishment?

Sometime in 2011, a nationally-recognized Virginia-based Tea Party organizer started making the rounds of local Tea Party groups with a presentation called "Tea Party 2.0" that encouraged them to stop protesting and start learning about the Republican Party, the branches of local government, and legislative and administrative processes, an effort that occurred across the country (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Tea Party activists in Virginia have largely embraced this approach, gaining substantial power in elected and administrative positions in the Republican Party and in local government. At the same time that they have been aggressively pursuing access to the Republican Party, however, Tea Party groups have also maintained an independent movement. In this subsection, I show how these two dynamics have played out simultaneously, a process facilitated by the diffuse nature of the Tea Party movement.

The process of integrating into the GOP is sufficiently pervasive that most Tea Party activists in Virginia are comfortable with this approach. Deana Rohlinger and Leslie Bunnage (2017) find that the majority of Tea Party activists who remained in the Tallahassee Tea Party movement between 2011 and 2013 in Florida had participated in the Republican Party. This is true in Virginia in more recent years, as only those activists I interviewed who were the least committed to the Tea Party were wary of Republican-Tea Party linkages. Moreover, only one group in my study rejected the idea of joining the Republican Party (they also refrained from joining the VTPPF and operated more independently than others). Indeed, most activists saw the

Tea Party's evolution into the GOP as inevitable. Bill was one of several Tea Party leaders who used the word "mature" to describe the process:

> In the first days of the Tea Party, it was more of a protest kind of thing. Where it's evolved now, you hardly see any Tea Party protests anymore, and I believe what's happened is it's grown and matured and we've become active and engaged in the political process….Most of the time protesting doesn't do anything except gather media attention. It doesn't change the government.

The pervasiveness of this attitude was reflected in activists' political trajectories. Of the 65 regular and/or semi-regular activists I surveyed at meetings, a slight majority reported some previous experience either with the GOP or with a political campaign before joining the Tea Party. In comparison, seventy-five percent said they became involved with the local GOP or a political campaign since being in the Tea Party. According to these surveys, 20 new activists had become engaged in the Republican Party or electoral politics through the Tea Party. My interviews suggest that the effect of being in the Tea Party is quite significant, since the prior experience that 56 percent of activists described was usually limited to activity such as attending a single candidate's rally or helping a friend gather signatures for a local race, for example. In contrast, most regular Tea Party attendees had – since becoming involved in the Tea Party – volunteered on campaigns and attended multiple Republican Party events. Among the 45 Tea Party activists I interviewed in 2016, 40 had paid their annual $25 fee and become official members of their local GOP. Some went regularly to county and district meetings, although most attended official Republican functions only for the major events when the party elected its administrative representatives. As I observed at meetings in all but one of the groups, Tea Party leaders alert their membership to such events and explain that while administrative Party elections may seem minor, they have serious consequences for later candidate selection.

Tea Party participation in the Republican Party and local government is not limited to low-level membership. Rather, by growing their numbers in general GOP membership, the Tea

Party gained the votes to advance some of their activists into higher-level positions in the GOP. Between 2012 and 2017, nearly all new representatives from the Richmond area to the Virginia Republican State Central committee – whose members yield substantial power in distributing funds and determining primary election procedures – were associated with the Tea Party. Several were activists whose first political event was a Tea Party function, people who are often described as having "come up through the movement." Tea Party activists claim this transformation was critical in winning the nomination of Dave Brat to successfully challenge the powerful Congressional incumbent Eric Cantor. During the same time, five Tea Party activists won seats as county supervisors in the Richmond area while others gained paid positions with statewide and federal campaigns, including those of Dave Brat and Donald Trump.

As Tea Party activists joined the Virginia GOP, they greatly expanded its conservative arm, yet most did so while remaining involved in the Tea Party movement. For example, I encountered 16 Tea Party activists in the greater Richmond area who entered public office, won Republican chairships at the county or district level, gained leadership roles in conservative advocacy groups, or had official roles in congressional and presidential campaigns. Among these activists, eleven remained active in the Tea Party movement, regularly attending meetings or retaining leadership positions in local groups. Among the five who were no longer active in the Tea Party, three were elected representatives who had been rejected by activists who claimed they had become corrupt or moderate in office. The other two who left the movement explained that they had limited time, and felt their efforts were best spent outside of the Tea Party. In fact, they were not entirely divorced from the movement, as I ran into both of them at Tea Party meetings, suggesting that they continue to participate. Furthermore – with a couple of exceptions

– the primary leaders from each Tea Party group are not the individuals running for elected offices.

Because the diffuse nature of the Tea Party movement does not require official membership or assert official policies or agendas, activists are free to move in and out of other organizations. While this might seem like a threat to the Tea Party, I found that it allows the movement to seep into other institutions without forcing activists to choose allegiances. Activists can claim that they are 100 percent Republican – which they might need to do if they are running for Republican Party offices – without compromising their commitment to the Tea Party.

Part of Tea Party activists' commitment to maintaining the Tea Party is their antipathy to the Republican Party, especially towards what they consider its "establishment" faction. Many of the activists with political experience prior to the Tea Party had been involved in a local Republican Party, but did not view it positively (see also Deckman 2016). They pointed not only to ideological differences with the establishment faction, but also cultural and social distinctions, describing situations in which they felt excluded or uncomfortable: "A little stuffy and a little stuck up," said one activist of GOP experience.

Anti-elitist fervor was central to the Tea Party's initial mobilization and remains common in its rhetoric and framing. Activists have relaxed some of their hostility to the GOP at the local level to gain institutional power, but the process of allying with the GOP also stoked new hostilities for the Virginia Tea Party by crystallizing distinctions between themselves and "establishment" Republicans, a move which reinforces Tea Party allegiance over the GOP. Nearly everyone I interviewed – from the most casual activist to the organizational leader – shared stories about the local GOP establishment's perceived corruption and lack of ethics. In several cases, they claimed that county GOP committees intended to prevent Tea Party-

associated citizens from joining (and thus gaining votes) by refusing to hold meetings in which new members would get inducted. In other cases, establishment leaders openly attempted to "slate" Tea Party-associated delegates out by packing meetings with their own crowd (Laris, Vozzella and Weiner 2014). In another incident, Tea Party activists claimed that a county GOP was siphoning money away from Tea Party-associated Republican candidates (a claim "establishment" GOP leaders disputed).

Tea Party activists came to define themselves against their perception of corruption in the GOP. In their narrative, the Virginia Republican Party is made up of people who participate in politics simply to advance their own interests. Even GOP actors with extremely conservative views were rejected by Tea Party activists, because they believed a continuing relationship with the establishment indicated primary loyalty to the GOP "machine," (as Tea Party activists called it). This conflict came to a head during a county Republican chairship race. Although an establishment-endorsed candidate was widely considered to be a "strong conservative," as a Cruz supporter in the presidential primary, everyone I spoke with in the Tea Party rejected his candidacy. According to Penny, a Tea Party activist and "machine" skeptic, it ultimately doesn't matter what someone's beliefs are; if someone is attached to a party machine, they will act according to the dictates of Party leadership:

> You can't say that you know what's [in] anybody's heart and soul, right?....The fact that he was happy to take those endorsements, and then use them for his campaign….The rub comes in when elected officials believe that it's up to them to run the party. Ok…. Who's really in charge around here? Are they accountable to us or they're accountable to them?....So to me this race was less about straight up ideology, and it was more about, is the….Cantor machine still running? They may not be running on all cylinders, but are they still running, because 'this is the way we've always done business.'

Tea Party activists and sympathizers who disagreed with the strategy of replacing existing GOP officials with Tea Party-associated ones charged that, after a few years of growing success in the Republican Party, the Tea Party is now merely replacing the "establishment party

machine" with their own version, in which candidates are accountable to the Tea Party instead of to the GOP's establishment. Said Charlotte, one long-time GOP activist who had had some involvement with the Tea Party: "You're either one of them or you're not….You're either with them 100 percent of the time and you're viewed as being no ties to establishment, or you're not one of them." Casey, another long-time activist who was also somewhat involved in the Tea Party, agreed, complaining that Tea Party activists imposed a constant "litmus test" on anyone who still had ties to the establishment, saying: "You shouldn't have to walk into a room and prove you're being conservative every time."

Tea Party activists, especially those new to politics, were sensitive to charges they were creating their own "establishment," and sometimes challenged these directly. They repeatedly argued that they acted with accountability and transparency, occasionally using meeting time and online communication to explain their actions and call for input from other members. For example, after Trump and Cruz delegates competed at the Virginia State Republican convention, the establishment was perceived as taking Cruz's side. One local Tea Party, which included activists from both campaigns, called a meeting to discuss the events. Over several hours – in a rare meeting that involved extensive interaction and debate – activists discussed the details of every action at the convention, arguing about what was unfair and corrupt, and what was simply political gamesmanship.

This meeting to address convention events demonstrates a key mechanism by which the Tea Party avoided ideological co-optation by GOP elites: maintaining independent space. After the state GOP convention, the Tea Party "brand" among Republicans was directly under attack, as it appeared that the movement was hypocritically adopting the very tactics they railed against. However, when Tea Party activists from the Cruz and Trump sides came together, the Tea Party

was able to create a different narrative, arguing that Tea Party-associated Cruz supporters were more organized than Trump supporters and that a higher percentage of them had attended. As one activist quipped, using a common political refrain: “Politics belongs to those who show up.”

Furthermore, the decentralized nature of the Tea Party meant that local activists – even Tea Party leaders – did not feel obligated to defend conservative GOP leaders at the state level. For example, Ken Cucinelli is a long-time conservative Republican who won the GOP 2012 gubernatorial nomination with the help of the Tea Party. When he was accused of orchestrating anti-Trump measures at the 2016 state convention, a number of activists publicly claimed to disapprove of his actions.

Tea Party activists used this independent space not only to create their own strategies, but also to generate terminology and framing to facilitate an identity independent of the GOP. For example, at the meeting described above, activists openly mocked Republican establishment attempts to co-opt the “conservative” label. When they heard that establishment candidates for GOP office were calling themselves the “conservative unity” ticket, Tea Party activists laughed out loud, joking that at least they didn’t call themselves “grassroots.” In response, the Tea Party-associated candidates printed stickers calling themselves “TRUE CONSERVATIVES.”

Furthermore, Tea Party-associated Republicans used a strategy of physical separation to distinguish themselves at Republican events. For example, at the Republican National Convention, tensions ran high between what were now largely Trump and Cruz camps. There were Tea Party activists on both sides, but predominantly as Cruz delegates. Throughout the four days of the event I attended, many – though not all – of the “conservative” Tea Party-associated delegates sat at tables with one another, largely isolated from the other delegates where they

shared information about what they had seen and heard and what they had done, creating narratives that were distinct from those of the "establishment" GOP.

Over eight years, the Tea Party in Virginia has managed to build elite connections and institutional power through the Republican Party without becoming beholden to the dictates of the central powers of the GOP. As I demonstrate, this process is facilitated by the highly decentralized and informal nature of the movement. Because the movement retains independent spaces in which they create counter-narratives and identities, I found that they are able to avoid ideological cooptation, a finding consistent with Doowon Suh's (2011) claim that organizational autonomy facilitates movement independence, despite institutionalization. At the same time, I found that the Tea Party's ability to maintain autonomy lies in an informal and decentralized nature in which activists see themselves as individuals pursuing particular political ends, and thus don't struggle with competing loyalties between the movement and the Party.

3.2.3 Institutionalization Without Deradicalization

Neither institutionalization nor continued community outreach has tempered the most radical ideology advanced by Tea Party members and leaders, in large part because of its decentralized and informal nature. In this subsection, I document the level of "radicalness" among activists and groups within the Tea Party and show how radical content circulated in the movement via its fluid nature.

Most activists tell me they do not think that their views have changed much over the course of their participation. Rather, they think they have just learned more about issues and systems, and become aware of – to use common Tea Party parlance –"what's going on" (see also Braunstein 2017). Many cited Ronald Reagan, who famously said of his exit from the

Democratic Party, "I didn't leave the Party. The Party left me," comparing their rejection of the current Republican Party to Reagan's historical refutation of the Democratic Party. In their view, they haven't changed, the Republican Party changed. To illustrate, I asked activists how long they had "been a conservative." Most responded that they had been conservative their whole lives, they just hadn't known it. According to Toby:

> It's sort of like you had a disease, right? You had it all your life, and then all the sudden it shows its ugly head – and so now you're learning it, and you say 'Oh, now I can control it and I know what it is'….It may still get ya in the end…. [laughing].

Before the Tea Party, Toby had never participated in politics, but has been highly active in the movement since it began in 2010. During this time, he has come to believe that Communists have infiltrated mosques all over the United States and that the United Nations threatens Americans' property rights. However, while his views have become more extreme, his life otherwise has changed very little. He has been married to the same woman (as he says, a "tag-a-long activist" who's too busy to do much with the Tea Party, but who occasionally comes to events and whom he otherwise "keeps informed"), had the same job, and lived in the same house. Toby does not feel isolated by his radical views, nor that he needs to retreat to a friendly or accepting environment. Rather, he is happy to think of himself as more politically-engaged and informed than those around him (see also Braunstein 2017).

This attitude was nearly universal among my activist informants. As social movement scholars predict (Blee 2002; Munson 2010), nearly everyone – especially those without previous political participation – had developed more radical views over the course of their participation in the Tea Party. For example, many – although not all – had previously been supporters of then-Congressman Eric Cantor, but after challenger Dave Brat labeled him an "amnesty supporter" based on his support for comprehensive immigration reform, Cantor became anathema to them and ousting him became their central goal. As Tea Party activist and Brat enthusiast Maggie

explained, she had previously been an active Cantor supporter – attending fundraising benefits for his campaign – but after she retired (and became involved in the Tea Party), she "had time to look at his record" and realized that he was not as conservative as she had thought he was: "When I saw the voting record of Cantor I'm like, I gotta go look elsewhere." Other activists described similar transformations in their views of former President George W. Bush. Through participation in the Tea Party, many activists became more concerned and unforgiving about issues like immigration and the national debt, effectively radicalizing them towards the right-wing. They also became more accepting of conspiracy theories linking communists to cultural and political institutions throughout the country. For example, the same former Cantor supporter was a teacher who said during her tenure she had organized her students' desks into tables to facilitate group work and interaction, but now realizes this practice was part of a Communist effort to weaken young people's sense of individualism. These activists had undergone a substantial radicalization in their views, yet did not see this process as such, and did not feel isolated by their changing views.

As described by other research (Berlet 2012; Parker and Barreto 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2012), radical content has been a consistent feature of the Tea Party at the organizational level since its early days. Despite the partisan institutionalization the Tea Party has pursued in recent years, I found no change in this respect. Although Tea Party groups rarely had explicit goals or policies, the speakers they invited give some indication of their ideological locations. For example, groups regularly introduced extremist content and rhetoric by welcoming speakers like conspiracy theorist Trevor Loudon who says that "hundreds" of U.S. Congressional Representatives are "enmeshed in neo-communist or Muslim Brotherhood front groups" (quoted

in Klein 2017), and that comprehensive immigration reform is a Communist plot to create Democratic voters (Loudon 2013).

The decentralized and diffuse nature of the Tea Party organizing model facilitated the circulation of radical content in several ways. First, the lack of formal and hierarchical leadership meant there was little gatekeeping or policing of individuals and /or content in the network. For example, on several occasions, I saw individual activists publicly voice support for extremist ideas at Tea Party meetings that were ignored, rather than openly challenged. In one instance, a regular activist declared that he was interested in forming a "citizens' grand jury" to indict politicians whom corrupt courts were not keeping accountable.[3] After he made his statement, folks nodded and immediately moved on. I suspect there are other Tea Party activists who support such an idea, but also some who see it as far-fetched and conspiratorial. Further, I suspect that many people there were not familiar with the concept. However, because the individualist nature of the movement does not require anyone – leader or activists – to respond to every posed idea, no one challenged this extremist suggestion, allowing it to circulate further.

Further, when extremists were deliberately invited to speak, leaders and activists were able to claim that they did not personally subscribe to those views, or to not all of them, but were just making information available. Finally, without a professional staff, an official agenda or Party candidates, the movement tended to fly under the radar of the mainstream press. Specific politicians may be associated with the Tea Party, but given the informal membership and lack of spokespeople, no politician was held accountable to justify or defend Tea Party group or member

[3] According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, "Citizens' Grand Juries" are a concept popularized by White supremacists (Morlin, Bill. 2016. "Antigovernment Extremists in Oregon Now Plan Their Own Justice System." Southern Poverty Law Center, January 13th Retrieved February 3, 2018 (https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/01/13/antigovernment-extremists-oregon-now-plan-their-own-justice-system).)

activity. As these examples illustrate, the diffuse nature of the movement meant that there was little accountability for content within the Tea Party.

At the same time, the movement has established itself as a popular political institution in the community, meaning that radical content was integrated along with more mainstream and regular activity. For example, regular meetings became a meeting place for conservatives and Republicans to meet political candidates and hear local political updates. This meant that aspiring and current public officials had to show up at the Tea Party or face charges of being unavailable to constituents. In the Richmond area, I observed that nearly all local Republican politicians and/or candidates, as well as many non-partisan local government officials, appeared at Tea Party events, including those generally unpopular with the Tea Party. Indeed, much activity in Tea Party groups is generally mainstream. For example, there were discussions of local budget issues, explanations for how the local electoral system works, debates about meals taxes and funding for mental health services, and so forth. Tea Party meetings were frequently a place for locals to get information about routine affairs in the county government. Thus, radical content is normalized as it circulates alongside mainstream content and activity. Furthermore, as described in the previous subsection, keeping an autonomous movement structure allowed the Tea Party to advance narratives and frames that continuously challenged mainstream views.

Ultimately, the endurance of the diffuse and decentralized nature of the Tea Party has helped it to maintain its radical ideology, while still building institutional power through the Republican Party.

3.3 CONCLUSION: ESTABLISHING A MOVEMENT NETWORK

This chapter has demonstrated how the evolution of the Tea Party has progressed in the eight years since the start of the mobilization. As social movement literature predicts, the movement lost substantial popular support after the Tea Party successfully mobilized Republicans to help secure majorities in the House and Senate in 2010. Afterwards, the remaining activists moved towards institutionalization through the Republican Party, as consistent with social movement literature predictions, especially given the movement's strong ties to partisan institutions. Given the polarized nature of today's political climate, perhaps it is also not surprising that the movement did not deradicalize, as movement theories typically suggest movements do. However, my research shows that this dynamic was not merely an inevitable result of a changing political climate nationally, but rather was a force advancing this transformation, inserting radicalized activists into the Republican Party and pressing it farther right.

Furthermore, I show that – somewhat in contrast to literature predictions – Tea Party movement organizations did not experience much institutionalization, but rather, retained a highly diffuse, informal, and decentralized nature. Although individual groups are genuinely independent, they are tied to both national and local right-wing organizations. At the same time, these groups are well-integrated into constituent populations, with open meetings that continued to welcome new visitors. This evolution has several results. First, it was a critical mechanism in maintaining radicalization, creating an autonomous space through which radical content circulated with without challenge from mainstream actors and little accountability. Second, it facilitated the movement's role as the center of a broader right-wing network, connecting sympathizers and political elites through multiple grassroots groups and events. Finally, the

diffuse nature facilitated the movement's integration into the Republican Party, while preventing centralization, and maintaining its radical ideology.

In the next chapter, I show how this organizing model is partially a result of the political culture dominant among activists and sympathizers in the Tea Party network.

4.0 POLITICAL CULTURE IN THE TEA PARTY

Before the Tea Party, Jennifer had never attended a political event or gone door-to-door for a candidate. She had been frustrated and angry with politicians for a long time, especially with Republicans, who she felt had betrayed their voters by claiming to support "small government" and then passing large spending bills. Although she says she wasn't "really actively involved," she "did what I could," by researching candidates, donating small amounts of money, and making phone calls in support of George W. Bush and John McCain (even if she wasn't very "enthusiastic" about them).

When Jennifer heard the Tea Party call "patriots" to rally together and send a message to Congress to stop federal programs like the Affordable Care Act, she felt like this was a way to tell President Obama and Congress what she had been thinking: "How dare you do this – we told you 'no.'" She thought the country was going in the wrong direction, and was relieved to find that at Tea Party rallies, everyone seemed to share her outrage. Eventually, she heard about a local Tea Party group in her area and started attending meetings. Today, Jennifer is a dedicated political activist, regularly attending local Tea Party and Republican Party meetings, going door-to-door for candidates, working the polls, and so forth. She hasn't been to a rally in a long time now, as she thinks the Tea Party has evolved beyond this tactic and realized the best way to effect change is through the electoral and legislative systems.

Looking back on what she calls her "pre-extreme involvement" years – before the Tea Party – Jennifer says she doesn't believe there was a lot more she *could* have been doing: "Before the Tea Party movement started, Republicans had become more and more and unreliable, so there wasn't much to support there." According to Jennifer, a lack of "good candidates" to volunteer for meant she didn't really have options to participate in politics. But now that the Tea Party has gotten individual Tea Party conservatives to work through the local Republican Party to get "good candidates" nominated and elected, she sees a direct role for herself in this process:

> I resisted joining [the local Republican Party] for so long. I just didn't want to be involved….But that is where candidates are chosen. That process – that system of city committees, of county committees, the state central committee – all of that is hooked into who eventually gets chosen as our candidates. So if you want better candidates, then we've got to get involved.

The way Jennifer describes her political trajectory says a lot about how she sees the political system, and what she sees as her personal role therein. In Jennifer's mind, "political involvement" is heavily centered around political representatives, either getting particular candidates elected or contacting incumbents about issues and legislation. She did not imagine alternative ways of participating in politics. And yet, she also rejected the formality and the hierarchy of the Republican Party. Thus, to understand Jennifer's involvement in politics – how, when, and why she participates – you have to understand the meaning that she attaches to her actions. That is, you have to understand the "political culture" in which Jennifer participates.

Drawing on the work of Charles Kurzman (2008: 5), the "meaning" of actions incorporates "moral understandings of right and wrong, cognitive understandings of true and false," and "perceptual understandings of like and unlike." For example, what does it mean that you vote for a candidate? Does it mean you are fulfilling your patriotic duty, or that you are complicit in an inherently exploitative process? As the political culture of a community reflects

such shared understandings, social movement scholars use political culture to explain a variety of movement elements, including tactics, strategies, narrative frames, and organizing styles. In this theorizing, actors consciously and unconsciously draw on existing symbols, languages, rituals, ideas, and figures with which they associate meaning.

This body of work is part of the "cultural turn" in social movements (Williams 2004). While earlier theories in the field drew on purely structural models relating to political arrangements, resources, and institutions, subsequent waves of scholarship highlight the ubiquity of culture as an animating force in these dynamics. In a 2004 article entitled "Culture is Not Just in Your Head," Francesca Polletta argued that political opportunity theorists (see McAdam 1994) tended to identify "culture" as a discrete element to be integrated into structural accounts of mobilization only in the moments when activists were interpreting the "objective" structural conditions. Instead, Polletta argues, institutions, actors, and forces themselves are cultural artifacts, imbued with power and meaning because of collective cultural memories, associations, and histories. "Structures are cultural (though not only cultural)," she argues (Polletta 2004: 97).

In the case of the Tea Party, structuralists argue that the movement mobilized in response to the opportunity presented by the Republican Party's multiple electoral losses in 2008 (the presidency and Congress), as conservatives were effectively excluded from institutional centers of power and took to the streets because they had nowhere else to go (Almeida and Van Dyke 2014; Heaney and Rojas 2015; Meyer and Pullum 2014). And yet, as I showed in the last chapter, the Tea Party has maintained its independence, despite Republican gains in power and Tea Party involvement in the Republican Party. And, as I also showed, it has maintained a highly diffuse organizing structure that has helped them maintain movement independence and avoid deradicalization.

In this chapter, I argue that a central force in the maintenance of this movement is the political culture of the Tea Party network. That is, Tea Party activists and sympathizers are animated by a particular "democratic imaginary" (Braunstein 2017), an ideal of the political system and their roles therein, and driven to enact this ideal by participating in the Tea Party. For example, while most Tea Party activists – like Jennifer – have concluded that mainstream political institutions are the best way to advance their political ideals, they do not see the Republican Party as a vehicle for enacting their political ideal. I illustrate this argument by explicating the dimensions of the Tea Party democratic imaginary and showing how the Tea Party movement better approximates this imagined model of democracy.

I build on Ruth Braunstein's (2017) argument that Tea Party activists imagine themselves as actors in a political narrative in which they are inheritors of a national democratic project initiated by the "Founding Fathers" (see also Lepore 2010). Drawing on the cultural resources available to them from the broader cultures in which they are embedded, Tea Party activists develop goals, strategies, and norms for interaction and speech that conform to this ideal (Braunstein 2017).

Braustein's (2017) model of the democratic imaginary is a useful beginning, but the activists in my study have developed an imaginary that is based around more collaborative and less hostile interactions with politicians than in Braunstein's study. Additionally, I expand the idea of the democratic imaginary by placing more emphasis on the political culture of the wider movement network that includes activists from multiple groups as well as non-activists in the broad culture. That is, I argue that the shared democratic imaginary of the Tea Party exists not only among the activists who regularly meet and eventually develop a strategic plan, but more broadly among a larger population. Furthermore, I argue that this broadly shared political culture

is key to the enduring success of the movement, as it provides a unique space for activists to enact their imaginaries.

I start by examining concepts of political culture in social movement literature. Several models dominate this area, considering political culture as a collection of cultural resources, as identity, as "group style" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), and as an idealized "democratic imaginary" (Braunstein 2017). I then move to my findings to show that, in the specific context of the Tea Party, the concept of a democratic imaginary model best captures the unique dimensions of the political culture of the Tea Party. I argue that several characteristics of the Tea Party make this wider model of a democratic imaginary more apt: it is highly diffuse, with many activists who have little to no previous political experience and little knowledge of the conservative mobilizing history in which they now participate; its activists live in highly conservative areas, where movement ideology is common; its activists' ages and social statuses suggest that most may be "biographically available" (McAdam 1988) even if they are not "cognitively available" (Munson 2010: 57), meaning they are in a place in their lives where they have the time and resources to participate in the movement, yet are not particularly open to new ideas and conceptions. Together, these characteristics suggest that Tea Party activists are highly influenced by extra-movement forces, which must be incorporated into an understanding of the movement culture.

My model of the "democratic imaginary" uses a specific sociological approach that pays attention to the entire movement network – elite institutional forces and non-activist sympathizers, multiple Tea Party groups and partner organizations. My study thus focuses on how people throughout the Tea Party network share a democratic imaginary. Finally, I show how

the Tea Party movement maintains its relevance to activists by enacting this democratic imaginary and thus drawing heavily on the shared political culture.

4.1 SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POLITICAL CULTURE

Social movement scholars have integrated political culture into analysis through a variety of theoretical models. Each of these provides insight into how cultural forces permeate movements and impact their evolution and trajectories. The following subsections address four different models of political culture that are utilized in social movement theory, identifying particularly salient theoretical dimensions for this analysis, with particular attention to how these models address tactical choices between institutional and extra-institutional activities. I conclude by arguing that Braunstein's "democratic imaginary" incorporates the critical dimensions from these models and, with modification, is best able to capture relevant cultural dynamics in the Tea Party movement.

4.1.1 Political Culture as Cultural "Repertoire"

Many scholars describe political culture essentially as a collection of cultural resources from which organizers and activists draw, like Charles Tilly's (1993) idea of a movement's "repertoire of contention." This approach is primarily oriented towards examining movement strategy, asking why some tactics, frames, or organizational patterns are more appealing than others, both to targeted audiences and to activist leaders. Similarly, according to Francesca Polletta and James Jasper (2001), tactics are both strategic and expressive. Organizers make decisions to

mobilize in ways that will resonate with their target audiences, even as organizers are themselves influenced by cultural dynamics such that their decision-making is inherently culturally expressive (Jasper 1997; Polletta 2004; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Swidler 1986; Williams 2002).

Movement organizers draw on existing symbols, languages, rituals, ideas, and figures with which they and their audiences associate meaning. Of course, they do not simply replicate such cultural material, but rather they manipulate it to convey new messages, often "extending," "amplifying," or "transforming" familiar materials (Benford and Snow 2000; Williams 2002). And audiences do not merely absorb information; as cultural material circulates, meanings continue to shift and transform (Berezin 1997). For example, Rhys Williams (2002) argues that Martin Luther King combined familiar appeals to Christian notions of universal humanity (a "beloved community") and American ideals of patriotism (equality, liberty and freedom). His approach was particularly affective in engaging and persuading White Americans because it located the Civil Rights Movement (at least, King's mainstream representation of it) within the bounds of a majority White political culture oriented towards ideals of civic participation and individual rights (Chappell, Hutchinson and Ward 1999). At the same time, as Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper (1999) point out, King's rhetoric should be understood not solely as strategic and calculated to appeal to specific audiences, but also as a genuine reflection of his beliefs and thus a sign of his embeddedness in a particular political culture.

Some theorists view cultural repertoires largely as results of political histories. For example, Raka Ray (1999: 8-9) defines political culture broadly as:

> The acceptable and legitimate ways of doing politics in a given society, strongly influenced by but not reducible to the complex web of class, gender, race, religion, and other relations that order society.....The dominant discourse within a political culture defines what politics is, who legitimate actors are, and what can or cannot be put on the political agenda.

In her case study of women's movements in Calcutta, Ray argues that a long history of anti-colonial politics dominated by Marxist organizing created a political culture in which movement claims were oriented around class struggle and through political parties. Thus, even while they face gender inequality, women in Calcutta must organize through the dominant political paradigm of social class, a finding that demonstrates the power of organizational forces on political culture.

Social movement scholars David Meyer and Sidney Tarrow (1998) argue that in recent years, movement tactics have become popularized, largely de-stigmatized, and ultimately integrated into the fabric of American political culture more broadly. Thus, traditional movement tactics, such as protest, have been introduced into the repertoires of political actors across the political and economic spectrum, including relatively advantaged actors such as Tea Party people, who traditionally have relied on more institutional tactics (Meyer and Pullum 2014). This idea appears to be supported by the recent wave of popular protests across the political spectrum and around the world, such as the "Arab Spring," the Occupy movement, and Black Lives Matter movement (Fox Piven 2014). Yet, recent scholarship suggests that some groups may continue to be uncomfortable with contentious tactics. For example, in a chapter entitled "No to Protests, Yes to Festivals: How the Creative Class Organizes in the Social Movement Society," Judith Taylor (2015) shows that a group of white, middle-class liberals in Canada were relatively uncomfortable using confrontational tactics in a conflict with local government, suggesting that social norms regarding protest may vary more than social movement society theorists suggest.

Some scholars have argued that people that are right-oriented politically might prefer mainstream political institutions to protest tactics. For example, Swen Hutter and Hanspeter Kriesi (2013: 287) show that right-wing protest activity wanes when right-wing parties gain

institutional access (they found the opposite dynamic on the left), suggesting that right-wing activists might prefer mainstream political tactics that reflect specific "value orientations."

Thinking about political culture as a collection of cultural resources highlights particular instances when shared cultural symbols, rhetoric and meanings are appropriated for political use. It also demonstrates how tactics, frames, and symbols circulate through populations. However, as this approach tends to focus on strategy and tactics, it emphasizes the boundary between organizational leaders – as the people who create and implement those strategies and tactics – and assumed audiences in a way that obscures their shared participation in political culture. In contrast, models that portray political culture as political identity tend to avoid this binary by focusing on all individuals.

4.1.2 Political Culture as Identity

To think of political culture as political identity is to suggest that how people see the political system and their roles in the system reflect the relationships that they see themselves having with the state, society, movements, communities, and entities. For example, Paul Lichterman (1996) found that activists pursued very different types of politics depending on whether or not they saw themselves primarily as political activists – motivated by a commitment to specific principles of social justice – or as community activists – motivated by responsibility to a particular community. For the former, Lichterman (1996) argues a "personalist" politics prevailed, in which individuals perceived activism as a life-long and all-encompassing pursuit and participated in groups and in communities that emphasized self-actualization, self-expression, and lifestyle politics. In contrast, community-oriented activists focused on tangible results in specific areas, imagining politics as a more discrete component of their lives, in which they may

or may not engage in different contexts. Further, Catherine Corrigall-Brown (2011) suggests that political orientation may influence how activist identity impacts tactical choices; she found that conservative activists did not actually identify as "activists" and in fact spoke negatively of protests even when their organizations were involved in such activities.

Jo Reger (2008; 2012) emphasizes the influence of political climate in activist and movement identity, showing that feminists in different environments pursued politics in different ways. In an urban context, in which feminism was widely celebrated and leftist political organizing was dense, they incorporated feminist ideals into diverse types of campaigns and projects. In contrast, in a conservative college, in which feminists felt defensive and fewer other political opportunities were present, they focused on internal consciousness-raising among each other and their supporters.

Looking at the population broadly, Mabel Berezin (1997: 6, 27) argues that the political culture of fascism in Mussolini's Italy centered on a "fusion of the public and private self" whereby the government attempted to "forge new identities" in which a fascist identity was central. She shows that the regime drew heavily on the cultural material of the Catholic Church not only because its symbols and rituals had widespread and well-understood meaning among Italians, but also because Catholic identity was an all-encompassing identity that the regime hoped to emulate. That is, Catholicism was a lifestyle that shaped personal as well as political behavior. Thus, Catholic cultural elements, including masses, parades, and saints, were integrated into the newly-created rituals of Italian fascism to create a political culture in which individuals were directly tied to the regime. As these examples show, seeing political culture as personal identity elucidates the internal transformations that activists experience through participation in social movements.

4.1.3 Political Culture as "Group Style"

Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman (2003) focus on micro-dynamics within groups, arguing that they draw on cultural assumptions from broader society to develop "group styles" of interaction and group action that reflect their interpretation of who they are collectively and what it means to be a member of their group. In social movement groups, group style is evident across a range of actions, from how an outreach campaign is framed, to evolving norms about how to speak to one another in a meeting. Drawing partially on Eliasoph and Lichterman's work, Kathleen Blee (2012: 85) shows how group styles unfold rapidly in the early days of group formation, when activist groups must immediately wrestle with defining questions such as the "scope" of the issues the group will address, such "global imperialism," or "poor school lunches."

In another account, Amy J. Binder and Kate Wood (2013) compare the "political styles" of college Republicans in two very different universities. One group pursued a very confrontational approach, staging events meant to provoke outrage among their liberal peers, while the other was far less contentious and focused on more traditional political events. They argue that the "provocative" approach of the first group was a result of their relative isolation in a large university in which they had fewer personal relationships with liberal peers and faculty and thus were more comfortable creating hostile relationships. In contrast, the second group of students attended a smaller school, where their "civilized discourse" approach reflected the close relationships that they had with liberal students as well as faculty.

Analyzing group style shows how individuals in group settings police each other's behavior and establish enduring patterns of interaction. However, this approach is less useful in analyzing the political culture of a broad movement, comprised of a network of groups and individual actors. In such a network, as I argue below, actors build less rapport with one another,

and, given the changing population, rely more on existing and broadly shared cultural norms, as opposed to establishing their own cultural styles.

4.1.4 Political Culture as a "Democratic Imaginary"

Ruth Braunstein (2017:11, 28) theorizes political culture as "democratic imaginary," in which activists develop a shared ideal of how politics *should* work, what their role as participants in it should be, and what kinds of tactics and strategies are "appropriate" given their shared ideal. For example, an idealized image of the Founding Fathers was a constant point of reference for Tea Party activists to justify their identity as political actors ("active citizens" vs. "activists"), their interactions in meetings (developing official hierarchies as opposed to a shared consensus), and the frames, rhetoric, and policies that appeal to them (imposing an individualist as opposed to a collectivist framework) (see also Lepore 2010).

Braunstein argues that Tea Party activists developed this political imaginary by drawing on the "cultural repertoire" (Tilly 1993) available to Tea Party activists because of their shared demographic profile (middle-aged, White, native-born, nominally-Christian). Given their shared experiences (educated in the same era, living in similar circumstances), and shared expectations about political activism, the Tea Party group that Braunstein observed developed a particular democratic imaginary in which activists were independent citizens engaged in political research so as to confront their legislators.

Since I studied a network as opposed to a single group, I consider the democratic imaginary as a more vague and less stable paradigm, with a few shared themes that unite individuals across a diffuse political network. Here, I build on the work of Amin Ghaziani and Delia Baldassari (2011) who suggest that movements supply a "thinly coherent foundation"

across individuals, organizations, and time. Ziad Munson (2010) similarly finds that non-activists and activists share superficial rhetoric, but that the former have comparatively underdeveloped political ideas and views; that is, they share only a "thinly coherent foundation."

Drawing on the cultural analysis of David Kertzer (1988), who argues that symbols and rituals are multivalent and unite people across myriad social divides, I consider how shared ideas about politics serve as a cultural foundation across the Tea Party network. This model captures several critical dynamics in the Tea Party movement. First, the majority of activists had little or no previous political experience, so were largely unaware of existing political norms, organizations, or tactics, even those used by conservative movements that foreshadowed their own. Thus, they drew heavily on ideas and influences that were broadly shared outside of politics. Given their homogenous demographic profile (White, middle-aged, middle class, Christian, and suburban or rural), they drew largely on civics and history lessons as taught in 1970s schools, the military, Christian institutions, and in conservative media. Second, Tea Party meetings were not always intimate affairs. Instead, they often included dozens of people, some of whom have shown up for the first time, as well as representatives from myriad groups and entities. Thus, the movement needed to maintain its attachment to the symbols and representations of the broader political culture.

As the following subsection shows, relying on a particular democratic imaginary has served the Tea Party very well, harnessing people's widespread fear, anger, and distrust into an enduring political movement.

4.2 "POLITICS" ACCORDING TO THE TEA PARTY: THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE MOVEMENT

In this section, I show how a diffuse and largely decentralized model is sustained by the political culture of the Tea Party network, in which Tea Party activists and sympathizers imagine politics and their roles therein, activists attempt to enact this imaginary through the movement, and these ideas unite individuals and organizations across a network. I first describe the ideal narrative within this imaginary, wherein citizens interact directly with their elected representatives without the need for collective organizations or representations. I then discuss the role of elites in encouraging this model on the right, before describing examples of how this imaginary was manifest among non-activist sympathizers throughout the community. In conclusion, I argue that Tea Party activists sustained their movement partially because they were culturally invested in this model of organizing.

4.2.1 "Guys" Up in Washington

My interview with Pastor Rob lasted just under an hour, but in that time he used the word "guys" more than twenty times. In fact, most of the people we talked about were referred to as "guys"; there were "guys" in his congregation, "guys" in the police force, "guys" in Congress, and even "guys" who wrote the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Such casual diction is common in rural Virginia where Pastor Rob lives and works, but this shared cultural style is not limited to shared speech patterns; rather, it permeates collective ideas about how the world works, or how it *should* work – politics, of course, included. For Pastor Rob and the other people in the Tea Party network, politicians should be "guys" – they should be *your* guys. That is, they

should represent you and your demands; ideally, you'd get to know them, build a relationship with them, and maybe even take a turn "going up to Washington" for a couple of years to represent your friends and family back home.

Of course, almost everyone I spoke with realized this ideal is impossible (at least at the federal level) in a complex society of millions of people. But attempts to approximate this ideal dominated conversations about the way individuals should participate in politics. For example, Bill told me it was the responsibility of citizens to be "informed and engaged." He continued:

> Now, I say 'informed' meaning reading, learning about a particular issue that they're passionate about…..and that affects them in some way, shape or form, and then lobbying their elected officials to help further that cause, or inform them of what they think they should do on particular issues when the bills come up related to that.

Previous research on the Tea Party showed activists using the same language, emphasizing the educational component of the Tea Party as a way to become "informed" (Braunstein 2017; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Braunstein (2017) argues this was central to the movement's democratic imaginary, as activists saw themselves as researchers, collecting information to equip themselves to confront their legislators.

Although my informants did not shy away from confrontations, they saw hostility as necessary only when representatives were unresponsive, dismissive, negligent, or even criminal. Of course, Tea Party activists believe that lots of legislators have behaved this way and are thus deserving of such hostility, but they would prefer a more interactive approach. In the Tea Party democratic imaginary as expressed by my informants, citizens approach their legislators and share with them their opinions and views. For their part, legislators update their citizens about political goings on, and then consult their constituents before making political decisions. To build this kind of relationship, my informants saw the need to educate themselves about "the issues" and to get to know their representatives.

Nathan, an activist with a long history of working in the Republican Party, but who had joined the Tea Party early on – attending protests and quickly becoming a local leader – told me that working "behind the scenes" was much more effective than forceful, public confrontations. Activists, he said, should:

> Do something that's productive, rather than jumping up at a meeting, and screaming and hollering – what does that do? What change does it bring?....Except get people mad at you [laugh]….Work behind the scenes….work through the legislature. Work though some committee or something like that and make changes.

Like other activists who had participated in the early days of the Tea Party, Nathan saw hostile confrontation as an appropriate strategy only when others had failed. With a few vocal exceptions, this sentiment was widely shared. For example, Tea Party activists saw Congressman Dave Brat as "their representative," whom they could count on for "insider information," and to whom they could go to when they want something changed. This is a change from their more hostile relationship with the previous Congressman. In general, collaborative relationships are seen as both palatable to the wider population of non-activists and more sustainable in the long-term. That is, Tea Party activists held an interactive vision that reflected the individualist and traditionalist themes of conservative political culture as primarily an individual endeavor – citizens contacting their representatives – and a traditional ideal of politicians as representatives of the people. As I show later, non-activist sympathizers were familiar and comfortable with this model. By building relationships with such legislators, Tea Party activists created a long-term agenda that was proactive, and not merely reactive.

4.2.2 Activism Without Activists

The model of political participation embraced by the Tea Party is a departure from the traditional social movement model of contentious politics. However, their quick transition to institutional

politics was not merely a move to take advantage of political opportunities – as structuralists suggest – but was also motivated by cultural preferences, such as their rejection of anything associated with traditional movement activism, including protests, collective representations, and even the term "activist." As I explained earlier, Tea Party groups rarely did anything collective (see also Braunstein 2017), primarily seeing their groups as places to get information and learn about external opportunities. In this subsection, I describe how a cultural rejection of collectivism permeated the Tea Party network and how the movement managed to leverage this into a mobilizing force.

Perhaps the most obvious expression of a cultural emphasis on individualism within the Tea Party was the constant rejection of collectivist representations. That is, Tea Party activists rarely used specific identifiers that indicate membership in a group, such as "Tea Partyers." Rather, they identified as members of amorphous collectivities through which membership is established by a personal relationship with a somewhat abstract entity. For example, many were evangelical Christians, yet few identified primarily as part of a particular denomination. With the exception of some Baptists or Catholics, if informants qualified "Christian" without prompting, it was to say that they were a "Bible believing" Christian or, in a couple of instances, an "orthodox" or an "evangelical" Christian. Most attended services and were even highly involved in their church communities, emphasizing strong relationships with their pastors and fellow congregants, and indeed, seeing church communities as the basis of their social lives. And yet, many reported switching churches, moving between Baptist or Pentecostal churches and showing a lack of denominational allegiance. A few were even involved in "home" churches that are organized independently and run out of private households. Even those who identified as Catholic reported switching congregations and expressed feeling alienated from congregations

by the current emphasis on “social justice” in the Church. For Tea Party Christians, churches were a place to express and expand their personal relationship with Jesus Christ (see also Braunstein 2017). So, while being “a Christian” was a critical source of identity, they were unlikely to narrow that designation to a particular group of people.

During research for my Master’s degree I noticed how people in the Tea Party network identified politically. Although many found politics through the Tea Party, and the Tea Party was their primary avenue of political participation, they tended to identify with the general term “conservative,” as opposed to “Tea Party” or even “Tea Party conservative” (Yates 2014). Furthermore, they defined this label in extremely broad terms that referred to lifestyle and general political views, broad boundaries that often included most people they knew. For example, after finding that all my informants identified primarily as “conservative,” I began each interview for my dissertation by asking: “What does being a conservative mean to you?” Inevitably, they responded in terms of general principles, often moving between political ideals and descriptions of lifestyle. For example, committed Tea Party activist Jennifer described conservatism in highly personal terms without immediate political implications:

> Conservative means being self-reliant. Taking responsibility for your actions and decisions and your own family. Allowing other people to live their lives and living your own, so long as you’re not impacting other people. I’m also a Christian….obviously, this country comes from a Judeo-Christian background and ethos, and a lot of [those] values….are what formed this country and ….the foundation of conservatism.

Jennifer’s definition of conservatism, drawing directly on Founding Fathers and Christian imagery, is inclusive of a broad swath of the population that she sees as including most middle class Christians. Despite the fact that Jennifer is a seasoned activist with extensive political knowledge and experience, her political self-definition revolves around principles that she interprets independently, and that could potentially include many people who have no political experience whatsoever.

This distinction is evident in the fact few Tea Party activists felt citizens were obligated to do more than vote and keep an eye on their elected representatives. When asked if they were frustrated that they dedicated so much time – attending and organizing meetings, encouraging others to get involved, and supporting candidates – when so many others they knew chose to spend their time differently, most activists were very understanding. Many recognized that their ability to participate in the Tea Party movement was a result of biographical availability (such as recent retirements or children leaving home). Those that had children at home or full-time jobs sometimes said that their spouses contributed to the movement by taking care of other responsibilities, allowing them to dedicate time to it. For Tea Party activists, political participation is just one part of a conservative lifestyle. Some might choose to focus on politics, others on jobs, families, or church. This is consistent with Catherine Corrigall-Brown's (2011) assessment of conservative activists who refused such a label, yet it is in contrast to the views of Braunstein's (2017) informants, who resented friends and families who were not sympathetic to or engaged in politics.

Tea Party activists tended to shy away from the term "activist" to describe themselves, at least, not as a noun. Most described their role using adjectives, calling themselves "involved in the Tea Party movement," or "active in the Tea Party." While many Tea Party activists make political participation a central part of their lives, they resisted naming it a central identifier, rejecting the "activist" ethos to stand apart as someone challenging the system.

When Tea Party activists did describe organizational and collective membership in politics, they often justified it as a necessary means to an end (see also Braunstein 2017). This was particularly true in the case of the Republican Party. As previously discussed, the majority of Tea Party activists I interviewed had joined local Republican Parties. However, in describing

their decision to join, they were almost apologetic, repeatedly emphasizing that they simply did not see another way forward. As Tea Party leader Cameron said:

> We felt like your local GOP committee is what kind of steers your local elections and has an impact on the candidates. So we felt like from that perspective, then not only did we need to be involved in county government, but we need to be involved in the county political arena. So the only way you can do that is to join the Republican Party.

According to Cameron, the GOP dominates local politics, so accessing it was the only way forward. A Tea Party leader from another group – who was also a local Republican Party leader – explained that it wasn't only the Republican Party that she disliked so much, but the idea of political parties in general. As Katherine explained:

> The party is screwed up. Parties in general are a problem. Any human group is going to be a problem. The Party platform – we've got a Constitution!….If the Party was Eric Cantor, if the Party was John Boehner…..

According to Katherine, the U.S. Constitution was as specific a document as any political group needed. Furthermore, in her estimation, parties were always subject to domination by powerful individuals. For example, when Eric Cantor became one of the most powerful Republicans in Virginia through his role in House leadership, Katherine felt that Speaker John Boehner had basically taken control of the Virginia Republican Party.

In contrast, the Tea Party's individualist model was a more comfortable fit for many people. Because the Tea Party does so little collectively, groups ask very little of participants. Visitors do not have to sign a pledge, obey administrative rules, or abide by a complex, federated hierarchy, in contrast to the Republican Party. The only thing Tea Party meeting attendees have to do is pledge allegiance to the American flag – a tradition universally accepted in conservative circles.

Furthermore, while the idea of "activist" politics was unpalatable to Tea Party activists, they largely rejected the central identifier of activism, public protests. Even though the Tea Party began by using extra-institutional protest tactics, activists who remain in the network generally

rejected the idea of returning to such tactics (see also Heaney and Rojas 2015). To them, "the protest period," as dedicated activist Hillary described it to me during preliminary research, was simply a time when they were frustrated, but didn't know what else to do. It was ineffective politically, but it did at least help the network form:

> We didn't know any better. So, it was the illusion of action more than actual, implementation of action. By going and holding up signs and, going to town hall meetings, and you know, yelling at people about, or getting our views known. That way. It had a higher profile, it got some press, but it didn't really lead to a lot of change. Except it did get us a name, and an overall sense of community that 'yes, there are a bunch of us.' Now….the next step….becoming educated, and then becoming effective. And that's less glamorous. That doesn't make press.

So for those who remained active in the Tea Party, incorporation into mainstream politics provided relief. According to Candace, another activist new to politics through the Tea Party:

> I was starting to learn how the system worked and what was important. And starting to feel more in control. Kinda 'Knowledge is power,' so just even understanding how the system, how the game is played….it's all a game, and you have to know the rules…It's like healthcare or law….it's like a whole other universe, different language, different vocabulary…and therefore then maybe where you might have a role…

The cultural norm of rejecting protest politics and embracing traditional politics was consistent across activists and non-activists sympathizers in the Tea Party. As evidence, both groups answered the question: "Who are some conservatives you admire?" similarly, almost all naming Ronald Reagan, and many naming the Founding Fathers. Other common responses were fathers and grandfathers while only a couple named mothers or grandmothers, even among the women informants. Activists were likely to name conservatives and to include less well-known politicians or political pundits, but only a couple – despite nearly eight years of political organizing – included any social movement leaders. I was surprised because I had expected that some would mention either the most famous Civil Rights leaders, or possibly Christian-right, anti-abortion, or anti-tax organizers from the past. Almost none did.

Furthermore, in another surprise, Tea Party activists almost universally rejected any comparison with leftist movements, such as Occupy or Black Lives Matter. Although I assumed

that Tea Party activists would reject the claims of these movements, I thought they might attempt to gain political legitimacy or authenticity by such comparisons, especially because they seem to think "the liberal media" has embraced such protests. Instead, their critique of these movements mirrored almost exactly the right-wing backlash advanced by White segregationists towards the Civil Rights Movement. In their depiction, leftist protestors were disrespectful, violent, uneducated, young, and lazy, lacking political direction or even intent. For example, Toby, unprompted, began criticizing leftist protestors: "These people disrespect everything. There's nothing that they really respect….These activists and protestors and stuff like that….They don't even know why they're there, they just argue….Tea Party people….they're respectful to everybody." Thus, although many scholars have argued that the protest movements of the 1960s normalized protest and reduced its stigma (Meyer and Tarrow 1998), my research shows that this cultural norm might not have shifted as far as it appears (see also Taylor 2015), especially on the right, where activists continue to denigrate protest (see also Corrigall-Brown 2011).

4.2.3 Political Culture in the Network: Non-Movement Sources

In the last subsection, I described the Tea Party political culture and showed how activists enacted their democratic imaginary through their participation in the Tea Party. And yet, this view of politics was not limited to Tea Party activists, but was shared among actors at various levels of political interest and engagement throughout the greater Tea Party network. In this subsection, I show how extra-movement actors within the Tea Party network shared and thus contributed to the political culture of the movement.

4.2.3.1 Elite Organizational Influences Over the last several decades, right-wing organizations have successfully harnessed the reaction to a racially, culturally, and politically changing America by mobilizing conservatives through voting and other institutional forms of participation. During fieldwork, I observed this traditional political model encouraged by myriad professionalized, elite sources. At a Franklin Graham rally (Graham is the son of the late evangelical preacher and presidential political advisor Billy Graham), Graham demanded that the audience pledge to vote, pray for the country, and consider running for local office. This was not a Tea Party, Republican, nor a Trump event; among the thousands of people in attendance, I only saw a handful of small Trump or Republican symbols or insignia. However, members of the Tea Party network had mentioned it to one another and encouraged each other to attend. I ran into more than ten people I had met through the Tea Party network, and I heard later from others that they were there.

Explicitly political organizations in the Tea Party network encouraged similar forms of mobilization. Heritage Action, the political lobbyist arm of the ultra-conservative Heritage Foundation, runs a program encouraging a similar form of political participation as modeled through the Tea Party, naming them "Heritage Sentinels." Several Tea Party activists I interviewed were official Sentinels, and although they described membership as having a very low commitment, they said they were regularly asked by Heritage to call legislators or agencies about particular policies. The online application to become a Sentinel asked six questions, one of which was "What relationship do you have with your member of Congress?" It also asks "What do you currently do to advance conservatism?" asking potential sentinels if they "call or email your Senators, attend Tea Party meetings, write letters to the editor, call talk radio, organize your precinct, or advance the message online" (Heritage Action 2017). Heritage Action, like other

right-wing groups including evangelical Christian ones, organizes citizens along a traditional model of political participation.

Recent efforts by conservative, elite organizers reflect a pattern of organizing on the right. This is especially visible with the rise of the Christian Right in the 1970s and 1980s, where evangelical leaders successfully integrated iconic symbols of American history into calls to mobilize via voting and outreach to legislators (Wuthnow 1983). For example, Jerry Falwell closed a long-running program with an image of the Liberty Bell, and his organization the Moral Majority described legislative wins as "victories for America" (Wuthnow 1983: 181). This movement is most famous for national leaders and programming, but it also included explicit calls for Christian conservatives to become involved in local government, quietly entering school boards and local political offices that previously were not contentious political battlegrounds (Deckman 2004). This wave of Christian organizing occurred alongside and was often explicitly linked to non-religious organizations that encouraged grassroots organizing in mainstream politics, from anti-tax movements where individual citizens flooded congressional offices with letters and calls to transform property taxes (Martin 2008), to suburban women's groups supporting Barry Goldwater (McGirr 2001).

The Center for Self-Governance (CSG) is a prime example of this model of grassroots participation through mainstream political institutions. CSG organizes people primarily through a series of training courses in which participants learn practical skills on how to interact with their elected representatives (such as letter writing, calling) that are couched in an ideological context that insists that citizens exercise their "civic authority" to "save the republic." Founded by a former Tea Party activist in Tennessee, the organization is now nationally organized, has a professional staff, and has received attention from well-known right-wing actors such as David

Barton, an evangelical Christian activist. The Tea Party in Virginia has a close relationship with CSG: the statewide Tea Party federation initially provided funds for trainers to travel to Virginia and found them private homes to stay in while they were in town. Several leaders are local CSG representatives, and many activists I interviewed had received CSG training.

To see the relationship between CSG and the Tea Party as merely the penetration of a national group into a local setting misses the cultural salience of this organizing model among grassroots conservatives. CSG has been so successful not because it is powerfully financed and organized – other national groups, such as Americans for Prosperity, are much better financed and organized, yet less successful in organizing among my informants – but because it appeals to the individual and traditional democratic imaginary of the Tea Party network. It primarily provides training, and only to individuals. Recipients act only on behalf of themselves, without making collective representations or agreeing to any agenda. Tea Party activists react very well to this program. According to Tea Party activist John, taking CSG training and understanding how citizens can participate in the traditional process was the solution they "all," meaning Tea Party conservatives, were looking for:

> And at that point in the Tea Party formation, I would say that we were all groping to find this [gesturing towards CSG materials]. We were all groping to understand the Constitution. We knew that we were being transformed into something we shouldn't be…. but we really didn't have….the foundation.

In my research, this reaction was consistent between activists who had never participated in politics before the Tea Party, as well as those who had been long-time conservative activists. Calling citizens to individually interact with their government was a very effective form of framing to reach Tea Party conservatives. In the following section, I show how the Tea Party, like CSG and other right-wing organizations, has drawn on this shared democratic imaginary to unite participants and sympathizers in a diffuse movement.

4.2.3.2 Non-Activist Sympathizers My research shows that the base elements of this political imaginary was widely shared among a broad sector of the public who might be sympathetic to the Tea Party. Among White, middle and upper middle-class American Christians who came of age in the post-War era, views of the political system are dominated by narratives of American Exceptionalism and rugged individualism, stories that are woven into their cultural fabric through myriad sources. For example, evangelical Christians emphasize the individual nature of "being saved" by building a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (see also Braunstein 2017), while military and veterans' groups glorify nationalist patriotism emphasizing America's supposedly unique moral standing, and traditional history courses taught through public and parochial schools use a "great men" lens that portrays the Founding Fathers as eternal heroes to be emulated.

The Tea Party effectively drew on shared ideas of American exceptionalism, Christian nationalism, and individualism, and how they relate to civic engagement to integrate people with various levels of political interest, experience, and dedication into the diffuse movement. For example, while it seemed clear that everyone who had remained connected to the movement in 2016 was more comfortable with the individualist model, leaders sometimes argued that individualist organizing was strategically effective. In one instance, Cameron realized that being labeled as "Tea Party" was going to prevent their group from being as effective. So, he emphasized the individual nature of each member's relationship with their elected officials, rather than their collective force as a single Tea Party group:

> When we went into [our local Congressional] office, the gentleman that came out said 'Oh y'all are part of that Glenn Beck group.' And I said, 'No, we're your constituents.' So, that's what I wanted to stay [away] from. I didn't want to be marginalized. Because [our Tea Party group] is this [signals small] and 'we the people' is this [signals big] and I think it was very easy early on for people to say 'You're just this little group'…. No, we're not.

This individualist organizing model was possible because Tea Party activists and sympathizers alike viewed politics as primarily an individual endeavor. Take for example, Bryan – a Tea Party activist from a different group, who was much less involved in the movement. In fact, his designation as an "activist" is disputable; he described himself as a "conservative" and approves of the Tea Party, but primarily attended his local meetings because he was interested in hearing about local zoning and development updates, not to become involved in the political process. However, when I asked him what his political responsibilities were as a conservative, his answer was largely consistent with those of activist leaders:

> I think….your obligation is to vote, for sure. Again, not a conservative or liberal thing. I think if you're are a citizen you're obligated to vote …..[and] to know – to the extent you're able to – ….who is representing you. I think it's your obligation to let them know what you think….calling, writing letters, I think that's an obligation…..If you're not providing input into the system, then you probably shouldn't complain about it.

Pastor Rob answered the same question along the same lines: "Vote, number 1....It's a God-given right we have as Americans to elect our own leaders." Later, he continued: "I think Christians should run for office. I advocate raising them up in our church, here, seeing if we can get some guys here we can raise up, and get educated, and support 'em." Importantly, Pastor Rob is not a Tea Party activist. However, he is a leader in the overall Tea Party network. That is, he has allowed his church to host a couple of Tea Party-associated events (although he insisted that his church be the exclusive host). Many Tea Party activists and sympathizers, as well as local elected officials attend his church, and Tea Party conservatives told me that, as their pastor, they considered him a major influence in their lives.

4.3 CONCLUSION: A MOVEMENT OF THEIR OWN

Political theorist Margaret Canovan (1999) argues that an inherent tension in populist movements is that they demand direct access to the levers of political power, and yet, in a democracy, political power is mediated through institutions. As she explains, populism involves:

> ….a deep revulsion against institutions that come between the people and their actions, and a craving for direct, unmediated expressions of the people's will….Most schemes for improved democracy aim to decrease alienation by bringing the polity closer, making it something more expressive of the people. The trouble with that agenda is that democratic governance means institutions.

In response, she explains, populist movements rely directly on charismatic and authoritarian leaders who appear to embody the will of the people, thus skipping over traditional democratic institutions.

My informants in the Tea Party generally rejected authoritarian leadership, particularly as embodied in Donald Trump (Yates 2016). But, they also rejected the Republican Party, the central mediator between conservative citizens and legislators. As I have shown, the Republican Party does not adequately meet Tea Party conservatives' expectations for political participation, as it is too formal and hierarchical, and collective. In contrast, the Tea Party movement was much closer to the Tea Party ideal. As anti-partisan, individualist, and independent, the diffuse, decentralized model of the Tea Party appealed to Tea Party conservatives' idealized image of politics as a direct relationship between citizens and legislators. Although the Tea Party has built extensive ties with the GOP, the movement has endured partially because it conforms to the political culture of the Tea Party network, like few other political organizations do. Furthermore, the political culture of the Tea Party is not limited to the movement itself, but based in a larger conservative community. Finally, I show that that the concept of political culture is particularly

useful for studying a movement like the Tea Party, that I find is diffuse, decentralized, full of activists with little political experience, and right-oriented.

In the next chapter, I show how Tea Party activists and sympathizers enact their democratic imaginary through interactions with Congressman Dave Brat.

5.0 BACKED BY "THE BRAT PACK": A TEA PARTY MOVEMENT POLITICIAN

As Congressman Brat entered the small auditorium, a ripple of excitement moved through the crowd. After a warm introduction by a local Tea Party leader, "Dave" – as everyone there called him – took center stage and immediately got started on the "D.C. legislative update" his office had advertised. First on the docket was the upcoming budget vote. Brat said he was currently "leaning towards 'No,'" but wanted to hear what his constituents thought. He continued by describing recent negotiations between "our group" (the Freedom Caucus) and the Republican leadership, explaining that leadership ultimately refused to agree to his terms in writing. "So…" said Brat. At this point he paused and gazed at the crowd before asking what they thought. His question was met with a clear "No!" Brat nodded his head. "That's what I thought," he said, and quickly moved on.

During the six times I saw Brat speak in 2016, I learned that this exchange is a recurring performance: Dave Brat visits the Tea Party; he provides a "legislative update;" he makes a brief request for feedback, before moving to questions. Here, the crowd eagerly demands "insider" information: Do Republicans in the House and Senate ever get together to talk? Have you heard about how we're eventually going to have a cashless economy? There are "truth in advertising rules," are there similar laws for politicians?

To the Tea Party, Dave Brat was "their guy" in Washington. I found that he remained extremely popular with the movement. Although his campaign mobilized Tea Party activists to

join the Republican Party to support him, the conflict that his race created (described below) crystallized the divide between the Tea Party and the "establishment" factions in the local Republican Party. Brat was, and continues to be, a uniting and mobilizing force within the Tea Party movement.

Social movement literature suggests that, once elected to office, movement leaders find it difficult to retain approval from their movement base, making "movement politicians" rare and often short-lived. Once in power, they have to govern a more diverse constituency, work directly with the opposition, and frequently compromise, thus becoming vulnerable to claims that they have "betrayed" their movement supporters (Heaney 2017). This may be especially true in a movement like the Tea Party, which was ostensibly organized as opposition to the political establishment. As Braunstein (2017: 139) shows, Tea Party activists can pursue a confrontational approach to politicians, continuously threatening them with "tar and feathers."

Certainly, a central factor in the Tea Party's enduring support for Brat was his continued, far-right voting record, especially on immigration and the budget, areas of importance to movement activists. However, this public activity was only one dimension of the relationship between Brat and the Tea Party. My research shows that away from the TV cameras Brat continued to cultivate strong ties with the activists and groups who helped elect him.

The Tea Party facilitated a close relationship between activists and Brat by encouraging citizens to interact with him directly and by creating opportunities for these interactions. In the Tea Party democratic imaginary, "engaged citizens" contact their representatives and demand information from them. The Tea Party provided space for such interactions by holding regular meetings and welcoming elected representatives for such purposes. Brat, along with other Tea Party politicians willing to face a Tea Party audience, thus plays a critical role in the democratic

imaginary of the movement, as citizens need representatives to make themselves available to their constituents and take advice to enact this imagined ideal.

In this chapter, I review the literature addressing the difficult dynamic between social movements and the politicians they helped elect. I then show how the Tea Party launched Brat into electoral victory, and how he maintained movement support by conforming to the role of the Tea Party's "guy" in Washington. I argue that, throughout this process, Brat advanced the partisan institutionalization of the Tea Party while simultaneously enabling the movement to maintain its autonomy and radical ideology. Thus, the relationship between Congressman Dave Brat and the Tea Party joins arguments from the previous two chapters to illustrate how Tea Party political culture and its diffuse organizing model leads to institutionalization without deradicalization.

5.1 SOCIAL MOVEMENT POLITICIANS

Social movement scholars are unequivocal about the difficulty that politicians face in retaining social movement support after successful election. As David Meyer and Amanda Pullum (2014: 91) explain:

> Movement candidates virtually always disappoint in office. If they hold to purist rhetoric, they will be unable to make inroads in Congress. If they eschew pork-barrel politics, they will disappoint constituents who *know* that other elected officials deliver earmarks to their districts….If they compromise on principle to make deals, they will alienate many of the people who put them in office, because they will become the successful institutional politicians they railed against. This is a feature of the institutional design of the United States, and one that challenges all social movements.

As Meyer and Pullum argue, elected politicians always have broader constituencies than the movement activists who fueled their election. Once in office, representatives must cater to these other groups, making compromises that violate campaign promises and rhetoric. This is

especially true in a dual-party system like the United States, where the lack of party options means that many movements will have nowhere else to go, and politicians prioritize non-movement swing voters (Frymer 2010).

Some of the most visible examples of social movement politicians have occurred recently in Latin America, where movement-associated candidates have won presidencies. For example, Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, "Lula"– who began politics as a union organizer and helped found the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party) – quickly disappointed his movement supporters, causing well-known Party leaders to resign in protest (Flynn 2005). In Bolivia, President Evo Morales – who rose to prominence as an organizer of the "cocaleros," or coca pickers – was elected as the leader of el Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism), which also grew out of union politics. Jessica Camille Aguirre and Elizabeth Sonia Cooper (2010) argue that Morales made a failed attempt to negotiate his "social movement presidency" by deploying a hostile rhetoric towards international entities – in line with MAS' agenda – while compromising repeatedly on domestic policies.

The Tea Party itself has cycled through a number of movement politicians who disappointed them, including Mia Love, a Congressional Representative from Utah supported by a number of Tea Party groups, who quickly lost Tea Party favor when she voted to support John Boehner for Speaker of the House (Henderson 2015). According to Jennifer, one of my informants, Mia Love immediately betrayed her campaign promises:

> She got elected by promising to oppose Boehner, and promising to oppose his agenda – her very first vote she had the opportunity to vote against him for speaker, and she didn't. Right from the start she was breaking promises that she had made to get elected….I can see the point of view 'Well he was gonna get elected anyway, so I don't want to suffer his wrath.' And if you go back and look, people did suffer his wrath. People were pulled off of powerful committees because they opposed him. But that doesn't hold water when you were sent to Washington on the promise that you would oppose that….

As these examples demonstrate, social movements often contain populist undertones, including anti-elitist and anti-institutional rhetoric that makes politicians particularly hard for them to embrace. Braunstein (2017) argues that Tea Party activists envision a hostile relationship between themselves and elected officials, one in which activists need to remain constantly vigilant, monitoring representatives for any perceived deviation and threatening them with rejection.

And yet – as Braunstein's work also argues – a theoretical assumption of this dissertation is that social movements are not exclusively instruments of policy advocacy, but also expressive vehicles that reflect activists' emotions, identities, and culture, in addition to their interests and needs (Buechler 1995; Melucci 1989). To understand Dave Brat's enduring relationship to the Tea Party, we need to examine its cultural and emotional dimensions, drawing on scholars who argue that populist leaders maintain citizen support more through style than substance, by using rhetoric and performance rather than policy agendas (Berezin 1997; Moffitt 2016).

In the rest of this chapter, I show how Dave Brat maintains Tea Party support in part by appealing to activists' democratic imaginary, the idealized relationship between citizen and representative. I begin with background on Brat's initial race and his congressional tenure since that time.

5.2 A TEA PARTY UPSET

One Tea Party activist I spoke with called Brat's primary win against Eric Cantor "the shot heard round the world," referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem about the first shot of the American Revolution. Although this is a hyperbolic comparison, Dave Brat's win was a major political

upset at the time, and Donald Trump's subsequent election suggests Brat's populism portended broader national trends.

Eric Cantor was a thirteen-year incumbent, one of the most powerful Republicans in the House, who raised $5.4 million for the race (Martin 2014). The 7th District includes mostly suburban and rural areas outside Richmond, with a population that is majority White and, although Cantor is Jewish, the majority of religious devotees in the district are Christian (Cain 2016; Jarman 2018). By several measures, Cantor was a fairly conservative Republican, earning strong conservative scores from traditional indexes (American Conservative Union 2014; Enten 2014). However, Brat attacked Cantor by claiming that the Speaker supported "amnesty" for undocumented immigrants. Although Cantor had recently opposed a comprehensive immigration reform bill, he was an advocate of a Republican version of the DREAM Act (legislation to provide legal status to undocumented youth) and had signed a Republican leadership statement supporting some relief for undocumented immigrants (Foley 2014). Furthermore, as a member of House Party leadership, Cantor was clearly associated with the Republican establishment and had joined them in supporting numerous votes to approve the debt ceiling and TARP, the Troubled Asset Relief Program better known as the "bank bailout," all votes which Brat used to depict him as a Washington elitist, a member of the "one party….the power party and….the money party" that Brat claimed Democrats and Republicans in Congress had formed (as quoted in *The New York Times* 2014).

Dave Brat ran a bare bones campaign against Cantor, with only a couple of paid staffers and a budget of just $200,000 (Bump 2014). An economics professor at Randolph-Macon College, a small private institution in the district, Brat had little experience in politics. He had been a legislative advisor to a state senator and served on a state economic advisory council, but

had never run for elected office (Frank 2014). Although he failed to earn any large donations or have substantial coverage in the mainstream press, Brat received publicity boosts from national right-wing personalities including Laura Ingraham, Ann Coulter, Mark Levin, and Glenn Beck, and from right-wing news sites such as Breitbart, The Daily Caller, and Townhall (Costa, Vozzella and Farenthold 2014; Farhi 2014; Tau and Parti 2014). A Presbyterian with a Master's in Divinity, Brat used typical evangelical Christian language saying he "felt the call to seminary" and "followed the Almighty" (DaveBrat ForCongress 2014). He also said he believed the Founding Fathers were "divinely inspired," and was the director of a privately-funded program at his university called "The Moral Foundations of Capitalism" (DaveBrat ForCongress 2014; Kurtzleben 2014; Prokop 2014). Brat beat Cantor by over ten percentage points, and would go on to easily defeat the Democratic candidate in the general election.

Immediately upon his inauguration, Representative Brat joined the far-right Freedom Caucus, establishing his bona fides as a strong conservative and dooming comprehensive immigration reform (Caputo 2014) as well as the tenure of House Speaker John Boehner. He frequently touted his high conservative "scorecard" ranking by groups such as Heritage Action and the American Conservative Union, where he was ranked among the most conservative members of Congress (American Conservative Union 2018; Heritage Action 2018). In 2017, he broke with Trump's stated positions on 10 percent of issues, namely, in opposition to government surveillance measures and disaster relief for Puerto Rico (fivethirtyeight 2018). During each of the six times I saw Brat speak, he deployed extremely anti-establishment rhetoric, identifying himself as a lone conservative rejected by most of his Party and poorly treated by the press.

5.3 LAUNCHING A MOVEMENT CANDIDATE

This section first explores the grassroots Tea Party's relationship with Dave Brat and shows why Brat should be considered a "movement candidate." Although Brat had never been directly affiliated with any Tea Party groups, he quickly became known as the "Tea Party candidate." According to my research, this designation is apt. Not only were Tea Party activists the base of his campaign, but in the period since, the Tea Party movement has remained closely linked to his office.

I heard competing stories about how Dave Brat became the Tea Party candidate, but it is clear that Brat had made it known to the Tea Party that he was interested in running for office. Leaders from several different groups met with him separately and decided to support him. A couple of non-leaders also reported seeking Brat out to meet him and see if they approved. However, once he gained the support of these leaders and a few well-known activists, he was warmly received throughout the Tea Party network. For example, when Dave Brat attended a local Tea Party meeting in February 2014 he reportedly attracted about 80 people. In addition, several local Tea Party activists publicly announced their support for Brat.

Activists told me that the issues they cared about most were immigration and deficit spending. According to Maggie, who learned about Dave Brat through the Tea Party, she frequently knocked on doors for Brat, but never told people whom to vote for. Instead, she asked what they thought about immigration and the deficit, telling them:

> 'I hope you get time to research'….I would also ask what they thought about immigration. I would ask them what they thought about the debt, ask them what they thought was being done to bring down the debt, and how it was gonna affect their family and how it was gonna affect the country.

Another Tea Party activist reported that – on her own volition – she printed out copies of news articles about Eric Cantor's votes on immigration and TARP, handing them out as she went. Road signs created by activists also emphasized the issues of immigration and the deficit, such as one that read "ERIC CANTOR: FOR AMNESTY, FOR OBAMACARE, FOR BIG GOVERNMENT. FOR YOU?" or another that read "COINCIDENCE? BIG BANKS THAT RECEIVED TARP RELIEF ARE NOW SOME OF CANTOR'S LARGEST $$$$ CONTRIBUTORS."

Among the 34 Tea Party activists I interviewed who were involved in the movement in 2014 and lived in Brat's district, I confirmed that 29 volunteered for Dave Brat's primary campaign against Cantor. (Among the other five, two did not volunteer for Brat and I could not confirm this information for the other three. Additionally, two Tea Party activists from outside Brat's district also volunteered for him.) Some spent multiple weekends door-knocking; others made copies and stuffed envelopes in his makeshift office in a volunteer's private business or collected signatures to get Brat on the ballot. Some became official campaign county chairs, or staffed events and fundraisers.

Perhaps most importantly, the majority of the Tea Party activists I knew had participated in the inter-GOP revolt, joining local Republican committees for the first time to vote against Cantor-associated Republican activists in administrative positions within the Party. The politics of these committee and district meetings are complex, arcane, and not well-known to the general public. However, these administrative positions are critical to political campaigns because they allocate Party funds and determine Party procedures such as whether to select nominees through an open primary or a closed convention. Tea Party leaders worked hard to educate Brat supporters about this process. One made an explanatory YouTube video; others encouraged Tea

Party conservatives to register for the Republican Party and show up to vote at meetings. In one instance, a Republican committee meeting turned into a raucous event where attendees overflowed into parking lots. In the meeting, Laura told me that when Eric Cantor's "right-hand man" was voted out of his administrative position, she was at first confused because the crowd was screaming and yelling so loudly that she couldn't tell what had happened. Beaming, she told me: "That was an amazing day. That was an amazing day."

5.4 THE TEA PARTY'S "GUY" IN WASHINGTON

Braunstein (2017) argues that the democratic imaginary of the Tea Party compels activists to maintain hostile attitudes towards elected officials, but I found that this hostility was attenuated in certain situations. As discussed earlier, Tea Party activists and sympathizers believed that in the ideal world envisioned by the Founding Fathers, elected officials represent their constituents by reflecting their interests and demands. To do so effectively, officials need to keep their constituents informed about what's "going on" so that when citizens make such demands, they are well-informed.

Although the central protagonists in the Tea Party's democratic imaginary are the citizenry, they cannot achieve their ideal of being "engaged" citizens unless their political representatives are willing to "engage" with them. That is, the Tea Party expected representatives to regularly meet with constituents, to answer their questions, provide information, listen to constituent comments and concerns, and finally, to ask constituents about the policies and actions they pursue. Thus, despite how much they claim to hate politicians, the Tea Party movement needs them. In the following two subsections I outline how Tea Party activists and

sympathizers imagined the role of the ideal legislator, then describe how Brat seemed to embody this role.

5.4.1 Brat Keeps the Tea Party "Informed"

A month before the 2016 presidential election, I went to a Tea Party meeting to watch a right-wing movie attacking the Democratic Party. Before the event started, Congressman Brat arrived to provide a "legislative update" and answer questions. A young man raised his hand and asked if Brat had heard "any indication" that establishment Republicans might be willing to start cutting federal spending? Brat looked at the man: "No. Have you?" The crowd laughed. "No, I haven't," said the questioner, "but I was wondering if there's some whispers….it's very unpopular to talk about, but behind the scenes…" Brat shook his head, agreed that it was unpopular, and complained that other Republicans – "from my own side" – call him "radical" and a "right-wing extremist" for such proposals.

As this exchange unfolded, I noted what by now had become a familiar pattern: Tea Party activists see Dave Brat as their guy "inside," and they thus expect him to feed them information from "behind the scenes." This is a critical dimension in the relationship between Brat and the movement because Tea Party activists were infuriated and frustrated by a political system they felt elites had intentionally made complex in order to exclude them. When Brat took the time to engage with his constituents, answering their questions and responding directly to them, they felt relieved, like they finally had a reliable source of information to help them navigate the political system. As Karen, a Tea Party activist explained, she was very "thankful" to Dave Brat:

> I still feel like a novice….They've created this very, very complex federal state and local system. That almost seems impenetrable. It's not, but it's really, really hard to penetrate it. And that's why I'm so thankful for Dave Brat. He's really great because…. he explains…I'm sure – he's got a

> PhD in economics he could be very heady if he wanted to – but….he can explain things in layman's terms. I just think he communicates really well.

Throughout Brat's interactions with the Tea Party, I observed that audience members were very comfortable approaching Brat with a range of questions. For example, one asked Brat if he thought the FBI investigation of Hillary Clinton would result in high-level indictments, (he responded affirmatively: "The government hangs in the balance, equal treatment under the law….") or whether Paul Ryan was likely to get re-elected Speaker. By comparison, when Congressman Rob Wittman spoke to the Tea Party, his demeanor was quite different than Brat's. Brat was relaxed and conversational – sometimes waiting patiently for audience members to deliver long screeds before asking a question – but Wittman was defensive, much less patient, and spoke faster. Brat gave the impression that he was obligated to answer each and every question, and projected an image of humility and patience.

Brat had plenty of opportunities to engage with the Tea Party, consistent with his promise to meet with constituents in every locality every month. Indeed, activists frequently mentioned Brat's willingness to meet with his constituents in comparison to Cantor. Some – all men – shared a visceral anger at what they felt were slights by Cantor. They thought that, as citizens, they were entitled to private interactions with their congressman. One told me that he became sympathetic to the Tea Party when Cantor responded to him with "form letters." Another complained to me that Cantor was his only representative who was unwilling to meet with him. In contrast, during one of Brat's visits to the Tea Party, a man asked him whether he had read his email, told him what the subject line had been, and then asked him to get back to him soon. Tea Party anger at Eric Cantor's perceived lack of availability reflected the broader anger among activists and sympathizers towards political elites generally, who they feel have consistently

ignored them: "People feel like they haven't been listened to they haven't been heard," said one sympathizer.

Most informants realized that Brat could not speak to all 750,000 individuals in his district every month, yet still emphasized his responsibility to keep his constituents informed. And Brat framed his interactions with constituents this way. For example, Brat sent bi-weekly emails to anyone who signed up; these were entitled "Update from Congress" and included an account of recent Congressional events almost as if reporting his activities to a supervisor. In contrast, congressman Morgan Griffith sent a "Congressman Griffith's Weekly E-Newsletter" that consisted mostly of his essays on various topics. In every interaction with the Tea Party, Brat reinforced the message that it is his responsibility to let them know "what's going on in Washington."

5.4.2 "Your Public Servant"

In the Tea Party democratic imaginary, keeping constituents informed is only the first task of legislators; they must also must listen to constituents and meet their demands. "They're your public servant," Tea Party activist, Matt, explained angrily. "I hate when people say 'My elected official.' They're not an official, they're a representative. They represent you….they're there to serve you." As Matt described what he saw as the role of elected representatives, he grew increasingly frustrated with me – in his mind, the idea that representatives should enact the demands of their constituents was so basic that he shouldn't have to explain it. This formulation was the source of Tea Party resentment towards the Republican Party generally. Activists had been loyal Republican voters for a long time, but through the Tea Party, came to believe that their representatives had not been reflecting their campaign promises. According to Lisa, a

former activist, the GOP had betrayed her by not governing as the conservatives they claimed to be: “We voted these guys in, and they’re not doing anything, why?” A classic political debate is whether representatives should act as “delegates” and directly carry forward the demands of their constituents, or as “trustees” and make the decisions they think are correct (Dovi 2017). Tea Party activists side with the former position, at least, when they are the constituents.[4]

Dave Brat appears to act as a delegate by regularly meeting with Tea Party constituents. According to Toby:

> Dave Brat doesn’t always vote the way we think he should vote, because he….has more information than us. But what we do and what expect is that candidates will report back to us and explain to us why they voted that way. You know, and then we can make a decision whether or not we still support him or not. Most candidates will not come back and face their constituents….He does.

Indeed, Tea Party activists maintained that – no matter how hard they worked on Brat’s campaign, or what promises he made, they are vigilantly watching him to see if he meets their demands. Tea Party activists reminded Brat – and one another – that if they do not approve of his votes, they will replace him. As Pamela explained:

> If he ever goes to the dark side and becomes an obstacle, then we have to get rid of him….doesn’t matter who it is. I have every reason to believe he’s going to continue on the path he’s on, and I have every hope for it and I love him to death – he’s doing a great job. But if he were ever to completely turn and start voting against us, I’d have no problem getting rid of him. He can go. And really…. that’s exactly what happened to Eric Cantor.

Tea Party activists are convinced that Brat understands and agrees with their expectations of him. As Katherine said: “He’s terrified of making us pissed at him. He mentioned that. He said ‘I gotta go back and look you guys in the eye! But it’s real.” I pressed Katherine, asking if she thought Brat was genuine in this fear, or if it was just a “line.” But Katherine was dismissive,

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[4] Skocpol and Williamson (2012) argue that the Tea Party is unwilling to recognize other constituents’ rights to make competing demands. Braunstein (2017) shows that that Tea Party activists assume that people who don’t share their views are insufficiently informed. I found a similar reaction among my informants. I pressed this issue with one prominent Brat supporter, but – at least initially – she struggled to conceive of Republican opposition to Brat as anything other than Cantorite-led “animosity.”

arguing that Brat did not engage in such displays. "Dave's lines are very straight forward….He is who he is."

Brat's regular check-ins with the Tea Party were not only done in public events. A couple activists reported that Brat occasionally called them directly to ask where the grassroots stood on an issue. For example, one said Brat asked him if there was any way he could get the grassroots behind voting for Boehner, without Boehner agreeing to their demands in writing. Unfortunately, the activist responded, without proof, they wouldn't be able to hold Boehner "accountable," and thus they did not think the Tea Party would back such a decision. The activist cited this as an example that Brat genuinely listened and responded to his constituents.

5.5 "BRAT PACK" VS. "CANTORITES"

Brat's initial campaign transformed the Tea Party by accelerating its infiltration of the local Republican Party. At the same time, it crystallized divisions between "conservative" and "establishment" factions of the Republican Party, resulting in the movement's partial partisan institutionalization, gaining power in the Party without fully merging into it.

While conservative leaders throughout the country had been encouraging Tea Party activists to join the Republican Party for years (Skocpol and Williamson 2012), Brat's campaign provided an immediate incentive for Richmond-area activists to get involved. Afterwards, the trend continued. For example, in one county immediately outside Richmond, my informants reported that the number of attendees at the biannual Republican "mass meeting" grew dramatically in 2014 – when Brat was first running – compared to 2012. When I attended the 2016 meeting, I observed large numbers of Tea Party activists I knew, many surrounded by

throngs of people sporting “Dave Brat” stickers. One leader told me he was shocked to see the crowd had continued to grow, even in a year when Dave Brat’s seat was safe (the number of delegates had continued to increase from 2014, see Delaney and Werrell 2015; Gulbransen 2016). Two activists who generally avoided such GOP events told me they heard earlier that Brat was going to be challenged, and even though the challenger had dropped out, they had decided to show up for “Dave” no matter what.

The Tea Party’s involvement with Dave Brat caused an interesting dynamic: it brought the movement closer to the GOP, but established a fault line between the “establishment” (or “Cantor”) Republicans and the “conservative” (or “Brat”) Republicans that solidified anti-GOP fervor among Tea Party activists. According to activists I interviewed who had experience in the GOP prior to the Tea Party, a divide between more and less conservative wings had existed in the local Republican Party for decades. In fact, several confirmed, since Cantor was considered as a representative of the “conservative” side when the Tea Party first mobilized, these divisions were not entirely clear. However, when Brat ran against Cantor, the division emerged, as did a Tea Party vocabulary, “Brat Pack” vs. “Cantorite,” to describe it. Brat’s campaign thus became a vehicle to channel anti-establishment anger from the Tea Party. This dynamic was evident in the obvious happiness that Tea Party activists described in contributing to Brat’s victory. One activist called it “exhilarating.” Cameron described immense satisfaction in observing the “establishment’s” shock: “When Dave Brat unseated Eric Cantor, you could have bought any of them for a penny. I mean it just sucked the wind out of them.”

Throughout 2016, Tea Party activists used the Cantor/Brat distinction to differentiate themselves from “establishment” Republicans. They not only distinguished between Brat and Cantor supporters specifically, but also between those they described as the “Party machine”

from those who supported more populist, less centralized leadership. According to Tea Party activist Penny, getting endorsed by the "Cantor machine" meant you could not really be accountable to constituents. As she explained in relation to a candidate for a local GOP position, that he was endorsed by former Cantorites automatically made him suspect:

> If the establishment endorses you….he ideologically could be as pure as anybody, but the fact that he was happy to take those endorsements and then use them for his campaign….who's really in charge here? Are they accountable to us or are they accountable to them?

In practice, the Tea Party repeatedly defined themselves in relation to a single politician – Dave Brat. Again and again, I observed Tea Party activists use this relationship to define themselves against others. For example, at the District 7 GOP convention, nearly every local position had two candidates, one associated with the Tea Party and one with the "establishment." Many Tea Party-associated candidates declared themselves an *original* member of "the Brat Pack," differentiating themselves from the former Cantorites who now were also sporting Dave Brat stickers. So, even as the Brat campaign pushed the Tea Party towards the Republican Party, it simultaneously forced the movement away from the mainstream arm of the Party.

5.6 CONCLUSION: TEA PARTY, HOME OF THE BRAT PACK

The Tea Party democratic imaginary requires politicians, who, like Brat, are willing to play the role of the responsive politician, the complement to Tea Party activists' role as engaged citizens. By regularly meeting with constituents, patiently listening to them and responding to their questions, and appearing to genuinely ask for their input, Dave Brat works with the Tea Party to enact this vision. Dave Brat's performance with the Tea Party thus facilitates the expressive dimension of the Tea Party movement, whereby activists play out their ideal vision of the world.

Together with his highly conservative voting record, Brat is thus able to maintain his status as a "movement politician."

Brat's ability to maintain a positive and enduring status with the Tea Party relied on the diffuse model of the movement, because it provided access to Tea Party constituents while demanding little in return. Since Tea Party meetings were open to any elected representatives interested in reaching their constituents, Brat was able to attend regularly without making any commitments to the movement. Furthermore, the Tea Party was an environment in which constituents were comfortable meeting him and were, in fact, taught – from sources throughout the Tea Party network – that it was their responsibility to ask him questions, advise him what they think he should do, and follow up with him to confirm that he meets their demands. At the same time, Brat was free to recruit volunteers from the Tea Party, without creating conflicts with group leaders. In sum, the Tea Party political culture facilitated a positive and enduring relationship with a politician who was willing to play his designated role in their shared democratic imaginary.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Recent research on the grassroots Tea Party has focused on how it has impacted the electoral and legislative politics in the Republican Party. Scholars have shown how its activists have infiltrated the GOP at all levels – from precincts to Congressional offices to the White House. As Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson described in 2012, "the Tea Party boosts the GOP and prods it rightward" (p. 155). This work shows how much the Tea Party has changed since it first captured national attention in the early years of the Obama presidency, moving from outdoor protests to the halls of power. Yet relatively little attention has been paid to how much the Tea Party has stayed the same. I show that – despite the Tea Party's closer relationship with the Republican Party – the movement has retained its modus operandi as a decentralized, diffuse, outward-facing, and independent movement.

In some ways, the endurance of this informal and largely decentralized model is unexpected. Some research suggested that, given the Tea Party's genesis as a partisan backlash, it was likely to move back into the folds of the GOP, as the Party regained power (Almeida and Van Dyke 2014; Heaney and Rojas 2015; Meyer and Pullum 2014; Perrin et al. 2014). Furthermore, the more limited cultural analysis on the movement suggested that – as in other movements on the right (see Corrigall-Brown 2011; Hutter and Kriesi 2013) – Tea Party activists preferred institutional tactics to the protests and extra-institutional strategies in classic social movements (Heaney and Rojas 2015). So why, after Tea Party activists moved into the

Republican Party and successfully forced it rightward, do they continue to mobilize as a movement?

While there are certainly strategic motivations animating the Tea Party's enduring independence (see Blum 2016), my research shows that a primary motivation for continuing to build the Tea Party movement is a cultural preference. That is, activists want to enact what Ruth Braunstein (2017) calls the "democratic imaginary" in which politics involves direct relationships between them – citizens – and their elected representatives. The Tea Party approximates this ideal by giving participants access to representatives at all levels and providing information on a range of topics without requiring them to make explicit ideological or practical commitments to the movement. Furthermore, it provides them information about issues and opportunities to participate in politics in a physical space in which they feel welcomed and comfortable.

I find that the Tea Party's success in maintaining this diffuse movement model, while integrating into the Republican Party, has several results. First, it allows activists to penetrate other political organizations individually, without threatening their allegiance to the movement. Second, it enables a radical ideology, by creating a base of support that is largely independent of mainstream political actors, and by providing autonomous space through which radical content circulates with little accountability. Finally, it facilitates the movement's ability to retain strong connections to the broader community, as they continue to draw sympathizers and occasional activists to events in which they are welcomed and made to feel comfortable.

6.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In the rest of this chapter, I elaborate on how these findings contribute to scholarship in the areas of social movements and polarization, social movements and political culture, and Tea Party organizing. I conclude with suggestions for future research.

6.1.1 Political Polarization and Social Movements

The Tea Party in Virginia is at once the result of decades of political polarization and a generator of increased political polarization, demonstrating the recurring force that social movements can exert on political parties and institutions (Bosi 2016; McAdam and Kloos 2014; Rojas 2007; Santoro and McGuire 1997; Schlozman 2015; Staggenborg 1988; Suh 2011). My research shows how its decentralized and individualistic model of organizing facilitates the Tea Party's influence on national politics. By eschewing established membership, the movement enables individual activists to participate in multiple organizations simultaneously, allowing Tea Party activists to obtain leadership positions in mainstream political institutions like the Republican Party, without giving up movement activism. Without a strong leadership hierarchy or professional employees, or even an established agenda or collective statements, the movement operates with little accountability, so no one is held responsible for the extremist claims or radical content that circulate through the movement.

However, my case study is based in a highly conservative area, with deeply Republican counties and established conservative political institutions. As I show, this environment facilitates the diffuse movement structure of the Tea Party, as a broad population of sympathizers provides an emotionally and ideologically supportive environment for activists. Future research

should compare the institutionalization/radicalization dynamic in more politically diverse settings to see whether Tea Party movements in Democratically-dominated contexts have similarly diffuse models. Are Tea Party movements in less conservative areas able to successfully infiltrate the Republican Party to the extent that the Tea Party in Virginia, and especially Richmond, has? And have they maintained the same level of radical politics?

6.1.2 Political Culture and Social Movements

My research builds on scholarship suggesting that, even in a "social movement society" (Meyer and Tarrow 1998), activists in right-oriented movements might prefer participation in mainstream political institutions to protest tactics (Corrigall-Brown 2011; Heaney and Rojas 2015; Hutter and Kriesi 2013). I found that most Tea Party activists preferred mainstream political participation to protest tactics. Further, I find that this preference is directly related to a cultural and ideological persuasion, as activists identify this approach as closer to their "democratic imaginary," which is based on their interpretation of the views of the Founding Fathers. However, this does not mean that they are committed to the party politics of the GOP. In fact, my research demonstrates that Tea Party activists continued to maintain their movement activity in addition to their partisan activity, frequently expressing a preference for the Tea Party over the local Republican organizations. Partisan politics violates their idealized image of political participation (which would occur through direct relationships to elected representatives), but it is closer to this ideal than are street protests. Thus, I argue that scholars should not mistake the right's commitment to mainstream politics for a commitment to the Republican Party.

Future research should examine those who are integrated into culturally conservative networks but are not politically conservative. I encountered such people, including friends and acquaintances of Tea Party sympathizers who attended the same churches and lived in the same neighborhoods but identified as Democrats, liberals, or "not conservative." This division often broke along racial or generational lines, as sometimes younger people and people of color were more liberal than their older family members and White church friends. Do these people share the democratic imaginary of their Tea Party friends and acquaintances? Do they have a similar preference for individualized and institutional politics? Is left-oriented politics in these communities organized similarly to the right-oriented politics? How do these preference emerge in current debates around immigration, refugees, Muslims, and Black racial justice movements, especially those with strong ties to faith communities?

6.1.3 Tea Party Organizing in the Trump Era

The Tea Party has established an enduring, independent grassroots organizing presence on the right that previously did not exist. This has shifted the political reality, likely for the long-term; as the Tea Party weathered the entire Obama administration, it seems likely that they will also outlast the Trump administration.

My research has two implications for the future impact of the Tea Party on local and national politics. First, the diffuse nature of the Tea Party movement often obscures its presence. For example, to my knowledge, no local Tea Party group ever took an official position, made a public statement, or otherwise directly integrated itself into an overt public debate about several proposed Islamic centers/communities in Virginia while I was conducting research. Tea Party groups and other organizations in the network regularly hosted anti-Muslim activists like Brigitte

Gabriel, who argues that the U.S. Constitution is under threat from “Sharia law” and that a “practicing Muslim” cannot be a “loyal citizen of the United States” (Southern Poverty Law Center 2018). My informants frequently agreed with these sentiments. So, it is not surprising that discussions about local mosques and Islamic community centers came up in meetings and in interviews, as activists spread information about the incidents and encouraged others to “learn more.” This pattern suggests that Tea Party involvement in social and political conflicts may not be obvious from press coverage.

Future research should focus on uncovering the role of the Tea Party in political and social conflicts, by examining the impact of Tea Party-associated activists in situations in which the role of the movement might be obscured. This includes occasions when Tea Party conservatives interact directly with – or themselves become – local legislators, school board members, and county budget officers, as well as their roles in local conflicts over mosques, refugees, or public bathroom access for transgendered people. Many observers have examined the impact of the Tea Party in congressional politics, but we know very little about its impact at the local level where it may have the most impact.

Second, the enduring strength of the Tea Party suggests that the national conversation around right-wing populism should better incorporate the different components and constituencies of the movement. While Trump supporters and Tea Party sympathizers substantially overlap, my research shows that Tea Party activists tend to be more traditionally conservative than the blue collar, rural, former Democrats that commentators have declared to be essential to his candidacy (see Kruse 2017), even though I found that the Tea Party was a primary vehicle for Trump organizing in the Richmond area leading up to his election (Yates 2016). As the Trump administration evolves, it is important to study challenges to Tea Party

conservatives from the Trump-associated, more typical populists on the local level, as well as whether the Tea Party will continue to dominate at the state level. Future research also should examine the effect of the Trump administration on Tea Party organizing below the national level.

APPENDIX A

TEA PARTY MEETING PARTICIPATION SURVEY

1) How did you find out about this meeting?

☐Local Tea Party email list
☐A friend, family member, or other person invited me
☐Physical signage or other local advertisement (yellow sign, newspaper, etc.)
☐Local Tea Party group website, facebook page, or meetup.com page
☐Email from a conservative candidate or campaign
☐Email from a national conservative organization/national Tea Party group
☐Other: ____

2) Is this the first Tea Party-associated event, (meeting or rally) you have attended?

☐YES
☐NO

*If you answered **"NO":** (If you answered **"YES"** please turn to Question 3)*

How often do you attend Tea Party events?

☐I've been to a few other (1-5) events
☐I come every few months
☐I try to come to most regular meetings
☐I'm always here!
☐I used to come regularly, now I come every once in awhile

What was the first Tea Party-associated event that you attended?
☐Rally or protest
☐Regular meeting or event hosted by local Tea Party group

When was the first Tea Party event that you attended?
☐2015-2016
☐2013-2014
☐2011-2012
☐2009-2010

How did you hear about the first Tea Party event you attended?
☐Radio (WRVA, Doc Thompson, etc.)
☐TV (Mainstream News, Cable News)
☐A friend, family member, or other person invited me
☐Physical signage (yellow sign, newspaper ad, etc.)
☐Local Tea Party email list
☐Local Tea Party group website, facebook, or meetup.com page
☐Email from a conservative candidate or campaign
☐Email from a national organization/national Tea Party group
☐Other: ____

2) *Before* attending any Tea Party events, had you ever attended any other political events or volunteered for political causes?
☐NO
☐YES (please check all that apply)
  ☐Campaigned for a particular candidate (door-to-door, phone calling, stuffing envelopes, etc.)
  ☐Republican precinct, committee, convention, or other party politics
  ☐Pro-life or traditional marriage advocacy
  ☐Through national conservative groups (Heritage, etc.)
  ☐Civic engagement/citizenship training
  ☐Through 2nd Amendment/Gun Rights organizations
  ☐Other: ______________________________________

3) *Since* attending any Tea Party events, have you attended any other political events or volunteered for other political causes?

☐NO
☐YES (please check all that apply)
☐Campaigned for a particular candidate (door-to-door, phone calling, stuffing envelopes, etc.)
☐Republican precinct, committee, convention, or other party politics
☐Pro-life or traditional marriage advocacy
☐Through national conservative groups (Heritage, etc.)
☐Civic engagement/citizenship training
☐Through 2nd Amendment/Gun Rights organizations
☐Other: ____

****

Thank you for participating!!!! Interested in saying more??

This survey is a part of my larger research project I am conducting as a graduate student in Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. I am looking for self-described "conservatives" to sit down for confidential interviews and talk about their views, what they see going on in their communities and in the rest of the world, and how they would like things to change. Interviews will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. I can meet you at a time and location that is convenient for you (coffee shop, library, office, etc.). If you are interested in being interviewed or in learning more about my project, please provide your name, phone number, and/or email address and I will be in touch shortly!

Name: ____
Phone:____
Email:____
Thank you!
- Liz Yates, Graduate Student, University of Pittsburgh, eay15@pitt.edu, [phone number]

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Date/Time:

Location:

Interview #:

I'm going to be talking to you today about being a conservative, what that means to you and how you fit that into your life. So, I'd like to start right away by asking you to tell me about conservatism.

1) What does being "a conservative" mean to you?
   - Would you describe yourself as a "Constitutional conservative?" or a "Tea Party conservative?" or a "Christian conservative?"

2) How long would you say you have consciously described yourself as a conservative?

3) Who are some conservatives that you admire?
   - Politicians or public figures, or people you know personally?
   - What about them do you admire and how do you know they are conservative?
   - Which of the original Republican candidates did you support and why?

4) Do you see Donald Trump as a conservative? Why or why not?
   - Was he your first choice to get the nomination?
   - If not who was? Why?

- Did you support his campaign by volunteering for him or voting for him?

5) What kinds of obligations to society do you think you have as a conservative?

- Do you have specific political obligations?
- What about obligations to society outside of politics?
- To those less fortunate than you?
- What exactly is the source of this obligation?
- Would you judge other people for not meetings these obligations?

6) Where do you get news from?

- Radio?
- Newspapers?
- Online blogs? Facebook? Websites? Twitter?

7) Think of the five or so people in your life to whom you are closest.

- For each one, tell me whether or not you would consider them a conservative, and why or why not?
- *If they all are conservative:* Do you have any close friends or family members that you would say or not conservative?
- *If they are all family members:* Do you have any friends, not including family that aren't conservative? Why do you think that is?

8) Are you in any formal or informal groups?

- Regular get-togethers, churches, book clubs, Bible study, sports, parent associations, etc.?
- *If so:* How many people are in those, how much time do you spend on them, do you think most of the people in those groups are conservatives

(FOR TEA PARTY ACTIVISTS ONLY)

9) How did you first get involved in politics?

- Have you ever been involved with the Republican Party or a political campaign?
- What was the first Tea Party event you attended? How did you hear about it?
- Have you been involved in gun rights, pro-life, traditional marriage, or other conservative campaigns?

(FOR NON-ACTIVISTS AND/OR NON-TEA PARTY ACTIVISTS ONLY)

9) Have you ever participated in politics? Such as attending a rally or meeting or volunteering for a candidate?

10) What do you know about the Tea Party?

- Where have you learned about the Tea Party? From media, (which), friends, signage, etc.?
- Has anyone ever asked you to come to a Tea Party-related event? Have you ever tried to get anyone else to come to a Tea Party-related event?
- Have you ever seen an advertisement for a Tea Party event?
- *If they haven't been:* Have you ever thought about going to one? Why or why not? Why did you not go?
- Do you know anyone who has attended Tea Party-associated events, or who participates in the Tea Party at all? Do you know anyone who has or who regularly participates in other political activities?
- *If they do know people in the Tea Party:* Do you feel like you agree with them politically? Why or why not? Do you think you agree with them on non-political things, like basic values, etc.? How do you know? Have they ever invited you to participate with them, directly or indirectly?
- What do you think the role of the Tea Party has been so far in this election?

Demographic Questionnaire

Age: _______________

Race/Ethnicity(s): ____

Religion: ____

Place of Worship:______________________________________

Current Marital Status:

☐Married ☐Divorced ☐Single

☐Other:______________

Do you have children? ☐Yes ☐No

If "Yes," please list the ages and genders of each of your children:

____

____

____

Town/City/County of Residence: ____

Type of Area**:**

☐Urban ☐Suburban/Exurban ☐Rural

Type of Residence:

☐House ☐Apartment ☐Other: ______________

Do you currently own your home? Yes ☐ No ☐

Do you currently own any other properties? Yes ☐ No ☐

Are you currently working?:

☐Full-Time ☐Part-Time ☐Not at all

☐Retired ☐Student

Job Title/Occupation (Current or former): ____________________________________

Highest Level of Education:

☐Some High School ☐High School

☐Some college ☐Associates Degree ☐Bachelors Degree

☐Graduate Degree ☐Technical Degree

Yearly Household Income:

☐less than $25,000 ☐$25,001 - $50,000 ☐$50,001- $75,000

☐$75,001 - $100,000 ☐$100,001 - $125,000 ☐$125,001 -$150,000

☐More than $150,000

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