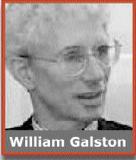


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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

The **Democratic Strategist** has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As **The Democratic Strategists'** editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

THE TEA PARTY PROTESTERS WERE NOT ALL TRADITIONAL CONSERVATIVES. MANY COMBINED A SMALL BUSINESS VIEWPOINT AND "POPULIST" DISTRUST OF LARGE INSTITUTIONS—INCLUDING THE REPUBLICAN PARTY. THEY ARE NOT "IN THE BAG" FOR THE GOP

BY *ANDREW LEVISON*

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By Andrew Levison

Now that the "spin war" over the size and authenticity of the "tea parties" is over, Democrats should look at the protests more carefully and consider how best to respond.

To begin, the most important fact to note is that there were actually several quite distinct agendas being pursued during the events.

First, the major "non-grass-roots" promoters of the protests—Fox News, Freedomworks, Americans for Progress—ultimately will want to channel the protests back into the "corporate conservatism" of the Republican Party. The essence of this economic approach has been to provide corporate America and the wealthy with their entire short-term wish-list without any coherent philosophy or plan guiding decisions. During the Bush years, corporations and industry lobbyists were quite literally allowed to write their own laws and regulations—which were irresponsibly lax as a result—and then to seek and receive bail-outs with public funds when the companies failed. Tax rates on the wealthy were massively lowered without regard to fiscal prudence (on the grounds that "Reagan proved that deficits don't matter") and, as a consequence, major increases in the federal budget deficit and public debt were allowed to develop at the "wrong" expansionary stage of the business cycle.

The Bush administration's PR machine described this mixture of economic policies as representing a "free market" or "conservative" approach and, at the time, few congressional Republicans made any serious objection to this characterization. But it was, in reality, not grounded in any coherent social philosophy at all. It simply represented the accommodation of whatever short-term corporate demands various industries and lobbyists could successfully push onto the desks of the Bush policymakers.

There was some significant grumbling about this approach among some "grass roots" conservatives during the Bush years, but it was only with the emergence of the crisis last fall that anger exploded across the political spectrum. In the on-site reports from the Tea Parties there are just too many cases of Republicans being booed, heckled and even discouraged from attending the protests to ignore.

(Andrew Levison is the author of two books and numerous articles on the social and political attitudes of blue collar workers and other ordinary Americans)

But what were the alternative views? Some protestors were focused on a wide variety of perennial “grass-roots” conservative social issues—evolution, gun control and abortion. Other, more conspiratorially-minded protestors focused on Obama’s supposed “non-citizenship”, “hidden” Moslem beliefs or “secret plans” for police round-ups of true patriots and concentration camps. These participants drew disproportionate attention because their signs, costumes and slogans were particularly flamboyant, but most reports suggested that they were not expressing the typical view of the attendees.

On the contrary, the on-the-scene reports by citizen journalists from Huffington Post and other web publications suggest that probably the largest single group within the tea parties were neither corporate Republicans, single-issue protestors nor conspiracy theorists. [Writing in the Washington Examiner](#)¹, Byron York offered a particularly empathetic view of their attitudes which he portrayed as a mixture of bewildered patriotism, fear of the unknown and nostalgia for traditional, “old-fashioned” economic values and attitudes.

For Democrats, the key to understanding the outlook of this “small-town traditional” group is to recognize that it is not the expression of the standard, “institutional” conservative ideology of the Heritage Foundation and University of Chicago. On the contrary, it is an authentically “grass roots” perspective rooted in a “common sense” understanding of economic affairs that arises from practical experience in the world of small business. The Americans who embrace this view have never read Milton Friedman nor attended any formal lectures in their lives. Their philosophy is sustained by the informal exchange of ideas with friends, neighbors and co-workers and is derived from daily life in “the real world” as it appears to many average Americans.

At the core of this view is a cluster of ideas that can best be summed up as “pre-Keynesian.” It is an approach that is unified by the idea that that government should be run according to the same principles that apply to running a small business.

The main ideas are:

1. Government spending to create jobs simply does not work. It can only create phony “make work” or “leaf raking” jobs and not “real” jobs that need to be done. This is rooted in the widespread but superficial “common sense” notion that if there actually were a real demand for some service or product, private businesses would inevitably arise to provide it. As a result, aside from a limited set of necessarily public jobs (police, fire, etc.) there is basically no need for the government to be involved in peacetime economic activity.
2. Government simply should not go into debt; it should maintain a permanently balanced budget. This idea, which in previous generations was called fiscal responsibility or “sound finance,” is based on making an analogy between an

individual household and the government. If going into debt is bad for an individual, it must be equally bad for country. The “common sense” notion behind this view is that borrowing money to buy things one cannot afford (“going into hock”) is never a good idea on moral grounds. It undermines important virtues like thrift and hard work.

3. Banks are visualized as essentially profit-seeking businesses like any other and not as an abstract “credit system” that provides “finance” or “liquidity” to the economy. In this view, the fact that banks’ particular business happens to be taking deposits and lending money does not entitle them to any special treatment. In consequence, common sense dictates that they do not deserve to be “bailed out” when they fail any more than any other business.
4. Government regulation is seen from the perspective of a small businessman. As such it appears as a maze of annoying paperwork, licenses, permits, inspections, and so on. Since the 1970’s when the demands on small businesses—and particularly the paperwork required of them—increased exponentially, the view grew that many of these regulations were really created by government bureaucrats to keep themselves employed rather than as a sincere attempt to solve genuinely pressing social problems. For many small businessmen this is backed up by the “common sense” perception that in their personal experience there are more useless regulations imposed on them than useful ones. For every sensible regulation protecting the public from tainted food or lead paint, their personal business experience seems to suggest a dozen examples of regulations that seem unnecessary or so poorly enforced as to be useless. This very small scale view is then extrapolated to the economy as a whole.
5. Taxes are seen from a very limited point of view—as money that is simply taken away from individuals by the government—and not visualized as part of a larger circular flow that returns in exchange services and a healthier society in which to live. The “common sense” notion simply is that “Taxes are my money, not the government’s money.”

Before the 1930’s, most of these views were part of the dominant social philosophy in America—a broad consensus that extended from the economics textbooks to the leaders of industry and government. Since the 1930’s in each of these areas a broader, “system-wide” economic view has taken hold, one which can broadly be defined as Keynesian.

1. This view sees a substantial part of government spending as investing—not just in national defense but in modern science, education, infrastructure development and other fields that have broad long-term benefits for the society as whole and multiple “spin-off” benefits for the private economy.
2. This view sees the management of government debt and spending as part of maintaining the circular flow of income—of managing the business cycle and preventing mass unemployment or run-away inflation.

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3. This view sees the credit system primarily as a critical mechanism for providing finance for private investment and growth. An individual bank's success or failure is seen as a secondary side-effect of this national economic function.
 4. This view sees regulation as driven by genuine and significant market failures and vital to the economic system of any advanced country. From a broad social view, an advanced country simply cannot have babies dying of lead poisoning, stockholders routinely defrauded or "snake-oil" medicines sold without control. Regulation is seen as vital for creating the basic level of trust and economic stability needed in a complex modern economy.
 5. Taxes are seen as the price of necessary public services. They are the "overhead costs" of living in a stable, advanced country rather than a destitute third world backwater. When pre-Keynesians describe a place without taxes as Utopia, proponents of the Keynesian view suggest Ethiopia as a more realistic example.

By the 1960's, this Keynesian "big picture" view of the economy had become dominant among economists, corporate leaders and government officials—a dominance codified in the successive editions of Paul Samuelson's textbook which defined the field of economics for the entire decade. Even today, after 40 years of massive attacks on its premises by conservatives, the essential elements of the Keynesian-Samuelson view—rather than its pre-Keynesian predecessor—remains dominant among corporate leaders and government policymakers.

In terms of Democratic strategy, here is the key point to note: neither the pre-Keynesian nor the Keynesian views directly overlap the standard ideological divisions between progressives and conservatives. Many "conservative" businessmen and major corporate executives support the main elements of the Keynesian "big picture" view of the economy while many working class "populists" reject it in favor of a small government, balanced budget view.

It is this divergence between Keynesian and pre-Keynesian economic ideas on the one hand and between conventional progressive-conservative ideological divisions on the other that produces the unique "neither typical Republican nor typical corporate conservative" philosophy that was reflected in the tea parties.

In terms of Democratic strategy, there are two key implications of this analysis:

First, while these voters are unlikely to support Democratic candidates, their distrust and hostility to Obama and the Dems can be significantly moderated, reducing the number who move on to become committed anti-Democratic activists in hundreds of communities around the nation. The key is to reject the assumption that people who do

not accept a Keynesian view are necessarily doctrinaire conservatives or committed Republicans. As we have seen, there is good evidence that they are not. Democrats can moderate the opposition of these voters by communicating with them in their own distinct “common sense” and “small business” framework.

Obama actually understands this strategy very clearly. [David Brooks describes his approach as follows](#)²:

...when President Obama summarized his economic policies in a speech at Georgetown last week... [he] didn't sound like an economic liberal. He sounded like a cultural conservative.

America once had a responsible economic culture, Obama argued. People used to save their pennies to buy their dream houses. Banks used to lend by “traditional standards.” ...But these traditions broke down, Obama continued. They were swamped by irresponsibility. Businesspeople chased “short-term profits” over long-term investments. Smart people spent more time manipulating numbers and symbols than actually making things... It's time to get back to basics, he said. He embraced tradition, order and authority. He quoted the New Testament and argued that it is time that the U.S. built its economic house on rock and not sand.

If Republicans aren't nervous, they should be. Obama is arguing for his activist agenda not on the basis of class-consciousness, which is alien to America, but as a defense of middle-class morality, which is central to it. Obama is positioning the Democrats as the party of order, responsibility and small-town values.

This approach has tremendous appeal in many sectors of the electorate and is an important reason why the Republican attacks have not severely dented Obama's popularity. In the particular case of the grass-roots Tea Party protesters, however, the basic goal for Democrats is not necessarily to win these voters' support but simply to make them feel less ignored and threatened by Democratic governance. They may not come to support Democrats, but their opposition and hostility can be significantly moderated.

The second important strategy for Democrats to follow is to point out—not insultingly, but sincerely—to the “small-town traditionalist” grass roots protesters that there is a genuinely huge gulf that separates their own views from those of the major organizations that have emerged as the main “clearing houses” for the Tea Party movement.

Just look at these major “behind the scenes” groups:

Freedom Works:

- The organization was started by top Bush administration and Republican Party insiders including former White House spokesman Ari Fleischer and Carl

Forti, long-time communications director at the RNCC and earlier this year Political Director for Mitt Romney's presidential campaign.

- FreedomWorks major funder has been Billionaire Sheldon G. Adelson, who is the biggest gambling casino operator on the planet.
- FreedomWorks is currently headed by Dick Arme, now a **corporate lobbyist whose firm represents**³, among others, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rishid Ad Maltoum, Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates on oil related issues and (in 2006) the Senate of Mexico on immigration issues.

One would have to be genuinely naïve to believe that, among all its other clients and vested interests, FreedomWorks will fully and fairly represent the views and desires of the average grass-roots Tea Party protestors.

Americans for Prosperity:

- Americans for Prosperity is run by Tim Phillips who was Ralph Reed's partner in the lobbying firm Century Strategies. **Under Reed, the firm was deeply implicated in the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal**⁴ and was exposed taking money from both gambling interests and anti-gambling groups during lobbying efforts to open new Casinos.
- The major funder of Americans for Prosperity is the Koch family foundations whose wealth is derived from the oil industry. **Before the tea party protests, AFP was organizing "grass-roots" events**⁵ supporting—surprise, surprise—domestic oil drilling.

Other key "clearing house" web sites for the tea party protestors are connected to organizations supporting libertarian candidate Ron Paul or the "objectivist", "John Galt" philosophy of Ayn Rand.

- In the 1990's, Ron Paul has had a variety of connections with militia groups and racial organizations (Paul's connection with militia and racist groups in the 1990's is **detailed here**.⁶
- **Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy is bitterly anti-Christian**⁷ (dismissing Christianity as "superstition" and religious faith as "extremely detrimental to human life") and deeply contemptuous of average working people ("The man at the bottom who, left to himself, would starve in his hopeless ineptitude, contributes nothing to those above him, but receives the bonus of all of their brains.")

As a consequence, the "traditionalist" grass roots protester who does not want to tie himself or herself to corporate Republican lobbyists or to fringe groups with ideological views he or she probably does not share has a serious problem. As unfocused tea parties give way to more specific actions, protesters face the increasing likelihood

that these sites will be channeling them into supporting positions and engaging in actions of which they basically do not approve.

This is not a coincidence. It is the lobbyists and fringe groups that have the money and resources to provide free websites, paid staff and organizing tools “without charge”. In their view, these are investments that will pay off later on.

If the mainstream tea party protesters want democratic organizations that reflect their views, rather than those of others, they will have to create and financially support them themselves. This is something progressives have known for decades and which Democrats can politely but clearly point out.

¹ <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/politics/Small-town-rally-shows-true-meaning-of-tea-parties-43078082.html>

² http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/21/opinion/21brooks.html?_r=1

³ <http://thinkprogress.org/2009/04/14/lobbying-clients-teaparties/>

⁴ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1218060,00.html>

⁵ <http://thinkprogress.org/2009/04/09/lobbyists-planning-teaparties/>

⁶ <http://www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2007/5/15/124912/740>

⁷ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2009/03/rand_and_conservatives_a_remin.php