

Anyone Fancy a Spot of Tiffin? The inside story of the American Tea Party.

Well the voting is over, the results are in, and the Tea Party has tapped into a seam of frustration in America in a way no pressure group has done for many years – or so our pundits tell us.

But there are few things that need to be clarified before calling this something new and different. The Tea Party is a classic “party within a party”, so well known in British and European politics, rather than a separate party more familiar to American voters.

Protest or issue-based parties are nothing new in America. Ross Perot, running as an independent in 1992, had higher poll ratings in June of that year, at 39%, compared to the numbers for the sitting Republican President (Bush), at 31%, or the eventual Democratic winner, Bill Clinton, who stood at 25%. Now there was a protest! Only a threat of a Republican “dirty tricks” campaign aimed at his daughter prevented him building on this wave of support and possibly really changing the nature of the political process, or at least the Executive branch of government.

Ralph Nader is a perennial independent Presidential candidate and has been blamed by some in the Democratic party for preventing an outright win for Al Gore in the 2000 Election – now that did change American history and that of the rest of the world as well!

This recent past seems to have been forgotten by the “insta-pundits” we are exposed to in today’s media.

The grass roots campaign of today’s Tea Party is different in strategy – bottom up rather than top down - but not too different in terms of the electorate expressing a desire for change in Washington and using any means to make it heard.

As many readers will know, we have commented on the British General Election of 2010 and have a time series of voters’ affinities to the parties here in the UK. Regular visitors to our site will also be aware of the analytical tools we have developed to measure values across differing cultures. One of the tools we use is based on the work of Shalom Schwartz, which has been independently used to measure values of populations in over 80 countries.

A report published just days before the American mid-term elections – based on over 17,000 nationally representative respondents on Facebook – asked people about their attitudes and behaviours relating to the Tea Party. Among the questions were the values identifying questions used by Schwartz.

Using data from this sample and comparing them with our British data we have been able to make some interesting insights and observations about values of the voters who are likely to be supporters of the Tea Party.

The survey is useful to values researchers as it not only contains standard demographic data but it also more “modern” and psychological indicators: Myers – Briggs, McCrea and Costa’s “Big 5”, Jonathan Haidt’s “Sacredness Scales” as well as Schwartz. These scales provide a real insight into the psyche of the respondents – their values and personality.

Here we will look specifically at the Schwartz implications that emerge from this data set – but let's see what the report says first.

The research and the author of the report conclude that the Tea Party has two very specific and different sides to its supporter base. Interesting already! They do not see a coherent pattern of support across the movement. They see distinct and, in many ways, contradictory wings.

In Maslowian terms we agree and see a Settler vs. Prospector split.

Tea Party Research October 2010

Settler

Prospector

Characteristics	Religious Conservative Supporters	Libertarian Supporters
Values	Tradition, Propriety, Security, Benevolence	Self-Direction, Stimulation, Power, Security
Morals	Morally charged, particularly regarding group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity	Morally permissive
Personality	Down-to-earth, diligent, confident	Assertive, industrious, intellectual
Religiosity	Devoutly religious (by definition)	Mix of religious and non-religious
Professional Values	Emphasis on morality, efficiency	Emphasis on integrity, competence
Interests	Religion, family, sports	Business, finance, news and science
Age	Disproportionately baby boomers	Reflects general population
Gender	Balanced	Disproportionately male
Primary Race	Mostly white	Mostly white
Location	Strong in the Bible Belt, Midwest	Strong in the Southeast, Mountain region
Education	Above average	Above average
Household Income	Middle to upper middle class	Upper middle to upper class
Parenthood	Disproportionate number of large families	Many small families and non-parents

MyType Research
17,000 Wtd US pop.

The authors of the report call this is a split between Religious Conservative Supporters and Libertarian Supporters. Given a list of demographic and psychographic indicators, we can see that they are largely very different. For organizers and supporters of the movement, this means some real issues in the next couple of years, if they are to leverage the discontent into a political force.

We have noted this phenomenon of a seemingly cohesive voice at one stage of a cultural dynamic – usually when a group “wins” and is charged with changing things - leading to angry behaviour and hurt feelings when “unspoken support assumptions” are not made clear until policy decisions begin to be formulated. We have called this the “Logjam of Violent Agreement” and Chris Rose (www.campaignstrategy.org) has written extensively about it, especially in relation to the creation of public policy.

We predict this will occur in Washington very soon and have a real impact on the support for the Tea Party. This is based on the tensions among the voter base that essentially leads to the conclusion that, if one wing wins, the other loses. Given the differing values of the wings, the psychological contract implied in the vote will be seen to be “broken”. Continued support will become very problematic for many.

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Displaced Entitlement – It’s Wasn’t Like This Before – I Deserve Better Than This – It Isn’t My Fault – I’m a Victim

MyType Research
17,000 Wtd US pop.

Before we explore these differences, let’s highlight the few similarities between the two wings. They do have some very pronounced similarities that can be seen in the television and multi-media coverage from which we get our news, providing good fodder for media coverage. Tea Party supporters tend to be:

- White.
- Middle Class with a bias to Upper Middle income level.
- Above Average Education.

They look and sound like successful Middle America and the media narrative loves them – they look and sound like their viewers and readers. They are role models for other Americans.

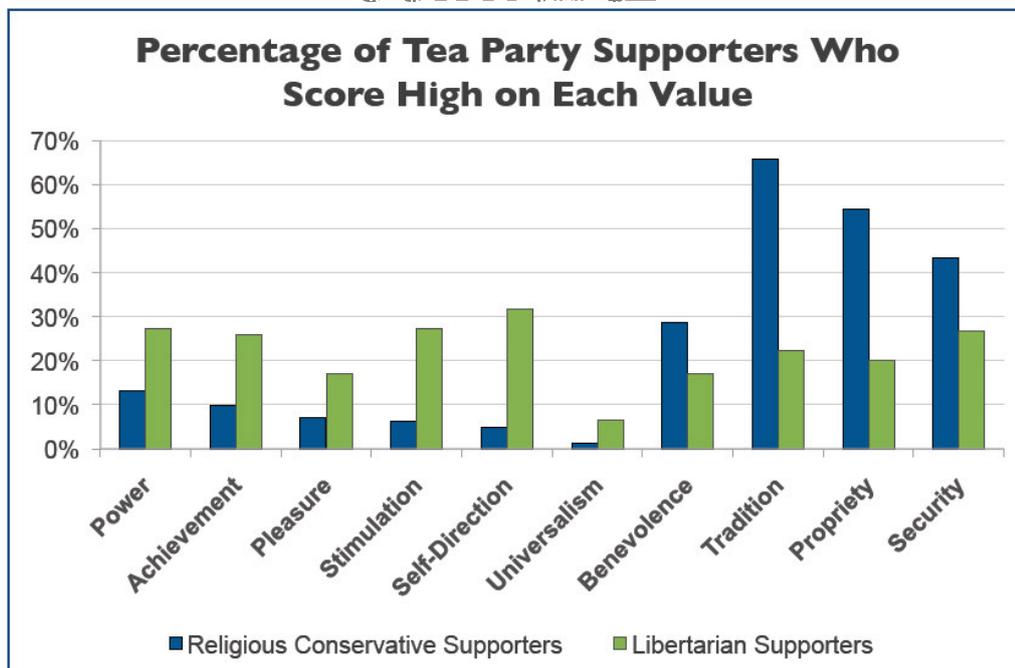
What have they got to protest about? They’ve achieved the American dream, haven’t they? When we look a bit closer we find this is precisely the reason that they are protesting – the dream hasn’t turn out the way it was “supposed to”. The values sets of these people – their desired end states – lead them to feel that they haven’t realized the dream yet. They feel deeply – at the level of their subconscious values - that they are “victims”. The Tea Party is the sound of the fabled Silent Majority making its voice heard.

Is it really as simple as that – a revolt by normal Americans at straitened circumstances? Or is it something different?

The report makes it quite clear that, from the psychological perspective, it is quite different. Although the supporters may look and sound the same, different wings are very likely to have different reasons for supporting their candidates.

Let’s take a look at the Schwartz¹ analysis of this group of people who support the Tea Party.

Schwartz



High equals top 20% of possible score

MyType Research
5,008 weighted US
Aug-Oct 2010

¹ Readers familiar with the SIMS Wheel developed by CDSM will notice that “Hedonism” is missing from the list of descriptors. In the Schwartz system this area of the circumplex is called “Pleasure”. We changed this to Hedonism as we already had an Attribute called Pleasure and wanted to avoid confusion. Pleasure in this graph has the same definition as Schwartz gives it.

Several patterns stand out.

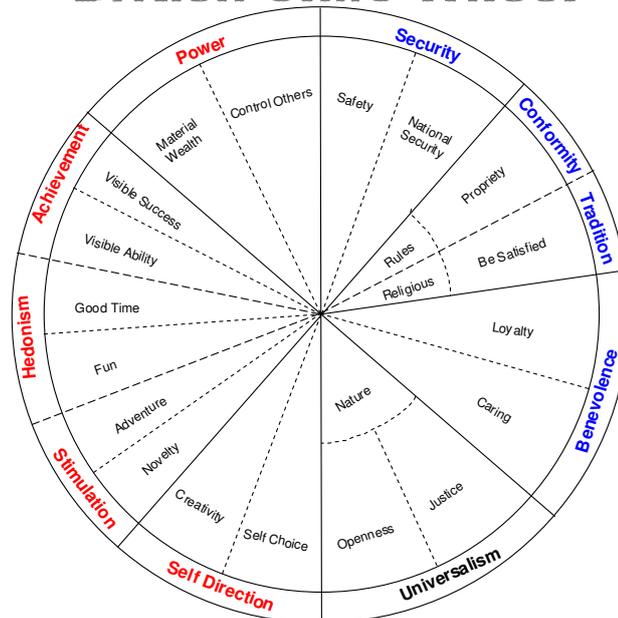
The first and most obvious is that the Religious Conservative supporters are very skewed. They have very high scores on three values and, relative to the Libertarian supporters, on one other; while they score very low on the other six.

The second pattern is that for the most part the Libertarian supporters are more evenly weighted across the values, not heavily skewed to one or another value, with the exception of the Universalism value – more about that later.

A third pattern emerges when it is recognized that the values least espoused by the Religious Conservative supporters show a relatively large and consistent downward variation from the Libertarian supporters.

To those not familiar with the Schwartz system it should be noted that he developed a tested system based on antagonisms and sympathies between the values he measures. Let's take a look at that presented on the SIMS Wheel.

British SIMS Wheel



The Values in Red are held more strongly the Libertarian supported and those in Blue by Religious Conservative supporters.

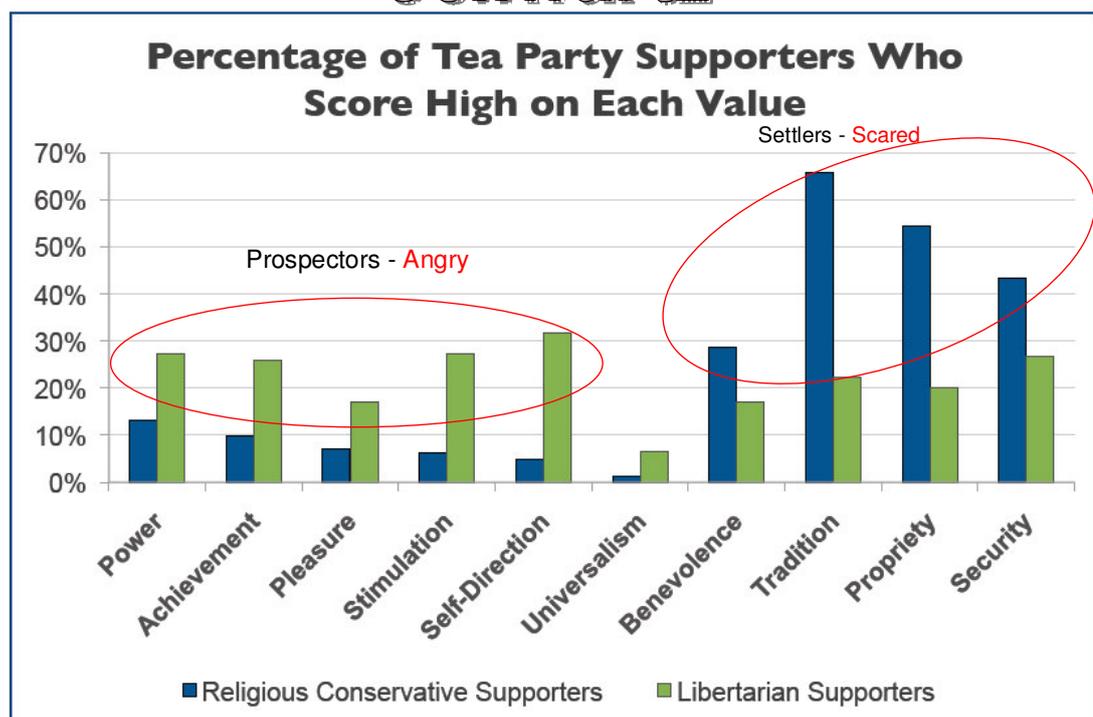
Values on opposite sides of Wheel are antagonistic to each other and those side by side tend to be sympathetic to each other. For example, Stimulation is opposite Conformity, therefore they are antagonistic to each other. This tells us that the Religious Conservative is more likely be concerned about following rules and doing the right thing and the Libertarian supporter is more concerned with having fun and breaking the rules if they don't suit them.

Another example is between Achievement and Benevolence. The Libertarian is concerned about the approval of their reference group and feels it is natural that the world is fairly Darwinian, in the sense of “survival of the fittest” - i.e. there are winners and losers and they will do everything in their power not to be a loser. The Religious Conservatives are more likely to agree to the statements that measure Benevolence - which is basically translated as taking care of others like oneself because it is the right thing to do – nothing to do with power or status.

The consistent differences between the wings of the Tea Party spell real trouble for those who believe this is a cohesive movement. This is a prime example of a Logjam and an indication that tough times lie ahead for organizers attempting to build momentum on the 2010 supporter base. As the Washington members of Congress come together, they are likely to begin offending their own base, because of the way Congress works, and end up getting conflicting messages sent to them through their polling.

This diagram highlights the differences in motivations.

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The Prospectors are angry at the failure of the dream. They thought they would have power over their own lives and the lives of others – instead they see others having the power to control their lives. They are not feeling they have been able to achieve all that they planned for. The prospect of enjoying the fruits of their labours – to have fun – is disappearing under a welter of higher than expected bills and lowered expectations. They value taking risks and pushing their own boundaries but they feel hemmed by their inability to do so by financial institutions and a government that seems alien to them.

This feeling of distance from their own dreams is caused by their relatively high score on Self Direction – they want to be in charge of their own lives – but they seem to be prevented from doing this on multiple fronts. They are frustrated at the disconnect between their dreams and aspirations, and the current economic climate. This disconnect leads to anger. Anger and their “Just Do It” mentality can lead them to a negative vote against the establishment and a positive vote for the Tea Party.

The Settlers aren’t angry – they are basically just scared for their future - the future of their country, and their children and grandchildren. At the best of times they are more tradition oriented and have a less rosy opinion about the future than other groups – but this economic dislocation has cast an even darker pall over their view of the future. They will seek out and negatively label those who are different than their reference or peer groups. This labelling of “the other” could be through colour, accent, income level, employment status or their religion. President Obama is almost a perfect “them” in the world of the frightened Settler.

They will find the “enemy within” and cast the blame there. This enemy is often seen as having almost mythical powers over them to influence their lives negatively – it’s an “us versus them” world and “us” has almost no power to defend ourselves. Their high scores on Security indicate that small perceived weaknesses can be magnified in major threats – threats that “they” can use against “us”. Vigilance and paranoia are not far separated in the Religious Conservative supporter.

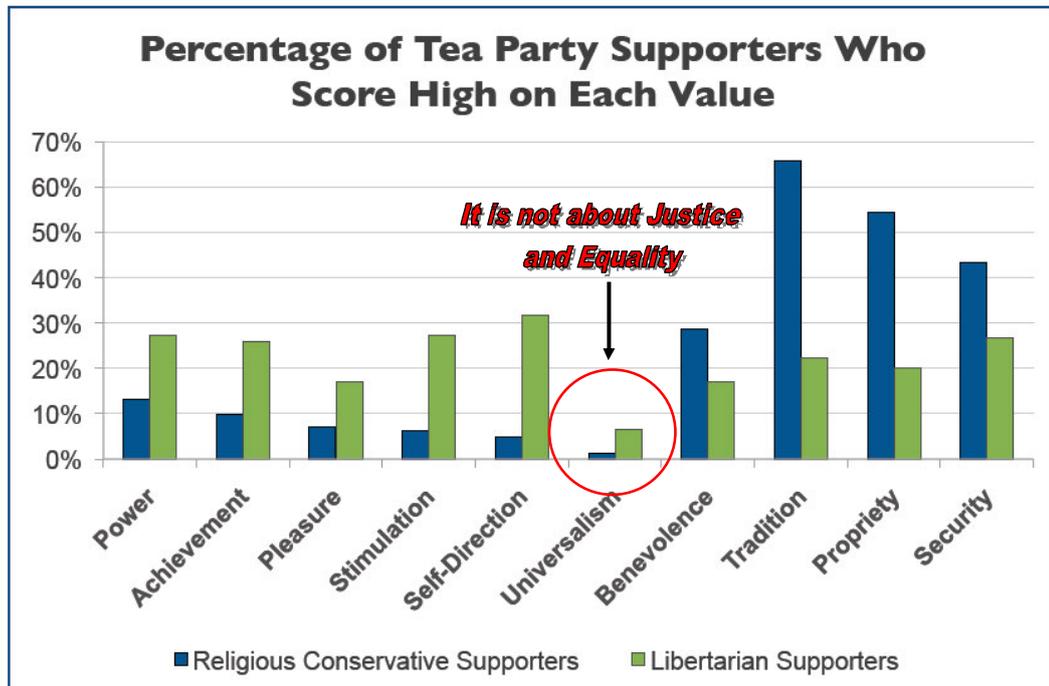
The Settler world-view or values system is nothing new to American politics. Historian Richard Hofstadter wrote about the “animosities and passions of a small minority” in a seminal essay in an issue of Harpers Magazine in 1964. The article was examining the emergence of the Goldwater conservatives that were reframing the American Dream after the Eisenhower era. He noted that America had a long tradition of movements firmly grounded in the politics of victimization and a “them versus us” confrontational style that was driven by fear rather than outright anger.

The Tea Party is based on a sense of anger and fear. Confrontation with others not like them is a natural reaction to this world-view. This spells trouble for both Democrats, who want to try to seek pragmatic compromise – just keep the system running; and also for their bed-fellows in the Republican caucus for whom they have little but disdain. This stems from their understanding of their performance prior to the 2008 election that put the economy into the huge debt position that lead to many of the problems of today; and also for their support of the bailout measures after 2008.

Surely they are driven by a sense of fairness and justice for all the other Americans in their position?

Well no actually! This group of well educated and well heeled white, mostly former Republican mainstream voters, only barely have this orientation in their values set at all. Their scores on Universalism are so low that they barely register at all.

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This reinforces the mind set of both wings of the Tea Party – the view that life is basically about taking care of your own, that having power leads to safety for “our people”. The American story is about triumph over adversity – the all powerful “other” in psychological terms. In terms of standard demographics they appear to have it all. But, in their minds, they have had it all taken away and they don’t want equality – they want what is “rightfully theirs”. They want to be winners and to be safe - and they feel neither. Equality is the problem, not the answer to their problem.

This insight alone goes a long way to explaining their abhorrence of the word “socialism”. This particular trait of the Tea Party base is the root of much head scratching in Europe and around the world. Perceptions of America abroad are often based on the freedom and equality in the American Dream – everyone is created equal in the U.S. In much of Europe it is accepted that socialism is premised on this drive for equality of opportunity. In the U.S., among the Tea Party supporters of both wings, it appears to have an almost exact opposite meaning. The low score on Universalism is the best indicator of the reason for this being so.

What is the future for the Tea Party?

In a federal system of government, that is based on the theory of checks and balances between three parts of government, the insertion of members of Congress who do not value cross-party discussion and compromise will either be a major imposition to business as usual; or they will be sidelined quickly as the body politic – supporters nationwide and other members of Congress – make decisions that withdraw support for their positions.

Whatever happens, it is unlikely that the Tea Party movement will be able to speak with a united voice by 2012.

Watch for the following factors to impact on the sentiment of the Tea Party supporters - the support or otherwise of Fox News, and the attack on them by organizations that support Karl Rove and his powerbase.

Both of these organizations have the ability to offer alternatives to this week's Congressional winners – and get them ousted in a putsch in time for the 2012 elections. Remember, all Members of the House of Representatives are up for re-election every 2 years and a third of U.S. Senators.

Game On!

ⁱ For those unfamiliar with the term, Tiffin was originally an Indian word that meant a small light meal. During the heady days of British rule in India, it became fashionable to take “Tea and Tiffin” during the day.