

WELCOME TO THE Tea Party

Gauging the effect of the movement on the 2011 legislative sessions is a little like reading tea leaves.

BY LOUIS JACOBSON

There's little doubt Tea Party groups have flexed their muscles in state legislatures this year. But as lawmakers and seasoned political observers reflect on the sessions of 2011, defining the Tea Party's precise impact in the states is tricky.

Tea Party activists pushed steeper budget cuts or more far-reaching initiatives in a number of states than Republican legislators might have sought before their Tea Party-led gains of the 2010 election, says Martin Cohen, a political scientist at James Madison University who has studied the movement. "The Tea Party, in its ability to dominate the Republican Party's agenda, has been a great success" in 2011, he says.

In Maine, a relatively moderate state in recent history, Tea Party-backed Republican Governor Paul LePage pursued an aggressively conservative agenda despite winning office with only 38 percent of the vote in a five-candidate race. He signed a budget that featured \$150 million in tax cuts, phased-out a health care plan backed by Democrats and cut benefits for state workers.

In Texas, where Republicans dominate state politics, activist groups aligned with the Tea Party held establishment GOP lawmakers' feet to the fire on spending and taxes—and in a break with the past, lawmakers did not drain the state's rainy day fund, as they could have. Instead, they

made cuts to education and health programs.

Despite such victories for the Tea Party and their policies, the boundary between Republican causes and Tea Party causes is often murky. This makes it difficult to pin down whether Republican policy victories in 2011 owed more to general Republican gains at the ballot box in 2010 or to specific legislative initiatives pushed by Tea Party activists.

In the GOP-controlled Missouri legislature, for instance, "the Tea Party represents a powerful and influential voice," says Ken Warren, a Saint Louis University political scientist. "But since normal Republican cuts in the budget have been going on for so long in Missouri, it is hard to say that any of these cuts occurred because of the Tea Party. In my opinion," Warren says, "the Republican Party in Missouri is naturally made up of people who have been acting like so-called Tea Partiers for a long time."

Meanwhile, a similar dynamic prevailed in Indiana, where Republicans gained complete legislative control after a takeover of the House in the 2010 election.

"The issues the Tea Party championed elected a huge Republican freshman bloc that was sympathetic to the cause, but even if there had been no Tea Party groups, the candidates would have won and been pushing the same agenda," says one political observer in Indianapolis, who asked not to be named in order to speak freely. "There seemed to be an undercurrent of sorts of trying to please, or at least



PHOTOS: VICKI D. OSELAND

not wanting to tick off, the Tea Party types, but I'm not sure that this changed the results on any vote. What it may have done is change the tenor of debate and the rhetoric."

Part of the inconsistency in the Tea Party's impact nationally stems from the movement's structure, or lack thereof. Several national groups have "Tea Party" in their names or work to encourage Tea Party-type activities—such as rallies, candidate forums and grassroots lobbying—but these groups have sometimes squabbled or gone their own way rather than presenting a unified front.

In fact, Senator Jim Banks, an Indiana Republican, notes that "several of us were supported by Tea Party factions in our campaigns, but I found that while in one county some Tea Party members might support me, in other counties they might not."

Louis Jacobson is a staff writer for PolitiFact.



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DIFFERENT AGENDAS

Florida became home to the nation’s first official Tea Party in August 2009, but a handful of similarly named groups have jockeyed for primacy ever since, sometimes waging fiercer battles among themselves than against establishment politicians. These groups, University of South Florida political scientist Susan MacMa-



SENATOR
JIM BANKS
INDIANA

nus has written, “were quite disparate in name, origin, size, organizational structure, candidate preferences ... and top concerns.”

Meanwhile, many Tea Party supporters have focused more on national politics, either in Congress or in the Republican presidential race, than on the nitty-gritty work

of influencing legislatures state by state.

“In Alabama, Tea Party activists seemed decidedly more involved in national issues than state issues,” says Todd C. Stacy, communications director for Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard, a Republican. “The Legislature passed many reforms that Tea Party activists tend to support, including measures to crack down on

illegal immigration and cut excessive government spending. Tea Party or not, anyone who has long wanted to enact good-government conservative reforms in Alabama would have been very pleased with this legislative session.”

Perhaps most important, the Tea Party, as a self-styled grassroots movement, has tended to encourage decentralized and locally autonomous leadership. As a result, state Tea Party groups have not taken a cookie-cutter approach to influencing legislation.

Based on interviews with several dozen political observers and participants in a range of states, State Legislatures magazine found that while Tea Party activists agreed on a low-tax, small-government agenda, activists in the movement—and the legislators who won their support—actually pursued a wide range of issues.

Some worked inside the system, others out-

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side it. Some took up a focused agenda, others backed a more expansive one.

It's not clear whether the end of collective bargaining for state employees—the centerpiece of the conservative agenda that gained so much national attention in Wisconsin, Indiana and Ohio earlier this year—qualifies as fundamentally a Tea Party issue, as opposed to a generally Republican issue. Much the same could be said about efforts approved in a number of legislatures to tighten immigration enforcement, impose new identification requirements on voters, or restrict abortion.

Brendan Steinhauser—federal and state campaign director at FreedomWorks, a national group that has encouraged the formation of Tea Party affiliates nationwide—says his group's “biggest” issues at the state level are budgets and taxes. Other longstanding priorities include curbs on state-employee unions and expansion of school choice initiatives. In certain states, he says, FreedomWorks has encouraged smaller, local issues, such as the privatization of liquor stores in Pennsylvania.

At the same time, Tea Parties tend to stay out of other policy battles popular among many conservatives. Guns, Steinhauser said, “are not in our issue set.” Nor are “social issues,” including gay marriage.

Still, while Steinhauser's group has some influence with Tea Party groups and activists, the movement is neither hierarchical nor uniform.

“Most of the vocal Tea Party members were already conservative activists” before the movement began, and each had their own particular set of favorite issues, says Utah Senator Dan Liljenquist, a Republican. “As such, they have tried to mesh the fiscal responsibility side of the movement with their own specific non-fiscal issues.”

Local tea parties “are free to address the issues they feel



SENATOR
DAN LILJENQUIST
UTAH



are important,” says Debbie Dooley, co-founder of the Atlanta Tea Party and a Tea Party Patriots national coordinator. “On the national and state levels, the Tea Party Patriots stick to our core principles of fiscal responsibility, limited government and free markets.

“We avoid social issues on the state and national levels,” she says, but some local groups do address social issues. The Walton County Tea Party Patriots, she says, often talk about social issues at their tea parties.

Dooley's Georgia Tea Party Patriots helped kill a tax bill that would have lowered individual income tax rates but cut out charitable contributions and other deductions.

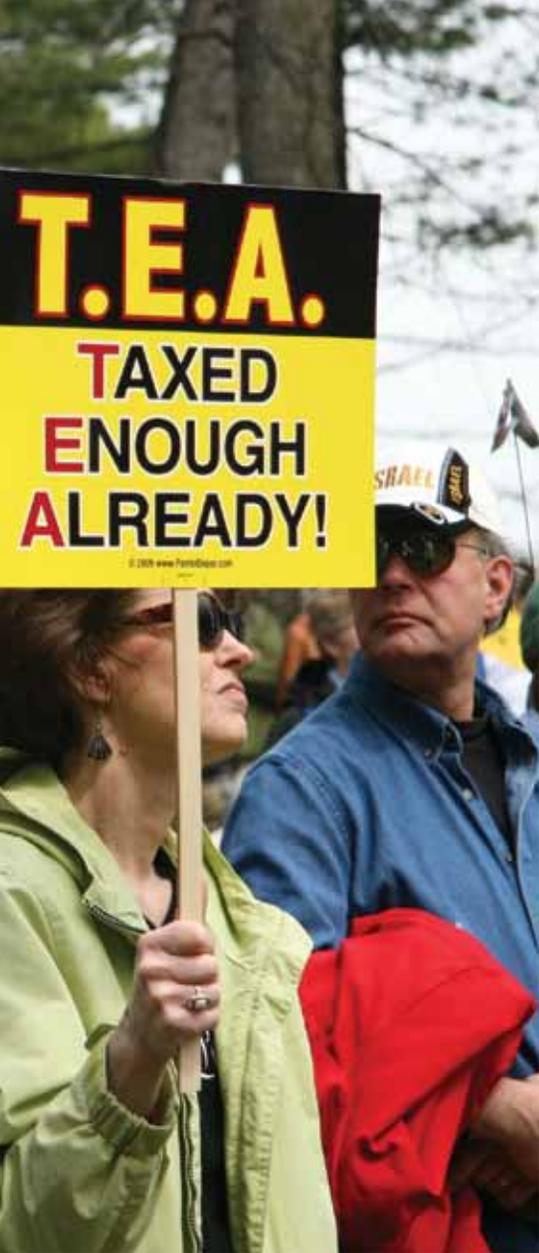
The group also successfully lobbied against a measure backed by Republican Governor Nathan Deal that would have begun setting up the health care exchanges called for in the federal health care reform law. Tea Party activists typically oppose any efforts to advance the

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DARYL METCALFE

health care law, which they strenuously oppose. The group also publicly clashed with Deal over his choice of a state party chairman. “We wanted someone who answered to the grassroots, not powerful elected officials,” Dooley says.

One of the group's most notable impacts, however, was less stereotypical: An effort—unsuccessful so far—alongside odd-bedfellow



allies such as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters, to push lawmakers to enact tougher ethics rules.

The Tea Party agenda in Pennsylvania, however, took an entirely different tack. A key issue the party supported was the “castle doctrine,” a law protecting people who use deadly force, such as firearms, to stop intruders in their home or other locations. In passing the law, Pennsylvania joined about two dozen other states that have similar measures, sometimes referred to as a “Make My Day” law.

GOP Representative Daryl Metcalfe, who chairs the House State Government Committee in Pennsylvania, called enactment of the castle doctrine “a significant victory” for the Tea Party. “Above all, what the majority of Tea



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PENNSYLVANIA

Party members consider a victory is any and all legislation that guarantees more liberty and less government.”

TO COOPERATE OR NOT

Tea Party activists vary widely on a key tactical question: How much to cooperate with GOP legislative leaders, as opposed to being an independent thorn in their side.

In Kansas, collaboration prevailed.

“The state took a serious right turn in 2011, but the Tea Party proper wasn’t at the center of this,” says Burdett Loomis, a political scientist at the University of Kansas. “The new conservative legislators, who were most comfortable with many Tea Party preferences—smaller government, anti-immigration policies and so on—provided the votes and the caucus power for the consideration of and passage of a Tea Party-like agenda.”

Elsewhere, though, Tea Party-aligned legislators effectively drove a wedge between hard-line Republicans and more pragmatic ones, which in many cases included legislative leaders.

In Arkansas, Tea Party-backed legislators used their numerical leverage to extract some concessions on tax and spending issues, since lawmakers need a three-quarters majority on key votes. But on other issues, “when push came to shove, ‘institutionalist’ Republicans tended to peel off,” says Jay Barth, a political scientist at Hendrix College in Conway, Ark. “The more mainstream Republicans generally refused to go along with anti-immigration legislation and other Tea Party bills.”

And even in New Mexico, where the Democrats control both chambers, legislators aligned with the Tea Party torpedoed a bipartisan effort to install a more moderate Democrat as House speaker. Political observers interpreted this as a desire by Tea Party activists to aid their cause by keeping partisan differences sharp.

Montana Representative Krayton Kerns, a Republican, says he and his Tea Party-backed colleagues didn’t chalk up many victories this year, despite having a GOP-controlled chamber, since key posts were held by more establishment types. “There is no significant difference between moderate Republicans and Marxist Democrats,” he says, and as a result, “constitutional conservatives” had little effect on the session.

In Louisiana, one of the biggest impacts of the Tea Party has been conservative, white Democrats switching to the GOP fold. “These party changes are coming fast and furi-

ous and were a major contributor in the ascendancy of Republicans in both houses of the Louisiana Legislature for the first time since Reconstruction,” says Pearson Cross, a political scientist at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

Still, Cross adds: “It’s hard to separate Tea Party legislative victories from the normal operation of a Legislature in a state that was conservative and is becoming more so with each passing year and election.”

POSSIBILITY OF A BACKLASH

Not all is lost for the Democrats, of course. They are hoping for a voter backlash against Tea Party-driven, Republican-enacted policies, particularly in swing states such as Maine, New Hampshire, Ohio and Wisconsin.

A backlash is even possible in a state that’s leaned very conservative in recent years—Arizona. There, Senate President Russell Pearce, a leading Tea Party figure, faces a serious threat from a recall election. That comes after his chamber pursued an aggressively conservative agenda, including heightened immigration restrictions as well as a bill—ultimately vetoed by Republican Governor Jan Brewer—that would have required presidential candidates to prove their U.S. citizenship to appear on state ballots.

“It appears there is a revolt in the business community that will result in well-funded efforts to elect more moderate Republicans,” says Earl de Berge, research director at the Behavior Research Center, a polling outfit in the state.

And despite notable national gains for Republicans and their Tea Party allies, there’s strong evidence that the movement’s muscle is geographically inconsistent.

In Hawaii, the Tea Party is “almost a non-entity,” says Richard Castberg, a University of Hawaii at Hilo political scientist. “Some letters to the editor, but no presence in the Legislature or viable candidates for office.” Much the same prevails in California, where “the Tea Party is a tiny, anemic entity,” says Garry South, a Democratic strategist.

“It just gets lost in a state this big,” he says. “The whole movement is completely out of sync with where a vast majority of Californians are.”



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